

# Halifax housing horrors

## Homeless students join hundreds of others looking for shelter



By LOIS CORBETT

EVERY YEAR IT'S THE SAME THING.

Students flood Canadian campuses each fall and dramatically increase the number of people looking for affordable housing in cities that usually can't accommodate the influx.

Halifax is one of the worst hit cities. With a vacancy rate of 0.7 percent and 18,000 students to house, the metro area, year after year, hears horror stories about its incapacity to furnish roofs.

University student unions know all about the housing situation in this province. Student councillors are often the first people homeless students contact.

Catherine Blewett, Dalhousie Student Union president, has two students living with her because they have no other place to go. Tom Rhymes, student union president of King's College, knows of a two bedroom apartment that shelters nine people, all of whom are students, living there since January.

Blewett wants the university to step in. She doesn't criticize it for accepting more students than it can house itself, but she does think the administration-run housing office could do a better job.

"We approached the housing office with proposals to increase their advertising campaign," says Blewett, "but they didn't respond."

Advertising for space that doesn't exist won't help students looking for a place to live. And it doesn't address the problem of housing in total, or even recognize that students are only one part of a bigger crisis.

Grant Wanzel, a member of the steering committee of Housing for People, a Halifax coalition of more than 30 organizations, says the crisis is one that can be solved, if parties responsible start facing reality.

He places much of the blame for the perpetuation of the housing shortage squarely on the area's universities.

"I think all the universities, and Dalhousie principal among them, have been irresponsible," says Wanzel. "Dalhousie has been absolutely derelict in offering any sort of leadership in housing policy, in assuming any form of responsibility for the (housing) problem or in acting in any way that says they're not the only people in the city."

Wanzel adds that universities, because their budgets depend on enrolment figures, want to accept all the students they can, but they don't want to be responsible for



Illustration: Kimberley Whitchurch/Dal Gazette

finding those students a place to live.

"Dalhousie has demolished a lot of adequate housing, and it hasn't built any new residences, but it still wants to bring all those students to Halifax," he says.

"I think that attitude is extremely arrogant," he adds.

Housing for People includes representatives from Dal Legal Aid, the North End Clinic, church groups, labour organizations, concerned individuals, students, and others dedicated to generating a community response to the housing crisis, says another member of its steering committee, Dennis Theman. The organization has targeted 11 groups in Halifax that face particular housing problems including, says Theman, "students, single parents and senior citizens."

Some students are caught in a double bind when they find they are members of more than one of these target groups. Single mothers who attend university, for example, face discrimination from landlords that won't rent to them because they have children, and others who won't give them a place to live because they are students.

Wanzel says he is sympathetic to students' concern for affordable housing, but adds they have to join the already long list of people with fixed incomes searching for a home that is within their budgets.

"They are all out there, fighting with one another for a place to live," he says.

These people have been attracted to, or remain in Halifax, explains Theman, for a number of reasons. "The off-shore oil bubble brought a lot of new people here, all hoping it would work out for them. Others came back from the west after the recession there," he says.

There has been no increase in construction, however, to meet the demand for housing. Landlords like to put this down to high interest rates and rent controls,

claiming the government restrictions prevent investment in the housing market.

New building in Halifax almost exclusively has been aimed at middle to high income people. Peggy Sarty, a statistical clerk at the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) office in Halifax says most of the construction has consisted of condominiums.

"There has been a lot of those going up — so much so that they are probably reaching their saturation point now," says Sarty. "Maybe some of those units will be placed on the rental market, temporarily anyway," she adds.

Theman agrees, but only in part.

"There's no problem getting housing here if you've got money. If you want an \$100,000 condo, you can have one, no problem, wherever you want," he says.

But it's different for the poor. Waiting for condo developers to open their arms to them is not a viable alternative, nor is it immediate for the city's homeless.

Halifax student unions, the Students' Union of Nova Scotia, Housing for People and other housing advocate groups want government intervention, from all levels, provincial, municipal and federal.

Housing for People is directing its energy towards this fall's municipal election, demanding that candidates publicly challenge the city's lack of housing policy.

"It's an issue they can't ignore this time around," says Wanzel.

The group first attacked the city's June symposium, Housing Halifax. They called it an election ploy.

City councillor Don LeBlanc complained, on a radio commentary aired after the conference, that there was a lack of "innovative solutions" to Halifax's housing crisis. Halifax's other councillors failed to attend the symposium.

Wanzel says LeBlanc's state-

ment is foolish.

"I made my pitch to the symposium, and I might as well have spit in the sea. (City council) wants to believe there is some magic solution to the problem. They want everyone to live on the beach with a blanket to cover them," he says.

He says the city, along with the provincial government, just won't accept that it has to spend money to create housing for low income people.

"It's not as if we aren't aware of what other countries are doing. Nobody has really solved the housing problem. Those that have come the closest are those that admit the private sector will not provide affordable housing, and then do something about it," Wanzel says.

Theman says the city wants to "study the situation, just like all the other governments have made studies before them."

"I don't see why they need a new study when they won't even look at, or do, what a report of a century ago suggested," he adds.

The federal government sponsored housing studies in the thirties, says Theman, one after the war and one in the early seventies, studies that all say essentially the same thing.

"They all say that the private sector won't build enough affordable housing, and they all recommend the governments assume some of the responsibility of housing its poorer people," he says.

CMHC provided funding assistance to groups that wanted to build low income housing projects, says Sarty, but Wanzel says the 300 units that were built in the province were far from enough.

Housing for People is preparing a blueprint that demonstrates the need for at least 1000 units in the Halifax-Dartmouth area alone, he says.

The blueprint details, project by project, how the units will be used. "Some are used by the elderly, others are for single par-



ents. Some projects involve 100 units, others, 10," says Wanzel.

The draft demonstrates the need for low income housing and the diversity of the demands for it in Halifax.

"The 300 projects CMHC provided for are zip, absolutely nothing, compared to how many we could actually use here," says Wanzel.

CMHC provides funding to governments, municipalities and non-profit organizations for housing projects, but its budget has dwindled steadily over the years.

In the seventies, universities could also apply to CMHC for assistance in building residences, but that was stopped by the federal government in 1979. Since then, university administrations have had to look elsewhere for expansion funding, and many have launched capital raising campaigns that include drives for construction money for accommodations.

Robbie Shaw, Dalhousie university's vice president of finance, says part of Dal's capital campaign will be used to build a women's residence next year.

"We hadn't originally included it in the drive," says Shaw, "but we see a great need for it now."

Shaw says the effects of the housing crisis will lessen with the residence's construction, at least for female students. But he doesn't agree that the university should take more responsibility in warning students about the housing situation.

"Human nature being what it is, people will continue to come here after we accept them into university regardless of how much we warn them," says Shaw.

But a new women's residence in 1986 won't help the 100 or more women on Dalhousie residence's waiting list this fall. And it won't help students at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, or men at Mount Saint Vincent University, who have no residences. It won't help single parents, disabled people or elderly citizens looking for affordable housing in Halifax.

Housing for People, SUNS, and individual student unions recognize the problem. They all want government intervention, and call for a comprehensive housing policy for Halifax. Wanzel and Theman want the universities to take more responsibility for the housing crisis. But it's too late for students, resigned to paying extortionate rates for apartments in Halifax, knowing they might be broke by Christmas. And it's way too late for those students who returned home because they found no place to live.