

Wins, Winds, Worries and What to Do?



Understanding Our Times –The Recession in our Communities

***Community Legal Clinic Forum Panel – June 8, 2009
Cathy Crowe, Street Nurse***

“....The community cannot allow its citizens to starve or freeze, and if the cost of keeping them alive must be met it should be possible to reach some kind of conclusion as to the best method of meeting it....Canada is in some respects a progressive country, but it has little reason to boast of its social legislation....” (1925 editorial in the Toronto Star)

Wins of the past

It has been eleven years since the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, hundreds of organizations, and major Canadian cities declared homelessness a ***national disaster***. I want to celebrate that win because it was a great moment in our country's history of struggle for social justice because we stood together to decry the conditions of homelessness and poverty that had swept across the country.

That movement thrust homelessness and the housing crisis on the front page and agenda of every community in this country. Our rallies, our protests, our press conferences, our direct action, ***all of our actions*** created the wind for some movement in Ottawa. Prime Minister Chretien appointed a senior Cabinet minister to a new portfolio – 'Minister Responsible for Homelessness'. Over \$1 billion in federal emergency relief in the form of a ***new federal homelessness program*** (SCPI now renamed HPI) was delivered across the country. As Michael Shapcott has said "Minister Bradshaw made people a bit more comfortable homeless, but still they were homeless."

Winds* of the past

*for description of 'winds' see '***The Wind that Shakes the Barley***':

http://tdrc.net/resources/public/Crowe_Speech_oct_17_06.htm

In our movements there were also the more localized actions.

The rallies that forced the opening of thousands of shelter beds over the years:
-Doctor's Hospital, Princess Margaret Hospital, the Fort York Armoury, the Moss Park Armoury (armouries at least four times), Murray Street, 110 Edward Street

The actions that stopped biometric technology such as:
-finger printing/scanning being implemented on welfare recipients; or the removal of the Personal Needs Allowance.

The creative strategies such as:
-the Special Diet Campaign that put maybe a million dollars into poor people's hands for food.

You are one of our strongest allies. For as long as I can remember your clinic staff, board members and clients have walked the walk – you have donated, turned out and supported in every imaginable way when there has been a call to provide evidence at a public inquiry, rally outside a courtroom or coroner's court, provide food and relief to places like Tent City or Allan Gardens, and march – literally walking such as in the 2009 Toronto Anti-poverty demo demanding real solutions to poverty not just poverty reduction.

Worrying signs today

We have never won anything simply by asking or being polite. In recent years a shift to moderate coalition building whereby consensus means the lowest common denominator becomes the position of the organization has watered down our advocacy efforts and minimized, even trivialized the daily experience of poverty or injustice that ***the people*** live in.

Other worrying signs:

- an expensive conference on homelessness in Calgary mid-recession;
- two standing ovations at the AOHC conference last week for federal Liberal party leader Michael Ignatieff;
- conferences on 'networking' in these recessionary times;
- increasing numbers in need and massive loss in donations including some foundations and United Ways cancelling grants;
- Canada Revenue Agency's removal of charity status from one of the most profoundly socially engaged organizations – Phoenix Community Works Foundation;
- the co-opted language of '***Housing First***' that really encompasses street counts, the closure of emergency shelters, by-laws and regulations against homeless people such as anti-panhandling laws, programs like Streets to Homes and the de-funding of programs that provide survival supplies such as hot food and sleeping bags;
- and most sinister, the language of '***poverty reduction***' which by the way is used by the World Bank. Would we talk about 'reduction in child molestation', 'holocaust reduction', 'racism reduction'. No we would say "Never again".
- and most recently a huge euphoric excitement that the Ontario government has initiated consultations on housing.

Naomi Klein has taught us the impact of Shock Doctrine: privatization, government deregulation and deep cuts to social spending. We have to apply those lessons at home. They are not just happening in New Orleans. Look at the recent e-health scandal in Ontario.

Linda McQuaig last week in her column in The Toronto Star wrote:

"The Harper agenda has always been about reducing spending on government programs – with the exception of the military, which under Harper has swelled to almost \$20 billion this year."

The big picture – new ways of organizing

War on the war – TDRC's Housing Not War campaign

After ten years at TDRC we felt strongly we needed to do some focused work on the bigger economic/political picture that 'allowed' worsening homelessness.

One of those is our ***Housing Not War*** campaign. For over a year we targeted our work to building awareness of the impact of military spending on social programs. Today at national peace rallies, the slogans 'Housing Not War', 'Education Not War', 'Childcare Not War' are prevalent.

In my deputation to the federal committee examining poverty which I titled ***Combating Poverty, Homelessness and Hunger: Create a Peace Dividend*** I suggested the following to the committee:

We are spending \$100 million a month in Afghanistan, the majority of that not in peace-keeping or NGOs but on war. This is troubling since quite simply that spending that could be directed towards a peace dividend that could include a national housing program among other things. For example:

\$\$ for one light armoured vehicle could fund 60 teacher salaries for 1 year (\$3 million)

\$\$ for one CH-123 Sea King Helicopter could finance books for 570,000 university students for one year (\$114 million)

\$\$ One C2 105 MM Howitzer cannon could finance child care for 180 children for one year in Quebec (\$450,000)

\$\$ 2008 spending in Afghanistan could fund 3,500 new units of affordable housing (\$1 billion)

\$\$ spending in Afghanistan by 2011 could fund 9 years of a national housing program (\$18 billion)

****sources available at <http://www2.parl.gc.ca/Sites/PBO-DPB/documents/2008-10-09%20Statement%20-%20Afghanistan.pdf>***

A popular education toolkit called Housing Not War is now available on the HnW section of www.tdrc.net for you to use in your community: http://tdrc.net/uploads/file/HnW/poped2009_2.pdf This project was funded by the CAW.

Fighting the Recession – TDRC launches the Recession Relief Fund concept

Today, mere months into the recession, it is evident that homelessness is poised to reach catastrophic proportions. I often say that THIS is our Katrina. This is our Katrina because just like those hurricane and flood victims, Canada's homeless are displaced, economic refugees, left in appalling conditions by political leaders and bureaucrats who will not deal with the question of the right to housing. It is not the lack of political will or action. It is political will.

TDRC decided to act and created the Recession Relief Fund Coalition (now called the Recession Relief Coalition), knowing that many of our social safety net programs arose out of massive campaigns during and post the 1930s Depression.

John Andras, a founder of TDRC, Project Warmth, past President of the Rotary Club and Chair of the Board of SKETCH is our honorary chair.

He too presented to the federal committee last week and told them who and what we are:

“In December a group of agency heads, foundations academics, and business people founded the Recession Relief Fund Coalition. Over 230 organizations and thousands of individuals signed the Declaration to call on Ottawa to consider the needs of the front line agencies in the budget process. The need for emergency funding to be made available to the agencies feeding, clothing, sheltering and counselling the victims of the recession is clear and pressing. Governments need to respond to the reality that demand is growing and non-government funding is falling. Even if the “shovel ready” infrastructure projects begin construction, even if there is a commitment to affordable housing, it will take several years to make any real impact on people requiring housing.”

The Declaration states:

Recession Relief Fund Declaration

We call on the Federal Government to immediately create a Recession Relief Fund which will include:

- preventing spending cuts to public and private not for profit agencies serving vulnerable people including children, youth, families, immigrants, those who are homeless, un/under-employed, senior citizens, people who are disabled and those suffering from mental illness. (some funding programs are set to expire March 31,2009)

- increase funding to all HRSDC (Human Resources and Social Development Canada) and settlement programs, including doubling the existing level of funding being provided through the HPI (Homeless Partnerships Initiatives) program to supplement funding that is projected to be lost from private sector sources and increase funding levels as required.

In addition, we call upon the Federal Government to invest a portion of proposed infrastructure spending on social infrastructure by implementing a fully funded National Housing Program.

http://www.socialplanningtoronto.org/recession_relief_fund.html

I don't need to tell you, you more than most organizations are at the battle lines, fighting evictions, worsening tenant conditions etc.

This is what the recession looks like:

- Drop-in centres which are day-time shelters are more crowded with a 20-30% increase in numbers. Families with children are now going to drop-ins that traditionally have served adults. Why? For food.
- More families in family shelters (if the city or town has one) and I have seen them in rooms that do not meet the United Nations Standards for Refugee Camps, There are so many families now that they overflow into scummy and dangerous shelter motels that are considered and counted as shelter beds by the municipality.
- Newly homeless people. I remember seeing this before, precipitated by among other things, the Ontario welfare cuts of the 90s. The new homeless are coming from homes they are losing and like the last wave of newly homeless from the last economic downturn they are shocked they are there. This time, in the first post-workfare recession there is no EI for most and eligibility criteria for social assistance means that by the time they seek out social assistance they have lost everything.
- Clusters of homeless deaths and more violent deaths: death by fire, suicide, disease. People are now homeless so long, left outside so long, that they are now requiring end of life care, curb side.
- Severely crowded shelters are now bedbug infested. Shelters that have to turn people away. Even the faith based Out of the Cold program reports that this winter they were forced to turn people away.
- Forced outdoor sleeping necessary because of shelter crowding including squats and encampments, cardboard boxes, sleeping bags, families living in tents or trailers in some communities.
- Increased criminalization of homeless people. In 2004 police gave out 2725 tickets, in 2007 that number almost quadrupled to 10,584 tickets for 'aggressive panhandling'. City policies that prohibit community agencies

- that receive their funding from providing survival supplies including hot food, sleeping bags and blankets to homeless people.
- Hunger, emaciation, starvation.
 - Old diseases like tuberculosis. New diseases: Norwalk virus, MRSA, Strep A. Today, fear of a pandemic that leaves most communities with no special plans that address the health protection needs of people in congregate living, i.e. living in shelters.

What You and Your Clinic Can Do:

1. **Endorse** the Recession Relief Coalition Declaration that calls on more funding for Recession Relief at http://www.socialplanningtoronto.org/recession_relief_fund.html.
2. **Get on our email list** to keep up with what we're doing and how you can get involved by:
 - Signing the Declaration (see above), and/or:
 - Joining our Face book group: <http://tinyurl.com/recessionrelief>, and/or:
 - Joining our Ning group: <http://recessionrelief.ning.com>.
3. **Join the Recession Relief Coalition and help us build for a large public forum or rally** and develop other plans to build our campaign and networks. **Email at recessioncoalition@gmail.com**
4. **Help us track the impact of the recession.** We are launching a template to help communities track what is happening. We are holding a press conference this Thursday June 11, 9 am at the Meeting Place – Queen and Bathurst to release some preliminary info.
5. **Organize/host a Recession Relief Forum** in your community or neighbourhood. The Coalition can offer you planning support to help with finding speakers, securing a venue, and publicizing the event. Contact us!

Check with delivery