

BC NON-PROFIT HOUSING ASSOCIATION

A submission to the Homelessness
Partnering Strategy's Advisory Committee
on Homelessness

August 29th, 2017



INTRODUCTION

BC Non-Profit Housing Association (BCNPHA) is pleased to submit this response to the Homelessness Partnering Strategy consultation process. This response represents the views of BC Non-Profit Housing Association as the provincial umbrella organization for the non-profit housing sector in BC, comprised of nearly 600 members, including non-profit housing societies, businesses, individuals, partners and stakeholders. Together non-profit housing societies manage more than 60,000 units of long-term, affordable housing in over 1,500 buildings across the province.

BCNPHA has become a strong voice advocating for the affordable housing and homelessness sectors in British Columbia. Our members provide supportive, transitional, and assisted housing services to individuals and families facing homelessness.

The focus of this submission is to inform policies and strategic direction that will lead to a homelessness-serving and housing sector capable of ensuring that all British Columbians have access to safe, secure and affordable housing and supports. The response highlights specific investments and policy interventions that are required through HPS to more effectively address homelessness in British Columbia.

A BC RESPONSE FOR A RENEWED STRATEGY

Through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy's provision of direct support and funding in its seven designated communities in BC, the framework for a local, flexible response has been laid nationally. At the same time, the number of individuals experiencing homelessness in virtually all of BC's communities has continued to increase.

While the move to Housing First was grounded in a robust evidence base, it has fallen short of achieving the desired policy outcomes. This is primarily due to two factors:

A. HPS funds are not sufficient: there has been continued under-resourcing of homelessness-prevention and -response programs despite growing numbers of homeless individuals and families;

B. HPS programs are not sufficiently coordinated with local, regional and provincial investment programs in some communities.

The following minimum requirements are necessary for a successful expansion of the HPS program:

1. Promote coordination within the homelessness serving sector
2. Strengthen prevention mechanisms
3. Develop a needs-based funding allocation formula
4. Integrate homelessness policy

1) Promote coordination within the homelessness serving sector

The homeless-serving sector emerged as a community-driven response to the crisis of increasing homelessness throughout the 1990s and 2000s, and has historically been disconnected from the affordable housing sector in both policy and service provision. In addition to the challenge of policy silos, our province experiences other challenges resulting in an uncoordinated system such as:

- A broad array of funders with similar but distinct interests;
- Lacking or overlapping non-profit services;
- Providers operating within a competitive environment that does not foster effective cooperation and coordination;
- Hundreds of municipalities with different approaches and varying capacities to address homelessness.

Despite this complexity, all of these actors have the same end goal in mind: ensuring that all individuals are safely and affordably housed.

To guarantee that HPS will have maximum impact, the program must reinforce and contribute to coordination between the broad range of stakeholders working in and around homelessness such as non-profits, government agencies, the private sector, philanthropic organizations, and community financial institutions.

Figure 1- Standard and coordinated systems to addressing homelessness

Standard system	Coordinated system
No coordinated outreach/access points	Fully coordinated outreach and access points
Each program has own assessment	One community-wide triage tool
No way of prioritizing clients or “first-come, first serve” prioritization	Community-wide prioritization protocol based on highest level of need, best fit, and the community’s other priorities
Each program keeps list of clients	One community-wide by-name list
Funders reinforcing a siloed system	Funders reinforcing a coordinated system
Program-centric view to address homelessness	Client- and system-centered view to end homelessness
Some programs use a Housing First approach	The entire system uses a Housing First approach
My clients/my resources	Our clients/our resources

Figure 1 outlines the outcomes of a coordinated system that HPS should aim to achieve. Communities should be empowered to ensure that entry points into the homeless-serving system are coordinated, so that individuals accessing the system are assessed and triaged based on need. Integral to coordinated entry points are community- or

region-wide vulnerability assessment tools and data sharing agreements to track and monitor individuals in the system in real time, as well as ensure that individuals with the highest vulnerability are prioritized for appropriate and available units. In addition, a coordinated approach should ensure that the entire homeless-serving system is adopting a Housing First approach and that government, foundations, and other funders are aligned in their investment strategies.

2) Strengthen prevention mechanisms

Funding for homelessness in Canada has tended to focus on investments in short-term, crisis-based services rather than fully integrated, community-wide systems of prevention. Evidence from the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, and the United States demonstrates that focusing resources toward homelessness prevention programs and activities are beneficial both socially and economically. BCNPHA recommends that HPS develop a robust Homelessness Prevention Framework, as advocated by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness.¹ The focus of the framework should be based on a public health prevention model, which would include elements of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention.

1. Primary prevention relates to **preventing** new cases of homelessness among both the general population and those deemed at-risk of homelessness. Primary prevention strategies focus on broad-based universal initiatives such as large-scale investments in affordable housing, as well as targeted strategies for populations known to be at a higher risk of homelessness such as youth leaving foster care, low-income people with cognitive impairments or mental illness, or those leaving prisons.
2. Secondary prevention attempts to **intervene** at an early stage of homelessness such as the beginning of an eviction or when a household first accesses a shelter. Emergency rent payments to landlords, utility assistance, eviction prevention in the form of landlord-tenant mediation, housing advice, and domestic violence victim support are all forms of secondary prevention.
3. Tertiary prevention focuses on helping those who experience chronic homelessness to **find housing stability**, including supporting health and well-being; supporting access to income and education; and complimentary supports such as life skills training. These activities are overlapping and a fully integrated prevention strategy needs to include elements of all three areas.

BCNPHA recommends that a key focus for HPS is the adoption of a Homelessness Prevention Framework that brings together all levels of government, the non-profit and private sectors, and other community stakeholders to plan and implement a strategy to reduce individuals and families falling into homelessness. The Framework should focus

¹ See Stephen Gaetz and Erin Dej (2017) "A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention" Found at: <http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/SOHC2016.pdf>

on the structural drivers of homelessness; support for individuals transitioning out of public institutions; early intervention strategies; eviction prevention; and housing stabilization. A key component is the realization of long-term and stable funding to provide rental supports for people accessing market housing.

3) Needs-based funding allocation

Federal affordable housing dollars have historically been allocated on a per-capita basis rather than a per-need basis, which is problematic given that housing need is not distributed evenly across the country or population groups.

In 2016, vacancy rates in British Columbia were 1.3 percent, the lowest of any province. High land prices in major -regions like Metro Vancouver compound low vacancy rates and make it more difficult to secure sites for affordable housing projects. Regions like Metro Vancouver also absorb a high proportion of Canada's net immigration each year, which requires more affordable rental housing due to the fact that new Canadians are more likely to rent than own in their first years of settlement.

Municipalities in BC have a larger homelessness problem than other parts of the country, with Vancouver and Kelowna having some of the highest per capita rates in Canada.² Smaller communities like Squamish, Nelson, Terrace, and Cranbrook have an even higher per capita homelessness rate than our larger population centres.³

Further, people who identify as Indigenous continue to make up at least one-third of people experiencing visible homelessness in BC communities, despite accounting for only 5 percent of the general population.

These facts demonstrate that there is more need for affordable housing and homelessness support in British Columbia than in other provinces, and for Indigenous people in particular. Funding decisions should reflect these realities. As such, BCNPHA recommends federal policy interventions and accompanying funding programs be based on need, rather than on a per-capita basis. This recommendation is consistent with proposals submitted by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, which recommend that the formula be based on factors such as local affordable housing demand and rates of homelessness.

To address the disproportionate prevalence of indigenous people in the homeless population, immediate and serious preventative and reconciliatory action is required,

² See Canadian Observatory on Homelessness "Which city in Canada has the most homeless people per capita and why?" Found at: <http://homelesshub.ca/resource/which-city-canada-has-most-homeless-people-capita-and-why> . Note that figures for Vancouver and Kelowna are based on figures for the city proper.

³ See Housing Central's *An Affordable Housing Plan for BC*, page 14. Found at: <http://housingcentral.ca>

including the allocation of funding to culturally-relevant health programming and economic development opportunities.

Through the renewal of HPS, a broad reconsideration of qualifying communities should be undertaken to reflect the growth in homelessness in currently non-designated communities over the last decade.

4) Integrate homelessness policy

Homelessness is a complex policy issue that has many different causes. As a result, solutions to homelessness require cooperation and collaboration across a wide variety of provincial and federal departments and ministries and civil society institutions. To effectively address homelessness, HPS must foster greater integration between ministries that touch on homelessness issues such as Indigenous Services; Families, Children, and Social Development; Health; Infrastructure and Communities; Justice; Employment, Workforce, and Labour; as well as corresponding provincial ministries and departments.

The homeless serving sector and HPS are not solely responsible for ending homelessness, and HPS must reinforce this principle by working across government silos.

For communities in BC, the Housing First Approach will only produce significant impacts if its foundation – the access to housing of choice and accompanying support mechanisms – can be guaranteed irrespective of the economic context. Such requires considerable capital investment in the appropriate affordable housing stock and income supports for renter households to fill the current ‘affordability gap’.