



RNAO's Submission on Ontario's Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy:
Housing is a Human Right and a Determinant of Health

Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing

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The Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO) is the professional association for registered nurses who practice in all roles and sectors across the province. We represent the nursing profession in Ontario, speaking out for health and speaking out for nursing.

RNAO's mission is to pursue healthy public policy and to promote the full participation of registered nurses in shaping and delivering health services now and in the future. We believe health is a resource for everyday living and health-care is a universal human right. In the context of our mission, we appreciate the opportunity to participate in this community consultation on Ontario's Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy.

Ontario's registered nurses know that access to safe, affordable housing is a fundamental human right and a key determinant of health. Ontario's Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy is being developed in the context of the province being in the midst of an affordable housing crisis. The Auditor General reports that as of December 2008, the number of Ontario households on waiting lists for social housing totalled about 137,000.¹ The average wait time to secure social housing was more than five years in many urban centres and one municipality reported a wait time of 21 years for all categories except seniors.²

Ontario's housing costs are the highest of any province, with a median annual household shelter cost of \$10,878.³ Nearly half of tenant households in Ontario spend 30 per cent or more of their income on housing,⁴ money that is then unavailable to spend on such essentials as food, medicine and child care. In fact, the Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto, which averages 85,881 client visits per month, found their clients are paying 76 per cent of their income on rent/mortgages, including utilities.⁵ At the same time, Ontario is the worst among the provinces in terms of jurisdictional investment in affordable housing. In the fiscal year ending March 31, 2009, Ontario spent \$64 per capita on affordable housing, about half the provincial average of \$115 per person.⁶ Nurses find this to be shameful reality in a country as wealthy as Canada, and in a province as privileged as Ontario.

Added to this is the fact that one third of housing stock located in Aboriginal communities is in need of major repairs compared to only eight per cent of Canadian dwellings.⁷ The First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey revealed that almost half of the respondents found mould or mildew in their homes in the 12 months preceding the survey.⁸ In terms of living in crowded dwellings, 31 per cent of Inuit and 15 per cent of First Nation people experience crowded conditions compared with three per cent for Métis and non-Aboriginal people.⁹ This is a reality that can, and must be changed.

Access to safe, affordable, appropriate housing that meets the changing needs of individuals and families throughout their life cycles is a key determinant of health and essential to good health. People who are homeless are sicker and have higher death rates than the general population. A study of men using homeless shelters in Toronto found mortality rates 8.3 times and 3.7 times higher than rates among men in the general population aged 18-24 and 24-44 respectively.¹⁰ Homeless women aged 18-44 years are 10 times more likely to die than women in the general population of Toronto.¹¹ Living in shelters, rooming houses, and hotels is a marker for much higher mortality than would be expected on the basis of low income alone.¹² A Street Health Nursing Foundation 2007 survey found that the daily lives of homeless people were stressful, isolating, and dangerous where people are often hungry, chronically ill, and unable to access the health care that they urgently require.¹³ Shamefully, some groups and individuals face even greater barriers in finding affordable housing. As the Ontario Human Rights Commission has revealed, people with disabilities, racialized groups, seniors, and those with mental health issues are among those who are confronted by discrimination from potential landlords.¹⁴

RNAO endorses the Housing Network of Ontario's Declaration built on the foundation that "we believe everyone in Ontario has the right to live poverty-free and with dignity in housing that is stable, adequate, equitably accessible and affordable."¹⁵ We support the key priorities that Ontario's Affordable Housing Strategy must address, including: 1) the affordability of housing; 2) the availability of affordable housing; 3) supports, programs and protections; and 4) a clear way to measure progress.¹⁶ In addition to fully supporting the Housing Network of Ontario's full set of recommendations that includes a mix of affordable housing options that range from supportive housing, municipal and private non-profit housing, co-operative housing, affordable private rental housing, and affordable home ownership,¹⁷ RNAO particularly urges in the strongest possible terms government action on the following recommendations:

RNAO's Recommendations:

- **Immediately enshrine the human right to adequate housing in federal and provincial legislation.**¹⁸
- **Immediately implement the recommendations of the Ontario Human Rights Commission to address discrimination in rental housing.**¹⁹
- **Move immediately to develop a fully-funded, long-term comprehensive Affordable Housing Strategy with clear goals and yearly targets to address housing insecurity.**

- **Invest in the upcoming budget on new affordable housing such as the Housing Network of Ontario's call for a minimum of 10,000 affordable housing units each and every year for the ten years of the Affordable Housing Strategy.²⁰ To ensure that housing is accessible to people with disabilities, all new affordable housing units must be designed and built using principles of universal access and accessibility.²¹**
- **Fund in the upcoming budget a program for regular maintenance and repair of new and existing affordable housing in order to address aging, substandard housing stock.**
- **Introduce and fund in the upcoming budget a universal housing benefit for all low-income Ontarians, whether receiving social assistance or not, to address the gap between tenant incomes and housing costs.²²**
- **Increase in the upcoming budget the funding for access to supportive community-based housing and services for those with physical, cognitive and/or mental health and/or addiction needs so that Ontarians may live with dignity at home.**

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in Ontario's Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy consultation. Building on the foundation of Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy and critically now as many Ontarians are hard-hit by the economic downturn, this is the time for bold leadership to build a stronger province by addressing housing insecurity. Ontario's registered nurses look forward to working together with government and a wide range of stakeholders in our community, especially those most affected by housing challenges, so that everyone is secured with a safe, affordable place to call home.

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