FINDING A PLACE TO CALL HOME: THE CHALLENGE OF HOUSING SECURITY FOR IMMIGRANTS IN ALBERTA

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Home sweet home.
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home.
Home is where the heart is.
Home shelters the body and comforts the soul.
All up and down de whole creation sadly I roam, still longing for de old folks at home.
Keep the home fires burning, while your hearts are yearning.
Lead, kindly Light,... the night is dark, and I am far from home.
Home is where you hang your hat.
Home is home.

Home is one of the most powerful images in our lives. Cozy homilies, pœts, theologians, comedians, and advertisers have all drawn on its rich connotations to communicate.

The etymology of the very word "home" offers insight. In many places people through history have lived with social obligations to be hospitable and at the same time with strong expectations to uphold the honour and integrity of one's own group. And so, in ancient times if the end of the day found a person away from their own home, in a time when hotels and inns were unknown, it would be likely there would be an invitation into a home to pass the night. But with that hospitality may be the potential of being identified as someone with a link to an injury to a clan member of those offering shelter, and thus the demands of revenge. The wise approach would be to rest while remaining alert, perhaps sitting leaning against the wall, dozing, but always holding one's staff firmly in case a sudden need arose to defend oneself. And so, the image as language evolved that was used for "home" was of the place where it was safe to lie down. Only in one's own home could all the defences be relaxed and one could just stretch out flat on the ground to sleep deeply and carelessly.

For immigrants, the strength and the complexity of the meaning of home is often even more significant than for those who have not left a home or sought a new one as dramatically as the immigrant dœs.

And so, when newcomers arrive in Canada, whether intentional immigrants who, after careful research, have worked for years to get here, or refugees who have never heard of Canada and know nothing about it, there are complex issues related to home that are part of their experience, issues of loss and of finding. A place to call home is central to much of the rest of the settlement and integration narrative that will develop for immigrants.

Immigrants are arriving in a very different context for housing than at any time since the Second World War. After a distinguished decades-long record in Canada of funding the building of tens of thousands of units of social housing year after year, in the early 1990s the federal and Alberta governments determined a key tool to end deficits would be to make dramatic cuts to social programs, including housing. Within a few years cities across the nation were counting hundreds and thousands of people who were homeless. These were not the small numbers of those who had used emergency shelters in the urban core of large cities for a long time—people who were often dealing with interlocking issues of substance abuse, mental illness, FASD, and little education or job skills, typically single adults. These were new demographics of women and children, elders, youth, and victims of violence. In Edmonton a first count of homeless people in 1999 identified over 900, and people reacted with shock. By the time the 2008 count was done and found more than 3000 people the public had begun to see homeless people as a normal characteristic of urban life in Canada[1].

Even the development of a "tent city" in Edmonton on a piece of vacant land next door to the police headquarters in the summer of 2007, with more than 200 residents, provoked no strong public reaction. Governments quietly waited and in the waning days of summer evicted the few who remained and securely fenced the land so no one could use it again. The fact most of those who had been living there were still without decent homes and living scattered along back lanes and on public parkland[2] in dangerous isolated situations seemed accept-

able – at least there was not an embarrassing site where the media could drop by and present the story so easily.

The new population of homeless people was largely people who would have had access to social housing in the past, but with no new housing being built and old stock disappearing from the market the waiting lists for available units quickly grew to be years long. With income support programs slashed at the same time, market-level rents were out of reach for the same people. Market rents continued to move up as Alberta communities attracted more and more people from other parts of Canada and the energy-sector wealth meant there were plenty of people able to pay whatever was asked. Provincial government refusal to bring in any program of rent controls or guidelines meant those with little money had fewer and fewer choices. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation statistics for many recent years in Edmonton have indicated vacancies at the lowest end of the market have been practically zero. Thousands of units of previously low-rent housing have disappeared to condo conversions and the small amount of new funding that began to reappear in federal and provincial budgets has not even prevented the shortage growing, let alone contributing to a reduction.

Rhetoric has been abundant and task forces and committees have written reports making the same recommendations over and over.[3]

In this context, immigrants have been especially hard hit. Poverty rates for those in their first years in Canada are much higher than in the overall population. Research done by Dr. Rick Enns in the spring and summer of 2007 in Edmonton gathered information from nearly 200 immigrants and found over 70 percent were paying more than the 30 percent of gross income for housing[4] and more than 30 percent of this sample were paying over 50 percent of total family income to keep a roof over their heads[5]. What adds a deeply disturbing context to these numbers is the research finding the average monthly income for these people was $1580.

The voices of immigrants make clear how difficult housing insecurity is, how much it adds to the severity of other challenges they experience. One person describes the difficulty of having maintenance done: "The condition of the buildings are not good. Sometimes see that the water is coming from the roof and the laundry washing is not working … then how people should do what they have to do … Like my thing was a leak and I informed the building manager and first he came and he said "that is not leak". I said "see there is water" … then that took almost three weeks, then he came and fixed that." Another explains a problem that arose because of not having English proficiency or being familiar with other cultural issues in Canada: "I thought thirty days is [in] February, just I took a cheque in the February … I thought thirty day, February 30th, that day is March 2nd, I took a cheque, that manager write for me [a fine of] fifty dollars."

For people who are already struggling with very limited economic resources, the actions of landlords can create serious trouble in lives. Stories such as this experience are not uncommon: "The other guy he just found a house … apartment in downtown and they told him that he must pay like nine hundred something and deposit is seven hundred but he's still visitor, they're going to hold that money until they will see if the manager there, the owner of the house, will agree for them to move in or not. Now it's gone almost two weeks without any answers [and the money still being held by the landlord]."

The crowding that arises from people having little ability to pay high rents affects quality of life: "We are two people all living in one big room … like I want to read a book and … she's sleep, I can't read a book or do anything and then if she wanted and I sleep, she can't do anything. For that the thing is that very important nowadays, it's money and if we don't have money then we all are accepting the places that not really comfortable with it, not happy." The economic pressure to maintain housing affects other aspects of life too: "We are not able to do anything for ourself. Even for my medicine, always I'm asking for my daughter whenever [she] is asking that I need like sometimes for a good medicine, I'm saying that I can't afford this, I can't buy this. For our food, we are trying to food, to get the very cheap food to save the money for rent or for electricity bill or for other things."

In Edmonton immigrants make little use of the established emergency shelters. More often people crowd into housing with others who offer some hospitality, a practice often casually called "couch surfing" but much less friendly than the name suggests. This practice is dangerous for everyone involved. A landlord finding more people living in a unit than were approved in the lease may react by starting eviction processes against everyone, so the end result is worse for even more people. Settlement organization staff often find apartments or suites with eight, ten, or more people living, not all related. Several children may be sleeping together on a floor in a common room. Adults working at jobs on various shifts come and go at various times. Access to safe food storage and cooking facilities can be very limited. Children in particular are in precarious situations. Frequent moves caused as these unstable housing situations change mean children, who may be struggling with English language learning needs already, and, in the case of refugee children, be years behind academically, are having to be in two or three or more different schools a year, and teachers have no opportunity to really diagnose and address their learning needs.

People desperate to have shelter may also be vulnerable to other abuse. Settlement practitioners at Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers have found cases where people will apparently offer "hospitality" to people without housing but will then take advantage of them, perhaps for cheap labour in a business. When the choice is being on the sidewalk with your children and your bags, it can seem the lesser evil.

In addition to the challenge to immigrants generally to be able to have affordable, appropriate, safe, and healthy housing in a province where housing is almost entirely market driven and expensive and they have limited economic resources, there are particular housing needs for those coming from refugee-like backgrounds where they have spent extended times in the midst to situations that have led to trauma and mental illness. People from such backgrounds may have little familiarity with how to live in North American-style housing so the unit may incur damage and lead to eviction. Without language skills or familiarity with residency laws landlords may take advantage of them, and without funds for deposits or references from other landlords many potential landlords will refuse them. For such people shelter is a source of fear and uncertainty in their lives rather than a place of sanctuary.

Research listening to people from such backgrounds done by Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers in 2003[6] led to the development of a model of supported housing that first began to operate in 2004 and now houses about 100 people in two buildings. One basic purpose of this approach was to ensure people could have the peace and stability of their own modest place, where they had privacy, an affordable cost so all their economic resources did not go to shelter, personal control, and safety. Another was to provide comprehensive integrated dynamic and flexible support to people, using plans developed by the person or family, with goals they determined, not disconnected formal services delivered during office hours. The idea was that such substantial support for a period of time might achieve more than a meagre trickle of services spread over a longer time. A third purpose was to provide a context in which community could develop and be supported and tenants could become involved with each others lives and be helpers to each other and exercise control of aspects of their housing. This opportunity for natural social support to become a part of people's lives has had very positive results. A 2008 evaluation for Citizenship and Immigration Canada of this supported housing work offers ample evidence of the value it has[7].

This simple model has provided a place for remarkable achievements by many people. People who had experienced no success previously in Canada have gone on to educational achievement in universities and technical institutes. The physical and mental health of many others has improved. Others have been able to achieve economic success, and in a few cases even purchase their own homes. But finding funders willing to support such an approach has been a continuing challenge and only slowly are governments recognizing the cost of this service, where nearly 100 people are served by a staff complement that costs less than $500 000 annually, is a bargain compared to the average cost to the public treasury that is pegged at about $100 000 a year for a single homeless person.

Public policy in Canada needs to rediscover the ancient power of home as the foundation of social stability and successful community. The recognition that housing security is a central pillar of achieving true settlement and integration would be a significant step. Despite Canada's historic part in the International Declaration of Human Rights where the right of every person to housing is affirmed, Miloon Kothari, the former United Nations special rapporteur on housing, recommended, following a tour across Canada in late 2007, "In order to comply with human rights standards and to efficiently address adequate housing for its population, Canada needs to base its policies and programs on the human rights framework and fully recognize the right to adequate housing. Canada needs to commit stable and long-term funding to a comprehensive national housing strategy, and to co-ordinate action among the provinces and territories. Canada needs to embark again on large scale building of social housing. It should also consider providing subsidies including housing allowances or access to other cost-effective ways in order for low-income households to meet their housing needs.... To address effectively the more critical obstacles to enjoyment of the right to adequate housing, Canada needs a comprehensive and properly-funded poverty reduction strategy respectful of its human rights obligations. The Federal Government needs to work with the provinces and territories to create a consistent framework of tenant protection and rent regulation laws that meet the standards set in international housing rights law. Specific funding should be directed to groups particularly vulnerable to discrimination including women, Aboriginal people, the elderly, youth and migrants. The housing continuum concept and a plan to make available various forms of housing including transitional and supportive housing should be nationally adopted." Ignoring these recommendations will contribute to a polarized nation where newcomers have more limited possibilities of a good quality of life than others. The cost of this will be significant in terms of social stability even more than in economic measures.

A simple step would be to set allowances for government assisted refugees at a level that ensured they could afford near market level rents in the communities where they settled. A commitment to fund settlement services to include supported housing would enhance the chance of success for thousands of people with more complex settlement challenges. Tougher enforcement of laws of non-discrimination would root out too many incidents of racist-based landlord behaviour that are reported by immigrants to settlement organizations. There is little research on housing issues as a part of the lives of immigrants but in recent years this has been a priority with Metropolis and slowly good information is being gathered. This needs to be vigorously pursued, since even when solid information is available the evidence of the past decade is that it is difficult to move public policy and the financial commitments necessary to address housing insecurity in Canada.

Housing security activists maintain there is no reason Canada cannot ensure homes for all, provided there is a will to do so. The failure to do so is particularly difficult on newcomers eager to establish new lives and the consequences of such failure will reach far into the future.

NOTES

[1] All the reports of the counts of homeless people are available at the website of Homeward Trust (www.homewardtrust.ca).

[2] Park rangers report a tenfold increase in the number of campsites they are removing on parkland compared to 2000.

[3] Jim Taylor, a member of Edmonton city council at the time and co-chair of a joint City of Edmonton/Province of Alberta task force that reported in 1999, noted in October 2008 as a new committee was at work creating a "10 year plan to end homelessness" that a review of the decade-old report would find all the necessary actions described then, but little actually done since. In October 2007 Premier Ed Stelmach promised an Alberta provincial 10 year plan to end homelessness, despite the government having rejected nearly every substantial recommendation of an extensive affordable housing task force only a few months earlier. As of December 2008 the promised plan was still not in sight.

[4] 30 percent is considered to be the maximum that should be spent on housing without creating stress on the capacity to meet other living needs.

[5] The full report is available at the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers website (www.emcn.ab.ca).

[6] The report by Sunita Chera is available at the EMCN website (www.emcn.ab.ca).

[7] The report by Ann Goldblatt is available at the EMCN website (www.emcn.ab.ca).