



CHRA Congress Session Series 2021

In a Time of COVID: Partnerships for Housing Solutions & Economic Recovery

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**Canadian Housing and
Renewal Association**
A Home for the Housing Sector



BC HOUSING



In a Time of COVID: Partnerships for Housing Solutions & Economic Recovery

THIS SUMMARY

This paper is a summary of the session, “In a Time of COVID: Partnerships for Housing Solutions & Economic Recovery” which took place virtually during the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association’s Congress on April 28, 2021.

THANK YOU



Thanks to BC Housing for their generous contributions to the Congress Session Series.

Canadian Housing and Renewal Association (CHRA) held its 53rd National Congress on Housing and Homelessness in April 2021. The session, In a Time of COVID: Partnerships for Housing Solutions & Economic Recovery had three panelists who discussed the effects of the current global pandemic on emergency housing need in Canada. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted challenges for the non-profit housing community, including the immediate connection of housing and public health.

The CHRA Congress session featured three panelists:

1. Shayne Ramsay, Chief Executive Officer, BC Housing;
2. Justin Marchand, Executive Director, Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services (OAHS); and
3. Susan McGee, Chief Executive Officer, Homeward Trust.

Prior to the pandemic, the number of Canadians experiencing homelessness was significant. As the effects of the pandemic were felt, there was a large increase in homelessness, particularly for vulnerable populations.

People experiencing homelessness are more likely to be marginalized and a disproportionate number are Indigenous Peoples. Each of the panelists spoke to this from their geographic locations of British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario.

Although the panelists felt strongly that the right to housing is reason enough to address homelessness, each one demonstrated that the economic cost of emergency services outweigh permanent, stable housing. It is more cost effective for society as a whole to offer supportive housing to those in need, rather than responding with emergency shelter beds, hospital beds, urgent care, and police services.

Rather than responding to the homelessness crisis, a solution to the cause and not treating the symptom is to provide permanent, stable housing. There simply isn't enough housing stock in the country as we lose affordable units each day. Non-profits are working hard to create new, purpose-built housing.

Each of these topics will be explored further, along with concluding thoughts from the session that homelessness is due to a lack of affordable housing options, not mental health, and housing is inextricably linked to public health, not just individual health.

Increase in People Needing Emergency Services

British Columbia saw an increase in the number of displaced people due to the pandemic. This was compounded by the national drug crisis. In Vancouver and Victoria, Shayne noted that there was an increased number of people living rough and camping in parks. The largest encampment in Canada took place in Strathcona Park. Over three weeks, BC Housing helped to move more than 605 people from the encampments to motels and hotels that were rented and purchased in Vancouver and Victoria. Every person was offered a space indoors. There was an additional opportunity for some of those living in the camps to be hired as peer workers, as front desk staff with a living wage, pension, and benefits.

Another response to the immediate need was the creation of more than 3,000 emergency spaces in 200 locations. These spaces allow for appropriate distancing to keep people safe. Shayne highlighted a pilot project partnership with Staples Business Advantage to set-up 1,000+ dignified spaces with beds and short walls to provide both physical distancing and privacy. This was seen as an alternative to setting up cots on floors in gymnasiums.

Prior to March 2020, Homeward Trust, in Edmonton, was focused on long-term outcomes to end homelessness in the community. They were seeing success with a steady decrease in the number of people experiencing homelessness. However, once the pandemic began, they saw homelessness rise by 120-140 people per month. Homeward Trust had to shift their role from long-term planning to emergency response in crisis mode.

Homeward Trust partnered with service provider agencies to offer a safe place in a convention centre, EXPO, that allowed for distancing where people could access day services and sleep overnight. Within just a couple days, 2,000 square feet of space was opened. EXPO cost \$10 million over four months to operate and in that time, 6,650 people were served. A second convention centre, Tipinawaw, was opened as well. More than 5,000 people were served at this location for a similar cost. Susan noted that while these costs were high, it was necessary to respond to both the need that existed prior to the pandemic, as well as adjusting for the increased need.



Figure 1: Location in Partnership with Staples Business Advantage in British Columbia



Figure 2: EXPO site in Edmonton

Homeward Trust also secured four hotels as 'Bridge Housing' to offer 450 spaces in the span of 12 months. Partnerships with the hotels allowed for utilization of their staff and cost efficiencies. There were also integrated supports offered to the tenants.

The pandemic effect is more than just an increase in the number of people living rough. People experiencing homelessness have a much higher risk of becoming ill or dying from COVID-19. Justin's presentation cited a [CTV News statement](#) that said someone who is experiencing homelessness is 20 times more likely to be hospitalized from COVID-19, 10 times more likely to receive intensive care, and five times more likely to die within 21 days of a

positive test (Jones, 2021).

The pandemic laid bare many things for the affordable housing sector. The first being homelessness is not just about individual health, but public health. It also showed that we can improve how we support people: through better street outreach, finding all available spaces for people to stay (i.e. hotels), and facilitating smoother relationships with partners. Shelter standards should be oriented to tenant services not facility management. There is an opportunity to come out of the pandemic doing things better than we were before for people experiencing homelessness. The focus shouldn't be "returning to normal", but to improve the standard of what "normal" is.

Disproportionate Effect on Indigenous Peoples

Each of the speakers acknowledged that in addition to the homeless population growing, the population is disproportionately comprised of Indigenous Peoples. Justin presented that in Ontario, Indigenous people represent 4% of the population but are anywhere between 25% and 99% of the homeless population. Yet, they only have access to 1% of available affordable housing.

Shayne noted that in British Columbia, 38% of the province's homeless population identify as Indigenous according to the 2018 provincial homeless count. In the Strathcona Park encampment mentioned earlier, half of the people living in the park were Indigenous.

In the face of this clear need, the federal government has not created an Urban, Rural and Northern Indigenous Housing Strategy. Announced in 2017, the 10-year National Housing Strategy includes three distinctions-based housing strategies for First Nations, Inuit and Métis, yet it does not have a distinct

strategy for urban, rural, and Northern Indigenous peoples. CHRA and other housing organizations have continued to [call for the federal government to complete a strategy](#). We encourage you to [write to your Member of Parliament](#) and urge them to work towards the creation of an Urban, Rural and Northern Indigenous Housing Strategy.

Economic Costs of Homelessness

While it is unfortunate to have to rely on an economic reason to offer permanent housing, data demonstrates that every dollar invested in housing results in savings for public services (Crépault & Blackstone, 2012; Din et al., 2018; Government of Ontario, 2017). Simply put, the symptoms of homelessness are expensive to respond to and it would make more sense to provide people with permanent stable housing instead.

BC Housing found that when people live in supportive housing, rather than living rough on the street, they are 64% less likely to use ambulances, and 50% less likely to need to visit a hospital. Susan noted that every \$1 spent on Housing First initiatives results in \$4+ of savings for community health and justice systems services. Housing with supports is a better use of resources, with better outcomes.

The State of Homelessness 2016 Report demonstrates the following average monthly cost of care for someone experiencing homelessness:

- \$1,932 – shelter bed
- \$4,333 – provincial jail
- \$10,900 – hospital bed
- \$701 – rental supplement
- \$199-\$700 – community housing (Gaetz et al., 2016)

The OAHS Sioux Lookout Transitional Housing is a clear example of the economic case for supportive transitional housing. In Sioux Lookout, 99% of the homeless population is Indigenous. OAHS built a new transitional housing project there with 20 residential units. There are on-site supportive programs for people experiencing chronic homelessness offered by the Nishnawbe-Gamik Friendship Centre. Prior to the development, the town of approximately 4,000 people had nearly 10,000 calls to 911 annually. Half of the calls were in relation to just 19 individuals. Three months after completion of the Sioux Lookout Transitional Housing, the calls for service for the 19 individuals dropped by 90%.

The Need to Increase Affordable Housing Stock

The rise in Canada's homeless population and demonstrated positive outcomes from investment in supportive housing means we need more affordable housing stock for people to live in. BC Housing partners with more than 800 non-profit and co-op housing organizations to provide 70,000+ units. It operates legacy housing stock in BC and offers rent supplements. It also develops new housing, averaging about 4,000 new units every year. In Fall 2017, BC Housing began a pilot project to create supportive housing units using modular housing technology. Since then, 2,670 units have been created. The units are about 325 square feet with a private kitchen and washroom and the benefit of modular construction allows for them to be built quickly.

Homeward Trust began five new projects with funding from the first round of CMHC's [Rapid Housing Initiative \(RHI\)](#). The projects are in five different neighbourhoods and will create 210 homes. The buildings are scheduled to be completed at the end of December 2021 and also include modular construction with support services in the podiums.

The first round of RHI funding was for \$1 billion that is supporting the construction of 4,700+ units. Round two of RHI was announced on June 30. This round has \$1.5 billion and is targeting a minimum of 4,500 units, 25% of which will go towards women-focused housing. Applications are due August 31.

Justin noted that the sector, including government, must be more outcome focused. For example,

if government funding could be more flexible, less prescriptive, and allow the housing providers to demonstrate how they are helping people, it would enable the affordable housing sector to scale up better. Shayne raised the point that non-profit organizations bear a lot of responsibility as the backbone of the sector. There is a lot of pressure and demands on the organizations. Justin echoed this, comparing the non-profits to safety nets for government to meet the housing needs of all Canadians. While Homeward Trust has managed to do so much in such a short period of time, Susan reflected that the herculean efforts take a toll on staff.

Conclusion

The speakers represented three different geographical locations in Canada and all at different levels of jurisdiction, but their messages were very much the same as one another:

- People cannot be healthy without housing.
- Many people believe homelessness is caused by living with mental health illnesses and addictions, but the biggest cause of homelessness is the lack of affordable rental housing.
- We need to stop managing homelessness and start building housing.
- There is a shared responsibility between health services and housing services, but the bottom line is that people will die if the work doesn't get done.
- Housing must be combined with culturally appropriate supportive services.

Although the pandemic has challenged us all in uncountable ways, there is also an opportunity to learn from the experience. There is an opportunity to do better by those that need assistance, those who are marginalized and lack access to affordable housing. Let's work together to provide dignified, appropriate services, and let's tackle the root cause by creating more affordable housing stock so that people do not need to experience homelessness in the first place.

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