HELPING YUKON’S HOMELESS

Providing adequate housing for vulnerable groups in a large northern territory with a small, scattered population and a harsh winter climate will make Yukon a better place for all, says its Opposition Leader.

Mr Arthur Mitchell, MLA, in Whitehorse.
Mr Mitchell became Leader of the Yukon Liberal Party in June 2005. He was elected to the Legislative Assembly in a by-election in November 2005 and re-elected in the general election of 2006. Mr Mitchell is also Liberal critic for the Executive Council Office, the Department of Finance and the Department of Health and Social Services. A businessman, he has been the Executive Director of the Yukon Chamber of Commerce, a business consultant, realtor and property developer.

Homelessness takes on life and death significance in Yukon’s harsh northern climate. The debate over housing as a basic human right takes on greater meaning when survival depends on shelter from the cold. Yukon’s small population base makes it that much more difficult to address homelessness because the government has no opportunity for the economies of scale that would be found in larger jurisdictions.

The fact that homelessness remains an unresolved social issue in Yukon is cause for concern. Government alone cannot address all the homelessness problems for each individual in need.

The harsh reality of Yukon’s northern climate however, demands that we meet every individual’s need for shelter.

Providing permanent shelter in Whitehorse for the homeless population has been reviewed, discussed, and debated several times in many forms. The only thing that has remained consistent throughout these discussions is the evasiveness of a workable solution that is both achievable and affordable.

Local efforts by non-government organizations to provide temporary shelter for the “hard to house” have provided a patch-work social safety net for the homeless demographic.

Governments at all levels have also developed a patch-work of programmes that are separately funded and specifically focused to address different aspects of homelessness.

While there can be significant differences between each of us as individuals, there are rare
opportunities when we can all come together to find a solution for a collective problem. If we are to help our fellow human beings live full, rich and meaningful lives, a place to call home is a good start.

Supportive housing
Supportive housing is a hybrid solution aimed at addressing the need to provide a home for the most vulnerable people in our society. The term "supportive housing" refers to affordable, quality housing for people with mental health issues. It takes the aspects of institutionalized shelters including on-site supervision and accessible support services and combines them with aspects of government-run affordable housing initiatives that offer privacy, security, and tenure.

Supportive housing is not intended to be a catch all for the homeless. Tenants share a common need, which could include individuals with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, brain injuries, cognitive or physical disabilities, autism, as well as individuals who are recovering from substance abuse problems or simply struggling to develop basic life skills.

Such facilities have been built and operated in dozens of neighbourhoods throughout Canada for several decades. Establishing adequate supportive housing in Yukon and sustaining an environment where supported living is both effective and economical is going to require everyone working together to achieve meaningful and lasting results.

We don’t have to start from scratch on this issue. We can learn from the lessons of other areas and apply what we’ve learned to the specific and unique circumstances of Yukon. The proper role for Parliamentarians in this case is to demonstrate leadership in creating inclusive neighbourhoods – listening and providing pragmatic solutions to the concerns that are raised.

Surviving Yukon’s harsh winter climate is a challenge for vulnerable groups in society like the homeless.
The cost of supportive housing is much less than the cost of “doing nothing”. Currently housing investments are not coordinated with support services funding. Government and non-governmental funding priorities do not include hybrid solutions such as supportive housing and private sector developers will not address the full scope of supportive housing on their own.

**Non-Government Organizations**
The Northern Cities Supportive Housing Coalition is a Yukon founded non-for-profit organization that is dedicated to providing affordable and supportive housing to our most marginalized individuals. The coalition envisions supportive housing with self contained suites that include common space, innovative building technologies, and on-site services to support healthy living. A safe, secure and healthy place to live is an important prerequisite for obtaining meaningful and lasting employment.

Northern Cities Housing Coalition takes a “housing first” approach, which means that they envision a shelter that allows people to consume alcohol within their own suite, but not within common areas. The theory is that if we demand sobriety in advance, we exclude some of the people who most need society’s assistance, which only leads to increased human tragedy and strain on our health care and criminal justice systems.

The Challenge Community Vocational Alternatives has been serving marginalized Yukoners for many years. Challenge CVA has applied for funding to provide permanent accommodations for at least 20 persons with disabilities that are currently in a transient living environment.

They are proposing a facility that would have a full-time onsite manager that will provide a safe, secure environment as well living supports and line-of-sight needs for marginalized Yukoners, especially those who self-identify with disabilities.

The need for supportive housing is well established and both of these organizations are responding to a different aspect of the same issue. Unfortunately there is currently a maze of programmes and rules in Yukon that create a significant administrative burden to any one advocating for supportive housing. There is no single solution or one-size-fits-all response. We’ve got to work together or risk getting nothing done at all.

**Local health integration networks**
As Parliamentarians we can lead the way in this respect by removing the obstacles that prevent these innovative solutions from being
developed. Governments at all levels, business, non-for-profit organizations, community outreach groups and even tenants can contribute to the success of these endeavours.

Canada stands alone among developed countries in lacking a national housing strategy that includes supportive housing. The federal government has provided some funding for pilot projects in several communities, which can provide useful lessons, but long-term funding for housing and supports are needed, not more pilot projects.

While current funding for supportive housing may be inadequate for the task, Yukon could achieve efficiencies by following provincial governments that have consolidated and integrated these fractured programmes into Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs).

Such an organization ensures that funding is properly coordinated at the local level and regional strategies are available for safe secure and affordable housing.

A place to call home
Public data show that supportive housing does not hurt property values or increase crime and that the tenants make important contributions to their neighbourhoods. Tenants contribute a modest amount to local businesses and economy, they participate in the friendliness and social interaction amongst neighbours, and are just the kind of great neighbours that every community needs.

Tenants have in some situations experienced being targets for criminal activity. In response, tenants and staff have developed internal ways to handle crime that protects both tenants and the neighbourhood.

The City of Whitehorse, through its Official Community Plan, can establish clear targets and adequate funding for supportive housing facilities in Whitehorse as part of a 10-year housing strategy and remove any regulatory hurdles that make it more difficult for supportive housing projects to move ahead.

Community organizations play a vital role in supportive housing. Challenge CVA, and the Northern City Supportive Housing Coalition are good examples of community leadership specifically directed at addressing supportive housing.

What these organizations are striving to achieve, however, cannot be accomplished without everyone’s help.

Community leaders should also take an active role in building strong neighbourhoods by engaging supportive housing providers and tenants in their work. Community leaders can promote the benefits that supportive housing tenants bring to a neighbourhood.

Supportive housing tenants recognize that their presence and contribution to the world around us is good for our community. Get involved and stay involved! Supportive housing tenants know, first hand, the value of supportive housing in their lives.

It has often been said that a society will be judged by how it treats its least fortunate and most vulnerable people. We have the knowledge and the resources to provide the basic human right to shelter for all Yukoners. In doing so, we will not only better the lives of those we assist, but we will improve our own lives as well, and Yukon as a whole. We are blessed with a wonderful and majestic place to live, and we cannot continue to tolerate the homelessness and substandard housing of any of our neighbours if we are going to be truly proud Yukoners.

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