



Back to Toronto Disaster Relief Committee folds after 14 years of spotlighting homeless

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It was the champion of the homeless.

Born in the late 1990s, when a combination of deep cuts to welfare and affordable housing were pushing hundreds of destitute Torontonians onto the streets, the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee firmly established itself as the voice of the most vulnerable.

The social activists, academics and business people who made up the TDRC — as it was also called — took up the cause with evangelistic fervour.

In the fall of 1998, a cluster of homeless deaths and dire warnings of a harsh winter ahead became the ominous backdrop to its concerted cry for help.

Frustrated by how quickly politicians dispatch money and even the army during ice storms and prairie flooding, yet ignore those perpetually in urgent need, the group staged a news conference on the steps of a downtown church and demanded the federal government declare homelessness a national disaster.



Sleep-ins, like this one at City Hall in November 2004, were a way for the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee to draw attention to the plight of the homeless. This is Nancy Baker, 44, who had been off the street for 8 months and had earlier joked that the group was asking her to spend another night on the street.

PETER POWER/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

They also called on all levels of government to commit to spending an additional 1 per cent of their budgets on affordable housing, with immediate emergency funding to help the country's swelling homelessness population.

It was a call to action that swept the nation, leaving a legacy that endures today.

The TDRC folded this week, felled by a lack of funding, shifting public interest and an inability to attract new blood to carry on the fight.

It was 14 years old.

For Sean Gadon, director of Toronto's affordable housing office, who worked closely with the group, TDRC's death is bittersweet.

"I'm disappointed they are gone," he said. "But the sector and the country and the city in particular are so much richer because they were there and helped in a very significant way to put these issues on the public agenda."

The TDRC's way of cutting through the complex roots of homelessness to the human stories of those suffering on the streets had a powerful impact on politicians, noted Charles Pascal, a former president of the Atkinson Charitable Foundation.

"TDRC really made people feel uncomfortable. That was their role," he said.

The group's Oct. 8, 1998, plea at the Church of the Holy Trinity, next door to the Eaton Centre, made front-page headlines and topped national newscasts across the country.

Toronto and other large Canadian cities were quick to declare homelessness a national disaster that fall. Ottawa refused, but appointed its first minister responsible for fighting homelessness in 1999. And money started to flow.

Since then, more than \$1 billion in federal funds has been earmarked for emergency programs to help the homeless, a lasting legacy recently reaffirmed by the Harper government.

Ottawa has yet to commit to the group's so-called 1-per-cent solution to kick-start a national affordable housing strategy. But in part because of the TDRC's work, municipalities, provinces, chambers of commerce, faith groups and numerous social agencies have taken up the charge.

"One of the things they did was put a very human face on why action is required," said Gadon. "People today have come to understand that the need for action is also deeply rooted in the economic, social, community and health consequences of not acting."

Spadina MP Olivia Chow and her late husband, Jack Layton, were strong political allies of TDRC. As president of the Canadian Federation of Municipalities in 2001, Layton turned TDRC's quest for a national affordable housing strategy into a local priority across the country. As federal NDP leader, Layton squeezed \$1.4 billion for housing out of Paul Martin's 2005 budget, Chow noted.

TDRC's eclectic make-up was key to its success. Street nurse Cathy Crowe, outreach workers Beric German and Bob Rose and retired NDP MP Dan Heap, were often the public face of the group. Along with the homeless and other social activists, they held memorials for those who died on the streets, staged "sleep-ins" at Nathan Phillips Square and videotaped squalid conditions in city shelters.

The group's strength behind the scenes included University of Toronto social work professor David Hulchanski, housing activist Michael Shapcott, businessman John Andras, realtor David Walsh and lawyer Peter Rosenthal. They provided academic, legal, theoretical and fiscal analysis to bolster the group's activism.

Their opposition to the eviction of people from Tent City — a four-year encampment of homeless people on the eastern waterfront that ended in 2002 — pushed former mayor Mel Lastman to pry money out of the provincial Mike Harris Tories to create a portable housing allowance.

Toronto's current Streets to Homes program can be directly linked to TDRC's efforts during the Tent City years, Gadon said. The initiative is now funded under Ottawa's Investment in Affordable Housing Program.

The city's cold and heat alerts, championed by the TDRC, are now common in cities across the country and go beyond helping the homeless to supporting isolated seniors and other shut-ins, he added.

But TDRC's momentum faltered as the world plunged into economic uncertainty in 2008. With business, unions and private donors under siege, there was less money to bankroll the group's operations. More poignantly, there was less energy.

"Organizations have their life cycle, and the time had come to close it up and move on to other things," said Andras, of Mackie Research Capital Corp., co-founder in 1993 of Project Warmth, an initiative that handed out more than 150,000 sleeping bags to the homeless over seven years.

Although the strength of the organization was its continuity of membership, it was also a weakness.

"As we all aged together and got tired together, we didn't seem to be able to bring in the younger people and fresh blood," he said. "To some extent that younger generation got involved in things like the Occupy movement and other initiatives."

For Pascal, TDRC died too young.

"This wake ought to be a wake-up call, because the work needs to continue in some sort of new expression," he said.

Crowe's 2004 economic justice fellowship from the Atkinson Foundation helped support TDRC's crusading work on homelessness for five years. But since then, the lack of funding has brought struggle.

Last year, the group closed its office in the Church of the Holy Trinity and became a virtual operation. This spring, Crowe gave up her cellphone.

"The decision to end our work has not been an easy one," she said. "Eventually, we realized that this hard next step . . . had to be taken."

The group's records and materials will be permanently housed in the Toronto Archives and made available to researchers, historians and students. York University's Homeless Hub will keep TDRC's media records, which cover homelessness both locally and nationally.

But Chow is among many who aren't ready to give up TDRC's quest.

"To quote Lastman — one of the first mayors to sign the disaster declaration in 1998 — Canadians are still asking: 'Where's the money for affordable housing?'" she said.

"It's still a disaster when people sleep on the street and can't find affordable homes."

A memorial for TDRC will be held June 12 at the Church of the Holy Trinity, 10 Trinity Square. It will be part of the regular monthly homeless memorial service — another initiative sparked by the group that will live on after it is gone.