

opposed rent legislation changes
could worsen the housing situation in Ontario

Ontario's emerging housing crisis will impact on children and youth

By Ann Fitzpatrick

Children's Aid Societies across Ontario are in an excellent position to speak out about the housing needs of children, youth and families. This voice is essential for two reasons: Metro Toronto and many locations in Ontario are in the midst of a housing crisis for low income families and youth; and, the government of Ontario is making many decisions in the housing policy front that will have long-lasting impacts on the community of children we serve.

Emerging data and anecdotal information from social workers paints a disturbing picture of the unhealthy and unstable living conditions for a growing number of children, youth and parents--a picture of a province with low vacancy rates for rental housing in many urban areas.

Awaiting lists for rent geared to income public housing has topped 26,000 in Metro Toronto and is more than 70,000 across Ontario. The government cancelled non-profit housing projects under development in 1995, resulting in 17,000 planned units getting scrapped and there is a moratorium on future non-profit housing.

Unemployment is a growing problem for many families, while social assistance rates were reduced by 21.6% in October 1995. For families and youth on welfare, the result is more money being paid for rent and less remaining for food and other basic needs. As a result, the number of households relying on food banks for survival has risen sharply in urban areas such as Metro Toronto. Child poverty in Ontario has increased by 35% since 1989, the year the House of

Commons unanimously resolved to eliminate child poverty. (Ontario Social Safety Net, 1995).

Canada's National Housing Act underscores the three standards for good housing:

- affordability (rent 30% of gross income)
- adequacy (housing in a state of good repair), and
- suitability (sufficient space and bedrooms to prevent overcrowding)

The majority of Ontarians have their basic housing needs met. But, for an increasing number of low-income families including child welfare clients, good housing is out of reach:

- there was a 33% increase in the number of applications to evict tenants filed in court between January 1995 and January 1996 in Metro Toronto. (Metro Community Services data, 1996)
- 2,600 applications to evict tenants were filed in September 1996, up from 1,000 from the year before. (City of Toronto, Housing Dept)

- 66% of social assistance recipients renting apartments had shelter costs above the maximum shelter allowance, meaning they had to use food and other money for rent (Metro Community Services)
- 5,582 children stayed in Metro Toronto's shelters in 1995, a marked increase from 1991 when 3,991 children were in hostels
- the Metro hostel system reports families are getting trapped in the shelters due to lack of options, with stays of five months or more
- child welfare staff report concerns about housing conditions including poorly maintained apartments in 'slum conditions', families moving more frequently due to high rents or evictions, and families living in shared housing situations
- shelters working with abused women report that women are returning to spouses more and having difficulties fleeing abuse due to lack of housing options
- shelters in the Metro Toronto area serving youth aged 16 - 24 are operating at capacity
- discrimination against families and youth applying for rental housing,



“...child neglect investigations were more prevalent in families living in unsafe and inappropriate housing...”

on the grounds that they receive social assistance, they have children or because of their age

Risks for children

Child welfare organizations can provide some evidence to government and others in the community about the trickle-down effects of housing problems on children, and the associated costs to the CAS and the larger community. Social work and health research has documented a relationship between adequate housing and risks for child welfare and even for abuse and neglect.

Overcrowded conditions are considered to increase the risk for health problems: "A variety of health problems from pneumonia and tuberculosis to increased infant mortality, suicides, mental hospital admissions, and cancer deaths have been statistically associated with overcrowded conditions" (City of Toronto, Dept. of Public Health, 1984)

Housing that is inadequate, or other stresses associated with housing can be one trigger for episodes of abuse or neglect. "Situational factors (like housing) serve as latent, inactive potentials for abuse ... such factors intrude to provide an explosive milieu which increases the probability that some behaviour on the part of the child will ignite an abuse interaction episode". (Kadushin and Martin, 1981).

Furthermore, research on reported child abuse and neglect in Ontario found that child neglect investigations were "dramatically more prevalent in families living in unsafe and

inappropriate housing". This research also found in 53% of the child neglect investigations where children were living in accommodations that were unsafe or inappropriate, the neglect was substantiated. (Trocmé, McPhee, et al, 1994)

Finally, housing problems have been associated with the need for some children to be admitted to care, either under voluntary agreements with parents or by apprehension. Research by the CAS of Metro Toronto and University of Toronto in 1991 found that housing was a factor in 18.4% of child admissions to care. (Cohen-Schlanger, Fitzpatrick, Hulchanski, et al, 1995) These findings mirror those in the child welfare community south of the border: "Inadequate housing and situational homelessness are also significant factors in the escalation of agency adjudicated child neglect cases. For child welfare workers the reunification of these families is often hindered by a lack of accessible or affordable permanent housing." (Child Welfare League of America, 1990.)

Child welfare has recognized the importance of continuity of care and relationships for children's well-being. The fragmented and fragile housing situations faced by more and more children increases their risks of admission to care, family instability and a lack of continuity.

Housing safety net under attack

Despite the growing housing crisis facing many families and children, both the federal and Ontario governments are looking at ways to off-load their

jurisdiction and current responsibilities in the area of housing policy.

The federal government has had 40 years of promoting social housing and assisting families and households in need. The federal government decided in May 1995 to give provinces more control over the management of social housing. In Ontario, the government has made many statements about 'getting out of the business of housing'. There is a lot at stake if the federal government 'devolves' the full responsibility for social housing in light of the current provincial direction.

In Ontario, in the midst of a developing housing crisis, we should expect some plans and action to address the needs. Instead the province is moving in the opposite direction, and proposes a reduced role. The government has confidence that the 'free-market' approach to housing policy will be adequate to meet most housing needs. This will be disastrous for the lowest income groups, since history has proven that it is not economic for developers to build housing for low income tenants.

The housing decisions to date, and government's future plans, will leave a damaging legacy for thousands of children, placing them at increased risk for hunger, homelessness and family breakdown:

The government proposes to eliminate universal rent control which provides an annual cap on rent increases for all rental housing units.

The new proposal allows landlords to charge unlimited rent increases on vacant units. In B.C. where this was



Participate in consultations on housing issues. The OACAS recently made a presentation to the Standing Committee on General Government opposing the removal of rent control from vacant units. The CAS of Metro Toronto also submitted a brief.

Encourage board members, staff, foster parents, volunteers and clients to act as child welfare ambassadors by sending a strong message to politicians that there is a role for government in social housing including legislation to protect affordable housing supply.

Work with municipal, regional, provincial, federal politicians, housing providers and others who work with families, children and youth to organize a housing forum focussed on solutions to address the needs.

Support local or provincial social action coalitions working to educate the public and politicians on the need to preserve provincial and federal mandates in housing, including maintaining rent control, preserving existing social housing and preventing the sale of public housing. **Call Home Front Ontario (416-921-8583) or Ann Fitzpatrick (416-924-4646, ext 3482) for more information.**

CASs are faced with funding and resource reductions that make it difficult to take on additional challenges beyond the core mandate. However, there is evidence that housing impacts on children's health and well-being and that child welfare will be dealing with the 'trickle-down' impact of housing problems over time.

It may be worth an ounce of prevention to invest in collaborative social action to support housing needs of children and youth.

If your society is taking some

creative action on the housing front, why not share this information with the OACAS and other child welfare organizations.

Ann Fitzpatrick is a community worker with the Children's Aid Society of Metropolitan Toronto.

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done, rents have increased and no new rental housing has been created to ease low vacancy rates. The law could be changed by February 1997.

The changes include the proposed sale of 84,000 units of 'rent-geared to income' public housing (tenants pay about 30% of their income on rent).

In addition, it would include the implementation of a new 'shelter allowance' where tenants are given a limited amount of money to help pay their rent in the 'private rental market'. This model was tried in New Zealand and resulted in tenants paying higher rents, being dislocated from their current housing, and having fewer options.

Government options are expected to be released in January:

- the repeal of Bill 120 - The Residents Rights Act - which permitted homeowners to install basement apartments that met health and safety standards.
- plans to repeal the Rental Housing Protection Act which provides protection to prevent demolition or conversion to co-op of affordable rental housing

Ideas for local and provincial action

Establish a committee to document what is happening to children's housing situations in your community. Use this to educate local, provincial and federal decision-makers, and to inform the public via public education forums or the media.

Work with local tenant groups, community organizations, social planning councils, other children's services, colleges or universities to document or research the housing situations facing CAS clients and develop recommendations for action.



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