

housing in the north

INSPIRATIONAL & INNOVATIVE HOUSING INITIATIVES OF NORTHERN CANADA

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Housing in the North: Inspirational and Innovative Housing Initiatives of Northern Canada

Session Summary authored by:

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This is a summary of the workshop session “Housing in the North”, which took place during the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association’s 51st National Congress on Housing and Homelessness in Victoria, BC on April 4, 2019.

Often northern housing is characterized by stories from a deficit-based perspective. The session highlighted how partnership and collaboration with governments, local non-governmental organizations, private industry, and Indigenous groups are driving innovation and made-in-the-North solutions to housing challenges.

Panelists

Tom Williams, President and CEO, North West Territories Housing Corporation

Lance Jakubec, Specialist in Northern Housing, Canada Housing and Mortgage Regional Representative

Jillian Hardie, Executive Director and CEO, Challenge Disability Resource Group

Stephen Mooney, Director, Northern Housing Innovation.

The challenges faced by Northern individuals in relation to livelihoods and housing are very real and ever present. Despite these challenges, there are many inspiring initiatives taking place in a variety of northern communities. These initiatives defy obstacles by creating housing models that are made in the north and provide solutions to their unique environmental, cultural and geographical circumstances.

Historically northern housing solutions have been adopted from more southern regions of the country, which has presented problems in sustainable and affordable builds in the unique geographic area of the north. Whether the challenges faced surround home design, materials, water, or septic systems, southern solutions are simply incompatible with the environment in which homes are being built and lived. It has been a heavy burden for northern families to bear the brunt of mistakes made by well-intended outsiders trying to solve their housing challenges. An example of incompatible design for the north from the south are septic systems not meant for heavy clay soils resulting in the rise of sewage over septic field mounds mixed with snow until the earth can thaw enough for the liquids to seep back into the soil, during the spring thaw. In addition to poor design and inadequate materials, by the time supplies, commonly used to build homes in other region, reach the build site, mold becomes an issue. This creates a health hazard for the future occupants even before the new build is completed. The resulting dangerous living environments have left some sick, or at risk of homelessness due to an inhabitable home. The health and safety of residents has been compromised over the years due to a lack of understanding and connection to the environment and distinctive needs of Northerners. These types of issues have created the need for a coordinated effort throughout the region in order to enhance local communities' capacity to reclaim leadership for their housing sector. With a vested interest in the success of housing plans and projects for their regions, Northern communities are driven to find solutions through strength-to-strength partnerships and collaborations within and between their communities.

Tom Williams | Northwest Territories Housing Corporation

Unique challenges in housing and infrastructure in the North have required creative solutions and partnerships in addition to capital and funds. The Northwest Territories is made up of 44,000 people in 33 different communities – the largest has a population of 20,000 and 82 residents live in the smallest. There are challenges surrounding the vastness, remoteness, and isolation of Northern communities. For example, climate change is impacting the housing industry through permafrost thaws and by reducing the window for delivering materials to communities. Winter roads, which are essential to the North for transport of goods, are completely weather dependent and winter heat waves have tremendous negative impacts.

Governments need to be strategic about their approach to social housing since it is the primary type of housing in the region; 90% of the housing in smaller communities is government owned. There are unique challenges that come with partnerships between different levels of government and diverse local community governance models – everyone realizes they need to work together to be successful in overcoming these challenges. “In the North, we are spending 8% of our annual [territorial] budgets on housing where the national [provincial] average is 1.5%. We put our money where our mouth is in housing.” says Williams.

Not only are they investing financially they are also taking the time to assess what works, what does not work, and what needs to be tweaked to help guide future work and developments. Currently, changes are being made to policy that will help pensioners and low-income residents in accessing repair programs. One way this is done is through locally developed Community Housing Plans. Local governments and community members are actively involved in the dialogue surrounding housing to better understand their unique needs and create solutions to overcome the challenges with which they are faced. The plans provide direction and set priorities of future investments in housing.

The Community Housing Support Initiative

This program combines contributions from the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation and community partners to increase the stock of affordable housing in communities. The initiative supports the implementation of innovative and community-driven housing projects by local and Indigenous Governments.

Lance Jakubec | Housing in the North - Opportunities under CMHC and the National Housing Strategy

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) has been an increasingly important source for Northerners looking to acquire funds for their affordable housing projects. Labelling this as a “unique and exciting time in the North” Jakubec spoke of funding available for new housing development construction, as well as repair programs for existing housing stock. The federal government is actively involved in affordable housing sector through various National Housing Strategy measures, such as the National Housing Co-investment Fund, and is eager to support new affordable housing projects in the North. Opportunities outside of the National Housing Strategy explore bringing together employment, intergenerational learning, and housing.

The Housing Internship Initiative for First Nation and Inuit Youth (HIIFINY) program for Indigenous youth is designed to grow net capacity within the sector through work experience and on the job training in housing in areas such as administration, construction, maintenance, or counselling.

Jillian Hardie | Cornerstone Affordable and Supportive Housing Development by Challenge Disability Resource Group (CDRG) an innovative supportive housing project in Whitehorse, Yukon.

Primary goal: To provide a continuum of support to individuals with disabilities and mental illness. The continuum of services will be delivered in accordance with the unique needs and personal choices of the individuals with the ultimate goal of independent living.

The new Cornerstone Affordable and Supportive Housing Development (CASHD) in Whitehorse Yukon is a project that was initiated in 2012 as a result of recognizing that supports are integral for housing and employment. Using an inclusion model, this housing development is important in preventing isolation and increasing community connections to improve the lives and dignity of residents.

“Every human being deserves dignity and respect.”

Supported by the National Housing Strategy, this mixed-model housing development will help to meet the diverse needs of a varied demographic to promote housing stability and sustainability. Through supportive housing and by partnering with community agencies, CASHD is designed to help tenants become independent in their living and connected to organizations that can help meet their individual needs.

Housing is the “cornerstone” for individuals to be successful in living and achieving their goals. In the Cornerstone development, a catering social enterprise will provide services to tenants for developing their cooking abilities; while Cornerstone’s Challenges Office will run employment training and trade services. In the development phase of the project, CDRG has a justice employment program for individuals who are involved in the justice system to be connected with the contractors building the development and work as first-year apprentices. The contractors who were hired for this project had to be in support of this program as a condition for gaining the contract for the build.

“Don’t underestimate the desire for those in your community to be involved in your innovative housing projects.”

The Cornerstone development will include affordable rental housing units as well as units for affordable purchase.

- Up to 5 units for Blood Ties Four Directions
- Up to 3 units for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Society Yukon clients
- 2 units allocated to Victims of violence
- 1 unit for Rapid re-housing
- Up to 22 units for clients of CDRG
- Up to 13 units for affordable housing
- 8 units for Affordable purchase (all sold)

Steven Mooney – Northern Housing Innovation Centre

Vision of the Northern Housing Innovation Centre:

To bring together all levels of government, technical experts, the housing construction and development sectors, and Northerners to address housing issues in Canada’s North.

The Northern Housing Innovation Centre is a new housing research facility proposed for Yukon College, located in the traditional territory of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation and the Ta’an Kwäch’än Council.

The goal of the Northern Housing Innovation Centre (NHIC) is to bring locally inspired creative solutions to Northern issues using Northern expertise and to create opportunities for northern residents to have a space for hands-on training, learning and testing of innovative model ideas for northern

housing. The NHIC allows for housing problems to be “solved in the North, for the North and by the North through research of northern issues and with northern expertise”.

“When technology and innovation push governments and policy, that’s when we start to see positive changes for communities”.

When looking at project management, construction designs, and technology, southern models may or may not work for northern communities or they may require some modification. Instead of imposing universal concepts and designs, housing corporations, First Nations communities and leaders, local architects, and other stakeholders need to be brought to the table to look for potential solutions applicable to the region.

One of the issues that is being researched through the NHIC is the sustainability of new housing builds. On average, within three years, brand new houses start falling apart due to environmental conditions, permafrost, and improper maintenance for the climate. Applied research has shown how you can build new homes more efficiently and reduce costs; pairing this with teaching homeowners how to maintain these homes is the key to success.

The centre will also allow for community members to learn and test how to best build homes for their communities – with the goal to see students designing culturally relevant homes, that are built by their people and brought back to their communities. This allows individuals to stay in their communities, to have the employment, and the housing they need - reducing social pressures and increase community connections and strength.

There is much to be celebrated in the progress of the North with creative approaches and persistence in finding solutions to housing challenges and needs. It is inspiring to hear of the multi-faceted approaches being used, whether it be through government funding, policy changes, innovative projects, or academia. The people of the North understand the need for collaboration, partnerships and respect for cultural autonomy. We often look at the North as isolated and alienated from much of our sprawling country, hindered by long winters and environmental challenges. The North is more than capable and willing to work towards their own solutions to housing their people in the climate they know best. What the rest of the country can do for the North is to serve as allies as they work towards goals that help to stabilize the climate, reduce the pressures from climate change, and support and respect their independence and strength.