

Immediate Action Needed to Prevent Pandemic Related Forced Evictions into Homelessness

Community organizations are calling on the Province to take immediate steps to prevent COVID-19 related forced evictions into homelessness. Eviction into homelessness has been identified as an international human rights violation.¹

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an economic disaster for many tenants at risk of homelessness in Nova Scotia. The pressures of mass layoffs, reduced work hours, and business closures are driving renters to the brink through no fault of their own. Though the province has just begun to reopen, Nova Scotia's unemployment rate remained at 11.1% in May 2019 and uncertainty persists about whether jobs will return and businesses will remain open in the months ahead.

The economic impacts of the pandemic have fallen hardest on low-wage workers in the service sector, a workforce composed disproportionately of women, immigrants, and racialized persons. Half of those Canadians who earned \$16 or less lost their job or the majority of their hours between February and April.² The Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) has softened the blow but with monthly payments amounting to only \$12 per hour, the CERB has failed to fully replace lost incomes. Further exacerbating this financial hardship is the fact the some 16% of unemployed workers remain ineligible for the CERB.³

Renters in Nova Scotia are especially vulnerable due to no wages/low wages and making the difficult decision to pay the rent or feed themselves and their families. Adding to this financial emergency is the lack of savings that working renter households in NS have access to. Even before the public health emergency, 62% of renter households in Nova Scotia had less than a month of employment income in savings.⁴

The pandemic has evaporated the savings of thousands of working families and forced many to default on monthly rent payments. Unlike in other provinces, Nova Scotia has failed to provide any rent relief or rent forgiveness. The result is that that many Nova Scotians will be

facing homelessness in the coming months once landlords are allowed to resume filing Residential Tenancies applications for eviction at the end of June .⁵

The Investment Property Owners Association of Nova Scotia, a lobby group that represents the interests of landlords, recently forecasted that landlords across this province may file up to 6,000 applications for eviction for non-payment of rent when Residential Tenancies hearings resume.⁶ The government needs to act now to ensure that thousands of tenants are not evicted into homelessness in the coming months.

This is an urgent situation and one that can be solved with progressive and swift action by the government of Nova Scotia. This is why we are calling on Stephen McNeil, Premier of Nova Scotia to support The Eviction Prevention Plan for Nova Scotia which includes the following provisions:

1. Extend the COVID-19 related evictions during the pandemic:

The NS government should extend the current moratorium on evictions for non-payment of rent due to COVID-19. The moratorium should remain in place for the duration of the public health emergency and should be accompanied by policies that direct landlords to enter into reasonable repayment agreements with tenants whose income has been affected by COVID-19.

2. Regulatory oversight on rental repayment plans:

The NS government should amend the Residential Tenancies Regulations to include a section directing landlords not to refuse a reasonable rental arrears repayment schedule with tenants whose income is affected by COVID-19. This regulation could include details to be included in repayment agreements, such as the following criteria:

1. Reasonable repayments must be determined in consideration of the tenant's financial circumstances. If a renter is receiving the CERB, CESB ,EI, or has had their hours significantly reduced as the result of COVID-19, then repayment plans must be

- deferred until the renter has returned to work, their hours have been significantly restored, or they have returned to post-secondary education and are working and/or receiving student loans.
2. Repayments will be made on a monthly basis and will be no more than 5% of the total arrears owing, until the arrears are paid off.
 3. Repayment agreements are to be in writing and signed by the renter and landlord.
 4. Once a renter and landlord agree to the repayment agreement, the landlord shall not apply to the Residential Tenancies Board for eviction due to non-payment of rent, unless the renter defaults on the repayment agreement.
 5. Should a landlord refuse to agree to a reasonable repayment plan proposed by the tenant, the Director of Residential Tenancies should exercise its currently existing authority under Section 17 (A) (g) of the Residential Tenancies Act to accept rent in trust from the tenant on the grounds that the Director is granting relief from forfeiture. In these cases, the Director would refuse to grant a notice of vacant possession to the landlord and continue to accept rent in trust until such time as the landlord agrees to a reasonable repayment plan. This authority should also be used by the Director pending the implementation of regulations relating to rental repayment plans.

We the undersigned call on the Government of Nova Scotia to take immediate action to protect tenants and to implement The Eviction Prevention Plan for Nova Scotia to prevent COVID-19 related forced evictions into homelessness:

NOTES

1 <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Housing/Pages/ForcedEvictions.aspx>

2 Ricardo Tranjan, “The Rent Is Due Soon Financial Insecurity and COVID-19,” March 2020. <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/rent-due-soon>

3 Ricardo Tranjan, Hannah Aldridge, and Garima Talwar Kapoor, “Locked down, not locked out: An eviction prevention plan for Ontario,” May 2020. <http://behindthenumbers.ca/2020/05/28/locked-down-not-locked-out-an-eviction-prevention-plan-for-ontario/>

4 Tranjan, IBID.

5 Tammy Findlay, Christine Saulnier and Alec Stratford, “Are you with us? COVID-19 confirms the need to transform Nova Scotia’s social safety net,” May 2020. <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/are-you-us>

6 Investment Property Owners Association of Nova Scotia, INSight Survey, May 2020.