



CHRA Congress Session Series 2022 Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Sector-led initiatives for sector-led solutions

SUMMARY AUTHOR

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MODERATOR

Susan McGee, Executive Director, Homeward Trust Edmonton

SESSION PANELISTS

Cliff Grant, Director of Indigenous Strategic Relations, Aboriginal Housing Management Association

Cheryl Krostewitz, Transformation Team leader, Manitoba Non-Profit Housing Association

Irene Martin-Lindsay, Executive Director, Alberta Seniors and Community Housing Association



**Canadian Housing and
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BC HOUSING

In the context of Canada's ongoing COVID-19 emergency, the community housing sector has responded to numerous crises at once, including sharp increases in homelessness, evictions, demand for specialized housing, and public health regulations alongside increased scrutiny from governments, staffing shortages caused by illness and fatigue, and a host of other pandemic-related issues that have negatively affected the delivery of housing services.

The 2022 CHRA Congress on Housing and Homelessness session Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Sector-led initiatives for sector-led solutions brought together three community housing sector leaders from different provinces, working in seniors, Indigenous, and affordable housing respectively, to discuss strategies for non-profit and specialized housing, the implications of COVID-19 for the sector, the affordable housing crisis, and the challenges their work will face in the future.

The panelists discussed the fact that there were a few positive aspects of the pandemic emergency response that could well lead to much-needed improvements in the systems in which housing providers operate, especially at the governmental and structural levels. For instance, the panelists remarked on the problem of the so-called "silo effect" (a situation in which organizations working in related fields do not communicate and coordinate enough with each other) in dealing with various provincial agencies and expressed a desire for greater autonomy and better coordination between the public policy and the programmatic aspects of their work.

The discussion was moderated by Susan McGee, Executive Director of Homeward Trust.¹ The first speaker was Cheryl Krostewitz, Transformation Team leader with the Manitoba Non-Profit Housing Association (MNPFA), whose bio indicates that she specializes in "working with boards to help them understand their roles and obligations under their legal agreements²" with provincial housing authorities.

Krostewitz noted that the issue of homelessness became more visible during the pandemic as Winnipeg residents were under greater economic pressure from job losses and though a province-wide moratorium on evictions helped, many were faced with larger debts due to growing arrears during this difficult period. So-called "couch-surfing" (the phenomenon of unhoused people finding temporary accommodations, typically staying with friends and family) became less and less tenable in the face of COVID-related measures that restricted movement and forced people into self-isolation. Krostewitz spoke about a \$2.6 million initiative funded by the Province of Manitoba. In her view, the initiative is unique in that the priorities for funding were developed by the community through a series of focus groups. The report stemming from that consultation process outlines a three-pronged strategy to coping with homelessness, especially in the context of housing the unhoused during the pandemic:

1. maintaining successful tenancy
2. sector capacity building
3. case management

More detailed information can be found in their summer of 2021 document: Community, Consultation and Engagement Report.³

The next speaker was Director of Indigenous Strategic Relations at the Aboriginal Housing Management Association (AHMA)⁴, Cliff Grant, standing in for absent Executive Director Margaret Pfoh. Grant's background includes working for band councils (Haisla Nation, Kitamaat, British Columbia), Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, and the City of Vancouver. His bio states that he's an "experienced Manager with a demonstrated history of working in the Provincial/Federal government administration

1 "Homeward Trust Edmonton: Ending Homelessness", online: Homeward Trust Edmonton <<https://homewardtrust.ca/>>.

2 "Meet Our Team – MNPFA – Manitoba Non-Profit Housing Association", online: <<https://mnpha.com/meet-our-team/>>.

3 <https://mnpha.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/MNPFA-Engagement-Report-FINAL.pdf> MNPFA-Engagement-Report-FINAL.pdf at 2.

4 "AHMA", online: AHMA <<http://www.ahma-bc.org>>.



industry.”⁵ Grant emphasized that throughout the pandemic, “housing was the one panacea” at AHMA. The COVID-related emergency in homelessness was seen through the lens of their core purpose, known as the “FIBI” philosophy (For Indigenous By Indigenous). Thus, all their planning was done with this concept in mind. In the same vein, Grant reiterated the urgent need for Ottawa to deliver on its 2019 promise of a National Indigenous Housing Strategy and outlined AHMA’s own approach in a published document,⁶ which he believes is unprecedented in Canada. Mr. Grant mentioned several key elements of AHMA’s adaptation and execution strategy over the past two years, including: developing a COVID-19 resource page; business contingency plans for internal purposes; prioritizing cultural activities; utilizing social media to communicate with the public; free webinars on Covid related themes; a monthly COVID-related newsletter; a needs request form to apply for emergency funding; setting up emergency shelters at gyms and arenas, etc.

The panel concluded with a revealing look at the state of housing in Alberta during the pandemic, as seen by Executive Director of Alberta Seniors and Community Housing Association (ASCHA)⁷, Irene Martin-Lindsay. Martin-Lindsay’s organization was focused on creating a pandemic response that would meet the needs of the 60,000 people who the members of ASCHA serve in a range of housing settings. ASCHA’s primary mandate is seniors housing, an area of housing that was hit particularly hard by the pandemic. Their focus was on supporting their seniors housing services members; the most heavily impacted of which were those who provide supportive living services. One of the biggest concerns for the organization was “uncertainty over how costs would be recovered and if funding would be continued or renewed” something that Martin-Lindsay said “created chaos” in the sector. As the seniors’ residences housing providers, ASCHA represented attempted to come to grips with the massive scale of the health emergency, they applied a series of new measures to control outbreak and community spread. This included: an Emergency Operations Centre Access Line, shifting to online resources, removing access to common areas, freezing evictions, etc. In addition to these challenges, her seniors supportive living provider members had to deal with visits from health inspectors from every level of government and their staff and residents being a low priority when the provincial vaccination program rolled out, and the reduction of homecare which created a “disaster” in seniors’ apartments.

Not all the consequences of the pandemic had tangible or measurable impacts. As Martin-Lindsay made clear during the question-and-answer segment of the discussion. “We will spend years dealing with the impact to our reputation. We had an identity crisis before it’s gotten much, much worse.” This will continue to be a difficult issue for ASCHA’s members, long after the pandemic is over.

Despite the unfortunate realities, much of the discussion accentuated the progress made in the sector since the outbreak began. As the panelists pointed out, sector successes included better relations with government, improved seniors housing resilience, expansion of the network of advocates and allies, streamlined inspection processes, liability protection legislation, and a host of other areas where contingency planning produced good results and will serve to make the community housing sector more resilient. The latter point was echoed by all the members of the panel and gave the audience a renewed sense of hope that community housing systems can adapt to become more agile in a pandemic; something that all the panelists agreed would be invaluable were a similar crisis to emerge in the future.

5 “(13) Cliff Grant | LinkedIn”, online: <<https://www.linkedin.com/in/cliff-grant-8b666a37/>>.

6 “BC’s first Urban Rural and Northern Indigenous Housing Strategy”, (26 January 2022), online: CHF BC <<https://www.chf.bc.ca/bcs-first-urban-rural-and-northern-indigenous-housing-strategy/>>.

7 “ASCHA”, online: <<https://ascha.com/>>.

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