

IMAGINE THE PLIGHT OF THE HOMELESS

Dr. Rayleen De Luca
National Chairperson of Community Life



Have you ever imagined what it would be like to be homeless? Can you fathom not having a bed to retire to at night? Could you contemplate not knowing where your next meal is coming from? Have you thought of how difficult it would be to stay warm without a place to stay in our cold Canadian winters? And then, in addition, can you imagine if you were further challenged with a mental illness? Think about it.



According to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives *Social Watch 2005: Canada* report, “there are 11 million households in Canada, of which 1.7 million households live on less than \$20,000 a year. . . . there is no [absolute] methodology for taking the count but, based on local statistics from key municipalities, it is estimated 250,000 people will be homeless this year.” Sadly, children also make up this growing population. While Canada’s economy is touted as “booming” the number of homeless continues to increase.

Mental illness and homelessness have frequently been correlated. Many studies have found that the mentally disordered make up a sizable number of the homeless. The Mood Disorders Society of Canada stated, “It is estimated that 1/3 of the homeless population suffers some form of mental illness. This number increases to 75% for homeless single women.” Unfortunately supportive housing is lamentably scarce.

Deinstitutionalization, the movement to close down mental hospitals and to treat persons with severe mental disorders in the community, has significantly contributed to the increased number of homeless individuals. An assumption of deinstitutionalization has been that individuals would receive mental health care in some other setting. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case. Many people who leave psychiatric hospitals are unable to cope once they are in the community. One consequence is that people who leave the institution become homeless.

The housing allowance for people with a mental health disability is limited and often only allows for very poor housing accommodation. There is no question that affordable

housing is a necessary condition for the prevention and elimination of homelessness. However, in most Canadian cities there is a critical shortage of affordable housing.

Although there are several provincial and federal initiatives in place, they do not appear to be effective in combating or reducing homelessness. Many members have voiced their concern

that it is inhumane and unacceptable to have people sleeping in doorways and bus shelters. Also, community initiative projects have stepped forward to partner with the government-based funding initiatives in an attempt to make a difference. Certainly a number of members have helped the homeless by volunteering in these community and church-based initiatives. Yet, the number of homeless people increases.

Clearly, members need to address these concerns with the provincial and federal levels of government in their areas of responsibility to achieve affordable housing. The number of independent and affordable housing units needs to be significantly increased. Moreover, additional resources are required for individuals struggling with mental illness to be able to move away from sub-standard housing. Innovative housing programs, along with improved access to health and mental health services, are critical if the homeless are to achieve self sufficiency, dignity, and full participation in Canadian society.

Now, I would like you to imagine what it would be like to have each and every Canadian being able to have a bed to retire to at night, knowing where his/her next meal was coming from and having a warm shelter with access to mental health care. How can members help achieve a national strategy for affordable housing? By writing letters to their provincial and federal representatives requesting that more resources be directed towards affordable housing. League delegations that have met annually with the federal government have been assured that letters make an important impact. In addition, educating members on the issue of affordable housing by inviting speakers from local housing authorities and housing shelters to parish council meetings can further enlighten members on the plight of the homeless. Imagine...we can make a difference. †