

## The Case for a “For Indigenous, By Indigenous” Urban, Rural and Northern Housing Strategy

When politicians and commentators discuss Indigenous peoples in Canada, it's not often recognized that 87% of Indigenous peoples in Canada live in urban, rural and northern settings. Given that fact, it's an unfortunate reality that the federal government is not living up to its housing obligations for Indigenous people living in urban, rural and northern areas of Canada. Indigenous people living in urban, rural and northern areas of Canada have housing outcomes that are far worse than non-Indigenous Canadians. The November 2017 National Housing Strategy says that “No relationship is more important to the Government than the one with Indigenous peoples” but the fact is that the National Housing Strategy contained no distinct strategy or program to address the needs of urban, rural and northern Indigenous peoples.

Housing for Indigenous peoples living in urban, rural and northern settings is precarious. According to the 2019 Rental Housing Index, Indigenous led renter households are spending a greater proportion of income on rents, and overcrowding is more prevalent. Indigenous peoples in Canada are 11 times more likely to use a homeless shelter compared to non-Indigenous people. The intensity of overrepresentation is particularly high for Indigenous women, seniors, and Inuit. Indigenous shelter users experience more shelter stays each year and are less likely to exit a shelter. Indigenous peoples also cycle through homeless shelters with higher frequency versus long-term stay, which can make reporting difficult.

These indicators demonstrate that there is a need for more culturally appropriate housing as it can speak to the frequency of migration between communities and urban centers.

So what does this mean for Indigenous peoples living in urban, rural and northern communities? It means that we need to have a plan in place that will provide an appropriate supply of quality, affordable, culturally relevant housing. Because these needs were not adequately addressed in the 2017 National Housing Strategy, urban, rural and northern Indigenous peoples require a separate strategy that is governed and administered by Indigenous peoples themselves.

Most Indigenous Housing organizations operating today received funding to build affordable Indigenous housing during the 1970s to 1990s under CMHC's Urban Native Housing Program and Rural and Native Housing Program. Over the decades, Indigenous housing providers have provided safe, affordable and appropriate housing to tens of thousands of tenant families and individuals. But since that time, there has been virtually no dedicated funding specifically for urban Indigenous housing.

In 2018, the Indigenous Caucus of the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association developed a “For Indigenous, By Indigenous” (FIBI) Housing strategy that sets forth a vision for how a revamped federal housing strategy aimed at addressing urban, rural and northern Indigenous housing could be developed. This FIBI Strategy proposes:

- Protection of existing tenants and current Indigenous social housing units by continuing rent subsidies and refurbishing the existing stock;

- Increased supply of stable, safe and affordable housing to “Eliminate the Gap” in core housing need for 38,000 Indigenous households – many of which are female led;
- Support for tenants’ well-being and long-term success with wraparound Indigenous services;
- Accelerated action on Indigenous homelessness;
- Special attention on Northern housing;
- Increased focus on data, information, research and evaluation; and
- A federally recognized “For Indigenous, By Indigenous” National Housing Centre that would provide Indigenous led governance for this strategy and its implementation.

With the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Reports Calls for Justice, as well as the repeated calls to adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples into Canadian law, the opportunity to make significant changes in our communities is at an all-time high and we must ride that momentum to create real change. Does the federal government have the courage to do this, possibly as early as the 2020 Federal Budget? That remains to be seen - but there is always hope.

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