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Time for a New Year's resolution to ensure decent housing for all Albertans

The Alberta government undertook a hasty review of affordable housing in Alberta that submitted its report to government in early October. In mid-December the government responded. Now, on the eve of a new year, the Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness (ECOHH) challenges the government to make housing security more than a drastically underfunded incidental in its agenda.

"We need a clear New Year's resolution from Premier Jason Kenney that 2021 will be the year we commit to adequate funding to address the housing crisis devastating the lives of far too many people," asserts ECOHH president Laura Murphy.

The government-appointed review panel report indicates a half a million Albertans (one in nine people!) are spending more than the 30 percent of income for housing. Thirty percent is considered the maximum a person should spend to not create challenges with other living costs. Over 165,000 families meet the definition of being in core housing need and 20,000 are on waiting lists for subsidized housing, lists so long they are meaningless.

"The housing crisis in Alberta is a prescription for further human and economic disaster. The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the challenges people have to meet even the most basic preventive health measures without proper housing," Murphy notes.

The government has accepted the recommendations of the review panel, but ECOHH finds most of the recommendations vague and unlikely to support housing developers or service providers to plan well for action.

"The government says it wants to be a funder and partner in addressing housing needs, but the absence of any commitment to a significant increase in funding support for housing leaves most of the recommendations on shaky ground. And the promise of a strategic plan for housing without a commitment to include the human right to housing in legislation is not encouraging," Murphy says.

While the recommendations accept the need for rent subsidies for some people, they are silent on the need to take a stronger approach to rent regulations, as exist in most provinces, or to eviction prevention. There is no indication the government will re-consider the reductions in rent subsidies announced in the provincial budget earlier in the year. The recommendations also ignore the evidence that the most successful and effective non-market housing is done by the social profit/not-for-profit sector and housing cooperatives, where the majority of funding should be targeted.

In its submission to the review panel, ECOHH urged the government to use better income assistance programs for low-income Albertans as a way to enable people to address their own housing challenges. "When income support programs and minimum wage jobs are not adequate to make ends meet, people are condemned to live in 'Pay the rent or feed the children' misery, never free of eviction anxieties," Murphy observes.

"It has been 13 years since the last time the government studied housing security issues. During that time homelessness has cursed thousands of our neighbours, and many more have had to survive in housing that is too expensive, dangerous, unhealthy, insecure, and without needed supports. One significant way to recover well post-pandemic would be for the government to

show leadership by real action to assure there are good homes for all. Without such a resolution for 2021, the review panel's report has little value," Murphy concludes.