



FAITH COMMUNITIES IN
ACTION AGAINST POVERTY

ISARC RELIGIOUS LEADERS FORUM 2021

SUMMARY REPORT

By: Elin Goulden - ISARC Executive Member

Over 70 people from faith communities across Ontario joined ISARC on the afternoon of November 24, 2021 for our virtual forum “Housing: The Key to Health.” Rabbi Yael Splansky of Holy Blossom Temple spoke of the upcoming festival of Hanukkah and how the small act of lighting the first candle was the beginning of the process of bringing light to our world. She also reminded us of the words of Rabbi Israel Salanter, who said “The physical needs of others are my spiritual responsibility.”



Rabbi Yael Splansky

The keynote address was delivered by Ricardo Tranjan, of the Ontario office of Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. He got participants’ attention from the outset by declaring “There is no housing crisis.” As he went on to explain, Canada’s housing market, as it is currently structured, is extremely lucrative for a lot of people. Two-thirds of Canadians own their own home, while landlords and Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) operate in a stable and lucrative environment, an environment which is also favourable for elected officials. Only renters and those people who have lost their homes are in crisis. The problem is that they lack enough power to be able to change a system which is built on their exploitation and exclusion.

To solve a crisis, which is not a crisis for those with economic and political power, is a daunting task that requires bold policy changes, not merely tinkering around the edges. Tranjan advised that we need to stop thinking of renting as a

phase or “stepping stone” to home ownership, and stop thinking of home ownership as a necessity. The desperation of first-time home buyers to get into the market helps drive up prices, yet between 60-65% of renters don’t make enough to be able to afford to buy a home, and don’t qualify for subsidized housing. Rather, we need to consider housing options and policies as well as

panel discussions on particular aspects of housing: Housing Advocacy, Social Assistance and Housing, and Long-Term Care. Each discussion was moderated by an ISARC Steering Committee member with another member taking notes on the presentations and questions asked.

In Housing Advocacy, Douglas Kwan of the Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario

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the Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario financial planning options and policies, that will allow people to rely less on increasing housing prices to secure their retirement.



Ricardo Tranjan (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives)

After the keynote address, representatives from all provincial parties in the Legislature were invited to make remarks. The Forum heard from the Green Party, the Liberal Party, and the New Democratic Party, but the governing Conservative Party did not respond to ISARC’s invitation.

Participants then joined one of three

noted several pressures on low-income tenants. Most low-income tenants – including 88% of Ontario Works recipients, 70% of ODSP recipients and 71% of people with annual incomes below \$31,000 are housed in the private rental market. Many available rental properties are being bought up by Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs), which are highly profit-driven and look for any opportunity to raise rents. On top of this, during the COVID-19 pandemic the Landlord and Tenant Board has shifted to all-virtual hearings, to the disadvantage of



Douglas Kwan (ACTO)

low-income tenants who may not have access to computers or reliable internet. As a result, evictions are increasingly uncontested.

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He recommended advocacy on a number of issues, including expanding inclusionary zoning requirements in municipalities, committing more public buildings, lands, and funding toward non-profit affordable housing, removing exemptions to rent control, and advocating for a return to face-to-face meetings at the Landlord and Tenant Board, as well as increasing social assistance rates.

The inadequacy of social assistance rates was the main theme of the second breakout group, led by Laura Cattari of the Hamilton Round Table on Poverty Reduction and Jennifer van Gennip of the Simcoe County Alliance to End Homelessness. Both speakers noted that low social assistance rates are driving increased homelessness. In Simcoe County, only 40% of those in core housing need have been targeted for housing supplements, pointing to increased need for direct financial supports. Moreover, “affordable” housing options are rarely affordable enough for people on social assistance. Ms. Cattari noted that when social assistance rates

have been increased, these increases have been to the basic needs portion of social assistance rather than the housing portion, resulting in social housing providers having to provide ever-deeper subsidies to people on social assistance. The Income Security Roadmap for Change, released in late 2017, recommended collapsing social assistance benefits into a flat rate which would be available to all social assistance recipients,



*Laura Cattari
(Hamilton Round Table on
Poverty Reduction)*



*Jennifer Van Gennip
(Simcoe County Alliance
to End Homelessness)*

regardless of housing situation – freeing recipients from intrusive questions about their relationship and living situations and freeing caseworkers from having to do complex calculations to determine benefits. By flattening the rate structure AND raising the rates, it would create a stronger income base to which housing supplements could be added as needed. A similar result could be achieved by the introduction of a Basic Income. Both speakers recommended that faith communities support the efforts of social assistance recipients to organize for change. In addition, they noted that affordable housing is being lost at such a rate that maintaining the stock of affordable housing (i.e. through the purchasing power of community land trusts) is even more urgent than advocating for new affordable housing to

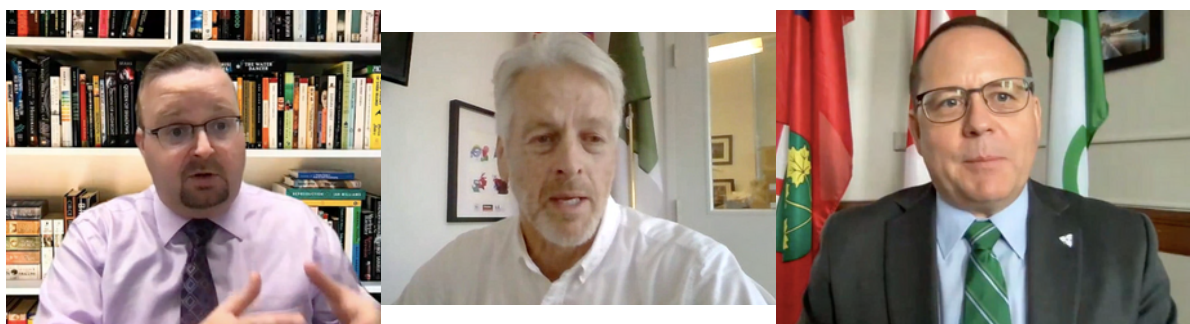
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working conditions of staff. For instance, most care home residents prefer to use toilet facilities if possible, but short staffing means that homes rely on incontinence products rather than helping residents to the facilities, resulting in a loss of dignity and often further health complications for residents. The shortcomings of long-term care have been made excruciatingly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, as over 4,000 residents of long-term care facilities in

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In the third breakout room, Sandra Caleta of Advocates for Long-Term Care Reform and Natalie Mehra of the Ontario Health Coalition spoke about long-term care as a dimension of housing. It is important to recognize that long-term care homes serve not just the elderly but also younger people with ongoing care needs: anyone is just one accident away from needing to live in a long-term care facility. Because long-term care residents depend on care home staff to meet their basic needs, the living conditions and the care of residents are directly impacted by the

Ontario have died of the virus to date. The greatest proportion of deaths were in private, for-profit facilities. Unfortunately, new legislation fails to address the issues adequately, by not enforcing minimum staffing standards and by promoting the very for-profit care home models that have seen the worst outcomes for residents. The Financial Accountability Office has reported that projected spending on long-term care is inadequate to meet the projected needs of our aging population. Moreover, funding and availability for home care, which most



Left to right: MPP Stephen Blais (Ontario Liberal Party), MPP Chris Glover (Ontario NDP), MPP Mike Schreiner (Ontario Green Party Leader)

With 2022 being a provincial election year, it is an opportune time to make housing a pressing issue for all parties.

people prefer if it is available to them, is even lower. It is important for us to make long-term care standards and funding an issue in the upcoming election.

pressing issue for all parties, and with the insights gained from our Forum speakers, we are in a better position to do so effectively. ■

The panel discussions all generated a good deal of interactive discussion as well as practical advice on advocacy. With 2022 being a provincial election year, it is an opportune time to make housing a



A portion of participants, ISARC Religious Leaders Forum 2021