

Improving housing in Edmonton's inner community

Bridging the Gap Abdullah Shah a.k.a Carmen/Gohar Pervez



Edmonton, Oct 4, 2019 (Issuewire.com) - The city of Edmonton is actively engaged in urban development and economic expansion, particularly in the downtown core. This endeavor has created employment opportunities in various industries, diversified the provincial economy and has opened a gateway for increased commercialization, all of which will contribute to a greater Alberta. While the city's urban growth is obvious and tangible, Edmonton's inner-city communities are plagued with much stagnation, primarily in the realm of housing. Edmonton continues to be one of Canada's fastest-growing cities and with that come challenges of accommodating an evolving population. According to the 2017 Profile on Poverty by the *Edmonton Social Planning Counsel*, approximately 107,960 persons lived in low income in the city of Edmonton (most living well below the poverty line), subject to a low-income rate of 12.1% in 2014, compared to a 5.7% rate outside the city boundaries.

The Affordability of housing in the city has also seen very little change as Edmonton still ranks fourth among the highest rent in the country while the demand for housing subsidy and assistance rises.

Capital Region Housing's most recent records (unofficially as of July 2019) reflect a waitlist of over 7,000.00 families awaiting accommodations. As of 2016, over 1752 people were homeless in the city of Edmonton (*Homeward Trust Edmonton*). In its 2015 Annual report, *Capital Region Housing* attributed the growing demand for assistance to "dropping oil prices, rising unemployment, and increased financial pressures." Other contributing factors mirror the common thread woven in the fabric of inner-city discourse: mental illness, criminalization, and drug use and trafficking. Regardless of the reasons for the increased demands for assisted housing, it is undeniable that it is a stubborn spill that needs a cap.

Provincial and municipal mandates have been implemented to manage and reform the housing crisis in Edmonton's inner cities and the effort has been plenty and impactful. For example, *Capital Region Housing*, formed pursuant to a provincial ministerial order in 1995, was established to provide affordable housing through comprehensive housing programs and initiatives for individuals who need community assistance. Local private and non-profit institutions also champion the cause of alleviating Edmonton's housing crisis. *Right At Home Housing*—formerly, Edmonton Inner City Housing Society and Internet, respectively—functions to assist members of Edmonton's inner cities with various housing options that are complementary to individual and familial needs. The organization works diligently to create stability, increase security and reduce poverty for persons who are struggling to live in difficult circumstances. *The Royal Alexandra Hospital* also actively participates in outreach with the implementation of its Inner City Health and Wellness Program, targeting individuals "with substance use disorders and/or those who are socially vulnerable". Local churches also share the burden, offering their place of worship as temporary shelters and dwelling places and, in some cases, paying rent for a short period of time for persons who are homeless.

Notwithstanding the communal effort of the government and private organizations/ institutions, the rate at which housing reform is progressing in the City of Edmonton is incompatible with the urgency of the needs of the community. This is more apparent when considering the City Council's recent decision to "officially lift the moratorium on building more subsidized housing in the inner-city neighborhoods of McCauley, Central McDougall, Queen Mary Park, Alberta Avenue, and Eastwood, located north of downtown" (The Star). It is encouraging that the City of Edmonton continues to make strides to facilitate housing for Edmonton's inner cities, but as the process is a seemingly slow one, local community members are doing their part to help. Among them is a controversial landlord, Abdullah Shah a.k.a Carmen / Gohar Pervez.

Though his reputation precedes him, Abdullah Shah has been a dedicated advocate for housing reform in Edmonton's inner cities. Shah has been an active figure in the community for approximately 20 years and during that time he has assisted persons with significant socio-economic challenges to secure

housing, enroll in rehabilitation and mental health treatment, and complete successful reintegration into society. In many instances, he does so to his detriment and financial loss. Shah, along with other members of the community, namely: Sarah Fassman, Jennifer Vuong and Shairose Esmail, actively engage in the 'nitty gritty' realities of many of the residents of Edmonton's inner-city communities. In doing so, Shah and his team have developed a level of trust and security with those who are socially vulnerable. Progressively, Shah has become a symbol of resolution for individuals who are struggling to manage their lives in the inner cities.

Abdullah Shah takes the stance of humanizing all members of Edmonton's inner-city communities who are traditionally judged and ostracized by their neighbors. These inner cities are not inherently bad and can certainly thrive, but such elevation is predicated on people's ability to shift their perspectives, practice empathy, and truly listen. Many of the residents who reside in "Shah's rental units" are struggling with various issues. Some are battling mental illnesses, some have been abandoned, some have been victims of drug and alcohol abuse and some simply made a few bad life decisions that have resulted in cyclical consequences. Regardless of the circumstances that have led to their disposition, Shah tries to meet people where they are and help them along the way. The challenges they face are not uncommon but require patience. Unfortunately, members of the community are not forthcoming with compassion and, consequently, they have made several complaints to community heads, mayors, and counselors, demanding that the inner cities be closely regulated. The residents of the inner-city communities are of the position that the City of Edmonton is not doing enough or moving quickly enough to rectify the problems.

Community members have resorted to vigilante-like behavior, dictating outrageous criteria for community membership whilst excluding individuals who do not "look the part" based on race, ethnicity, physical appearance, and financial status among other factors. Abdullah Shah's tenants have been particularly targeted in this regard as he has been wrongfully accused of condoning tenants' "bad behavior". Instead, Shah has helped to counsel individuals out of bad situations and guide them to being better tenants. Shah believes that there are two primary factors tainting the views community members have towards the socially vulnerable and the aid he provides them: his reputation and a lack of information.

While Abdullah Shah has a public history with Edmonton's justice system, he should not be regarded as a prisoner of past allegations. The work he has done and continues to do in the community is important to the residents who benefit on a day-to-day basis and it is a necessary tool to bridge the gap between what the city is already doing and what the community can do for its fellow neighbors. Similarly, the socially vulnerable members of Edmonton's inner-city communities should not be defined by the culmination of their past experiences and dispositions. As human beings, we encourage evolution beyond the people we once were and the decisions we once made at any given point in our lives. Thus, it is best to focus primarily on the work being done to improve the state of the inner-city communities rather than who is doing the work.

Community members' discontentment with the housing crisis can also be accredited to a lack of education on the matter. In large part, residents are unaware of the city's procedure for managing complaints. They are unfamiliar with the bylaws, protocols, and guidelines for housing matters; thus, it is easy to perceive no visible action as equivalent to inaction and this is false. For example, consider the procedure for a housing complaint:

- A resident files a complaint with the city
- A municipal officer is dispatched to inspect the property

- A municipal officer notifies the tenant/homeowner of any breaches and advises on the necessary steps to take to fall within the guidelines therein

In instances wherein the city has followed up on complaints and has ensured that properties are maintained pursuant to the bylaws, they have indeed fulfilled their mandate. However, the discrepancy between the actions the city takes and the action the community members expect is a matter of threshold. It does not mean the city is not taking the necessary steps to rectify community concerns, but rather, that the steps taken are unsatisfactory to the individuals filing a complaint. Notably, an individual's socioeconomic status is not grounds to remove them from the community. Community members cannot and should not attempt to push a certain demographic of people outside of the community just because they do not like who they are, where they've been and what they look like.

Various municipal departments have been working to appease the concerns of community members, but the issue of inner-city housing in Edmonton is far more complex. Specifically, one of the deeper symptoms that correlate with housing complaints is mental illness. A significant number of residents living in Edmonton's inner cities are predisposed to mental illnesses due to a cycle of poverty, lack of support, and substance abuse. Some individuals are formally diagnosed and utilize governmental aides to help them cope with their disorders. Others go undiagnosed and community members are quick to label their actions as delinquency. These individuals are expected to live normal lives in the spaces they occupy without sufficient treatment, mental health management, and resources. Unlike physical ailments, mental health conditions are not cut and dry. A person who suffers from depression or anxiety may be perceived as capable of managing their day-to-day lives without incident and that sets unrealistic expectations for their lifestyle. It certainly does not help that mental disorders are stigmatized. As a community, rather than pushing marginalized individuals out, we must work together to be inclusive and compassionate.

Abdullah Shah and other members of the community are eager to work with community members to help alleviate the negative stigma associated with Edmonton's inner cities. Shah is aware of the various complaints that have been submitted to the City of Edmonton, the secret groups that have been organized with a goal of removing him from the community because of "the type of people he has as tenants" and the efforts to delegitimize struggling members of the inner cities. Instead of forming secret meetings to exclude Shah from the community, community members should pool their resources and work with Shah to help residents who are socially vulnerable. Join your local housing organization to find out what some of the primary issues in the communities are and material ways you can contribute to improving the quality of life for all. Reach out to your neighbors and talk to them. When they share their struggles, do not be passive. The needs of the community are great and if we all commit to doing our part, the change will occur.

Abdullah Shah has assisted a myriad of community members, providing free rent, clothing, food, furniture, counseling, employment, and love. While the impact may not be felt by the community members who are preoccupied with filing complaints, the recipients are grateful for the assistance and resources. Darren Trimble, a member of the Spruce Avenue Neighbourhood, shared his perspective on how he became a resident of one of Edmonton's inner-city communities and how that has affected his life. Darren's story is a snapshot among hundreds of others. The charge, therefore, to frustrated members of Edmonton's inner cities, is to take active and unified steps to make our communities better for everyone, not just better for yourself. It only takes a few seconds for your life to change and if and when it does, how will you want to be treated?

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