



National Housing Collaborative

St John's Sounding – August 29, 2016

Hosted by: Canadian Home Builders' Association Newfoundland and Labrador, United Way Newfoundland and Labrador, Newfoundland and Labrador Housing and Homelessness Network

Attended by:

Suzanne Brake (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador); **Peter Batson** (Canadian Home Builders' Association - Newfoundland and Labrador); **Victoria Belbin** (Canadian Home Builders' Association - Newfoundland and Labrador); **Lisa Browne** (Stella's Circle); **Iris Bussey** (Corrections Canada); **Maria Callahan** (City of St. John's); **Stacey Cheater** (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador); **Emily Christy** (Coalition of Persons with Disabilities); **Mike Clair** (Memorial University of Newfoundland); **Sheldon Colbourne** (Canadian Home Builders' Association - Newfoundland and Labrador); **Tammy Davis** (United Way Newfoundland and Labrador); **Joby Fleming** (Empower – the Disability Resource Centre); **Charmaine Flynn** (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador); **Gran Genova** (Architect); **Dan Goodyear** (Canadian Mental Health Association - Newfoundland and Labrador); **Michelle Greene** (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador); **Allyson Howse** (Community Centre Alliance); **Heather Hunt** (Thrive); **Leanne Lane** (Violence Prevention Initiative, Women's Policy Office); **Morley Linstead** (Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation); **Maureen Lymburner** (Home Again Furniture Bank); **Raya Majid** (Association for New Canadians); **Dan Meades** (Transition House Association of Newfoundland and Labrador); **Denise Miller** (Salvation Army NHCC); **Cindy Murphy** (John Howard Society of Newfoundland and Labrador); **Dave Murphy** (Newfoundland and Labrador Housing and Homelessness Network); **Randy Oram** (Karwood Contracting); **Kathleen Parewick** (Municipalities Newfoundland and Labrador); **Bruce Pearce** (End Homelessness St. John's); **Steve Porter** (Canadian Home Builders' Association - Newfoundland and Labrador); **Wendy Reid Fairhurst** (Cohousing NL); **Abigail Sheppard** (AIDS Committee of Newfoundland and Labrador); **Michelle Smith** (Violence Prevention Initiative, Women's Policy Office); **Cyril Tobin** (Newfoundland and Labrador Housing and Homelessness Network); **Judy Tobin** (City of St. John's); **Amy Tulk** (Home Again Furniture Bank); **Lisa Zigler** (Eastern Health).

Key Messages:

- A direct assistance program should be created in collaboration with local communities, incorporate support along the housing continuum, have portable funding, and include a mechanism for measurement and evaluation.
- There is a need for better collaboration between federal and provincial governments in addressing homelessness. The federal government could foster collaboration by supporting local capacity-building, sharing data and research, creating best practices, and offering federal buildings and land to provincial homelessness programs.



- The new social housing strategy should be guided by the following principles: housing is a right, local collaboration, evidence-based decision making, and adaptability.

Summary:

The meeting began with an orientation of the NHC's work and process to date. Participants divided into small groups to discuss the NHC's policy development areas: direct housing assistance, improving the Homelessness Partnering Strategy, attracting capital to new and existing supply, and the expiry of social housing operating agreements. Groups discussed each of the four policy areas in turn, before sharing the highlights of their conversations in plenary. What follows is a summary of their discussions:

Direct assistance to tenants

Participants agreed a federal assistance program for renters has significant potential to improve housing affordability. Many participants were enthusiastic about the prospect of a more simplified and consistent assistance program for individuals in housing need. Participants also recognized the potential for a direct assistance program to provide cross-sectoral benefits by lifting people out of poverty.

Groups proposed a number of design parameters they thought would be integral to a successful federal housing assistance program. Many participants emphasized the importance of giving tenants flexibility and choice with regard to their housing location. A federal benefit program tied to the individual would allow that person to move between units, municipalities and even provinces or regions, in order to follow opportunity without risking their housing. One participant pointed out that portable funding allows individuals with complex needs, such as seniors or victims of violence, to seek out housing options that are most appropriate. Another participant noted that direct, portable funding could work with a Housing First model.

Some participants suggested all households in core housing need should be eligible for a direct assistance program. Others posited the mechanism could help individuals advance into a situation where they can be self-sustaining. Some emphasized the importance of a gradual cut-off, to avoid the disincentive of a welfare wall. Others proposed that there be direct assistance for both renters and those wishing to enter the ownership market.

A number of groups observed the potential for a new federal benefit to complement and fill gaps in provincial programs. Many emphasized that provincial governments and community organizations should be involved in the administration of a direct assistance program in order for the program to best align with provincial, municipal or community goals.



A number of participants highlighted the importance of evaluation, and basing the evaluation of any new program on its impact on outcomes for people. Some cautioned evaluating a direct assistance program is more difficult than measuring the impact of subsidized units. Participants suggested, therefore, that a method of evaluation be established before implementing a direct assistance program.

Finally, participants noted the greatest weakness of a direct assistance program administered through the tax system is that it misses the most vulnerable people who do not file taxes. There was consensus among participants that an assistance program must have a mechanism for identifying and supporting such individuals.

Increasing effectiveness of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy

Participants agreed both federal and provincial governments have distinct roles to play in addressing homelessness. In general, participants agreed the role of the federal government is to provide funding as well as high-level coordination for provinces. The role of the provinces is to implement interventions and preventative programs. A number of participants cited lack of funding as the greatest barrier facing provinces and communities when it comes to addressing homelessness.

A number of participants noted the need for a federal framework to coordinate collaboration between provinces and the federal government on a homelessness strategy. Suggestions for areas requiring multi-governmental collaboration included: education and local capacity building; collecting and sharing data and research; identifying and promoting best practices; activating vacant federal lands and buildings; and increasing funding through mutual agreements. Some participants noted that federal resources should be distributed in a way that recognizes regional and local disparities. In particular, they emphasized that provinces with smaller populations may not fit a standard per capita funding model.

Attracting capital to new and existing supply

The group agreed that there is a need to incent the private sector to contribute to increasing the supply affordable housing. Participants discussed a number of incentives to encourage private and non-profit investment in new and existing affordable housing.

Participants discussed the possibility for the government could provide seed funding for pre-development of private and non-profit housing proposals. Others put forward the idea that the CMHC could act as a financial partner in refurbishing and recapitalizing affordable housing. Participants agreed that banks could contribute to affordable housing by, for example, reducing the interest rate for the development of affordable homes.



Many groups discussed how new affordable housing could contribute to complete communities. Some participants proposed removing the GST from capital costs of new affordable housing units and another suggested establishing inclusionary zoning. Many raised NIMBY-ism as a major obstacle to building mixed income / mixed tenure communities. They suggested public education and engagement in the planning process, and creating innovative mixed-tenure options for building could help address resident opposition to new affordable housing construction.

Others recommended that the federal government support local consortia to help architects, builders and developers share resources and knowledge related to affordable housing. One participant added that this type of federally supported collaboration in the private sector could build a bank of case studies that other private developers could learn from. Participants agreed government has a critical role to play in de-risking new affordable housing development.

Expiry of operating agreements

There was consensus among participants that the response to the expiry of operating agreements must balance the need for a long-term, sustainable plan and the need to assist those in immediate need.

Many participants agreed that the first step in addressing the expiry of operating agreements is to establish a baseline level of federal funding to maintain the social housing that currently exists. Regarding a long-term solution, a number of participants emphasized that social housing policy should focus on prevention principles rather than remediation. As one participant phrased it, 'A focus on prevention will ultimately save the government future expenses related to health, social and economic challenges.' Many participants stressed the need for government to acknowledge the connections between different policy areas.

Groups discussed the principles that should guide government reaction to the expiry of operating agreements. Most participants agreed that a social housing program should be premised on the notion that everyone deserves a safe, affordable and suitable place to live regardless of their individual circumstances.

Participants agreed that a new social housing program should incorporate community engagement mechanisms in order to take into account cultural factors and address NIMBY-ism. As one participant expressed, underpinning the principle of community engagement is the philosophy that social housing is not just about providing a house, but about fostering healthy and prosperous communities.

Many groups also stressed the importance of evidence-based decision making. Recognizing that government policy benefits from quantitative analysis, participants



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emphasized that a new social housing program must incorporate robust measurement and evaluation mechanisms. One participant suggested that, as a first step, the government create a database of all existing social housing units in order to understand the impacts of the expiry of operating agreements.

Groups expressed a strong desire to realize a social housing strategy that is adaptable to individual need and open to innovation. As one participant put it, 'demographics in Canada are changing, and housing needs are changing along with them. Social housing needs to be at the forefront of responding to people in housing need.' In more concrete terms, one participant noted that the federal government should enable social housing providers to leverage their assets in creative ways in order to attract investment from the business community.

In a final plenary, the group expressed optimism about the potential for the national housing strategy to foster collaboration between communities and municipal, provincial and federal governments.