

Innovation of housing policies key to fairness and opportunity

By Dr. Jacline Nyman, president & CEO of United Way Centraide Canada & Tim Richter, President & CEO of the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness

Canada is well-positioned to realize its vision of ensuring fairness and opportunity for all Canadians. The Canada Child Benefit, introduced just two years ago, is helping to lift tens of thousands of households out of poverty, while the commitment to renew the Homelessness Partnering Strategy promises to significantly reduce the trauma of homelessness.

The next stage is the announcement of a new National Housing Strategy, which, if done wisely, will chart a course to greater economic security for Canadians by addressing both homelessness and the lack of affordable housing.

An effective Housing Strategy must deal with three critical areas. First, it needs to clearly state its purpose in terms of specific and measurable outcomes that focus efforts on those in the most urgent housing need. Second, translating good ideas into tangible progress must be matched by significant, multi-year investment. Third, changing times require policy innovation that moves beyond replicating past initiatives.

There are promising signs that this is what the federal government intends to do.

Clarity of Purpose: The most significant challenges facing Canada in the area of housing affordability are homelessness and housing poverty. At least 235,000 households experience homelessness in a given year. As well, almost a million households pay over 30% of income for rent (defined as “core housing need” by CMHC) and 400,000 of those pay over 50% of their incomes on rent. By any measure this is severe housing need. So it is good news that the National Housing Strategy has already set clear targets of reducing both chronic homelessness and core housing need.

Investment: The federal 2017 budget is a de facto “housing budget.” Eleven billion dollars are already booked toward housing investments for the next decade. This historic move means that for the first time in a generation, Canadians can count on long-term, predictable, significant investments in this central policy area. And while these investments alone will not address the full scale of Canada’s housing crisis, the hope is that tangible progress toward defined outcomes will mobilize expanded federal investment in years to come.

Innovation: Perhaps the biggest challenge is to introduce fresh approaches to solving our housing problems. The current system of housing supports and investments have certainly made a big difference over the past decades. But huge gaps remain, and new approaches are needed to keep up with the fast-changing social and economic environment facing Canadians.

Four key policy directions are prime areas for innovation and transformation.

A new national housing benefit, paid directly to low-income renters, will immediately reduce severe core housing need, and help households at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness.

Investments in both new and existing buildings will increase the supply of rental housing that is affordable to middle and lower income groups.

A new framework to replace the social housing operating agreements with the federal and provincial governments, needs to ensure existing tenants – among the most vulnerable in our society - are protected while we transition to the new housing benefit.

And, investing to increase the effectiveness of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy will make measurable improvements in reducing chronic homelessness.

We face an uncertain and changing world where globalizing forces and accelerating automation are transforming the nature and structure of our labour markets. Our social policies need to be adaptive and responsive to these new conditions. Old solutions for age-old problems won't do the job.

Federal leadership is essential to chart a long-term housing strategy that will address urgent needs, mitigate worsening trends, and establish sustainable solutions that ensure a safe, affordable home is a reality for every Canadian. Transformative action now will strengthen Canada's ability to improve housing outcomes across our nation.

No one strategy alone can resolve the complex issues at the root of poverty in Canada. A new National Housing Strategy will, however, build on the momentum already created, and enable a significant next step towards greater fairness, opportunity and justice for all Canadians.