INTERVIEW WITH THE HONOURABLE JOE FONTANA

Minister of Labour and Housing



Newcomers are one of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population in Canada. Can you describe what the National Homelessness Initiative is doing to understand this phenomenon and devise solutions?

We are aware that some newcomers to Canada, particularly those who arrived over the last ten years, are exposed to a greater risk of becoming homeless. Our research shows that one out of three immigrants face core housing challenges in Canada.

We have been tracking and studying the newcomers with respect to their housing needs through the National Research Program (NRP) under the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI). Approximately $7 million in funding over three years have been allocated to examine the characteristics of homelessness and its causes so that effective responses can be devised. In particular, four research projects were funded through NRP to gain a better understanding of the housing/homelessness issues that face today's immigrants and refugees.

We have also formed partnerships with other organizations such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Canadian Ethnic Studies Association and Metropolis to increase understanding of issues related to newcomers and homelessness and to facilitate the sharing of knowledge.

Recently, we have concluded national consultations on the development of a new Canadian Housing Framework. Many individuals and groups who deal with newcomers' housing and homelessness issues participated in the consultations and provided us with valuable input.

We believe that housing is a key determinant for better health and justice outcome. The projects, partnerships and consultation outcomes will help us develop effective responses at the local and national level that would ensure a seamless continuum of housing and support for all Canadians including newcomers to Canada.

For the first time, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) has announced that immigration is one of their key areas of focus for research. Can you describe some of the work that has resulted from this new focus?

First, let me tell you about a CMHC research report identifying the housing options available to refugee claimants in the Niagara Region, their housing information needs, and how these needs might be met. The research indicated that Refugee claimants generally arrive with the least planning, financial resources, Canadian contacts and skills. They typically face more difficulties than other immigrants. Their first accommodation is in shelters while they seek affordable housing. A shortage of both shelter space and affordable rental housing was identified.

The most important housing information resources for refugees are their resettlement counsellor, shelters, hostels, multicultural centres, and school settlement counsellors. The research provided recommendations to improve the housing situation of refugees and to assist the refugee support system. CMHC presented the research results in the Regional Municipality of Niagara and is considering how it might improve the usefulness of the housing information it currently makes available. This includes (see www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca) *The Newcomers Guide to Canadian Housing*, providing basic, plain language, general advice to immigrants on the Canadian housing system, and *Your Guide to Renting a Home*, containing a comprehensive overview of tenant and landlord rights and responsibilities, as well as rental practices in all provinces and territories. Both these guides are also useful to immigrants' service providers, counsellors and language training personnel.

Secondly, CMHC measures the housing conditions of immigrants, using data from the Census of Canada (see *CMHC Research Highlights*, Socio-Economic Series 04-042, 2001 Census Housing Series Issue 7: Immigrant Households). While recent immigrant households reported, on average, lower ownership rates and higher incidences of *core housing need* (explained below) than non-

immigrants, the housing conditions of immigrants and non-immigrants become increasingly similar the longer an immigrant household has lived in Canada. CMHC considers a household to be in *core housing need* if it lives in less than, and cannot access, acceptable housing; i.e., housing that does not need major repair, is not overcrowded, and which costs less than 30% of the household's before-tax income.

Finally, CMHC supports Metropolis, an international forum for comparative research and public policy development about population migration, cultural diversity and the challenges of immigrant integration. In Canada, Metropolis includes research centres at five Canadian universities. Metropolis studies (see www.canada.metropolis.net) on housing and homelessness have been focussed mainly on Toronto, Montréal and Vancouver where most immigrants settle.

There is some evidence to suggest that newcomers' choices of residential location are strongly influenced by the availability of affordable housing and services deemed to be important to them (i.e. access to public transportation, high quality schools, sites of worship etc). As a result the location of social housing and its density become critical considerations in where newcomers live, at least for their first few years in Canada as they find their feet. What does the Government of Canada do to ensure that social housing is made available in a variety of neighbourhoods and is not just concentrated in areas deemed undesirable?

Yes, mapping of social housing projects by tenant characteristics tends to show a concentration of recent immigrants and ethnic and visible minorities in certain social and affordable housing projects. Concentration is not necessarily a negative situation, however, in that recent immigrants may choose to live close together when they first arrive in Canada for mutual support, and to enjoy common languages and cultures. In fact, many non-profit and co-operative housing projects are owned and operated by ethnic, cultural and religious groups serving newcomers.

Older public housing projects tend to have the larger concentrations of marginalized populations due to their size and exclusive targeting to low income groups. However, there was a shift to mixed income non-profit and co-operative housing in the 1970s, and a tendency to build smaller scale targeted projects when full targeting of federal subsidies for new projects was reintroduced in the mid-1980s.

Provinces are primarily responsible for the delivery of current Federal-Provincial cost-shared Affordable Housing Program and most favour smaller-scale, mixed income housing. Provinces and municipalities also determine land use and zoning policies which dictate where social and affordable housing is developed to ensure diversity at the neighbourhood level.

There is an increasing body of research that suggests that Canadian work experience is essential to helping newcomers get their foot in the door. What does the Labour Program do to ensure that newcomers get this first critical experience?

As Minister of Labour and Housing responsible for the implementation of the *Employment Equity Act* and the *Canada Labour Code*, it is my goal to achieve fair and safe workplaces across Canada. In the 21st century, we need to see the changing face of Canada's workforce reflected in our workplaces. Canada has a diverse labour force of 16 million people with the skills to advance an increasingly knowledge-based, productive, competitive economy. Recognizing the importance of human resources, we must help workplaces obtain the participation of all Canadians. Canada cannot afford to waste or under-utilize our skilled population, especially by newcomers who may need help starting a career and integrating into the community. We must ensure that competence and qualifications are the most important criteria for hiring, retention and promotion within our workplaces.

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The Employment Equity Act is a pillar in the Canadian model of inclusion and citizen participation. The Act applies to federally regulated private sector employers (including Crown corporations) with 100 or more employees, to the Federal Public Service and to Separate Employers. The Federal Contractors Program, which is referenced in the Act, is a separate employment equity initiative that covers provincially regulated employers employing 100 or more and that have federal contracts valued at $200,000 or more. The Act commits employers to implement an employment equity plan that targets the removal of barriers and the accommodation of the four designated groups, women, Aboriginal peoples, persons with disabilities, and visible minorities. Employment equity opens the way for new Canadians to reach their full potential, an essential condition to achieving dignity, respect, both in the workplace, communities and homes. We must remove barriers to employment and advancement facing Canadians.

The Canada Labour Code also plays an important role in creating modern, flexible and productive workplaces within the federal government's areas of responsibility. This is achieved through a stable industrial relations climate, compliance with occupational health and safety standards as well as labour standards.

Both the Code and the *Employment Equity Act* contribute to Canada's success of achieving an inclusive labour market and caring society in which fairness and equality of opportunity are the measures of our progress.

My portfolio, Labour and Housing, is part of the larger Department of Human Resources and Skills Development. Other areas of the Department focus on skills development, labour market issues, immigrant integration and foreign credential recognition among others. Together, we strive to secure an adequate and highly skilled workforce for the Canada of the 21st century.

In the last few months you have spoken out about the need for a comprehensive national plan that includes a housing spectrum. Can you describe how this spectrum would ensure that newcomers are able to find the affordable and appropriate housing that is necessary for their successful integration into Canadian society?

In the 2004 Speech from the Throne, this government acknowledged that shelter is the foundation upon which healthy communities and individual dignity are built. While the majority of Canadians are well housed, I know that 1.7 million households are in core housing need. For many, a combination of housing and appropriate supports or services is required to facilitate safe, adequate and affordable housing solutions. Many newcomers are particularly vulnerable – with one out of three experiencing core housing need – finding themselves disproportionately represented within this national figure.

My vision is one where all levels of government and the private, voluntary, and non-profit sectors will work in partnership to ensure that Canada's housing continuum s upports the needs of all individuals and families. One of the messages I heard while I traveled across the country in January and February is that Canadians believe the federal government has a role to play in setting national goals – where housing is seen as a pathway to social inclusion. This is why I am currently developing a partnership-driven Canadian Housing Framework, to consider all aspects of the housing and homelessness challenges facing individuals and families, ensuring a seamless continuum of support is in place across the country.

ACS Student Forum: Canadian Studies in the 21st Century

The Westin Edmonton Hotel and Conference Centre, October 29-30, 2005

This forum will give Canadian Studies students the opportunity to meet and discuss the relevance of a Canadian Studies degree with professors, civil servants, journalists and other professionals, as well as to participate in sessions on various aspects of Canadian Studies research. Students will also be invited to present research papers. Information and a preliminary program for this youth forum are posted at **www.acs-aec.ca**

Students who wish to attend are asked to speak to their Canadian Studies Program Administrator at their university, or to contact the ACS directly at (514) 925-3097. Any student who would like to submit a proposal for a paper presentation is asked to please send the following information by e-mail to Carla Peck, ACS Student Representative: **peckc@interchange.ubc.ca**

1. Name, address, phone number and e-mail
2. Name of academic institution
3. A 200 word abstract describing proposed paper

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Deadline for submissions is June 30, 2005