Shared Neglect: Canada's Housing Policy

December 3, 2004 – Despite its important contribution to Canada's social and economic policy goals, housing has become a policy orphan.

Federal and provincial withdrawal from the housing field and the inability of the market or communities to fill the gap create a state of "shared neglect" say the authors of a new CPRN study.

In their report, ***Housing is Good Social Policy***, Tom Carter, Canada Research Chair in Urban Change and Adaptation at the University of Winnipeg, and Chesya Polevychok, Research Associate, call for the re-integration of housing policy with other sectors of social and economic policy. The paper traces the interaction of housing with health, education, income security, immigration, employment and community development.

"We find the contribution housing can make to policy in each of these spheres is being overlooked," says Carter. "Take health, for example. A dollar invested in social housing today could have a greater impact on health outcomes than if it were spent on the health care system. Yet such comparisons are rare."

What's more, good housing benefits a number of social objectives at the same time, from improving educational performance, to better health, employment, integration of new Canadians, and stronger communities.

Nevertheless, some 1.7 million Canadian households lack adequate or affordable housing today. And many of those who experience housing problems – Aboriginals, seniors, single parents, recent immigrants – are also significant users of social services.

"The effectiveness of those services is undermined when housing is treated as a separate policy world," says Carter.

As an example, the authors cite the case of social assistance, where a portion of the payment is designated for shelter. Given the shortage of suitable housing, that shelter allowance falls far short of what the market demands. Welfare recipients must take money away from food and clothing to cover housing costs.

…/2

e-network e-network work e-network e-net

In fact, public spending on housing through social assistance greatly exceeds direct spending on housing programs. In 1999/2000, for example, the city of Winnipeg spent $5 million developing new social housing units. In the same year, the housing component of social assistance payments in the city amounted to $50 million. That money paid for housing that was often substandard and consumed as much as 50% of family income.

“Is that the best way to spend our housing dollars?” Carter asks. “Both social housing and social assistance target poverty. One affects supply and the other demand. It’s important to get the balance right between the two.”

From a social policy perspective, social housing has additional advantages. It serves many generations, creates much needed stability, and is usually associated with support services that facilitate reintegration into society.

Beyond integrating housing with other social and economic policies, the authors recommend; re-engagement of the federal government in a leadership role in the development and delivery of social housing; provincial participation in funding and working with cities and neighbourhoods to integrate housing with other social and economic initiatives; municipal efforts to build community capacity and foster sustainable housing ventures; strengthening housing research and education to highlight the benefits of improved housing and; developing community capacity and expertise to do the job.

At the “micro” level, they recommend; expanding the social housing portfolio; employing both supply and demand side initiatives to broaden the continuum of programs to assist the working poor and those on social assistance who are in private rental units; using housing design, management and location to bolster other social and economic initiatives; creating incentives to preserve, modernize and add to the private rental housing stock.

“What is clear is that failure to integrate housing with other social and economic policy sectors raises costs all round, both human and economic,” says Carter. “It’s time to bring housing policy in from the cold. We can’t afford the alternative.”

e-network e-network
work e-network e-net