

MultiFaith Alliance To End Homelessness Declaration and Call to Action

Definition **Homeless:** lacking a dwelling place to call home. This includes people living on the street, in city shelters, in decrepit housing or staying temporarily with friends or relatives.

Premise This declaration and call to action is based on our belief in the fundamental dignity and worth of every human being, and argues that the care of poor and vulnerable people of all ages is a central tenet of our respective teachings and traditions, of good government, and of responsible, compassionate citizenship.

We hold that ...

- ◆ *Every person needs a home ...* and that a home is more than just four walls and a roof;
- ◆ *We are more alike than different ...* and that people who are homeless share the same needs and longings we all have;
- ◆ *Compassion demands action ...* and that we must apply ourselves to understanding the issues, advocating for people in poverty, engaging them, and sharing our resources with them;
- ◆ *Ignoring poverty makes everyone poorer ...* and that when people in poverty are shunned, our societal burden increases while our societal capacity diminishes;
- ◆ *Justice and mercy define good government ...* and that people who are homeless will be a priority for policy makers concerned with justice and mercy;
- ◆ *Poverty belongs at the centre ...* and that throughout history, when governments and communities have put the care of people in poverty at the centre of their agendas, all have benefited;
- ◆ *Government responsibility does not excuse our apathy ...* and that as religious and spiritual communities, we have important contributions to make to government and social service organizations;
- ◆ *Religious and spiritual communities make good partners for government initiatives ...* and that our principles, resourcefulness, and experience add meaning and value;
- ◆ *The very people we serve can be our greatest teachers ...* and that we must add our voices to theirs to bring about significant and sustainable change.

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We are representative of the many Canadian people of various religious and spiritual communities who believe that **the care of poor and vulnerable people of all ages is a central tenet of our respective teachings and traditions, of good government, and of responsible, compassionate citizenship. We are convinced of the fundamental dignity and worth of each and every human being.** We have witnessed the rise of homelessness as a crisis of disturbing proportions, and of societal, systemic and individual complexity. **The time has come to add to material action a clear, creative and challenging public voice.**

We all need homes, not just housing

A home is more than just four walls and a roof. It's a whole life situation that means being welcomed into a safe, secure and dignified place to live; enjoying healthy, nurturing relationships; having the opportunity for education and meaningful work for just pay; and being free to worship, dream and play in vibrant community. Housing initiatives need to take these values into account, and aim at creating far more than "affordable" space.

We are more alike than different

Drastically different life circumstances can create the illusion that we are inherently different beings, especially when those external differences are ones that may frighten or repulse us – such as homelessness. These perceived differences allow us to distance ourselves still farther, until we can easily justify our non-engagement with people who are homeless. Yet the closer we get to people, even those whose experiences, circumstances and proclivities seem completely foreign to us, the more essentially similar we find ourselves to be. **People who are homeless or marginally-housed have the same needs and longings we all share.**

Compassion demands action

Compassion is more than a feeling. Genuinely caring about people motivates us to take action. We must, therefore, apply ourselves to **learn why people become homeless or are trapped in poverty, engage in social and political advocacy, make a point of getting to know people who may live outside our own "comfort zones", and seek to share our time, abilities and material resources.** All of these energies are directed at effecting material change – such as dignified housing, meaningful work, or access to health care or education – in the lives of the people for whom we have compassion.

Ignoring poverty impoverishes everyone

Abandoning people to poverty increases health problems and welfare rolls, and sometimes drives people to crime – all major burdens for governments, and therefore, tax payers. The generational entrenchment of poverty diminishes hope (the capacity to dream) and the sense of personal value in the individual. Children, the unrealized potential of our nation, when they are born into poverty, start life so far behind others that they may never be able to catch up. The whole of society is enriched when the creative gifts of the poor are supported by governmental and social systems that affirm the value of what they have to offer. **When people are shut out because of their poverty, poverty itself "snowballs", increasing our societal burden while diminishing our societal capacity.** Homelessness in Canada is a clear and concrete manifestation of this truth.

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Justice and mercy define good government

Believing that our progress is measured by our standard of care for the least privileged among us, we expect good government to formulate policy that not only works toward a level playing field, but offers “second chances” to people who have failed or done wrong. We believe that justice ought to be primarily restorative rather than punitive. We recognize that both social policies and budgets are declarations of a government’s moral intent. We will offer whatever support we can to government initiatives that are just and merciful, and will continue to use every means at our disposal to press governments at every level until such policies are made a priority. **We believe that homelessness will be a priority for policy makers concerned with justice and mercy.**

Poverty belongs at the centre

Throughout history, when governments as well as religious and spiritual communities have put the care of people in poverty at the centre of their agendas, all have benefited. For perhaps 150 years, the general political and religious trends in the western world have been aimed at reducing poverty – with a significant level of success. In recent years, however, these positive trends have been in decline, diminishing and further marginalizing people who are poor, sometimes to the point of criminalizing certain aspects of poverty. We believe that, if this decline continues, it will ultimately be disastrous for our country. Religious and spiritual communities in Canada have a responsibility to provide moral leadership by making a priority of caring for people who are poor, and particularly people who are homeless, in their own budgets and activities.

Government responsibility does not excuse our apathy

While various levels of government clearly have a responsibility to address these matters, religious and spiritual communities must not succumb to a dichotomy whereby we construe our responsibilities to concern only the spiritual, and the government’s only the physical. **As religious and spiritual communities, we have different capacities than governments or social service organizations.** We must be ready to provide creative leadership in some circumstances, and to collaborate in others, in order to create realistic, dignified and sustainable options for people who are homeless or marginally-housed.

Religious and spiritual communities make good partners for government initiatives

Religious and spiritual communities have for many years been the largest non-government service provider to the poor and homeless in North America. In fact, many social services now funded and directed by government were begun by such groups. Since most spiritual teaching and practice encourages the development of functioning communities, a high level of volunteer participation, and the donation of money and other resources, **we can often achieve more with less, adding value and offering a wealth of experience and healthy community context to government resources.** Already, existing religious and spiritual communities offer a holistic context for the development or implementation of services and programs that government is not equipped to create on its own.

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**A message to our brothers and sisters
who struggle with poverty and homelessness:**

We will...

Learn all we can about the systemic, sociological, economic, cultural and spiritual deficits that have left you in this state. We will listen carefully to you, for you are our greatest teachers. We will seek out the knowledge others have acquired, and teach what we ourselves have learned to those who want to care more effectively for you;

Act with diligence and integrity to create with you healthy, nurturing relationships, and safe, secure, dignified homes;

Support you in speaking for yourselves and speak on your behalf when your own voices are not heard, to the end that Canadian religious and spiritual communities, governments, media and businesses would make the substantial reduction of homelessness, poverty and their root causes a high priority;

Encourage religious and spiritual communities to support and partner, wherever possible, with government initiatives aimed at the substantial reduction of homelessness, poverty, and their root causes;

Cooperate with others committed to these baseline objectives, respecting differences of approach and philosophy.

**We make these commitments
in the places where we work and serve,
in our religious and spiritual communities,
and in our personal lives.**