

**A NATIONAL PRIORITY
FEDERAL FUNDING FOR HOMELESSNESS
INITIATIVES**

**Memorandum presented to the
House of Commons
Standing Committee on Finance**

Pre-Budget Consultations on the 2007 Federal Budget

**Réseau Solidarité Itinérance du Québec
(RSIQ)
P.O. Box 60140
5101 St. Denis Street
Montreal, Que.
H2J 4E1**

September, 2006

1. Réseau SOLIDARITÉ Itinérance du Québec (RSIQ) and its demands

The Réseau SOLIDARITÉ Itinérance du Québec (homelessness solidarity network of Quebec or RSIQ) is made up of regional homelessness stakeholders in ten or so regions of Quebec. It represents some 200 organizations working with several thousand people who are homeless or at risk.

The RSIQ was created in 1998 and is involved at various levels: information sharing, knowledge sharing, action and political representation.

Its objective is to help improve the living conditions of disadvantaged persons who are homeless or of no fixed address, reduce homelessness, help such people fit back into society and eliminate poverty.

Since 1999, when the federal government established the homelessness funding program Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI), the RSIQ has played a lead role at the community level for the federal and provincial governments with respect to homelessness. Since then, the RSIQ has been an active member of the SCPI Advisory Committee.

The RSIQ urges the federal government to continue funding for homelessness through the SCPI program with a grant of \$50 million dollars annually for Quebec.

The Réseau SOLIDARITÉ Itinérance du Québec is spearheading several initiatives that are intended to ensure the continuation of the SCPI.

RSIQ has the support of over **350 social groups** who are in a position to ascertain what the needs of their respective regions are (and they are contributing to a fax campaign targeting Minister Diane Finley).

In Quebec, several major **municipalities** (Montreal, Saguenay, Sherbrooke, etc.) have also notified Prime Minister Harper of the need to extend the SCPI for several years, either through municipal resolutions or directly by mail.

The **government of Quebec** is an active partner on the SCPI file, and has also demonstrated its approval of a federal government commitment in this area several times.

Various **parties** at the federal level have supported the continuation of the SCPI: the Liberal Party of Canada, who first launched this initiative; the NDP, who often voice their concerns regarding housing and homelessness; and the Bloc Québécois, who support the demands of groups working on homelessness and spoke to this issue in the House several times during the last session.

2. What is homelessness? *More than just a housing problem.*

Members of the Réseau SOLIDARITÉ Itinérance du Québec use the following definition:

Homeless people are “*people who have no fixed address and no stable, safe, sanitary housing for the next days; who have very low income; who are discriminated against in access to services; who have mental health, addiction (alcohol, drugs, gambling) or social disorganization problems; and who are without a stable identity group.*”¹

¹ This definition is an updated version of the definition adopted in 1987 by the Committee on Homelessness of the City of Montreal.

This definition clearly demonstrates that homelessness is more than just a “simple” housing problem, although, with **111 000 Quebec households spending 80 % of their revenue on housing** at the time of the 2001 Census, we understand that there is a thin line between having a home and living on the street.

Many life paths

Homelessness is a living situation that is the result of a complex process of exclusion, marginalization and increasing vulnerability. Homelessness denies certain people citizenship and therefore makes it impossible for them to exercise their rights and responsibilities.

Over the past few years, homelessness has increased both demographically and geographically. The scope of the problem, as well as the serious exclusion experienced by these homeless individuals, requires that homelessness be treated as a **national disaster** and that the federal government consider its actions in this matter to be urgent and high priority.

In all regions, shelters and emergency housing have seen a considerable increase in the number of people using their services; the same applies to food banks, soup kitchens and other forms of assistance and intervention for homeless persons or those at risk.

According to the most recent quantitative study (conducted in 1996 by Santé Québec) there were 12,266 homeless persons using shelters, day centers and soup kitchens in Montreal, and 3,549 in Quebec City. In all of Canada, there are reportedly **150,000 people** who are homeless (according to 2005 figures from the Department of Housing).

In addition, if the number of people living in situations of exclusion and poverty has jumped over the past few years, it should also be noted that there is now a greater diversity of people in these situations. Currently, there are men and women of all ages as well as children living on the street.

On the street, we are now seeing a number of issues: addiction (drugs, alcohol, gambling, medication), mental health, poverty, lack of housing, referrals to the courts, discrimination, etc. Along with these problems, we see some structural factors having an impact on the street: changes in the labour market, the housing crisis, opting out of certain institutions, lack of public funding (social housing, income support, etc.).

3. What are the needs in Quebec?

\$50 million per year

There needs are still desperate, as we can see from the applications submitted under SCPI 2, which far exceeded the available funding:

- In Montreal: \$73 million in projects for \$25 million of the available budget;
- In Quebec: \$23 million in applications and \$7 million available;
- In Saguenay: \$5.5 million in applications and \$1.8 million available;
- In Gatineau: \$5 million in applications and \$2.3 million available;
- In Sherbrooke: \$4 million in applications and \$2.3 million available;
- In Drummondville: \$2.7 million in applications and \$1.1 million available.

Whereas the Liberal Party of Canada committed to renewing and extending four major program areas during its June 2004 election campaign (affordable housing, renovations, aboriginal housing and the SCPI) by spending between \$1 and \$1.5 billion on them over 4 years, these programs were extended for a single year only.

In November 2004, the federal government announced a \$134.8 million investment for all of Canada for the one-year extension of the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI), therefore the SCPI program. Reviewing the past distribution of these monies, there will be \$18.4 million that

could be allocated to Quebec for homelessness initiatives for the 2006-2007 fiscal year, that is one third of the available budget under SCPI 2.

The year-long extension for 2006-2007 has allowed for 90% of the human interventions in Quebec to continue. In 5 SCPI communities, the funding was insufficient and certain projects had to be cut or reduced in scope. For example, in Quebec City, as is the case in Gatineau, there is almost a 20% shortfall in budgets to ensure project continuity (\$650,000 and \$155,000 respectively). In other communities, funding was available for new projects but once again, the applications far outstripped the amounts available. (In Montreal alone, 118 applications were tabled totaling \$18 million whereas only \$5 million was available).

The current spending envelope (\$18.4 million for one year for Quebec) is inadequate: more is needed in order to extend all of the current initiatives, and in order to be able to respond to needs that were not met in the previous phases of the SCPI.

The needs for Quebec are a minimum of \$50 million annually for the coming years (three times more than the amount available in the first two phases). The phenomenon of homelessness will be significantly reduced only with a massive investment in this sector along with a transformation of social and housing policies.

A wide variety of needs

Moreover, it is essential that a **diversity of people-based intervention practices** be maintained so that a variety of the problems, paths and needs of homeless persons can be addressed. Over the past few years, the sector has been innovative in creating resources that can respond to emerging needs. However, this innovation is not possible in a situation of financial uncertainty.

So far, the SCPI has been a key program for preventing and alleviating homelessness and providing a variety of actions designed to improve the living conditions of homeless persons: human resources (street work, community support, psychosocial intervention, etc.), improvements to facilities and equipment, construction of housing units, etc. In Quebec, \$120 million were allocated to groups working with people who are homeless or at risk for projects carried out between 1999 and 2006. This made it possible to better structure the intervention, consolidate services, respond to the needs of the disadvantaged that had not yet been addressed, develop cooperation within the regions, etc.

During 2005, the RSIQ heard the needs of some groups in the various regions of Quebec for a third phase of the SCPI. Here are some examples of how it may be used:

- Strengthening street work and community teams
- Integration/reintegration services
- Social housing with community support
- Program for acquiring /reclaiming independence
- Improvement of services and increased accommodation capacity in shelters, placement, soup kitchens, day centres, etc.
- Better local cooperation.

Consequently, it is essential that the SCPI remain comprehensive in nature.

4. Why is federal government funding for homelessness required? A

wealthy country where poverty is a scourge

In 1998, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights criticized Canada “for not paying appropriate attention to the harmful effects that fighting the deficit was having on respect for the economic, social and cultural rights of the Canadian public as a whole, especially the most vulnerable groups.” The Committee felt that public policies on income security and employment insurance and cuts to education, housing, health and social services had led to an increase in the number of homeless persons, a worsening housing problem and an increase in the number of people using food banks.

One of the Committee's recommendations was that the government should treat homelessness and the housing shortage as a “national emergency” by re-establishing a social housing policy and adopting a “national strategy to reduce homelessness and poverty.”

The SCPI program was created in 1999. Today, in 2006, the situation of the homeless is even more alarming than it was at the time of the United Nations' denunciation. The investments have been inadequate until now. This is what this same Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights found last May:

“The Committee expressed important concerns that 7.4% of the population suffers from food insecurity and that the number of homeless persons in Canada ranges from 100,000 to 250,000. The Committee asked Canada to take the necessary steps to ensure that minimum wages are increased throughout the country to a level that would allow workers and their families to enjoy a decent standard of living.[.]

The Committee recommends that Canada fully comply with its obligations under the Covenant to make every possible effort, and do the most possible with the resources it has at its disposal, to ensure that all Canadians enjoy economic, social and cultural rights. It also recommends that the elimination of the shortcomings in the area of the fight against poverty should be a priority. “² [Translation]

In the recommendations the Committee made to Canada, it is clear they wanted to see the federal and provincial governments **treat homelessness and the housing shortage as a national emergency** by re-establishing social housing programs, by strengthening legislation against discrimination where housing is concerned, by increasing support of refugees, by increasing welfare and by providing adequate support services to people in difficulty.

The Committee also recommends that the government implement a **national strategy to reduce homelessness** that includes measurable objectives and time frames, consultation and collaboration with the communities concerned.³

The fight against poverty and social exclusion is not over

Not continuing the SCPI and not acting with regard to homelessness will inevitably result in major social and collective costs that will certainly be passed on.

Too often, we tend to think that people are fully responsible for their socio-economic situation and that they need only make a greater effort to get themselves out of poverty and homelessness. We

² Extract from the UN Committee's May 19, 2006 press release. The complete text is available at: www.ohchr.org.

³ According to the final observations made by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

need to identify the social causes that force people into homelessness and implement measures that will help homeless people by addressing these causes.

Significant measures must be taken

The involvement of the federal government, in light of the resources it has at its disposal, is necessary if we want to reduce the gap between the rich and those who are less well off.

The impact of federal funding on the living conditions of homeless persons was very significant in phases 1 and 2 of SCPI. Without SCPI, these groups would not have been able to deal with the increase in the number of homeless people or with the growing problems experienced by these people, which have been identified over the past few years.

We have seen the positive impacts. Unfortunately, we have also witnessed the distress and urgent needs of many people. We want at all costs to avoid a situation where we see and experience breaks in service or an untenable and precarious situation in the agencies that help these people.

Long-term action

The renewal of federal funding for homelessness would help ensure the continuity of interventions and work on long-term solutions for individuals. Project financing, which is the normal practice for many organizations (that must also resort to philanthropy much of the time), means that they are always starting over and working hard to rebuild, rather than consolidate what they have learned, which is a waste of resources and prevents long-term interventions with people who often need a lot of time to stay off the street.

Instability, insecurity and sometimes cutbacks to services are constant threats faced by organizations and the people they serve (the poorest of the poor).

We must commit permanent, adequate and recurring funding to this sector.

A national emergency

Fighting homelessness, poverty and social exclusion means coming to the assistance of the most disadvantaged people in our society. Fighting homelessness, poverty and social exclusion also means preserving cohesiveness and fostering the development of society in general.

The federal government must assume its responsibilities towards all citizens.

Before lowering the taxes of those people who can afford to pay them, the federal government must make it a priority to ensure that everyone has housing and shelter, for example, through various income support benefits (such as employment insurance), social housing and various social programs (of which the SCPI is one).

Given the living conditions of homeless people, the federal government must think of homelessness as a national disaster and make federal funding for homeless (SCPI) a priority.

5. In support of an extension of the SCPI beyond March 31, 2007

Currently, there is no certainty regarding the continued federal funding for homelessness after March 31, 2007. And yet, we already know that the needs on the ground will again be enormous. They represent a minimum of \$50 million per year for Quebec alone.

A third phase of SCPI should meet a variety of needs and help :

- ensure continued action with individuals;
- consolidate work teams and better equip them to intervene;
- develop new initiatives and respond to emerging needs;
- improve facilities and equipment; and
- cover the increase in demand.

It should be remembered that the needs are addressed by a great variety of people (in terms of age, sex, ethnic background, etc.) who experience many different problems. SCPI 3 should maintain the “multi-clientele” and “multi-problem” approach.

In addition, it is important that the same **delivery method for SCPI** be used. SCPI is currently subject to a federal-provincial agreement with Quebec. In this province, the regional health and social services boards and the organizations themselves have been involved, which greatly contributed to the success of the program since the project evaluation was done on criteria established by the community itself in developing a regional community plan.

Ottawa must announce the renewal and expansion of SCPI as soon as possible. This announcement must be made before the next federal budget, expected in February 2007, and the next budget must ensure that funding is available for the coming years, effective April 1, 2007.

This would mean that the money is available to ensure the continuity of services provided through SCPI 2, for which funding ends on March 31, 2007, **in approximately 200 days**, which is not much time given the usual delays for implementing these types of programs.

This would also make it possible to implement new projects and pursue initiatives that were rejected or cut in the earlier phases of SCPI.

We are asking the members of the Finance Committee to intervene so that the Conservative Government will commit to making this investment in the most disadvantaged. Action is urgently required on the issue of homelessness, which affects the survival of the most extremely marginalized and disadvantaged people in our society.

For more information, please contact our coordinator, Nathalie Rech, by email at nathalie.rech@videotron.ca or by telephone at (514) 528-6466.