

HOUSING CHALLENGES

Summary report from the June 18, 2019

Voices Hearing in Kitchener

In June 2019, the People’s Action Group of the Region of Waterloo Housing Stability System partnered with ISARC to host a Voices from the Margins hearing. They invited members from ALIVE (Awareness of Low Income Voices Everywhere), the Disabilities and Human Rights group and Alliance Against Poverty to take part in the hearings. Members of staff and interns from Mennonite Central Committee Ontario’s Walking with People in Poverty Program, House of Friendship and the Social Development Centre Waterloo Region helped facilitate the discussions and record notes from the hearings.

The Voices from the Margins hearings, held across Ontario in the spring and summer of 2019, is an initiative of ISARC, the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition. ISARC formed in the 1980s when members from faith communities were invited to be part of the Government of Ontario’s Review of the Social Assistance system, led by Judge George Thompson. That review resulted in the *Transitions* report published in 1988.

The Social Assistance Review Committee visited 14 communities across Ontario to gather input for the Review. When the review was completed, members from the faith communities who participated in the review, decided to reconstitute themselves as the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition, with the aim to see the recommendations from the review implemented.

Over the years, ISARC returned to the 14 communities and others throughout the province to find out what had changed for people living on the margins. Had they seen improvements in the income support system? Housing? Employment? Transportation? Accessing Services? What changes would they suggest that could improve their situation?

ISARC has produced half a dozen reports from those hearings that have been held over the past three decades. The last such report, *Persistent Poverty*, was released in 2010.

Participants at the Voices hearings spoke to four questions:

1. What are the issues you face in your daily life?
2. Please describe your life on social assistance or at a low-wage job?
3. During the past few years, would you say your life has gotten better, gotten worse, or is about the same in terms of you being able to meet your daily needs, your housing situation, being able to buy food, etc.?
4. What are two or three things that would help you in terms of those issues?

Issues that came up in response to those questions included the challenges of accessing safe and affordable housing.

Housing Challenges

Having stable, safe and affordable housing has a powerful impact on people's well-being. One person spoke about its impact on their mental health.

"For me, in the past couple of years, the only thing that has gotten better is renting a room instead of couch surfing and boarding rooms. I did not know if I would have roof over my head. It was so stressful, and it ruined my mental health. Now I am renting a room, so I know where I will have my roof over my head."

Another spoke to the critical role stable housing has for personal well-being. "When I moved into non-profit housing I had stable income and stable housing... those things help. There isn't enough time given to how important stable housing is to emotional wellbeing."

But for many people, living on a low income puts safe and stable housing out of reach.

"I'm better off than most," said one person, "because I have a trust fund. But I can't afford to live alone. I always have to have roommates, usually 4 or 5 people you don't know living in one house. Things go missing. There are drugs in the house, smoking weed in the house, people not getting along. I'm not able to live the way I want to."

One couple own their own home. "We are a little unique as we own our own home. It's rare to have a home and be low income," they said. "We were not low income as we bought the house. As illness occurred it happened."

While this couple owns their own home, the income available to them through ODSP makes it hard to maintain their home.

"To live on ODSP for any period of time what happens when your fridge breaks down, washer etc.? We don't have money to pay for things. We were living for a year and a half without hot water. If we were renting we would call the landlord but we own the house so we can't. This is a physical issue. Taxes are high as well."

Not having any housing was a reality for a number of people. One person reflected on the complex reality of her time at the women's shelter. "First time when I walked into the Mary's Place [the YW Emergency Shelter], I had a full bag and a stroller and I walked in and it was shady and dirty and I do not know what I am doing and they helped me. I was there and I was happy not going on the street. ... It is hard when you are in shelter, but it helps you to move forward. You get toiletry, clothes, and there are groups that give things too. The daily things and thoughts that I should be doing better than this. It was awful and you move forward. ... It is pretty much, it would either kill you or make you the strongest person that you would ever be. It got me to the lowest place I've ever been, but also built me up."

Another participant talked about how they really wanted to avoid going to a shelter. "The weather is warm enough right now. You can hide places to stay safe. I would rather camp with proper gear rather than stay in the shelter, sleeping in fear that someone will steal your stuff."

A number of participants spoke about changes in the housing services system in Waterloo Region. For many years, agencies serving people who were homeless worked together in a collaborative called STEP Home (Support to End Persistent Homelessness). One participant explained, "The Region of Waterloo was the service manager to manage workers at different agencies through STEP Home. Now the Region has contracted with Lutherwood (a local community agency)."

Several people voiced disillusionment with the new system. "The new program is not working. Huge difference, they changed the workers, moved workers around ... now they are scattered and you have to find the outreach workers yourself. STEP Home saved so many lives."

"I liked the idea of STEP Home," said one participant. "Now have to fill out a SPDAT (form). People being housed are the people that are hardest to house. So there are many people that are getting no supports."

One person spoke to what they appreciated about STEP Home and what they feel has been lost under the new system. "A solid committed worker that follows you from the first desk all the way through. When you are homeless you do not trust anybody and if you do not have that one person you do not care and you are so lost, and you are confused and lost. The person who knows you and helps you and follows you and getting housing, lamps, furniture, it is the connection and friendship, but now you have too many different workers for one person. It is hard on you, impossible."

One participant asked, "Why did we change the program that was working?"

But another observed, "There were more folks experiencing homelessness, so now there are more people in need of housing so STEP Home didn't work for the number of people needing services."

"It needs to start at housing," one person said, tracing the root of the problem to a lack of affordable housing. Another noted, "we need to change rules so that it's easier for people to be creative, like a granny flat in a back yard."

Another person pointed out "There are 18 buildings going up in the downtown core (of Kitchener). There will be less than 20 affordable units. There is no incentive from the government. The government is not doing anything to force developers to create affordable housing. The government wants to help the developers to share the job market."