

# Calgary Herald

## Cash alone won't solve the problems

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Byline: Bev Longstaff  
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With winter almost here and the days getting shorter and colder, Calgary shelters have already begun to turn away patrons. As a result, for the second time in as many years, Calgary has opened a temporary shelter to augment what is available to the individuals and families in need of warm accommodation over the coming months.

This is how we are marking National Housing Day in Calgary this year. Surely we can do better.

The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation predicts Calgary will experience the largest decline in rental affordability this year compared to four other major Canadian centres.

That's not good news in a city where the most recent citizen satisfaction survey found 61 per cent of the participants felt their quality of life had declined since 2004, and gave cost of living and homelessness as some of the reasons for that dissatisfaction.

This year, Calgary's average rent is forecast to increase by 12 per cent while the average income of renter households will grow at only half that pace. It is true the average income of Calgarians is increasing, but it is not keeping up with rental rate increases.

Faced with increasing homelessness, and knowing we could do better, Calgary took action. The Calgary Committee to End Homelessness was formed last January; their 10-year plan is expected to be unveiled early next year. And now the province has joined the fight.

On Oct. 21, in the wake of recommendations from the province's Affordable Housing Task Force, Premier Ed Stelmach announced plans for a "secretariat of action on homelessness" that will oversee the development of a provincial 10-year plan.

Citing "renewed determination" and "concrete solutions," the province is offering us the opportunity to become part of a larger, co-ordinated effort to address the shelter needs of so many low-income Albertans.

One year ago, the Poverty Reduction Coalition began asking for just such a partnership in the Funds, Land, Incentives recommendations report they submitted to all three levels of government. Needless to say, we were pleased with Stelmach's announcement.

These plans will only be successful if they are complementary and are backed up by policy changes such as an amendment to the Municipal Government Act that clarifies the use of inclusionary zoning as an

affordable housing tool in municipalities.

At present, the act is unclear and municipalities are uncertain. Our hope is that the provincial secretariat will live up to its potential to streamline the efforts of many municipalities.

The Alberta government says it is going to do more than just commit money to finding a solution. They intend to work with the organizations that understand the causes and issues, then determine a strategy to respond to the needs of each community.

And there's the key -- the strategy must recognize that, for the most part, municipalities know what will work best for them. They've done that work already. What they need from the province is support in the form of policy amendments and sharing best practices among communities.

Insufficient affordable housing and the struggles of homeless Calgarians will not be solved with money alone; they will not be solved by the provincial or municipal government; they will not be solved by social service agencies. A collaborative approach is absolutely necessary.

The coalition believes there is a role for everyone in reducing poverty. We hope a co-ordinated provincial effort will streamline those activities.

But government action is only part of the solution. The question for Calgarians must be what can we do about poverty and homelessness in our city?

We ask each of you, as employers and as community members, to become involved in finding solutions to poverty and homelessness in Calgary. The Poverty Reduction Coalition believes that with the help of Calgarians, the additional efforts of a provincial secretariat and some necessary policy amendments to support the changes that must and will be made in our communities, we can effectively address poverty and the pressing need for more affordable housing in this city and in our province. By working together, performing both big and small acts, it is possible to foresee a time in the future of this city when National Housing Day could be celebrated by all Calgarians.

Bev Longstaff is co-chair of the Affordable Housing Committee Poverty Reduction Coalition.