

**National Housing Collaborative
Winnipeg Sounding - May 17, 2016
Hosted by United Way Winnipeg and End Homelessness Winnipeg**

Attended by:

Chesya Polevychok, Manager, Manitoba Housing; **Clark Brownlee**, Coalition Coordinator, Right to Housing; **Clive Wightman**, Community Services, City of Winnipeg; **Erika Weibe**, Collective Impact Facilitator, Winnipeg Poverty Reduction Council, United Way Winnipeg; **Frank Koch-Shulte**, Vice President, Edison Properties; **Leah Goertzen**, Housing Initiatives Coordinator, West Broadway Community Organization; **Lisa Spring**, Homes Coordinator, West Central Women's Resource Centre; **Louis Soren**, President & CEO, End Homelessness Winnipeg; **Marie Cecile Kotyk**, Manager, Housing Access, End Homelessness Winnipeg; **Menno Peters**, Executive Director, Winnipeg Housing & Rehabilitation Corporation; **Molly McCracken**, Director, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Manitoba Office; **Sean Barnes**, Vice President and District Manager, PCL Construction; **Shaun Parsons**, Regional Manager, Quality Management Ltd.; **Sherman Kreiner**, Managing Director, The University of Winnipeg Community Renewal Corporation; **Terry Kozak**, Senior Policy Analyst, Manitoba Housing and Community Development; **Wally Ruben**, GEM Equities.

Key messages:

- Rental in Winnipeg is an affordability challenge, not a supply challenge
- Social housing should be integrated within the housing system, not isolated as its own category
- The NHC should look for opportunities where government can simplify, streamline and coordinate across silos
- The federal strategy should set broad goals and hold actors to account, while allowing the greatest level of local autonomy – housing is ultimately a local issue

Summary:

The conversation began with a description of the origins, objectives, and membership of the NHC. Participants were supportive of the initiative, though remarked the group had taken on a substantial task in a short time frame. Many emphasized the need for the NHC to involve regional and indigenous perspectives within the Partnership Table, stressing these perspectives in particular would strengthen the NHC's recommendations. Next, the group turned to consider the three priority areas identified by the NHC.



The group had a brief discussion about purpose built rental. The statement of scarcity was inconsistent with the Winnipeg experience: many around the table noted that thousands of new purpose built rental units are currently under construction around the city; many of these new units are family sized. Vacancy in Winnipeg is 3%, and expected to go down with the addition of new rental stock. One participant questioned the need for additional family sized units, citing the industry research shows demand is lowest for three bedroom units. Another suggested demand is suppressed by the affordability of larger units. While supply was not viewed as a problem, participants noted as many as 50% of renters are in core housing need, indicating a significant affordability problem.

The group did not approve of the categorization of 'social housing 2.0' as a distinct category for development. They cautioned the NHC against considering social housing as an independent, separate from other types of housing provision. Some suggested the goal should be to develop proposals to better integrate social housing services within the spectrum of housing – enabling more types of providers to offer affordable housing options, and equipping the social housing sector to provide new kinds of services and supports – on their properties and beyond. As one private developer put it “I want to be able to provide affordable housing and house people who need it. But many of these people need support, from people who know how to help them.” A social housing provider said, “We’ve spent 35 years being rule based, ticking boxes to survive. We need to be able to be more flexible.” Another participant said, “Social housing shouldn’t be separate from housing development.”

The group agreed innovative solutions are required to incentivize including affordable housing across the market, and to develop new forms of partnerships between the social and private sector. Many advocated for tying benefits to people as opposed to units. This was forwarded as the best way to maximize choice for individuals, and also as a way to minimize any stigma that may be associated with assistance. “We should tie benefits to people, not bricks and mortar.” Many also saw merit in increasing the flexibility for providers to incorporate affordable housing into their properties. One participant shared his experience building a new mix-model building, wherein the status of the unit could be reallocated based on the needs and capacities of the occupant, while keeping the overall proportions within the building stable. The group briefly discussed the possibility of adding further status allocations to allow tenants limited equity. Some participants were unsure of the relative merits of partial equity, but overall the group supported new ideas that would increase the range of action for providers, and choice for individuals.

The group saw colonization and family services to be the main contributors to core housing need. They observed the cyclical migration from reserves to Winnipeg, transferring individuals between jurisdictions and providing incomplete service in both. One participant suggested developing paths to property ownership for indigenous people would be a major step forward.

Participants lauded the NHC's determination to develop policy proposals grounded in the understanding of housing as a system. As one participant who had been working in the sector for decades said, "I'm glad somebody's looking at the complexity of the system because I don't understand the whole thing." Another said, "We need a multi-layered approach. If we just focus on homelessness and only put supports there we're just going to make more homeless." The group stressed policy development should recognize that housing serves a societal purpose, and clearly articulate that purpose to guide policy intent. They emphasized the importance of developing people-centric programs, citing Sustainable Livelihoods as a model for applying a comprehensive framework to address a complex social problem.

The group expressed frustration with the time and energy required to navigate the maze of overlapping government programs. They noted this is a problem for people as well as for providers and developers. As one service provider observed, "The more programs a person needs to deal with, the worse they do." Participants suggested the federal government could play a role coordinating with other orders of government to simplify use of existing programs. The idea of developing a single portal for developers and/or providers that could "Provide a single point of access for affordable housing that would activate multiple tax and programs across multiple order of government." had significant support.

The opportunity to play a coordinating role extended to data collection and research. Lack of information was seen by many as a major obstacle to "understanding the nature of the problem." Others noted social housing providers are discouraged from studying and learning from failures, as one revealed about Manitoba's Housing First program "We've failed but nobody wants to publish that. So we haven't learned."

Overall, the group agreed a national strategy is required for guidance from the federal level. They look to the federal government to hold policy to best practice, and suggested the strategy should be equity-based, and place-based. They agreed the federal role is to provide high-level goals, muster the energies of lower orders of government to work towards shared goals, and "provide funding to those parts of the system where the market is hurting the most," with defined outcomes for that investment. However, they emphasized "it is the place that determines where the pain



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is.” Providing flexibility to achieve differentiated outcomes, and granting the greatest amount of autonomy to all actors in the system – including people – were posited as major accomplishments a national strategy should seek to achieve.