We can end homelessness in Canada

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Homelessness

Homelessness has been an issue for so long many view it as a natural fixture of our world.

Inevitable. Unfixable. Quite simply, that's not the case. Mass homelessness is the result of

choices we have made. It's time to make better ones.

The federal government has just finished a consultation on what to include in a long-overdue

National Housing Strategy. If we get it right, it could mark the beginning of the end of

homelessness in Canada.

For decades governments trying to balance budgets opted for false economies, cutting

investment in housing and squeezing social and mental-health services. The net result?

100,000 fewer units of housing than would otherwise have been built, and a growth in

homelessness in communities across Canada.

Thirty-five thousand people in Canada experience some form of homelessness every day,

235,000 a year! Another 1.5 million people pay more than they can really afford – more than 30

per cent of their income – on housing. Canada emergency shelters are getting fuller –

occupancy is up more than 10 per cent since 2004, and those trapped in shelters are staying

longer. For seniors and families, the average stay has increased to more than 20 days.

More than one in four homeless people in Canada are women, about one in four are seniors

and one in five are youth. Indigenous people are 10 times more likely than non-indigenous to

end up in emergency shelter, representing as much as one-third of shelter users, despite being

only 4.3 per cent of the population. Two per cent of shelter users in Canada are veterans.

These are obvious human costs, but the cutbacks driving growth in homelessness haven't

even saved governments money. The failure to address homelessness means government

ends up spending more and more – on emergency shelters, health care, and incarceration. For

years, as we trimmed budget lines for housing and services, we added even greater costs to

other budget lines, all while leaving more people on the street.

It doesn't have to be this way.

The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness and York University's Canadian Observatory on

Homelessness just released the State of Homelessness in Canada 2016 which outlines the

steps governments could and should take to end homelessness. The recommendations are

tangible, concrete, affordable and proven to be effective wherever they have been tried

including in Canada. It's a list of things that we can actually do. 1/2

The report calls for a new federal/provincial/territorial framework agreement focused on

community capacity, prevention, and "Housing First" for those now on the streets. Success will

need increased investment and leadership at all levels of government and the community.

Priority should be on where the needs are most acute and the impact will be greatest and most

immediate – including the chronically homeless, youth, veterans and indigenous peoples.

It will be crucial to retain and expand existing affordable housing stock: You can't end

homelessness without building more housing. But this can come in a variety of forms, including

through a national housing benefit, an affordable housing tax credit that encourages private

social housing investment, and by expanding investment in affordable housing for indigenous

peoples.

Yes, there's a price to doing this – $4.4-billion a year for the next decade, an increase of $1.8-

billion a year over current investment. But that's only about $50 for each Canadian annually,

less than a dollar a week – a bargain when we consider that homelessness costs the Canadian

economy $7-billion each year. Ending homelessness would yield a 2:1 return on investment.

It's not often that an issue of national importance cuts across ideologies and partisan politics.

Addressing issues of poverty and social justice are regular refrains for progressives; reducing

spending while more efficiently using resources are a hallmark for fiscal conservatives. Being a

contributing member of society and a full participant in the economy requires an address.

The National Housing Strategy presents an opportunity to make a lasting impact. Let's use it to

end homelessness.