

Homelessness: A right to all Rights

Joint Declaration in favor of those who are homeless,
socially excluded and who live in extreme poverty

Preamble

In 1998, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights deplored Canada for its choice of policy objectives, “addressing the budget deficits by slashing social expenditures, the State Party has not paid sufficient attention to the adverse consequences for the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights by the Canadian population as a whole, and by vulnerable groups in particular”. The Committee considered that public policies in regards to social assistance, unemployment insurance benefits, as well as cuts in education, housing, health and social services have seriously contributed to the rise in number of people who are homeless, the aggravation of the housing crisis and the increase in use of food bank facilities. Consequently, amongst the recommendations proposed by the Committee, included was the suggestion “that the federal, provincial and territorial governments address homelessness and inadequate housing as a national emergency” and that government “implement a national strategy for the reduction of homelessness and poverty”.

Seven years later, the situation is even more alarming: there is an increase in the number of people affected in all regions of Quebec, a widening in the spectrum of people touched, a multiplication of problems and a lengthening of the period of homelessness for many individuals.

“*The Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms* expressly recognizes that every person possesses certain freedoms and certain fundamental rights”. The Charter also recognizes “that all persons must be treated equally”. Yet, the rights of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are often disrespected, forgotten or blatantly denied.

The present Declaration has two main objectives. First, the signatories wish to express their solidarity towards those people whom are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Second, they want to acquire an additional instrument for the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

The signatories assert that no person should be subjected to being in a state of homelessness or in a situation of having no resources or support. In addition, it is considered by the signatories that homelessness is not a question of fate.

We have the conviction that it is possible to act against social exclusion. It is a question of collective responsibility.

By collective responsibility, we understand that our individual and collective choices and actions respect the notion and consideration of the common good.

By collective responsibility, we also understand that a person is not solely responsible for his or her state of homelessness. On the contrary, homelessness is a result of a combination of vulnerabilities and of structural and collective factors for which we can and must individually and collectively act upon.

Chapter I: Recognizing the needs

In 2003, a single employable person had a welfare income of 6758\$ which corresponded to 34% of the estimated annual poverty line, calculated each year by Statistics Canada (Source: National Council of welfare).

In March 2004, a total of 236 717 people, including some 80 000 children, used a food bank in Quebec. Since 2003, the number of people having used a food bank has increased by 10.7% (Source: Canadian Association of Food Banks).

At the time of the 2001 census, 111 385 households in Quebec devoted 80% of their revenue to housing. Little over half (53.8%) of the households having an annual income under 10 000\$, devoted more than 80% of their revenue to housing (Source: Statistics Canada).

General considerations:

Homelessness is not simply a housing problem; rather it is a living condition often resulting from a process of social exclusion, of marginalization and of a series of vulnerabilities which result in a person being denied his or her citizenship and inevitably making it impossible for that person to exert his or her rights and responsibilities.

On a human and social level, homelessness is an intolerable situation; the cost that it represents for the homeless individual and for society in general is enormous.

Homelessness is the manifestation of a society's failure to support and include those who are most vulnerable and to guarantee the protection of the rights of the poor with firm policies and concrete and adequate measures.

Considering the need for the recognition of the different factors, individual and structural, that lead to homelessness;

Considering the need to:

At the economic level:

- ❑ Insure a better distribution of the wealth;

At the housing level:

- ❑ Establish various housing programs that guarantees housing that is accessible, adequate, stable and safe;

At the health level:

- ❑ Reinforce accessibility and equity to health and social services. We demand that the government immediately commit itself to addressing the problem within the State's health and social services;

At the community level:

- ❑ Favor the inclusion of those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and who are experiencing isolation and rupture, and who have been uprooted from their familiar social environment, and who often find it difficult to develop new ties with others, often a consequence of their experience with neglect, abuse or exploitation;

Continuation of Chapter 1: Recognizing the needs

At the moral level:

- ❑ Promote values such as social justice, solidarity, sharing and cooperation, and intervene to relieve the moral and psychological distress of those who are homeless;

At the family level:

- ❑ Recognize the need for social organization that supports families and children in difficulty;

Considering public space:

- ❑ Allow people who are homeless to have access to public and community areas and facilities and counter the judgment of those who are homeless and the criminalization of behaviors often associated with being homeless;

At the education level:

- ❑ Favor inclusive and adequate methods that incite and facilitate people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and who wish to pursue their education;

At the social participation level:

- ❑ Allow people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to exercise their citizenship;

Finally, we stress the urgency to reinforce the accessibility for homeless people or at risk of homelessness to services, resources and activities, let be health, social, education or judicial services.

Chapter II: Recognizing fundamental Rights

- ❑ **The right to a decent income** which covers a persons basic and essential needs, such housing and food;
- ❑ **The right to an adequate and financially accessible housing**, not simply a shelter but a place to live that is safe and dignified;
- ❑ **The right to support services** directed against neglect, abuse and exploitation;
- ❑ **The right to have access** to services, resources and activities that are free, confidential and appropriate, particularly in regards to medical, psychosocial, psychiatric, judicial and educational services;
- ❑ **The right to choose** to participate or not to measures, programs, activities and services designed for people how are homeless or at risk of homelessness;
- ❑ **The right to be a citizen.** People who are homeless must be recognized as being a citizen with the same rights and responsibilities as any other person. They must be able to exert their freedom of expression and to participate socially and democratically as any other person. They must have the same rights to access public space and facilities.

Chapter III: Committing to the cause

Consequently, we commit to:

- Ensuring that the rights of those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are respected and that their quality of life is improved;
- Promote the present Declaration as well as the rights that are advocated for those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness;
- Work towards the creation of a Quebec homelessness policy that will include the fundamentals rights mentioned within the present Declaration. The policy which will call out to all levels of government, must recognize the scale and significance of the homeless problem, it must mention the need to make homelessness a priority, and it must allow for progressive measures for the local, regional, provincial and national level.