

END HOMELESSNESS

ST. JOHN'S #WECANENDIT

HUMA Committee, June 19, 2020

Doug Pawson, End Homelessness St. John's

I would like to first start by thanking the Committee for inviting me to appear today. I appreciate your time and commitment to better understanding the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on our most vulnerable neighbours – specifically those experiencing homelessness.

At End Homelessness St. John's, we understand the dynamic interplay between the forces that create homelessness and housing instability for our most vulnerable neighbours. We recognize and accept that homelessness itself is not the issue; it is the culmination of social system breakdowns. These breakdowns, whether they be related to health, the economy, intergenerational poverty, colonization, exploitation, gender-based violence, trauma and more, all serve as pathways into homelessness. We also recognize that the opposite of homelessness is not just a roof over one's head, it is housing stability – having the resources, skills and confidence to maintain one's housing. Finally, we believe that it is possible, by working together, to end homelessness in St. John's and across Canada.

While many people across our community, and indeed across Canada, continue to suffer as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, one thing we have borne witness to is the incredible ways in which governments across all levels, have come together to support our most vulnerable neighbours. Watching institutions become more agile and collaborative gives me great hope that the pathway to housing and housing stability for those experiencing homelessness can happen.

The Government of Canada's emergency response, specifically the work within Employment and Social Development Canada and Reaching Home, under the leadership of Minister Ahmed Hussen and Parliamentary Secretary Adam Vaughan and their teams should be commended. The emergency funding allocated under *Reaching Home* has allowed communities to not only respond to the pandemic but begin thinking about how they can leverage investments to enact critical systems change that will lead to more communities across Canada reducing homelessness.

During the pandemic it became clear that the investments required to end homelessness in our community, like many others across the country, are needed now more than ever. The pandemic highlighted the significant gaps that exists for our vulnerable neighbours who live on the margins. In St. John's, we have seen an increase in demand for emergency shelter, an increase in demand for mental health services, and increased demand from women experiencing violence, amongst a host of other needs. What has become painfully obvious for those working in our homeless-serving sector is that the gaps to securing safe and affordable housing have widened.

But ending homelessness is not going to be done solely by building houses. For many people who experience homelessness, it requires additional supports to be part and parcel of any and all housing and homelessness strategies and investments. Research undertaken across several Canadian communities over the past ten years has demonstrated that those experiencing homelessness are at increased risk of:

- Morbidity and mortality
- Acute illnesses including traumatic brain injury and vascular disease
- Chronic medical conditions such as diabetes, cancer, and respiratory illnesses

#WECANENDIT

END HOMELESSNESS

ST. JOHN'S #WECANENDIT

- Severe mental illness and substance abuse issues, and
- Infectious diseases, including Hepatitis C, HIV, and tuberculosis

Taken together, what the research and the voices of those working on the front lines everyday across Canada show, is that people experiencing homelessness often have disabilities and medical conditions that place them at greater risk of COVID-19.

What we learned during the pandemic is the importance of finding ways to work across government departments that, by their very design and nature, operate in isolation. Finding new solutions to long-standing social and health inequities requires a commitment from all levels of government to innovation and collaboration within and between all levels of government.

This is why for us in St. John's and across Newfoundland and Labrador, we see an opportunity to lead inter-departmental conversations and collaborations amongst our income assistance programs, justice department, health and regional health authorities, and our provincial housing corporation to re-design our housing and homeless-serving systems to bring about real change for our most vulnerable neighbours.

The same approach can be taken with the leadership and commitment from the Federal Government. Investing in the Federal Housing Advocate and the National Housing Council is one place to demonstrate this commitment. As is investing in better understanding the unique needs of urban and rural Indigenous housing in Canada.

Even with the much-needed investments as part of the Government of Canada's emergency response, there is a lot of work in front of us if we are going to plan for a second surge.

The system costs of homelessness cut across multiple departments, as do the cost savings when investments are aligned. With the support and leadership of the Federal Government, we see an opportunity for a concerted effort to ensure:

- Community Entities and Provincial Governments work collaboratively with the Federal Government to maximize the investments under the *National Housing Strategy* and *Reaching Home*
- All departments within the Federal Government that have a housing, homelessness and health mandate, in fact all departments with a social policy mandate, work collaboratively to ensure investments are aligned and contribute to ending homelessness and housing stability
- Continued investments into housing and homelessness preventions as part of a post-pandemic relief package. These investments will accelerate an economic recovery through much needed job creation, save money and more importantly, save lives

Thank you again for inviting me to appear today. I look forward to our discussion.

#WECANENDIT