

Toronto Disaster Relief Committee

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Toronto Disaster Relief Committee: 14 years of advocacy, activism and action

After 14 years of advocacy, activism and action, Toronto Disaster Relief Committee (TDRC) is closing. The following is a synopsis of our work.

The homelessness disaster unfolds

Mass homelessness became common in Canada starting in the 1980s. As the market economy de-industrialized creating more low wage jobs, senior levels of government retreated from social spending, instead pursuing American-style practices of dealing with social issues.

In the 1990s, the cancellation of the federal and provincial housing programs, cuts to social assistance rates and reduced social spending created a perfect storm. Homelessness not only grew but became a chronic state. Social service agencies were stretched thinner and overall conditions worsened. Old diseases like tuberculosis returned. More homeless people were forced into a nightly migration relying on church basements for emergency shelter, or were forced to sleep outside, sometimes creating squats. Homeless deaths were on the rise.

A unique collection of individuals came together in the spring of 1998 to address the growing problem of homelessness in Toronto and Canada. The group included a lawyer, a priest, a retired Member of Parliament, a retired teacher, a street nurse, a community organizer, a formerly homeless man, a university professor of social work, a housing advocate, a real estate investor and a Bay Street investment manager.

We first met in a small and bare meeting room at Sherbourne and Dundas and decided to declare homelessness a national disaster as our first undertaking. The Toronto Disaster Relief Committee was born. In October 1998 we held a press conference and public meeting at the Church of the Holy Trinity to issue the 'State of Emergency Declaration' which launched our national campaign declaring homelessness a national disaster.

<http://tdrc.net/disaster-declaration-declaration-d-etat-d-urgence.html>

The campaign focus was twofold: to call for the 1% solution--a reinvestment in a national housing program--and to seek disaster relief funds to deal with the immediate emergency of homelessness across the country.

<http://tdrc.net/1-solution.html>

As a "committee" we planned for a brief and focused existence. We believed that Canadians, when made aware of the inequity and life threatening conditions facing homeless citizens, would demand change. As Ursula Franklin pointed out at our media conference: "we have the legal and technical means to end it (homelessness)". Unfortunately, the problem has become entrenched; it has become a "normal" part of what Canada is. The solution has been ignored by policy makers.

Advocacy, activism and action

TDRC played a very important role in raising the visibility of, and the strategies for preventing and ending, homelessness. An important part of its work was as a catalyst and a partner: it helped to frame the discourse locally, provincially and nationally. The work around the Disaster Declaration, the 1% Solution and the ongoing analysis and strategic responses was critically important and had a real impact. Our collaboration through the National Housing and Homelessness Network and the interventions at Federal/Provincial/Territorial (FPT) housing ministers' meetings, including Fredericton, London, Quebec City, Gatineau and Winnipeg, were also key in shaping the national agenda. A strong working relationship that developed with municipalities and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, thanks to Jack Layton. In all this work, TDRC brought visibility to the issues, framed the debate, powerfully advocated for solutions, inspired, supported and strengthened the work of many local groups across the country and achieved real impact. TDRC proved to be a durable base both to support local, provincial and national campaigns that achieved some important successes, and also a place that trained and inspired a significant group of housing advocates across the country to take action in their own communities.

Perhaps our most important impact, beyond framing the debate, was to achieve a series of significant wins at the national, provincial and local levels. Whether as a linchpin, initiator, planner or supporter, TDRC's engagement in the collaborative nation-wide fight to improve the issue was vital.

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- the national homelessness strategy of 1999 (this included the Supporting Community Partnerships Initiative (SCPI) later renamed Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) plus the enhancement of the federal housing repair program - essentially the emergency relief funding we were calling for)
- the FPT Affordable Housing Framework Agreement of 2001
- the extension of the Affordable Housing Program in 2003
- \$1.4 billion in affordable housing funding in 2006 (from the 2005 Parliament)
- a five-year extension of the national homelessness and housing repair programs in 2008 (re-announced in the summer of 2011)
- \$2b+ affordable housing funding in the 2009 stimulus budget.

Much of this funding was matched by provinces and territories, and several jurisdictions have added their own initiatives (Alberta, Newfoundland and Labrador). There has been other good work that has grown out of, or been inspired by TDRC's work including international housing rights work, Ontario Human Rights Commission housing rights work and the Charter Challenge on the right to housing which was filed in the courts November 2011.

At the local level in Toronto where we have been based, TDRC worked diligently to respond to the conditions homeless people faced.

✓ TDRC was extremely influential in the opening of hundreds of new emergency shelter beds which set a precedent for other cities. This included leveraging empty and/or available buildings for emergency shelter such as the Moss Park and Fort York armouries (multiple times), institutional buildings such as the old Princess Margaret Hospital, Metro Hall, Doctors Hospital and the old nursing residence at 2 Murray St.

✓ TDRC made visible the unhealthy and inhumane shelter conditions that existed in many shelters and Out of the Cold programs. This led to new and revised municipal Shelter Standards; they are considered a best practice model by other municipalities. In addition, patterns of discrimination (for transgendered people and same sex partners) were exposed and remediated.

✓ TDRC addressed the growing impact of inclement weather--both heat and cold--on people who were homeless or underhoused. This resulted in the establishment of heat-alert and cold-alert protocols that focused on vulnerable populations including people who were homeless, the elderly and shut-ins. These too were considered best practices and modeled by other cities in Canada. TDRC campaigns on this issue helped social service agencies to leverage valuable municipal support and resources to augment those provided by charitable or non-profits such as Project Water and Project Warmth.

✓ TDRC helped to strengthen the 'community's voice' at city hall through strong and effective participation and agenda shaping at various committees including the Homeless Advisory Committee on Homeless and Socially Isolated Persons and the Board of Health.

✓ TDRC established the monthly Homeless Memorial which includes not only the tracking of homeless deaths but advocacy and research to expose the gaps in political responsibility for this issue. The monthly memorial, founded in October 2000, continues to be updated and commemorated monthly. Located at the Church of the Holy Trinity, it is now supported by a committee which includes the church, homeless and formerly homeless individuals and community agencies. The memorial is so innovative it has been emulated by other cities who want to create their own Homeless Memorial. In addition it won NOW Magazine's Best Memorial Award in 2005. Sadly, over 600 names are now on the memorial board.

✓ TDRC launched a number of other advocacy groups (the Recession Relief Coalition, Housing not War) as a means to connect housing and homelessness to broader economic and political issues and movements.

✓ TDRC's work to support Toronto's waterfront encampment of homeless people known as Tent City (1999-2002) is well documented in Michael Connolly's documentary film 'Shelter from the Storm'. The film chronicles the delivery of disaster relief including pre-fab housing to the site, press conferences, and our joint advocacy efforts which always ensured a voice for the residents. The post-eviction rent supplement program that enabled everyone to be housed was ultimately studied by the City of Toronto and proven successful. People's quality of life improved dramatically after being housed.

The disaster remains as does the need to end it

Although the political wins we have been involved in have been enormous we are painfully aware that they fall short in addressing the inequities that exist and the lack of a national housing policy. Many of these victories have been hard-fought but short-term, either a year or two or sometimes three (the 2008 Homelessness Partnering Initiative and Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program extension for five years is the longest that we have achieved), and have necessitated constant campaigning just to preserve the short-term gains. An equally important concern is that the funding that has been secured has always been far short of the actual need. Sadly, we have also witnessed diminished political commitment to protect and enhance emergency responses to homelessness such as shelter, outreach and adequate social assistance rates. To this day we are fighting to prevent the closing of the School House, a city-funded shelter known for its successful harm-reduction approach.

There is ample research to demonstrate that the deep structural issues including inequality and poverty are growing more severe and that rates of homelessness will continue to grow.

All polls show Canadians care about homelessness and want it ended. The 1% versus 99% statistics of the 'Occupy' movement clearly demonstrate that people want to see a massive redistribution of Canada's income and wealth. This is the biggest, most important issue of our time. This struggle includes ending homelessness and requires the now emerging vast and diverse social movement to force change, something we support and will be engaged in as individuals.

Thanks to so many

The decision to end our work has not been an easy one. We discussed and debated the ending of TDRC many times. Often, we appealed to our supporters for a few more dollars to keep our doors open or our phone on for another few months. We downsized, closing our office but remaining a virtual entity. But, eventually, we realized that this hard next step, the decision to permanently close TDRC, had to be taken.

TDRC has been a successful advocacy group, primarily because of the people who were part of our work. This includes the founding Steering Committee members who initiated and campaigned for many years, and newer Steering Committee members who brought fresh energy and ideas with their passion for social justice. Over the 14 years we benefited from highly skilled and committed staff and countless volunteers. We received donations, large and small, from supporters. There are simply too many labour unions, faith communities, social justice networks, students and individuals to thank. People affected by homelessness have always been our moral compass and for their support and involvement we are especially appreciative.

We are very honoured that the City of Toronto Archives has accepted our materials and records which will be permanently housed in their collection and made available for researchers, historians and students. York University's Homeless Hub has accepted our media records which cover homelessness both locally and nationally.

As we move on, we invite all Canadians to engage in the struggle to end injustice. In the words of our colleague and supporter, a fellow combatant in the fight to end homelessness, the late Jack Layton: "My friends, love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair. So let us be loving, hopeful and optimistic. And we'll change the world.

For more information please visit our website www.tdrc.net or contact us at torontodisasterrelief@gmail.com