

Awaiting Ontario's affordable housing strategy

By JOHN JULIAN

It is hard to imagine a word that is more layered with meaning than home. Home should be a place where we are safe, comfortable, sheltered and warm. It is about family and close friends – a place where we can be ourselves.

Imagine the lack of a proper home! The significant effect on quality of life! It can have a severe effect on the health of an individual or family. Within the next few weeks, the government of Ontario is expected to release a new affordable housing strategy, a document awaited with great anticipation by people across the province.

Christina Marchant is director of community health promotion at Centretown Community Health Centre and a member of the Ottawa Branch of the Housing Network of Ontario, a group that includes Somerset West Community Health Centre, social housing organizations, the co-operative housing sector, and social service agencies. She says housing is one of the social determinants of health as social and economic factors influence our health.

She has observed that housing can affect health in many ways. For example, one in five renters in Ontario pays more than half of their total income in rent. For people in that situation, it means tough choices every month. It may be the choice between buying food and paying the rent. It certainly affects food choices as fresh vegetables can be expensive. Pasta is cheap and filling, but the result over the long term is poor nutrition and ultimately poor health, including obesity and diabetes. According to statistics, 260,000 households in Ontario make food compromises every month in order to pay the rent.

Christina says that bad housing often comes with unseen, but dangerous health hazards. Overcrowding means high levels of humidity that can cause mould in the walls. The result is respiratory and gastrointestinal problems, particularly in children. Poorly maintained housing can also lead to injury including falls on stairs or in the bathrooms particularly for children or seniors. And old, poorly maintained housing is expensive to heat. What is saved on rent is lost in high heating costs or the cost is too high so that families live in a constant state of cold.

Housing can also have a profound effect on mental health. It doesn't take much imagination to understand the stress that a single mom would feel when it is a struggle each and every month to pay the rent and the possibility of being evicted and not having shelter for your children hangs over your head like a constant threat. Instead of a place of comfort and security, home becomes a source of anxiety.

When affordable housing is scarce, low-income people often get by with less space than they really need, but

overcrowding comes with its own price tag. Illness is easily shared in a confined space, and the stresses involved when too many people share too little space can result in tension, family breakdown, even violence. A decent night's sleep can be hard to come by when too many people are crammed into too little space. For children, fatigue is reflected in difficulty concentrating at school.

Low-income people also move much more frequently than people in higher income brackets. Moves are often precipitated by the search for more affordable shelter. Housing insecurity often has a profound effect on children, resulting in behavioural problems, challenges at school, drug and alcohol abuse and depression.

Rémi-Serge Gratton considers himself to be one of the lucky ones. Since 2005 he has lived in a bright, one-bedroom apartment in Marion Dewar Place, a building that includes affordable housing units run by Ottawa Community Housing. Rémi-Serge lives on a disability pension. There isn't a lot of money, but his rent is geared to his income and he can afford it. It is a big change from his former residence: one room in a Sandy Hill rooming house that cost him three times as much as he is paying now. The washroom was on a different floor and, with his health issues, that was a real problem. The house was not secure and on cold nights he would often find people sleeping in the bathroom or prostitutes with clients. There were used needles in the washroom or the laundry room and he became accustomed to sharing his room with cockroaches. The environment and the stresses that went with it were not good for his health.

Better housing has brought with it better health and a better lifestyle. "I really like my place," said Rémi-Serge. "It is very comfortable. The building is marvellous. I am in a better place – my life has turned around in these five years, not just because of the better housing."

Better housing is the goal for Christina Marchant and the other members of the Housing Network of Ontario and better health for tens of thousands of low-income people. The network has released their suggestions for the Ontario strategy that include long term and consistent funding, both to build new affordable housing but also to repair and maintain existing stock. They are calling for more public land to be devoted to affordable housing, and they are suggesting that the construction of new affordable housing can be part of an effective strategy to create jobs and strengthen the economy as the province recovers from recession. They also believe that more attention needs to be paid to special groups within the population – the disabled, the elderly, single moms, first nations, and people living in remote communities.



From Left to Right: MPP Yasir Naqvi; HNO Ottawa Co-Chair Jennifer Wilks; SWCHC Board Member's Marguarite Keeley and Nancy Douglas; CCOC Executive Director Ray Sullivan; CCOC Membership & Communications Coordinator Meg McCallum; Options Bytown Non-Profit Housing Corp. Executive Director, Lorraine Bentley

Jack Purcell Park redevelopment project

By J DEVINE

Elgin Street Public School parent volunteers are embarking on an important mission, to redevelop the school ground and community park.

Due to our urban location, the park and schoolyard are owned and shared by multiple stakeholders. The three major players who maintain our park and schoolyard are: The city of Ottawa, Jack Purcell Community Centre and Elgin Street Public School (Ottawa Carleton District School Board). There is a unique sharing of land and community support. Collectively, this important project will address and make positive changes that will impact our community and park.

The objectives of the Jack Purcell Park Re-Development project are grounds beautification through tree planting and creation of accessible play structure/surfacing for children ages 0-12 years.

When completed, our accessible play structure and surfacing will provide the assurance that persons with disabilities may travel to our location where specific adaptations will be put in place enabling children of all abilities to play together.

The Community Foundation of Ottawa have generously kicked off our fundraising campaign with a donation of \$15,000 towards this valuable project.

The Community Foundation of Ottawa is a public, non-profit organization created by and for the people of Ottawa. It connects donors who care with causes that matter and serves as a trusted resource for addressing issues and leveraging opportunities in the community. It attracts and manages a growing endowment, the invested earnings of which provide grants to charitable organizations.

Your support is needed to make this project happen. Should you wish to donate towards this project, please send your donation to: Elgin Street Public School C/O Accessible Playground Committee, 310 Elgin Street, Ottawa, ON K2P1M4. Charitable donation receipts are issued for donations of \$15 or more.

Jennifer
MCKENZIE

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**Kitchissippi
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