



Canada needs a national housing strategy that engages key partners from the community up

A submission from the Wellesley Institute to the Commons HUMA committee for its review of Bill C-304

November 5, 2009

Thank you for the opportunity to make these submissions in support of Bill C-304, An Act to Ensure Secure, Accessible and Affordable Housing for Canadians. The Wellesley Institute is an independent research and policy institute dedicated to advancing urban health. We know from our extensive research, and from our policy work in communities across Canada and at the national level, that a good home is a basic requirement for a healthy life. We also know that good housing knits together communities and strengthens the local – and national – economy.

Our research, such as the Street Health Report 2007, draws the links between poor housing / homelessness and increased morbidity (illness) and premature mortality (early death). Our research, such as the We Are Neighbours report, shows that supportive and affordable housing is not only good for residents, but it also benefits the surrounding community. Our research, including Poverty Is Making Us Sick – the most comprehensive review of income and health in Canada – shows that the impact of income and housing is not just among the very poor and the very rich. There is a gradient which demonstrates that smart interventions along the spectrum of low, moderate and middle-income households yields positive results.

The links between housing and health are complex, and powerful. Comprehensive initiatives – such as the national housing strategy set out in Bill C-304 – deliver multiple bottom lines: Better for individuals, better for communities, better for the economy, and better for government. It is important to avoid seductive “magic solutions”, single strategies that are offered as a solution to all of the nation’s housing woes. The consultation process in Bill C-304 will allow a critical assessment of the ideas that deserve scrutiny, and ensure that good practices are adopted.

There are some who suggest that the federal government can be guilty of dictating rigid policies that others are required to follow. Bill C-304 doesn’t make that mistake. It directs the federal housing minister to engage with partners to create a national housing strategy that reflects the needs of local communities. However, two groups have inadvertently been left out. The non-profit and private sectors have valuable expertise and should be at the table. The non-profit sector includes non-profit, municipal and co-operative housing providers who have successfully and cost-effectively developed and managed more than half a million good homes; as well as thousands of community-based organizations that deliver housing-related services. The private sector has been a vital partner in previous national housing programs, and the private sector is a

key player in innovative housing strategies such as inclusionary housing policies that used in hundreds of US municipalities. We respectfully request that Bill C-304 be amended at sections 3(1), 4(1), 4(2) and 5(1) to include representatives of the non-profit and private housing sectors.

There are four main reasons why Canada needs a national housing strategy.

First, the federal government has said it wants to work more closely with the provinces and territories on affordable housing.

Second, provincial and territorial governments have said they want to work with the federal government to create a national housing framework.

Third, the federal government is investing billions of dollars in affordable housing annually, but without a national housing framework, it is hard to determine the value of those investments.

Fourth, without a national housing strategy, efforts to meet the needs of the one-in-four Canadian households who are precariously housed remain fragmented and unco-ordinated.

Canada, as noted in Bill C-304, has ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which includes the right to adequate housing. In February, the United Nations' Human Rights Council held its first Universal Periodic Review of Canada's compliance with its international obligations, including the right to adequate housing. The council received hundreds of pages of detailed material from the federal and provincial governments, plus submissions from non-governmental groups. During the UPR, a number of countries raised specific concerns about housing insecurity and homelessness in Canada. The federal government formally responded on June 9, 2009. It accepted the UN recommendations on housing, and stated:

“Canada acknowledges that there are challenges and the Government of Canada commits to continuing to explore ways to enhance efforts to address poverty and housing issues, in collaboration with provinces and territories.”

The federal government's offer five months ago to collaborate with the provinces and territories on affordable housing can be realized through the mechanism proposed by Bill C-304.

Second, the provinces and territories have been asking the federal government to partner with them in a national housing strategy for more than four years. The federal government signed the five-year Affordable Housing Framework Agreement with the provinces and territories in 2001. By 2005, the provinces and territories were seeking a new national housing framework. On September 22, 2005, provincial and territorial housing ministers released principles for a new national housing framework, stating:

“We all share responsibility for good housing outcomes. Federal, provincial, and territorial governments have a shared commitment in ensuring that their citizens have a decent and secure place to live, and, thereby, can access and contribute to the social and economic life of communities.”

Unfortunately, there has been no progress – not even another federal-provincial-territorial housing meeting – since September of 2005. Bill C-304 provides the welcome mechanism to get government ministers around a common table to create effective affordable housing solutions.

Third, without a national housing strategy as set out in Bill C-304, Canadians don't know whether the \$17.5 billion that the federal government is investing this year in affordable housing is being spent effectively. Earlier this year, the Auditor General for British Columbia released a comprehensive review of that province's homelessness programs. He concluded:

“Clear goals and objectives for homelessness and adequate accountability for results remain outstanding... [The] government has not yet established appropriate indicators of success to improve public accountability for results... We found significant activity and resources being applied to homelessness issues but there is no provincial homelessness plan with clear goals and objectives... When there are no clear goals or performance targets, accountability for results is missing. How will we know we are successful if we have not identified success?”

During the current fiscal year, the federal government reports it will invest \$3.57 billion in direct spending on affordable housing. These investments include:

Housing program expenses	\$2,247,000,000
Affordable housing initiative	\$164,000,000
Homelessness Partnering Strategy	\$134,800,000
Renovation of social housing	\$500,000,000
Housing for low-income seniors	\$200,000,000
Housing for persons with disabilities	\$25,000,000
First Nations' housing	\$200,000,000
Northern housing	\$100,000,000
Total	\$3,570,800,000

In addition, the federal government reports it will invest \$13.9 billion in housing-related tax expenditures. These tax expenditures include:

Home renovation tax credit	\$2,500,000,000
Various home buyers' tax subsidies	\$190,000,000
Capital gains exemption for principal residence – full inclusion rate	\$11,235,000,000
Total	\$13,925,000,000

What are the goals, objectives, targets? Where is the accountability for results? How do we know if this spending is delivering value? Until Canada has a proper national housing framework, the federal government cannot ensure accountability for results. Bill C-304 sets out a process to achieve accountability for multi-billion federal housing investments.

Finally, we need a national housing strategy to assure the nine million-plus Canadians who are precariously housed that they will get the practical and pragmatic housing help that they require. Even before the current recession hit, the housing numbers for Canada were grim:

- 150,000 to 300,000 Canadians are homeless;
- 450,000 to 900,000 Canadians are among the “hidden homeless”;
- 705,165 households are in over-crowded housing;
- 1.5 million households are in “core housing need”;
- 3 million households are in unaffordable housing;
- 3.3 million households living in substandard housing.

With the onset of the recession, half a million jobs have been lost, and more than 150,000 Canadian households have been evicted from their homes because they couldn’t afford to pay their rent. Canada’s housing supply deficit – the gap between the number of new households and the amount of new housing – is growing at 220,000 households annually. The housing needs of local communities are diverse. Grimsby is different from Laval and different again from Dartmouth or Weyburn. That’s why we need a national housing strategy that engages the provinces, territories, municipalities, Aboriginal communities, non-profit and private sectors and builds from the community up.

The federal government has said it wants to work with the provinces and territories on housing solutions, and the provinces and territories are keen to engage. Bill C-304 provides the mechanism to move forward and capture this important opportunity.

We urge this committee, and Parliament, to give swift consideration to this draft legislation so that we can move quickly to the important work of framing the details of a new national housing strategy for Canada. The Wellesley Institute and our partners across Canada and internationally have plenty of successful housing models and we look forward to bringing them into the consultation process of Bill C-304. Alberta has already made a \$1 billion down payment on its commitment to a 10-year housing plan to end chronic homelessness. Ontario has promised its comprehensive housing plan will be released by mid-summer of 2010. In recent years, Canada’s provinces, territories and municipalities have significantly ramped up their affordable housing investments – a clear demonstration of their commitment to be partners in housing progress.

Bill C-304 will ensure that the federal government plays a vital role in creating a comprehensive new national housing plan. We look forward to answering questions and providing more information to HUMA committee members. Thank you, once again, for this opportunity.

Respectfully submitted by:

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The Wellesley Institute advances urban health through rigorous research, pragmatic policy solutions, social innovation, and community action.