

## Toronto's Streets-to-Homes program is a promising start

By Nick Falvo

Many Canadian families are living in housing they can't afford. Given the current recession, a well-funded national housing strategy aimed at the most destitute — in particular the homeless — is more important now than ever. In the meantime, new models of service delivery are always welcome; one such model is Toronto's Streets-to-Homes (S2H) program.

Toronto's homeless population increased by 400% between 1980 and 2000. Its members experience chronic physical and mental health conditions at much higher rates than the general population. The homeless who live outdoors have been without a roof over their heads considerably longer than those living in shelters.

Government-assisted housing in Canada has traditionally been focused not on sheltering the homeless, but rather on providing homes for the middle class, seniors, low-income families, and the disabled. And very little government-assisted housing of any kind has been created in Canada in the past 15 years.

Until recently, no level of government made a concerted effort to move rough sleepers (those spending most nights outside the shelter system) directly into permanent housing. Toronto's S2H program, which originated in February 2005, has done an impressive job of filling this void, helping rough sleepers access low-cost housing (though not increasing the supply of affordable housing stock).

Relative to most programs for the homeless, S2H serves a large number of clients and has a large budget. This gives it clout, and it has used this influence to create special arrangements with key actors such as the Ontario Disability Support Program, Toronto Community Housing Corporation, private landlords, and non-profit housing providers.

The program has met with considerable success. For example, roughly 600 people have reportedly been housed each year through S2H since February 2005, and 90% of those it has housed have reportedly remained housed. Once housed, the majority of S2H clients report quality of life improvements.

But, as is the case with most service delivery models, there is room for improvement. To be sure, while some S2H clients have as much as \$600 per month to live on after rent is paid, others have as little as \$100. Not surprisingly, roughly two-thirds of clients recently reported that they "regularly ran out of money to buy food."

Another worrisome finding from clients should also be noted: when asked if they felt they had a choice in the type of housing they were offered through the program, 29% responded with an outright "no." Likewise, when asked if they felt they had a choice in the location of their housing, 30% said "no."

This lack of choice stems from two main factors. First, S2H does not add to the housing stock; rather, it helps people access the limited supply of already-existing housing. Second, most of the S2H clients receive social assistance

and must settle for the cheapest housing available.

These shortcomings can and should be addressed through support from senior levels of government. Indeed, S2H should not only continue to operate, but also be replicated in other Canadian municipalities.

Two measures could improve both S2H and its counterparts in other jurisdictions:

- First, the federal government ought to double funding levels for — and make permanent — the Homelessness Partnership Initiative (HPI), a decade-old program that is set to expire in five years. S2H currently relies on HPI for a substantial portion of its budget. Similar initiatives in other municipalities could do the same. Making HPI permanent would not only stabilize S2H and similar programs in other municipalities, but would also allow officials to engage in long-term planning.

- Second, provincial governments must address the affordability problems experienced by those assisted through programs such as S2H. The S2H clients who are left with as little as \$100 after paying their rent do not receive rent supplements from the provincial government. If provincial governments were to make such supplements available to all those participating in programs of this nature, their after-rent income would be substantially greater. Moreover, they would have greater choice in the housing they receive.

The City of Toronto should be commended for implementing an innovative program, but it cannot adequately address homelessness single-handedly. Both the federal and provincial governments remain key players in building a national affordable housing strategy that addresses the needs of the homeless.

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### Life expectancy rises, especially for women

A girl born in Japan today will probably live to celebrate her 86th birthday, the longest life expectancy anywhere in the world, according to the World Health Organization's latest annual health statistics.

Men live longest in San Marino, where the average life expectancy for a boy born today is 81. Sierra Leone has the shortest life expectancy for men, just 39, while Afghan men live to 41 and women to 42, on average.

Much of the sharp decline in life expectancy in many African countries is attributed to HIV-AIDS. In Canada, a girl born today can expect to live to celebrate her 83rd birthday, and a boy to live to 78. In the United States, life expectancy is up to 81 for women and to 76 for men.