

EMERGENCY HOUSING FOR WOMEN

A short reprieve from the housing crisis

by Elizabeth Donovan

Every day, Linda and her two little boys walk down to social services to check for any housing vacancies. Scanning the newspaper and other notices, Linda uses the phone to confirm possible openings. Before leaving, Linda checks with her social worker. Carrying one son in one arm and holding the other toddler by the hand, Linda sets out across town to follow up on the advertised openings.

"By the end of the day, when I still haven't been able to find an apartment, and my sons are tired from walking, it gets pretty frustrating," she says. "How long do I have to keep this up? It's been two months already."

Linda doesn't have permanent housing but recently her options for emergency accommodations have improved.

Collin House, an emergency facility, recently opened November 15th to homeless women requiring immediate shelter.

"This is the first facility like this in Atlantic Canada," said Elaine Bishop, supervisor at Collin House.

Before, there just existed places like Bryony House that only accepted battered women and their children. Other residences such as the YWCA and Bethany House accept women only—no children.

The idea for Collin House was generated by a group of concerned people and social service agencies early in 1982. They formed the Women's Housing Coalition in response to the alarming number of homeless women and children in the Halifax-Dartmouth area.

A study by the group, titled *The End of the Rope*, revealed an overwhelming gap between resources available for women and children and the demand in any immediate housing crisis. In the Halifax-Dartmouth area, 13 agencies received 66-93 calls per month from women who were considered homeless. In an average month 45-63 of these calls involved women with children.

The agencies had to use specific hotels within the city in order to cope with the demand.

Corrine Steele, a social worker at the Children's Aid Society, spoke of her concerns about the present use of hotels for emergency housing.

"Security is risky. There are no locks on these doors, usually no heat half the time, and children have suffered from fleabites," she said.

Linda not only is "aware" of such poor safety conditions, but has had to combat the fear of living in an unsafe environment for herself and children.

"In one hotel I stayed in there were lots of hookers and drunks. What was worse, there were no locks on the doors. It was no wonder they had such a high incidence of theft."

Steele noted the irony in paying \$1,000 a month for a tiny room in a hotel with shared kitchen, which is exceedingly higher than what the social assistance budget allows for.

Collin House is funded through a cost-share program from three levels of government. A daily subsidy is paid by social services for every woman and child staying in one of their 13 rooms.

The building itself was once St. Paul's School for the Blind. When the school moved to a new location, the building was offered for a dollar a year to any non-profit organization. It is an impressive house, with 17 bedrooms, 10 bathrooms and large living-room quarters. Near downtown and less than one block away from the Victoria Hospital, it is situated in an ideal location.

When one first enters the house, the slight smell of fresh paint and the austere decor give the only indication of the house's short history. It appears to contain the atmosphere of any home. Russel and Michael are playfully wrestling in one corner of the room while the women are relaxing after a satisfying supper.

Linda remembers the first time she heard about Collin House. She was living in a hotel in Dartmouth at the time.

"I got a call from social services 9:00 one morning and was told to get packing. 'You're moving,' they said."

"Where?" I asked. "I'm not sure," she replied, 'but you're moving to Halifax.'"



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Elaine Bishop hopes that Collin House will be a stepping stone toward the improvement of the housing crisis facing these women. Bishop perceives the intake process as a way in which to investigate the circumstances that led to the need for emergency housing, and to assess other difficulties women are experiencing in finding long-term housing.

The lack of adequate low-income housing is the result of families getting smaller, hence, much of the public housing in the Halifax and Dartmouth area contains homes built to accommodate families of five.

Jean Vigneau, manager of community relations for government housing, said, "We have presently 95 one-bedroom homes, 174 two bedroom units and 683 three bedroom units. There is no more money to build housing projects."

This year public housing has received 1300 applicants, and 320 are single parents. Vigneau said the houses are allocated on the basis of a point system, which is based upon the greatest need.

criteria assessing those in greatest need are health risks, bad conditions, overcrowding, and if rent costs exceed personal income. Eligibility also requires living in the area for at least a year.

Steele says a majority of her clients have had no choice but to stay in emergency accommodations and overcrowded living quarters. "These women are receiving the benefit of this housing crisis," she said.

Although Linda now feels a bit more secure for her children at Collin House, she expresses her concern over the possible side effects of having to move every three weeks.

"Just when my children are getting familiar with the faces in the house, they leave," said Linda. "They can't help but feel scared and insecure. They have to make sure that their mother is always there."

Until very recently, no support systems existed for single mothers who required emergency child care for their

children. Parent Aid, a project co-sponsored by Point Pleasant Child Care Center under the Federal and Provincial Governments, opened at the end of September this year. It provides care and support to children 18 months to 12 years in crisis situations. These crises could include situations where the parent needs some type of daily help, whether it be hospitalization or searching for accommodation.

Offering low rates through government subsidies, the Parent Aid program is available to those in financial need.

Myers cannot underestimate the value of such a service, because many of the children who are involved in a crisis situation are scared and need special assurance that their parent is fine.

Myers regrets the program's hours do not extend beyond 5:30 p.m. "We would like to see a 24-hour service and facility that would provide temporary but immediate child care when domestic problems seem to be at their peak."

Laura Myers, project manager of Parent Aid, says the program already has problems with red tape.

"Since we are under the Day-Care Act, we cannot accept infants and we cannot accept older children until they have had a medical examination," Myers said. "This becomes difficult for a mother who requires immediate assistance and can only be eligible if she makes a doctor's appointment ahead of time for the child's medical. It defeats the purpose of such an emergency program."

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Although Linda is experiencing difficulty in finding accommodation, she cannot go back to her husband.

"My husband suffered from a drinking problem. I was never sure if there would be enough money for food: I didn't want my children to grow up within an environment with no financial security," she said.

Ironically, Linda's present income from social assistance leaves little or no room for transportation costs or other necessities.

Corrine Steele agrees that the municipal and provincial assistance rates are below the cost of living.

A compounding factor prohibiting women and their children from finding adequate housing is the serious shortage of affordable housing for women with low, fixed incomes. Steele says many of her clients have met landlords who refuse to rent apartments to social welfare recipients.

The Women's Coalition report recognized landlord discrimination as a major problem on top of the poor housing situation.

"Landlords are aware of the low, fixed incomes these women receive, and exceed that amount with higher rents," said Steele.

"I've been told by open landlords that single women with children, collecting social assistance, are last on the list (of preferential tenants)," said Linda.

Steele cites an instance where one woman with her children have been searching for accommodation since last March. "The woman is almost ready to throw in the towel. She has lived in nine different accommodations in the last nine months," Steele says.

Since Collin House is an emergency facility, it can only accommodate women and their children on a short-term basis.

"When my three weeks are up, and I still haven't found a place to live, I'm right back where I started from," said Linda.

"When a woman has to leave her home because of intolerable conditions, she thinks that things can only get better. We've all left with such grand ideas, but the reality is you can't even get your first chance to make it on your own," Linda said. "More often than not, women have no choice but to go back to the situation that they initially had to get away from. Unfortunately, the woman is often returning to a situation which has grown worse."