Right to Housing
Social housing opens doors

Making Winnipeg a 'model city' for homelessness

by Shauna MacKinnon

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On Nov. 6, Prime Minister Mark Carney joined Manitoba Premier Wab Kinew and Winnipeg Mayor Scott Gillingham in announcing Winnipeg as the "model city" in his government's plan to "put Canada on a path to ending homelessness within 10 years."

This announcement builds on the provincial government's 2025 *Your Way Home: Manitoba's Plan to End Homelessness,* which aims to end chronic homelessness by 2031. It has been struggling to make meaningful progress.

The Right to Housing Coalition in Manitoba has long called on all levels of government to expand the supply of social housing to prevent homelessness and housing precarity. In 2023, the coalition released *A Social Housing Action Plan for Manitoba*, which includes clear targets and timelines.

It calls for 10,000 additional social housing units over 10 years, beginning in 2024. Since then, the province has committed to approximately 1,205 additional units.

When the federal government announced its budget commitment to contribute up to $800 million to support more than 2,000 new supportive and transitional homes, it breathed new life into Manitoba's plan to end homelessness. The city and the province will provide public land and the province has budgeted $84 million a year for tenant supports.

Additionally, a new health facility "will bring acute and outpatient mental health and addictions care together with permanent housing and co-ordinated support services."

The tri-level government commitment could bring Manitoba closer to reaching the Right to Housing Coalition's social housing targets. But many questions remain.

Who will own and operate the housing? Will the units be subsidized at 30 per cent rent-geared-to-income rates in perpetuity? Will the provincial commitment for housing supports include or supplement existing funding? Will the 2,000 units be in addition to the 1,205 units already committed? Will the three levels of government continue to invest in social housing beyond the 2,000 units to ensure that we achieve the goal of creating 10,000 new units by 2034? Will there be units located across the province where homelessness is increasing? These details are important.

The most pressing question is: Why the continued emphasis on transitional housing rather than permanent housing? The shortage of deeply affordable permanent housing has left people living

in existing transitional housing with nowhere to go. It is notable that the Government of Canada recognizes people living in short-term transitional housing as experiencing homelessness, requiring communities to include them in their point-in-time counts of homelessness.

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness similarly defines people living in transitional housing as "provisionally accommodated" and technically homeless. These definitions reinforce a fundamental concern: without security of tenure, transitional housing leaves people vulnerable to homelessness. All new deeply subsidized housing should offer tenants the option to stay permanently.

Finland, the model for ending homelessness, has largely eliminated emergency shelters and transitional housing. As part of its constitutional obligation to ensure the right to housing for all, Finland has replaced temporary housing with permanent housing. Significant supports are provided for those who need them, but unlike the transitional model, tenants can stay as long as the housing meets their needs.

Canada enacted the right to adequate housing into federal law in 2019 through the National Housing Strategy Act. Yet homelessness and housing precarity have increased considerably because governments have failed to implement the policies required.

Practical strategies to prevent homelessness are found in a growing number of countries, including France and Denmark. Some require a baseline of new development to be permanent social housing.

Although there is an urgency across Canada to house people who are chronically homeless, acute visible homelessness is only part of the problem. Many people are living in poor conditions and/or paying far higher rent than they can afford.

The Manitoba government's ambitions to end chronic homelessness without adding sufficient permanent housing options has put pressure on the existing social housing supply. Waitlists are growing and people are waiting longer. Public housing has become housing of last resort. People with serious issues are housed unsupported in buildings with others who now feel unsafe with nowhere else to go.

The Right to Housing Coalition is hopeful that the commitments announced by all three levels of government will begin to turn things around in Manitoba. But if there is one thing we've learned after 20 years of housing advocacy, the old cliché "the devil is in the details" still stands.

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