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Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario
L'Association des infirmières et infirmiers
autorisés de l'Ontario

Open Letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper: Affordable Housing Now!

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

Gilles Duceppe, MP
Chef du Bloc Québécois
Chambre des communes
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

October 12, 2010

Dear Prime Minister and Mr. Duceppe,

This Fall, Members of Parliament will have a chance to vote for a national housing policy that ensures secure, adequate, accessible and affordable housing for all Canadians. Bill C-304 would require federal, provincial and territorial governments to consult with municipalities, Aboriginal communities, non-profit and private sector housing providers and civil society organizations to establish a long-overdue national housing strategy. Ontario's Registered Nurses strongly urge you and members of Parliament from the Conservative Party and Bloc Québécois to give your full support to Bill C-304.

RNs know from their own practices that safe, affordable housing is essential to good health. People who are homeless are sicker and have higher death rates than the general population.^{1 2} A Street Health Nursing Foundation survey found that the daily lives of homeless people were stressful, isolating, and dangerous where people were often hungry, chronically ill, and unable to access the health care that they urgently required.³ Living in shelters, rooming houses, and hotels is a marker for much higher mortality than would have been expected on the basis of low income alone.⁴ Substandard shelter with overcrowding, poor heating, inadequate ventilation, vermin, mold, and lead are health hazards in themselves while high housing costs further erode health by reducing resources available for other basic needs such as access to healthy food.⁵

Some individuals and groups face a disproportionate burden in being able to access safe, affordable housing. Housing stock in Aboriginal communities too often lack access to clean water and are in need of repair.^{6 7} As the Ontario Human Rights Commission has reported, people with disabilities, racialized groups, seniors, and those living with mental health issues are among those who are confronted by discrimination when seeking housing.⁸

The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has described Canada's homelessness and inadequate housing as "a national emergency."⁹ This was reiterated a year

later by Miloon Kothari, the Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing of the United Nations' Human Rights Council, who witnessed "the deep and devastating impact of this national crisis on the lives of Canadian women, youth, children, and men."¹⁰ Even before the current recession, there were more than 9 million Canadians precariously housed according to the Wellesley Institute:

- up to 300,000 Canadians are homeless;
- 450,000 to 900,000 Canadians are among the "hidden homeless";
- 705,165 households are in over-crowded housing;
- 1.5 million households are in "core housing need";
- 3 million households are in unaffordable housing;
- 3.3 million households live in substandard housing.¹¹

Delegates to the 2010 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Nurses Association passed a resolution calling for development of an integrated, comprehensive, national housing and homelessness strategy by the federal government in collaboration with provincial and territorial governments, Aboriginal communities, municipal governments, non-profit and private sector housing providers and those organizations that represent people in need of housing.¹² Recently, the Senate unanimously passed the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science, and Technology's report, *In From the Margins: A Call to Action on Poverty, Housing, and Homelessness*.¹³ Among the extensive analysis and recommendations for action, Recommendation 44 is to develop a national housing and homelessness strategy that includes a 10-year commitment of funds from the federal government and similar commitments from provincial and territorial governments.¹⁴ We understand that the New Democratic Party and Liberal Party are already committed to supporting Bill C-304, the Secure, Adequate, Accessible and Affordable Housing Act, which likely will come to a vote this Fall.

Now is the time for all Canadians, individually and collectively, to work together for practical strategies to address the national emergency of homelessness and inadequate affordable housing.

Mr. Prime Minister, Mr. Duceppe, Ontario's registered nurses look to you for leadership on this issue of crucial importance to the health of Canadians. The time to act is now. We look forward to seeing you and your colleagues stand proudly with the other parties in Parliament to ensure that access to affordable quality housing becomes a reality for all Canadians. Please make this happen.

With kind regards,



David McNeil, RN, BScN, MHA, CHE
President, RNAO



Doris Grinspun, RN, MSN, PhD, O.ONT.
Executive Director, RNAO

CC: All MPs

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- ⁶ National Aboriginal Health Organization. (2002). *Drinking Water Safety in Aboriginal Communities in Canada*. Ottawa: Author. http://www.naho.ca/english/publications/ReB_water_safety.pdf
- ⁷ Reading, C. & Wien, F. (2009). *Health Inequalities and Social Determinants of Aboriginal People's Health*. Prince George: National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health.
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- ⁸ Ontario Human Rights Commission. (2008). *Right at Home: Report on the consultation on human rights and rental housing in Ontario*. Toronto: Author.
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- ⁹ Goddard, J. (2006). Canada's poor face "emergency": UN. *Toronto Star*. May 23, 2006.
- ¹⁰ Kothari, M. (2007). United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing: Preliminary Observations at the end of his Mission to Canada 9-22 October 2007, 3-4. <http://www.hic-net.org/articles.php?pid=2210>
- ¹¹ Shapcott, M. (2009). *Canada needs a national housing strategy that engages key partners from the community up: A submission from the Wellesley Institute to the Commons HUMA Committee for its review of Bill C-304*. Toronto: Author, 3-4. <http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/files/billc304wellesleysubmission.pdf>
- ¹² Canadian Nurses Association (2010) *CNA Resolutions-2010 Resolution 2: Advocacy for an Integrated National Housing and Homelessness Strategy*. Retrieved October 7, 2010 from http://www.cna-aiic.ca/CNA/documents/pdf/publications/Resolution2_Housing_e.pdf.
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http://www.parl.gc.ca/common/Committee_SenRep.asp?Language=E&parl=40&Ses=2&comm_id=604
- ¹⁴ Eggleton, A. & Segal, H. (2009). *In From the Margins: A Call to Action on Poverty, Housing and Homelessness*. Ottawa: The Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science, and Technology, 13.