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Safe, Secure and Affordable Housing Is Human Right

In a previous article, I mentioned the Working Group to End Homelessness (WGEH), which currently consists of 31 United Nations Non-Governmental Agencies (NGOs) who have come together to form the WGEH. The mission of the WGEH is “to influence the UN political proceedings to heighten Member States’ and Civil Society’s concern for and the action against the social injustice of homelessness.” There are several Catholic agencies who are members of the WGEH, including several who are Vincentian family members and, of course, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul.

As we embark on our own national housing campaign, we must remember that housing and homelessness are a global issue that is directly related to poverty and the greater importance of the human dignity that every person is entitled to. In its 75 years of existence, the United Nations has never addressed the issue of homelessness. The 2030 UN agenda for sustainable development failed to give greater focus to this global problem but did include it in SDG 11 (sustainable development goal) on sustainable cities and communities: “Ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing, basic services and upgrade slums.” For the first time, the UN has issued a resolution on homelessness, describing it and calling on Member States to measure it. It is a testament to the power of advocacy, collaboration and partnerships among NGOs, people who experience homelessness, Member States and the UN.

The other major task has been to describe and define homelessness to enable Member States to measure and address the systemic drivers of homelessness. The WGEH has developed a description for homelessness, which reads as follows: “Homelessness is a condition where a person or household lacks habitable space, which may compromise their ability to enjoy social relations, and includes people living on the streets, in other open spaces or in buildings not intended for human habitation, people living in temporary accommodation or shelters for the homeless, and, in accordance with national legislation, may include, among others, people living in severely inadequate accommodation without security of tenure and access to basic services.”

Here in Canada and globally, we must realize the importance of addressing the issue of homelessness and the lack of adequate housing and the effect it has on so many people. The measuring of this issue is one with which we have had some success in Canada. However, it is not enough to gather data and numbers on housing and homelessness. The other and more important statistic is the effect on the human being. The loss of human dignity, physical and emotional health and the loss of any hope for a better future are factors that are much more difficult to measure. Our Society does have the ability to measure these factors during our home visits and in the other ways we are able to engage with our neighbours in need. Our personal relationship with so many people can provide us with an opportunity to listen to, advocate for and act on behalf of those in need.

The Focus Group—An extension of our current methods in which we engage with people living in poverty is the idea of inviting several people to take part in a focus

group. The group setting has had success in giving those taking part the opportunity to share their experiences, difficulties and possible solutions to poverty issues and housing. If you are interested in this option, let us know and we can provide further guidance on how to conduct such a gathering. Advocacy has major role regarding housing and homelessness issues and will be a major component of our housing campaign. While advocacy can be done at the national and provincial/regional levels, there is an important role that our members can play at their own municipal level. We encourage your involvement in your hometown.

One way to get started is to familiarize yourself with what services are currently available, what gaps there may be in such services and what are the opportunities to collaborate with other local agencies, organizations or faith traditions. One other segment to consider is the Indigenous population in or near your community. Whenever we discuss poverty issues, their effect on Indigenous people is usually more pronounced and is one that is calling out for our support. The Society in Canada has an opportunity to make a real difference through open, collaborative discussion with Indigenous leadership.

Our May edition of *Changing Times* will have more details on our housing campaign plans. Every council/conference is encouraged to begin talking about the issues, and how you may advocate or act locally on issues related to housing and homelessness in Canada, your province or region and your hometown.

Jim Paddon, Chair
National Social Justice Committee