

What is homelessness?

- Living on the street.
- Staying overnight in temporary shelters.
- Staying in places not meant for human habitation.
- Moving continuously among temporary housing arrangements provided by strangers, friends or family ("couch surfing").

Who is "at risk" of homelessness?

Families and individuals can lose their housing for any number of reasons: fleeing abuse, losing a job, or having an income too low to stay in suitable housing.

Some are at risk because of mental illness, or substance use problems, or lack the life skills or ability to live on their own.

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The Alliance to End Homelessness

Submission to the
House of Commons
Standing Committee on Finance
Pre-Budget Consultations, 2008

A Housing Vision and Strategy for Canada

A Housing Vision and Strategy for Canada

The Alliance to End Homelessness in Ottawa Submission to the
House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance Pre-Budget Consultations Fall 2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Alliance to End Homelessness (ATEH) recommends that a *National Housing Strategy* be the cornerstone policy in the 2008 Budget. As a federal spending priority this is an opportunity for the Government to make an outstanding difference with the immediate creation a *National Housing Strategy* that is entrenched in a “housing vision” and imbedded in a new Canadian “Housing Ministry” that is sufficiently resourced and empowered to act on affordable housing issues in Canada. The diverse and extensive experience of the 70+ agencies who are ATEH members indicates that such a strategy is pivotal to ending homelessness in Canada.

ATEH data analysis for 2004 to 2007 as reported in our *Report Card on Ending Homelessness in Ottawa* shows a disturbingly flat trend in the impact of current efforts, whether federal, provincial or municipal, to reduce, let alone end, homelessness. It is this flat trend that focusses ATEH attention in the federal Pre-Budget Consultations on the urgent need for a *National Housing Strategy*. The four year trends show that the number of people using shelters in Ottawa remained relatively constant ranging from 8600 in 2004 to a little over 9000 in 2007 and that the population numbers for men, women, youth and families and children have also remained remarkably constant with small fluctuations. Unfortunately, shelter bed use increased for the third year in a row by 2007 with beds filled 18,540 more times in 2007 than in 2006. The four year trends in income and housing show little growth in affordable units and modest increases in minimum wage and income supports. It is no surprise that 1% of Ottawa’s population continues to experience homelessness each year. Immediately alarming is the average length of a person’s shelter stay which increased sharply by 13.9% in 2007 to 38 days, the highest level over the four years, after successive decreases from 2004 to 2006.

A *National Housing Strategy* will of necessity include short, medium and long term approaches and programs such as the federal *Affordable Housing Initiative* (AHI) and *Homelessness Partnering Strategy* (HPS) which come to an end in March 2009. The strategy will need to recognize and resource a variety of approaches, including: community-based affordable housing, housing with various levels of supports (transitional housing, supportive housing, supported housing, and the service models such as Housing First to assist that proportion of people who are chronically homeless with immediate access to stable housing and the income and supports required to keep it. A *National Housing Strategy* would also incorporate health and addictions services including harm reduction services and provide for housing for adults with special needs and frail elderly people in residential care facilities such as domiciliary hostels.

Of course, first-line and immediate emergency assistance will continue to be needed through emergency shelters, outreach services and drop-in centres. While the realities of creating and increasing the stock of affordable and appropriate housing for low and moderate households in Canada will require a range of approaches, over time such housing will greatly reduce the number of families and individuals who require emergency assistance. In the meanwhile, shorter-term approaches such as the current HPS (*The Homelessness Partnering Initiative*, the *Homelessness Accountability Network* and the *Surplus Federal Real Property for Homelessness Initiative*) remain indispensable in communities across Canada but it is very important that such programs reduce difficulties not create them. A persistent problem identified by our member agencies is the short time frame for HPS program funding and the inherent ‘project’ approach; a *National Housing Strategy* will need to strengthen federal HPS efforts with longer term and sustained funding. We respectfully suggest that a minimum of five years for instance, will support communities in effectively planning and allocating resources and provide the stability needed to lessen the impact of homelessness on families, individuals and communities.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Alliance to End Homelessness recommends that a *National Housing Strategy* be the cornerstone policy in the 2008 Budget, that it be entrenched in a “housing vision” and imbedded in a new Canadian “Housing Ministry” sufficiently resourced and empowered to act on affordable housing issues in Canada and that it recognize the diversity of reasons that underlie becoming homeless for the families and individuals who experience it across Canada and establish a goal to end not reduce or manage homelessness.

A Housing Vision and Strategy for Canada

The Alliance to End Homelessness in Ottawa Submission to the
House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance Pre-Budget Consultations Fall 2008

The Alliance to End Homelessness (ATEH) values this opportunity to focus on one recommendation for a federal program spending priority. The diverse and extensive experience of our members indicates that there is one approach that can make a substantive difference in ending homelessness in Canada. We also believe this to be an opportunity for the Government to make a outstanding difference by immediately creating a *National Housing Strategy*, one that is entrenched in a “housing vision” and imbedded in a new Canadian “Housing Ministry” that is sufficiently resourced and empowered to act on affordable housing issues in Canada.

We recommend that a *National Housing Strategy* be the cornerstone policy in the 2008 Budget.

Canadians hold housing to be essential. It is our members’ daily experience that people from all walks of life now expect the federal government to move away from the short-term, well-meant mix of homelessness initiatives and affordable housing now funded with limited dollars.

A *National Housing Strategy* that is based on direct federal responsibility and includes funding affordable housing can respond to the housing needs of families and individuals on low or moderate incomes.

Envisioning a *National Housing Strategy*

As a coalition our members’ expertise is, of course, in the provision of services and housing for homeless people who may be families with children, youth, or adult and senior women and men. The vision of the Alliance to End Homelessness is an inclusive community that takes responsibility for ensuring every resident has an appropriate home. Our values and operating principles are inclusion, collaboration, creativity and mutual respect. Similar values and principles would strengthen a *National Housing Strategy*.

The vast majority of homeless people and those at risk of homelessness will be assisted by a *National Housing Strategy* that has a broad mandate and recognizes the necessity of shorter to longer term policies, programs and funding. A broad mandate will reduce the number of people who, when all else fails, end up in a shelter and will allow our agencies to move beyond managing homelessness to ending it.

We know that some people who are homeless simply need the availability of sufficient appropriate housing combined with the wherewithal to pay affordable rent; other people need additional support services.

A *National Housing Strategy* would include resources for:

- **Community-based affordable housing** – This is a very successful approach to building housing stock because it is permanent, safe and appropriate housing. It includes private non-profit housing providers, social housing, and co-ops. Some affordable housing might be provided through the private sector, although the experience over the last decade demonstrates that we can no longer wait for this to happen. Waiting lists for rent-geared-to-income (RGI) housing show a pent-up demand for affordable housing, even while programs such as Ottawa’s *Housing Loss Prevention* services help families and individuals who are at risk of homelessness remain in suitable and affordable housing.
- **Housing with various levels of supports** – We now know that there will always be a need for the many forms of this type of housing. *Transitional housing* offers time-limited supportive or supported housing to prepare people for independent living. *Supportive housing* is permanent housing with on-site supports, for individuals who need assistance to stay housed, often on an ongoing basis. A variation of this is *Supported housing* for individuals who benefit from housing support that is not tied to any particular housing location. *Housing First* is a service model for helping that proportion of people who are chronically homeless by providing immediate access to stable housing and the income and supports required to keep it.
- **Housing for adults with special needs and frail elderly people** – Some of these individuals succeed in **domiciliary hostels**, residential care facilities, which are generally private, where they receive subsidized lodging and assistance with daily living.
- **Emergency assistance for homeless people** – This is first-line and immediate help. It includes **Outreach Services and Drop-in Centres** to engage homeless and at-risk people and refer them to community services whether these individuals and families are on the street, in a shelter or unstably housed. Many homeless individuals and families stay in **Emergency Shelters**, residential facilities that provide temporary accommodation, meals and personal support and assistance. In our community, Ottawa, this is where the majority of homeless people sleep.
- **Health and Addictions Services** – In Ottawa these services are often integrated into all of the above housing options. **Harm Reduction** services that aim to prevent or reduce negative consequences of potentially dangerous lifestyle choices are included within the range of services. We understand that the Ottawa level of integration is not necessarily available across the country.

Shorter-Term Requirements in a *National Housing Strategy*

It will take time to build up affordable housing stock in Canada, which is all the more reason that a *National Housing Strategy* be the cornerstone policy in the 2008 Budget. The number of people who need emergency assistance will, of course, reduce as more people have access to housing that is affordable and appropriate, but it is also our experience that developing housing is by no means a short-term solution.

The current Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) is an indispensable short-term approach. Its three programs, *The Homelessness Partnering Initiative*, the *Homelessness Accountability Network* (HAN) and the *Surplus Federal Real Property for Homelessness Initiative* (SFRPHI) play a valuable and key role in the efforts undertaken with communities, provinces and territories, partners in the private and not-for-profit sectors and Aboriginal partners. We are always pleased to help evaluate these programs.

Our members have identified that a persistent problem is the short time frame for HPS program funding and the inherent 'project' approach. One or two year terms ignore the realities and challenges of what we experience in the community dealing with a well entrenched crisis.

To strengthen federal HPS efforts, we propose: that longer term and sustained funding be established to avoid the current potential for gaps in meeting HPS goals. In the past we have recommended that a minimum of five years will support communities in effectively planning and allocating resources and provide the stability needed to lessen the impact of homelessness on individuals and communities. We respectfully suggest that that will be a beneficial time frame for short term approaches in a new Housing Ministry.

The 2008 Budget is a timely opportunity to strengthen federal leadership in ending homelessness

A *National Housing Strategy* can be an opportunity to continue and improve programs now set to end in March 2009, the federal *Affordable Housing Initiative* (AHI) and HPS. On the community level we see that a direct federal role in housing is imperative. While data from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) shows that new home construction has reached very high levels in recent years, most of the housing is ownership. This is where the private sector puts its effort. Canada has slightly more than 12.5 million dwellings, but only 5 per cent of these are subsidized under various federal programs. The percentage of social housing in Canada is among the lowest of our partners in the developed world: 40% Netherlands, 22% United Kingdom and Sweden, 14% Germany, France and Ireland, 10% Finland, and, 6% Australia. Only the United States at 2% has a lower percentage than Canada.

Starting in 2001, the federal AHI agreement with all the provinces and territories committed \$1 billion in federal housing spending for new affordable homes. As of 2006, federal spending increased by only \$234 million – or 23% of the commitment. The provincial and territorial governments promised to match the federal dollars with \$1 billion of their own, but by 2007, only four of these were able to keep that commitment. Ontario especially demonstrates the need for a *National Housing Strategy*; it promised to spend an additional \$358 million on affordable housing but instead cut housing spending by \$732 million! Clearly a stronger federal role is necessary to adequately house Canadians.

National Housing Strategy Goal

We propose that the goal of a *National Housing Strategy* be to end homelessness, not to reduce or manage it. Over the past several years there have been many suggestions as to its scope. Some useful ideas are:

- Financial resources for housing such as low-interest loans for local housing proponents for small renovations to very large multi-unit constructions to facilitate land acquisition.
- Financial resources for individuals, such as improved federal income benefits, rent supplements, portable housing allowances, etc.
- Of particular value will be an approach that is linked across federal jurisdictions and across the entire housing continuum combined with flexibility at the community level and with partnerships at all levels based on cooperation and collaboration.
- Other good ideas are: multi-year operating funds for agencies as well as program funds; a return to developing social and community based housing for CMHC; and federal public education and awareness activities about homelessness, for instance through media campaigns, to help the public understand the savings related to the costs. We are seeing public education success with our own *Report Card on Ending Homelessness* and are aware on a daily basis of the extensive support from community volunteers committing time and donations to our agencies.

The Alliance to End Homelessness (ATEH) in Ottawa

Over 70 diverse agencies are members of our coalition, which was created in 1995 as a response to workers in shelters, health care agencies and housing providers who wanted to work in a more coordinated and united manner. Agencies wanted to improve service levels and to more efficiently move people out of homelessness while communicating consistent messages to clients and the general public. Our members provide services, emergency shelter and supports to people who are homeless or at risk of being homeless. We also assist people in finding and then in staying in their housing, and help them to gain access to supports such as health care, home care, counseling, employment assistance and childcare. We hold an annual *Community Forum on Homelessness* to link research with policy and action in honour of National Housing Day and we host a website – www.endhomelessnessottawa.ca – as a community resource for information and action on homelessness. ATEH also operates an active listserv for 500+ individuals (mainly people who are working in the sector plus some who volunteer) to facilitate communication and collaboration on local, provincial, national and international homelessness and housing issues.

Ottawa – one community demonstrates a national problem

Since 2004, ATEH has released an annual *Report Card on Ending Homelessness* in Ottawa to track the community's progress in its efforts to end homelessness and to share what we have learned about "the surprising faces of homelessness". TABLE 1 is from the 2007 Report Card. Our focus is on Ottawa residents: those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness; those who are community decision makers, such as funders, politicians and the media; and also those who are professionals and volunteers in the homelessness sector.

TABLE 1: Indicators of the Alliance to End Homelessness <i>Report Card on Ending Homelessness in Ottawa</i>				
	2004	2005	2006	2007
HOUSING				C-
Affordable Housing				
Pre-1995 social housing units (total stock)	22,400	22,400	22,400	22,400
Post-2000 affordable units (total stock) (i.e., Action Ottawa & NHI units)	509	521	760	833
Rent supplements (City of Ottawa & CMHA)	3,000	3,085	3,198	3,198
Supportive housing spaces	650	863	865	885
Waiting Lists				
Households on social housing waiting list	10,500	9,914	10,055	9,370
Supportive housing waiting list	2,000	2,214	2,630	2,000
Housing Market Indicators				
Rental vacancy rate	3.9%	3.3%	2.3%	2.3%
Average rent for a 1-bedroom apartment	\$771	\$762	\$774	\$798
INCOME				C
Ontario Works for a single person	\$520	\$536	\$548	\$560
ODSP Assistance for a Single Person	\$930	\$959	\$979	\$999
Average monthly # of Ontario Works cases	17,879	17,552	16,541	15,296
Minimum Wage	\$7.15	\$7.45	\$7.75	\$8.00
Increase in Consumer Price Index	1.8%	2.3%	1.1%	2.0%
HOMELESSNESS				D
# of times shelter beds were used	323,612	310,299	323,625	342,165
# of individuals in an emergency shelter	8,664	8,853	9,010	8,915
Single men	4,845	4,905	5,007	5,029
Single women	1,221	1,267	1,451	1,337
Youth	509	543	607	515
Total Families	631	668	615	639
<i>Children</i>	<i>1,092</i>	<i>1,035</i>	<i>1,163</i>	<i>1,237</i>
<i>Adults</i>	<i>997</i>	<i>1,103</i>	<i>782</i>	<i>797</i>
LENGTH OF SHELTER STAY				D-
Average length of stay in shelters (days)	37.5	36.1	33.7	38.4
Single men	39.8	39.1	38.4	39.1
Single women	30.7	31.9	28.1	32.6
Youth	23.0	17.4	16.2	25.0
Families/Children	45.0	36.7	30.9	41.8
SOURCES – City of Ottawa (includes <i>Homeless Individuals and Families Information System</i> (HIFIS), National Homelessness Initiative, Canadian Mental Health Association, Ottawa Supportive Housing Coalition, The Housing Registry, Canada Mortgage & Housing Corporation, Province of Ontario & Statistics Canada.				
OUR GRADES Measure Progress Each Year Towards Ending Homelessness				
A = Significant Progress		D = Some Loss		
B = Some Progress		E = Significant Loss		
C = No or Slight Progress				

As members of the Federal Standing Committee on Finance, we ask you to consider why current federal approaches are insufficient. From within the homelessness sector, we are very mindful of the generosity, concern, and commitment that people and community organizations in Ottawa have to ending homelessness. That is why ATEH tracks community progress in ending homelessness in its report cards. We are not monitoring ourselves; we are confident that our efforts are innovative and targeted within the means available to us. Community homelessness persists in spite of effective assistance given to individual homeless people.

We know that only a portion of Ottawa's homeless population is chronically homeless. We know that some people experience repeat episodes and that for others it is a one time but highly disruptive, often harrowing, event.

A Step Backwards in 2007 Shelter Use

There were 8,915 individuals who used emergency shelters in 2007, in spite of relatively good economic conditions in Ottawa.

Alarming, there was a 3.9% increase in families with 1,237 (6.4% more) children staying in a shelter and an overall 5.7% increase to 342,165 in the times emergency shelter beds were used.

There was also a sharp increase in average length of stay in an emergency shelter of 13.9% in 2007, to 38 days. Men, women, youth and families all stayed longer than in 2006. This reflects the difficulty of finding suitable and affordable housing in Ottawa.

Only 73 new affordable housing units were created in Ottawa in 2007 (with City and Federal funding) while there were 9,370 households on the social housing waiting list and another 2,000 households on the supportive housing list.

As TABLE 2 on page 5 illustrates, the data trend over the last four years is flat (2004-2007) and demonstrates the need for significant change in government policies on housing and income supports.

ATEH Report Card data clearly indicates that the solutions are beyond the local community. As well, in 2005 Statistics Canada found that 12% of Ottawa's population or 95,691 individuals live on low incomes after tax, an income that puts many at risk of becoming homeless. Inadequate government responses are having the unintended effect of contributing to people becoming homeless or being at risk of becoming homeless in Canada.

Thus, ATEH believes the data supports our recommendation of a *National Housing Strategy* as the cornerstone policy in the 2008 Budget, one that is entrenched as a "housing vision" and imbedded in a new "Housing Ministry" for Canada with sufficient resources and empowered to act on affordable housing issues in Canada.

TABLE 2:

Flat Trends Over the Last Four Years

The Alliance to End Homelessness (ATEH)
The Report Card on Ending Homelessness in Ottawa, 2004-2007

ATEH data analysis for 2004 to 2007 shows a disturbingly flat trend in the impact of current efforts, whether federal, provincial or municipal, to reduce, let alone end, homelessness. It is this flat trend that focusses ATEH attention on the urgent need for a *National Housing Strategy*. CHART 1 shows the times shelter beds were used and the average length of stay and CHART 2 provides the numbers of shelter users by populations groups in Ottawa from 2004 to 2007.

FOUR YEAR TRENDS

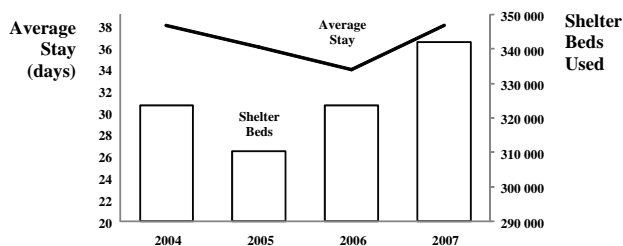
- From 2004 to 2007 the number of people using shelters in Ottawa remained relatively constant ranging from 8600 to a little over 9000 in 2007.
- The population numbers for men, women, youth families and children have also remained remarkably constant with small fluctuations.
- Shelter bed use has increased for the third year in a row, with beds filled 18,540 more times in 2007 than in 2006.
- Average length of a person's shelter stay increased in 2007 to its highest level over the four years, after successive decreases from 2004 to 2006.
- Trends in income and housing indicators show little positive impact over the four years. There was little growth in affordable units, 2004-2007. Modest increases in minimum wage and income supports have not led to reducing the incidence of homelessness in Ottawa.
- 1% of Ottawa's population experiences homelessness each year as a result of too little affordable and appropriate housing and incomes that are too low to pay rent and meet other minimal living costs.

AT-RISK OF HOMELESSNESS

Indicator Data for 2006 and 2007

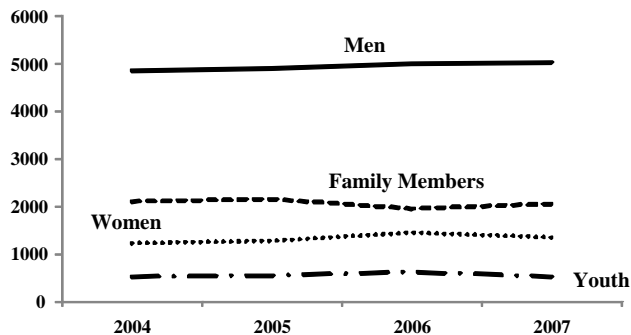
- Households Helped to Remain Housed**
(In Ottawa, federal, provincial and municipal funding for *Housing Loss Prevention* helped these households remain in their housing. Note that this is in addition to those individuals who stayed in a shelter.)
In 2007 – 9,567 households
In 2006 – 9,143 households
- Waiting for affordable housing**
(Households on *The Social Housing Registry of Ottawa* waiting list reflect need across the population.)
In 2007
– 9,370 households were on the waiting list (includes 3,689 households with children).
– 2,101 households were housed.
In 2006
– 10,055 households were on the waiting list (includes 4,054 households with children).
– 2,165 households were housed.

CHART 1: Times Shelter Beds Used and Average Stay
Ottawa 2004-2007



Source: City of Ottawa reporting software –
The Homeless Individuals and Families Information System

CHART 2: Ottawa Shelter Users 2004-2007



Source: City of Ottawa reporting software --
The Homeless Individuals and Families Information System

A Step Backwards in 2007 Shelter Use

- There were 8,915 individuals who used emergency shelters, in spite of relatively good economic conditions in Ottawa.
- Alarming, there was a 3.9% increase in families with 1,237 (6.4% more) children staying in a shelter.
- 5.7% increase in the use of emergency shelter beds.
- Average length of stay in an emergency shelter increased sharply by 13.9% in 2007, to 38 days.
- Men, women, youth and families all stayed longer than in 2006. This reflects the difficulty of finding suitable and affordable housing in Ottawa.
- Only 73 new affordable housing units were created in Ottawa in 2007 (with City and Federal funding).
- 2,000 households on the supportive housing waiting list.

Submitted on behalf of:

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by Lynne Browne

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