

“Ending Homelessness in Ontario – How do we get there?”

This was the topic of the November 27th, 2014 Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC) Religious Leaders’ forum which took place in the Carr Building at St. Michael's College.

It was a great venue as we sat at tables of eight, instead of long rows of people, making fellowship with the other attendees much more effective and enjoyable. People from all over Ontario attended with one person from as far away as Thunder Bay.

Imam Dr. Abdul Hai Patel gave the opening theological reflection. He has been serving as Imam and Community Leader in Canada for 43 years. He is involved with many local, provincial and federal faith and service communities. He is a founder and member of several Interfaith groups and active in interfaith dialogues. He is a regular speaker at national and international conferences. He is a recipient of the Governor General and Ontario Government’s awards for Community Service. He has also received an Honorary Doctorate degree from the Canadian Institute of Islamic Studies.

Iman Patel stressed love for humanity —

- “love one another”;
- the poor have a right in the wealth of the rich;
- life is sacred for all;
- we must serve the hungry and poor and work collectively.

During our morning Coffee Break table discussions were encouraged and these were shared with the whole group:

- Toronto’s Multidisciplinary Outreach Team (MDOT) provides support and service co-ordination to homeless clients who sleep on the street, MDOT is unique in Canada. It provides:
 - Specialized, multidisciplinary care. Team members include psychiatrists, case managers (nursing, housing, and street outreach), and a concurrent disorders specialist.
 - Streamlines referrals, made possible through formalized collaborations and service agreements between agencies in different sectors. These partnerships pool organizational resources and help improve clients’ access to a continuum of health, housing and income supports.
- Streets to Home -- Housing and Homelessness Services. For services in Toronto see: <http://www1.toronto.ca/wps/portal/contentonly?vgnextoid=d75dd4b4920c0410VgnVCM10000071d60f89RCRD>
- Rev. Katherine McCloskey, Director of Spiritual Programs at the EHM (Evangel Hall Mission), a very broad full-service organization from gardens to food banks to a wide range of services. Similar to the Toronto Christian Resource Centre (CRC) at 40 Oaks (See: <http://tcrc.ca/who-we-are/40-oaks-the-building>).

Lou Rinaldi, MPP (Northumberland—Quinte West) and Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing provided the government line on our topic and took questions as well.

- Asked about Bill 39 – http://www.thestar.com/opinion/commentary/2014/11/25/queens_park_newcomer_aims_to_move_the_yard_stick_on_housing-goar.html He said this should have been a government bill not a private member’s bill and he recommended we write our MPP.
- Asked about lack of meetings with Premier and PM, he suggested we write our MPP.
- He referenced Adam Vaughan as an advocate for a national housing strategy.
- He also emphasized this quote from Nelson Mandela: “Overcoming poverty is not an act of charity but an act of justice.”

The keynote speaker was Michael Shapcott, Director of Affordable Housing and Social Innovation at the Wellesley Institute, an independent, non-profit research and policy organization, dedicated to advancing urban health. He has worked extensively in Toronto, in many parts of Canada, nationally and internationally on social innovation, the non-profit sector, civic engagement, housing and housing rights, poverty, social exclusion, urban health and health equity. He is recognized as one of Canada's leading community-based housing and homelessness experts.

Michael Shapcott did a slide presentation comparing the data from the last time he spoke at ISARC in 2008 to today. Between 2008 and 2011 –

- incomes have come down; average rent has increased by over 5.7%;
- housing need increased by +8.9%;
- individual housing waiting list increased +31%;
- household " " " " +37%
- seniors " " " " +68.9% -- due to living in poor housing situations and illness

He referenced the recent TD economics report on inequality --

http://www.td.com/document/PDF/economics/special/income_inequality.pdf

He pointed out that tax breaks to high incomes combined with cuts to programs increases inequality. Overall the stats in his presentation showed decline in investment in public housing and increase in demand.

Recommendations have been made for significant investment in more housing stock that is affordable and accessible to all categories of peoples with strong public accountability and shift to more control by tenants, e.g. co-ops. We have good models of co-op housing but some are bad. It all depends on the tenants. The housing legislation needs to be reformed to build stronger communities and give cities power to expropriate. He also pointed out that we need a full-time Ministry of Housing to ensure these reforms.

After lunch a presentation was done by a panel of representatives from STEP Home in Kitchener/Waterloo. STEP Home includes a set of 12 interrelated programs designed to end and prevent persistent homelessness and foster respect, hope, home and community. They showed slides on changing the language, e.g. use people first not their condition. For more information on STEP Home see:

<http://communityservices.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/communityprogramssupports/stephome.asp>

The day's event closed with several advocacy strategy recommendations, such as:

- Write personal letters to MPs and MPPs. Petitions, etc. are good for building lists but not for effective government change.
- We need to continue to speak up strongly and share stories, not data, with our faith communities as well as the politicians. Speak to them when they are canvassing.
- The National Council of Welfare did all the research needed in "The Dollars and Sense of Solving Poverty". It's time the governments stop doing more research and start to take real action and own some risks.
- Protect our economy by stopping harm done to our environment.
- Participate in community conversations.

Report submitted by Heidi Fiebig