



Housing Justice:

Public Engagement, Policy Development and Legal Rights

The urgency of the crisis surrounding housing affordability and access across Canada, and in Vancouver in particular, is well-known. As of the 2006 Census, nearly one-quarter of Canadian households were spending 30 per cent or more of their gross income on housing. The city of Vancouver was ranked in 2011 as the second worst in the world for homeownership affordability and its rental vacancy rates are among the lowest in Canada. This crisis is complex and results from many factors, including: a rise in housing costs; a lack of appropriate government policy; too few new low-income rental units built; low rental vacancy rates; urban population growth; and, income growth that has not kept pace with the cost of living.

The problem we seek to address with this project is how to overcome the barriers to the development of affordable rental housing for those of very low income, and for working people of modest incomes.

What is Housing Justice?

Housing justice refers to the fair and just distribution of housing benefits in a society. Access to affordable, safe and adequate housing is key to an individual's inclusion in the full rights and benefits of citizenship. In a society marked by housing justice there would be a clear set of government programs, strategies and tax incentives that ensure that affordable housing is delivered and that housing benefits are distributed fairly between different segments of the population.

Three Strands

The Housing Justice Project approaches the issues surrounding housing justice with a focus particularly on Vancouver from three distinct but synergistic perspectives:

1. **Civil society engagement and education;**
2. **Policy development;**
3. **Social change litigation.**

In the first and second strands of the project, we will be working with community partners to leverage policy change at municipal, provincial, and federal levels, and to foster heightened civil society engagement with advocacy of housing rights. Through focused community engagement activities we will seek to provide opportunities for Vancouver's citizens to be educated on housing issues, and to engage in forums to create a dialogue on critical affordable rental housing priorities and to identify solutions. This will be done through communications using digital tools, social

media, roundtables and public forums. Policy initiatives will be developed in conjunction with community partners, and will flow out of these information gathering and dissemination sessions. A range of policy options will be considered, including practice and policy at the municipal level, as well as legislative acts and amendments and policy at the provincial and federal levels.

The final strand of the project involves building support and providing academic expertise for a legal challenge to move Canadian law to recognize a right to adequate housing in keeping with Canada's international human rights obligations. The specific focus of legal action will be determined by the outcomes of the earlier stages of the project. The goal is to position any legal action as part of an overall progressive change strategy, as a base from which greater public and government engagement can be leveraged and public and private responses to the issue encouraged.

All three strands, although independently conceived and orchestrated, are planned to be carried out in conjunction with each other. Insights or actions from one arena will play off and augment aspects of the others. The project thus proposes a dynamic play across policy, public engagement, and legal rights. Research methods include naturalistic observation of engagement events organized by the project. Standard doctrinal legal research and literature reviews/syntheses encompass the bulk of our research tactics.

Project Outcomes

We anticipate the outcome of the project will be a greater awareness of effective models for the provision of affordable housing. Informed community members can be effective advocates for furthering proposed changes. More specifically, the following three benchmarks are relevant:

1. Policy change;
2. Education and outreach;
3. Community advocacy.

Project Partners

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Community Partners

Rental Housing Supply Coalition
Pivot Legal Society

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