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## 'Nearly homeless' struggle to hang on

After five moves in as many years due to high rent and utility costs, the roof – literally – fell in on Brampton mother Colleen Richards and her family.



Phil and Colleen Richards have moved five times in five years. (VINCE TALOTTA / TORONTO STAR) | [ORDER THIS PHOTO](#)

By **LAURIE MONSEBRAATEN** Social Justice Reporter  
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After five moves in as many years due to high rent and utility costs, the roof – literally – fell in on Brampton mother Colleen Richards and her family.

"It actually fell on my head," says Richards of the day last spring when the soggy living room ceiling in the family's mouldy two-bedroom apartment finally gave way.

"After all these years of struggling, it really struck me. We shouldn't have to live this way," says Richards, who has been slinging coffee at Tim Hortons since 2001, when her husband was laid off from Chrysler. He has since retrained as a chef and is working in a restaurant.

"We're hard-working people. We don't mind working hard. We'd just like a fair shake." But in communities such as Brampton, where subsidized housing is scarce, the Richards and their three teenaged children – like so many other low-income families – have few options.

"We were nearly homeless. But there are so many different levels before you become truly homeless," says Richards, whose family was featured in a documentary film about homelessness in Toronto released last month by the Sky Works Charitable Foundation. "What is so troubling, is that ours is not a unique story."

Some 647,000 Ontarians pay more than 30 per cent of their income on rent; more than 129,000 households are waiting up to 20 years for a social housing unit where rents are geared to income.

Ontario launched public consultations on a provincial housing strategy last June as part of the province's anti-poverty strategy to cut child poverty by 25 per cent in five years. Since then, almost 1,000 Ontarians have addressed 13 provincial meetings and hundreds more have participated in another two dozen events hosted by MPPs and community groups.

The consensus was clear, says Yutaka Dirks of the Housing Network of Ontario. The province needs a comprehensive, long-term affordable housing strategy with bold targets that will help families and individuals weather the recession and thrive once the economy recovers.

The network, a coalition of provincial housing and anti-poverty groups, will be at Queen's Park Monday urging the McGuinty Liberals to come up with an ambitious and well-funded plan.

"The need in our communities is great and we expect the response from government to be up to the task," says Dirks. "We don't want to come out of this recession worse off. There are ways to make housing more affordable so losing your job doesn't mean losing your home."

In addition to more provincial money for construction and maintenance, consultation participants have called for a new provincial housing benefit, a return to rent control and new municipal zoning rules to ensure at least 20 per cent of all new housing is affordable.

Ontario is spending a record \$622 million over two years to match federal stimulus funding for housing, said Housing Minister Jim Watson. That will renovate 50,000 social housing units and create 4,500 new affordable units for seniors and people with disabilities.

The province's 10-year strategy will address not only money, but also "how we make the rules ... less complex for stakeholders to follow," he said in an interview.

Watson said he hopes a federal-provincial meeting of housing ministers in Ottawa next month will result in a 10-year federal funding commitment for housing and a national housing strategy. His provincial plan is due late next spring.

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