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## Wait lists for affordable housing continue to grow

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Waiting lists for affordable housing in Ontario surged to more than 152,000 households in January, despite modest economic growth in the province, according to a report to be released Monday.

This year's increase is a 7.4 per cent jump over last year and almost 18 per cent more than in 2009 when 129,000 families were waiting, says the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association in its 2011 waiting list survey, obtained by the *Star*.

Of the 10,000 new households who joined the line last year, more than 6,000 were in Toronto where a total of 66,197 households are waiting, says the report.

"Despite discussion of economic recovery, it is clear that many households are struggling to find a stable home they can afford," said Sharad Kerur, executive director of the association that has been tracking waiting lists since 2004.

"While employment numbers may be improving, many Ontarians are living through an uneasy economic recovery characterized by reduced work hours, lost jobs or new jobs at lower wages," he added.

Waiting lists swelled for all groups studied in the report, including seniors, non-senior singles and families.

But the largest percentage increase was among seniors, whose applications jumped by 10 per cent, the report says.

Torontonian Rory Beck, 64, who applied for subsidized housing about a year ago, is one of them.

The former long-haul trucker took early retirement at age 55 when work dried up and his health began to fail. But his \$439 monthly pension, topped up by a \$150 Ontario welfare cheque, provides him barely \$590 a month.

Meantime, the room he rents in a three-bedroom walk-up costs \$440 a month.

“If it wasn’t for the Daily Bread Food Bank, I’d starve,” said Beck, who suffers from emphysema, arthritis and depression.

“I’m dying a slow death here, living next to drunks, drug addicts and prostitutes,” he added. “I’d just like to find some peace for the last two or three years I have left.”

As Ontario’s population ages, more and more seniors who have been forced into early retirement due to the recession or the changing economy will be needing affordable housing, said Kerur.

The actual number of households in need of affordable housing is likely even higher than the report suggests.

The 2006 Census found that 20 per cent of tenant households across Ontario — or 261,225 — pay 50 per cent or more of their income on rent and would qualify for rent-geared-to-income housing.

“The numbers we see on waiting lists are really just the tip of the iceberg,” Kerur said.

The association, which represents 760 housing providers that operate more than 160,000 non-profit units, will be calling on candidates in this fall’s provincial election to say how they would address the problem, he added.

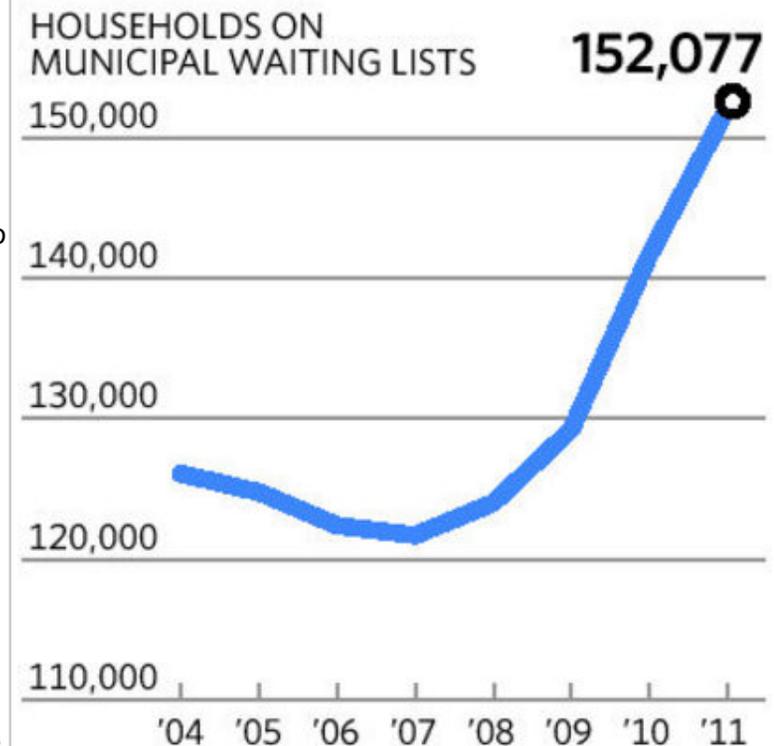
The study points to the need for government to build more affordable housing, said Mike Creek, coordinator of Voices from the Street, an organization that helps those who have experienced homelessness advocate for change.

In the short term, the province should heed the advice of housing and poverty activists and introduce a housing benefit for low-income Ontarians, he said.

“Many people in subsidized housing would move out if they knew they could get even that little bit of help (to pay rent) in the private sector,” he said. “Even if just 5 per cent moved out, it would free up space for those on the waiting list.”

## Waiting for housing

The number of Ontario households waiting for affordable housing has risen 18% since 2009.



SOURCE: Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association

