

Réseau SOLIDARITÉ Itinérance du Québec

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BRIEF PRESENTED TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FINANCE HOUSE OF COMMONS PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATIONS 2009

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Please consult the RSIQ section of www.rapsim.org

Summary

The Réseau SOLIDARITÉ Itinérance du Québec (RSIQ) is presenting its recommendations to the Standing Committee on Finance for the fifth consecutive year. As in its previous briefs, RSIQ emphasizes measures that directly affect citizens who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Our recommendations are intended for all elected members of the House of Commons and are non-partisan.

Our three priority recommendations are as follows:

1. That the federal government increase its investment in the fight against homelessness by raising its budget for the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) and allocate no less than \$50 million a year to Quebec through a generalist approach;
2. That the federal government allocate at least \$2 billion a year over five years to the development of new social housing, in particular by using the surplus of the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC);
3. That the federal government introduce adjustments to the personal and corporate tax system to achieve fairer wealth distribution.

1. Introduction: The Réseau SOLIDARITÉ Itinérance du Québec

The Réseau SOLIDARITÉ Itinérance du Québec (RSIQ) is a peer support, information and joint action network of some 12 regional coalitions operating across Quebec. It represents more than 250 organizations that work on a day-to-day basis with individuals who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Its purpose is to:

- improve the living conditions of individuals who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless;
- improve knowledge of homelessness in order to better assess and stop it;
- advocate universal rights respecting social integration and social participation issues;
- stem advancing poverty by promoting solutions that address the causes and effects that leave already excluded individuals vulnerable.

2. Homelessness in Canada and Quebec

It is estimated that at least 150,000 Canadians experience homelessness each year.¹ The actual number of homeless could be twice that. In Quebec, the most recent censuses date back approximately 10 years. In 1997, there were already 28,000 homeless persons in Montreal and 11,000 in Quebec City.² Since then, all agencies working with individuals who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless in a number of regions of Quebec have reported an increase in their clientele in all regions. HOMELESSNESS IS A GROWING PHENOMENON in the major urban centres, in the suburbs, in the regions and in the medium-size cities.

HOMELESS IS A TEMPORARY CONDITION, whether it be episodic, situational or chronic. It is characterized by certain common features: lack of stable housing, extreme poverty, social marginalization, isolation and psychological distress. Some problems arise in addition to this condition: physical and mental health problems, alcoholism, substance abuse, dependence on medication and compulsive gambling.

According to the Statistics Canada census, the number of rental households in Quebec spending more than the standard 30 per cent of their income on rent rose from 445,215 in 2001 to 448,840 in 2006, which represents 36 per cent of the total number of renters. The figure is 48 per cent in the case of individual renters living alone. It is in the Montreal and Gatineau areas where the percentage of rental households paying more than 30 per cent of their income in rent has increased the most, and once again rising rents are the reason. In Montreal, 266,360 rental households now spend more than 30 per cent of their incomes on rent. That is 38 per cent of tenants, compared to 36 per cent in 2001. Their average incomes have risen by 15.4 per cent in five years. In Gatineau, where average rents grew 17 per cent between 2001 and 2006, the percentage of tenant households paying more than 30 per cent rose from 34 per cent to 36 per cent, with 13,475 households now living in this dangerous situation.³

HOMELESSNESS IS THE RESULT OF A PROCESS OF EXCLUSION INVOLVING STRUCTURAL AND INDIVIDUAL FACTORS, a fact that moreover is recognized in the Homelessness Framework that Quebec's *Ministère de la Santé et des services sociaux* published in September 2008. In 1998, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights criticized Canada for not "paying appropriate attention to the harmful effects that fighting the deficit was having on respect for the economic, social and cultural rights of the Canadian public as a whole, especially the most vulnerable groups." The Committee felt that public policies on income security and employment insurance, and cuts to education, housing and health and social services had resulted in an increase in the number of homeless persons, thus exacerbating the housing problem and causing a rise in the use of food banks.

In 1999, upon reviewing the Canada report, the UN Human Rights Committee said it was concerned "that homelessness has led to serious health problems and even to death. The Committee recommends that the State party take positive measures... to address this serious problem."

¹ Federal government estimate, 2005.

² Santé Québec, *Dénombrement de la clientèle itinérante dans les centres d'hébergement, les soupes populaires et les centres de jour des villes de Montréal et Québec 1996-7*, Louise Fournier et al. (eds.), November 1998.

³ Excerpt from the Press Release: "Recensement de 2006 : Selon le FRAPRU, la hausse des loyers a empêché les locataires d'améliorer leur sort (1er mai 2008)", www.frapru.qc.ca

In its last periodic review of Canada's compliance with the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR) in May 2006, the UN went so far as to characterize the problem of homelessness and inadequate housing in Canada as a "national emergency", echoing the term used by the Big City Mayors Caucus of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, which referred to homelessness as a "national disaster". The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights noted "with concern that about 7.4 per cent of the population suffer from food insecurity and that the estimated number of homeless persons in Canada still ranges between 100,000 and 250,000. ... The Committee recommends that Canada fully abide by its obligations under the Covenant to take all possible measures to the maximum of its available resources to ensure the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights for all. The Committee also recommends that it eliminate gaps in the area of poverty as a matter of priority."⁴

In October 2007, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to housing conducted an observation mission. Following are a few excerpts from his report: "Everywhere I went in Canada, I met people who were living in the street or in unhealthy and unsafe housing. I was told that there had been hundreds of deaths directly related to the housing crisis raging across the country. Everything I saw and heard during the mission confirmed the profound and devastating impact of this national crisis on the living conditions of women, youth, children and men."

Canada was also singled out on the issues of housing and homelessness on February 5, 2009, by the UN Human Rights Council in the context of its Universal Periodic Review (UPR):

- 47. Consider taking on board the recommendation of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, specifically to extend and enhance the national homelessness programme and the Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Programme (Malaysia).
- 48. Intensify the efforts already undertaken to better ensure the right to adequate housing, especially for vulnerable groups and low income families (Vietnam).

3. Federal government intervention on homelessness

Some figures

In 1999, Ottawa announced that it was introducing the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI), the cornerstone of which was the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI). The SCPI was intended to enable homelessness groups to carry out projects aimed at populations who were homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. In concrete terms, between 2001 and March 2007, nearly \$130 million was invested in Quebec. On April 1, 2007, the NHI was replaced by the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) and the SCPI by the Homelessness Partnering Initiative (HPI). For Canada as a whole, \$270 million was announced for the HPS, which terminated on March 31 of this year. The HPI is aimed at designated communities (12 in Quebec, the same urban areas as the SCPI) and remote communities. The HPI represents \$38 million for Quebec over two years:

- 47 projects approved in remote communities for a total of \$1,983,610;
- 238 projects in designated communities for a total of \$36,174,204 (11 of which were still being processed at the end of July 2008).

⁴ Excerpt from the News Release issued by the UN Committee on May 19, 2006. The full text is available at: www.ohchr.org.

However, applications from groups have represented approximately three times the available budgets in most communities. **Current funding for homelessness is inadequate** to meet all the needs of the homeless and individuals who are at risk of becoming homeless.

Although the HPI has been extended until 2014, the federal government's Budget 2009 unfortunately made no provision for hoped for program improvements.

A diversity of responses to a complex problem

The HPI is a general program, like the SCPI, which, together with HPI 2007-2009, has made it possible to carry out a broad range of projects:

- T Capital projects: Increase in the number of emergency shelter beds available, construction of housing units (transitional and permanent), improvements in the quality and security of reception and intervention premises;
- T Additional human resources: Increase and improvement in the capacity and quality of intervention with individuals who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. There are a number of kinds of intervention: prevention to reduce risk factors in the deterioration of individuals' situations, or to respond to crisis situations, to promote stabilization, reintegration or integration of individuals, or to assist them and advocate their rights (social assistance, housing, justice, employment, etc.) to improve their living conditions;
- T Housing awareness and solidarity activities such as contributing to the *Nuit des sans abri* (an event that is held in some 20 cities across Quebec the October 16, 2009 version of which will be its 20th edition).
- T Regional joint action on homelessness: The needs of individuals are better identified and responded to through greater knowledge of the environment and greater cooperation between homelessness organizations and other players such as the public health system, city, police, etc.

4. Projects that have yet to be approved for 2009-2011

There is currently a high level of concern over delays in the processing of new projects, particularly those recommended by the Montreal community under HPS 2009-2011.

It is crucially important that these funds be made available to groups as soon as possible to enable them to carry out their initiatives. A number of projects may never be carried out. If that is the case, services will not be provided. These delays also have an impact on the hiring of caseworkers and on the cost and availability of capital assets planned by the groups.

The federal government has a responsibility to continue its efforts on homelessness. The current economic crisis has made already difficult situations even more precarious. Rising unemployment, the loss of jobs, houses and apartments and greater resulting insecurity could well increase homelessness.

Considering the extent of current needs, we ask that the federal government increase its homelessness budgets. We have estimated Quebec's needs in this area at a minimum of \$50 million a year (for the 12 communities currently designated by the HPS).

HPS 2009-2014 should continue to respond to a variety of needs and to:

- ensure ongoing intervention with individuals;
- consolidate work teams and better equip them for action;
- develop new projects and respond to emerging needs;
- improve facilities and equipment;
- meet increasing demands;
- provide funding for joint action on the fight against homelessness.

It is important to bear in mind that needs are being addressed by a broad range of individuals, including families (in terms of age, gender, ethnic origin and so on) experiencing a host of problems. The HPS should preserve this “multi-clientele” and “multi-problem” aspect. Homelessness cannot be reduced to a housing problem, and individuals must be offered a range of solutions, not just housing.

We also wish to emphasize the need to preserve the method of delivering the HPS in Quebec, where there is an agreement between the governments of Canada and Quebec. The program’s community aspect guarantees its success since it is the players concerned who determine the needs in their communities (by developing a regional community plan).

We recommend that the members of the Finance Committee call upon the government to make a commitment to continue this investment for the least well off in our society.

Once again, our three priority recommendations are as follows:

1. That the federal government increase its investment in the fight against homelessness by raising its budget for the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) and allocate no less than \$50 million a year to Quebec through a generalist approach;
2. That the federal government allocate at least \$2 billion a year over five years to the development of new social housing, in particular by using the surplus of the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC);
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