

Affordable Housing Subcommittee (AHS), Pathway to Potential: Brief on Ontario's Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy October 2009

Preamble: Background on AHS and Endorsement of Housing Network of Ontario Declaration

- Pathway to Potential's Affordable Housing Subcommittee (AHS) represents a multi-sector, collaborative, community-based approach to addressing housing issues. The AHS has been given a mandate by the City of Windsor's Housing Advisory Committee (HAC) and by Pathway to Potential, Windsor Essex County's Poverty Reduction Strategy (Pathway to Potential); to address all housing issues pertaining to poverty. (See Enclosures A.B and C.)
- The AHS builds on existing capacity in Windsor and Essex County (WEC), as its membership is drawn from a broad range of community stakeholders, including representatives from HAC, Pathway to Potential, People living in social housing and Advocacy groups including the Homeless Coalition.
- The AHS also has representation on the Steering Committee of the Housing Network of Ontario (HNO), which promotes a coordinated approach to affordable housing across the province. On the recommendation of the AHS, the Pathway to Potential Roundtable for Poverty Reduction has endorsed the HNO's Affordable Housing Declaration.

Question One: What Specific Roles Should Each of the Housing Partners Play in the Delivery of Affordable Housing?

- The AHS submits that all partners must play a strong role in the effective delivery of affordable housing. As mentioned above, the AHS takes a multi-sectoral, collaborative approach to addressing housing issues and embraces an expansive definition of "housing partners" in order to ensure inclusiveness and an accurate representation of perspectives.
- We recognize and applaud the fact that all three levels of government are making concerted efforts to form partnerships, and we support all initiatives that will strengthen these partnerships moving forward. Strong relationships between partners require that the federal and provincial governments have a solid understanding of the unique needs of communities. Service managers in WEC are in the position to best understand and meet the needs of our community, which is why the AHS fully endorses providing service managers with increased autonomy and flexibility. Accordingly, we support the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO)'s 2007 statement that Housing in Ontario must be based on the following principles:
 - "Focused on long-term, sustainable solutions that provide the most cost-effective solutions to problems across the full spectrum of housing and social policy, not just specific programs." (p. 1)
 - "Sustainable and sustained funding from the provincial and federal orders of government, with less prescriptive provincial legislation that, while ensuring

accountability, allows municipal governments, communities and agencies to make decisions locally, in order to provide the best services for their needs.” (p. 2)

- “So long as municipalities are the principle funders of housing services in Ontario, they should be the principle policy makers” (p. 1);

We submit that increasing services managers’ autonomy and flexibility is best achieved through increased “block” funding. Oftentimes the rules and time lines for funding applications impede a municipality’s ability to “take up” said programs. However, this doesn’t mean that municipalities can opt out of some incentives; flexibility needs to become the norm for all levels of government. (See Appendix 5)

The AHS endorses the following actions outlined by the AMO (2007):

- “Uploading of the cost of funding social housing from municipalities, because it is not appropriate to fund income redistribution programs from the property tax base” (p. 3);
- “Administration of social housing should remain with municipal governments because local governments are closer to the people being served, have constructive working relationships with other sectors locally and have proven to be innovative and effective in the delivery of human services” (p. 3)

Question Two: What Changes are needed to Our Housing Programs to Better Use Resources and Improve Access to Affordable Housing? Changes Could Include Modifications to the Affordable Housing Program or the Simplification of Housing and Homelessness Programs.

- The impact of the economic downturn has been particularly devastating for WEC: as of May, 2009, the unemployment rate was 13.5% compared to Ontario for the same time period was 9.4%. Between September 2008 and June 2009 the caseloads for Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) have increased by 16% and Windsor CMA’s vacancy rate stood at 15.5% in April, 2009 for apartments and is the highest of any urban centre in Ontario.
- Despite the high vacancy rate in the private rental market, it remains unaffordable for many in our community, as evidenced by the fact that there were 1633 applicants on the social housing waiting list as of July 31, 2009. We have gathered information from our Central Housing Registry and the one area that stands out is the number of people who have given up waiting for units, and in particular one bedroom and larger four and five bedroom units. According to the statistics, the wait times for one-bedroom units for people under 55 years of age is between 5 and 8 years; the wait times for larger 4 bedroom units is 3-4 years; and five bedroom units require at least a 4 year wait. Most people who are in need of the larger units may never be housed for two reasons: 1) families in these larger units do not tend to vacate and 2) there are very few larger units available in WEC. The CHC is the only housing provider that has five bedroom units (20), while all other housing providers combined offer only 117 4 bedroom units. As one example, in 2008 alone the Multicultural Council of Windsor-Essex County, which is only one of several agencies in WEC serving New Canadians and refugees, tried to place 25 New Canadian families in 4 or 5 bedroom units. Moreover, according to SHS Consulting, there are 12,260 low-income singles in WEC, but only 3580 available units.

Given these significant challenges facing our community, the Affordable Housing Sub-Committee recommends the following:

New Builds and/or Retrofits to Address the Mismatch between Supply and Demand

- The AHS submits that housing in WEC must reflect the growing diversity of household types. In Windsor and Essex County, there is an immediate need for new single units or more RGI units granted to the existing housing stock for non-family households. Windsor is the fourth most diverse city in Canada so it is imperative that some new larger 4 and 5 bedroom units be built, or if feasible and less costly, retro-fit some existing units within some housing portfolios to meet this need especially within our ever growing population of New Canadians, many of whom are large families.
- We need stock that is appropriate for today's families, singles, seniors, new immigrants, First Nations and people with disabilities. Most of the stock in WEC is old and does not by its very nature meet the requirements of accessibility, especially the wheelchairs of today. People need to be able to access housing within a reasonable timeframe and we believe the wait times should not exceed two to three years maximum. We also believe that Universal Design needs to become the norm in our province.
- Any grants or programs targeted at the private landlord are welcome as long as the landlord then passes some savings on rent down to the tenant.

Rent Supplements

- Increasing the number of rent supplement allocations will serve the dual purpose of stimulating the economy by filling the vacant private rental units, and combating ghettoization by promoting the inclusion of persons living on low-income into a wide range of neighbourhoods in WEC. This program is definitely a Win-Win for both landlords and tenants. The need to include "In Situ" is a direct request from many tenants who enjoy their present location and do not wish to be relocated one more time.

Ongoing Maintenance Costs

- With approximately two-thirds of WEC's housing stock being more than 30 years old, ongoing funding for maintenance costs is essential to ensuring accessibility and improving residents' social capital.

Rent-Geared-to-Income

- The AHS supports mandating that all new housing developments include RGI units, in an effort to promote integration and combat NIMBYism. This can be done by promoting inclusionary zoning within all municipalities.

Simplify Affordable Housing Program

- We support "sustainable and sustained funding from the provincial and federal orders of government, with less prescriptive provincial legislation that, while ensuring accountability, allows municipal governments, communities and agencies to make decisions locally, in order to provide the best services for their needs" (AMO, 2007, p. 2).

Supportive Housing and Continuum of Care

- The AHS recommends that stronger links be developed between the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, the Ministry of Community and Social Services and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Specifically, that these ministries “work together to ensure that policies and programs are mutually supportive and do not prevent local innovation and flexibility to provide both affordable housing and the supports that are often necessary for the people being housed” (AMO, 2007, p. 2). The principles underlying the government’s “Aging at Home” initiative, particularly the principle of attaching funding for support to individuals rather than to buildings, is one the government should consider extending to other populations, including people with addictions and disabilities.
- Healthy, vibrant communities require not only formal “supportive housing”, but a government commitment to ensuring that neighbourhoods are designed and structured in such a way as to promote residents’ full participation in their communities. Many core neighbourhoods are lacking schools, community centres, green space and health services that truly allow people to put down Roots and make their house into a home.

Question Three: What changes are required to the *Social Housing Reform Act, 2000* to reduce the regulatory burden and improve the management of social housing?

Streamline and Simplify:

- Informal supports given to temporarily homeless individuals and families by family members and/or friends must be supported by our government and recognized as essential to family cohesion. Individuals living in social housing should not be forced to hide family or be concerned about eviction as a result of these family crises, but allowed to support their loved ones and seek out professional assistance when needed until stability is reestablished.

Improve Affordability:

- In 2005, 20% of all renter households in Windsor were spending more than 50% of their income on rent. While Ontario’s average vacancy rate was 3.3% and the Canadian average was 2.8% for April of 2009 Windsor’s vacancy rate stood at 15.5%. However, there are still over 1600 people on the wait list for social housing. The rent in the private market is still not affordable or often times not adequate to meet the needs of many families, singles and especially the disabled.
- Rolling back the RGI rent calculation from 30% of gross monthly income to 25% net monthly income and include utilities in the equation would certainly go a long way in assisting people move out of poverty (it had been 25% for years and then was changed over a 5 year period to increase it by 1% to a maximum of 30%)
- For some individuals, most notably seniors, living in social housing does not mean other basic needs are affordable. For example, a senior, under the age of 65 years, may live on a very limited pension of approximately \$600.00/month. If 30% or \$180.00/month is used toward rent + a utility charge, the senior is required to pay for food, transportation, clothing and some medical costs from the balance of \$400.00.
- Although many families are able to move out of poverty and maintain some economic stability, many others struggle to sustain employment due to layoffs, family illness or disabilities. As a result, families who are paying the market rent for 12 months are often still in very fragile working situations. Losing their RGI eligibility can cause further crisis potentially contributing to families again paying more than 50% of their income on rent,

resulting in possibly being evicted from their present housing which could lead to homelessness.

Improve Accessibility:

- Many families move within communities and to new communities due to family violence, work opportunities, family needs etc. Often families are charged significant sums for maintenance costs or many have rent arrears from other developments. These debts and the required repayment plan often prevent families in need, including survivors of domestic violence, from reapplying as they feel pressured to repay at amounts unaffordable to them.
- A maximum charge of 5% of the person's net income will ensure that individuals are able to maintain their current shelter costs as well as other basic essentials.

Question Four: What creative new ideas could improve the current housing system? This could include new planning tools, innovative financial options and new green technologies.

Planning Tools

- Planning for housing developments must give priority to the need for inclusionary zoning with an emphasis on increasing residents' social capital.
- The Home Ownership component of the Canada-Ontario Affordable Housing Program was very successful in Windsor-Essex. Under both the 5% and then 10% down payment assistance, WEC was able to take up 130 units and every applicant expressed their gratitude and enthusiasm for such assistance. Comments like "I never thought I would ever own a home" were frequent and across the board from singles to families to couples. We hope this program can continue as it 1) stimulates the economy and 2) assists an almost stagnant housing market move along a continuum. The people who are able to utilize this program, then leave a variety of available rental units for those on a much more limited income and 3) it provides integration within neighbourhoods.

New Green Technologies

- Although every housing provider, including those in the private sector, would like to "Green" their units as they all know that more efficient windows, energy efficient appliances and better insulation bring down their costs – especially utility costs that they can then pass some of the savings down to their tenants – the concern is that these kinds of retrofits are very expensive. If there can be more money per unit provided for said costs, there would be a huge demand to take up this greening of units. Smaller, more compact units incorporating universal design will go a long way in assisting more and more landlords and developers to embrace this green technology. It is crucial that tenants be involved in this process in order to understand the true costs of utilities and be able to play an active role in reducing their utilities costs (if these are paid by the individual tenant).
- A promising and innovative "Green" initiative in WEC is the recent partnership between Windsor Essex CHC and The Now House Project to provide five "war-time" houses with an energy makeover in order to determine the most cost effective approach to reducing energy costs in 125 similar houses in CHC's portfolio. The basic repairs and renewal are expected to reduce energy use by 58%, reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 7.7 tonnes and provide a more comfortable, healthy home for years to come.

Question Five: What should be used as the housing indicator for Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy? In this context, what do terms like affordable, adequate and suitable housing mean to you?

- Affordable housing should be defined as costing 25% or less of one's net not gross household income. It must also be recognized that this indicator of affordability is not sufficient in itself, given the often prohibitive cost of utilities for people on a low or limited income. Utility assistance must be expanded and programs like "Share the Warmth" must become part of the total housing costs.
- Adequacy and suitability should be interpreted broadly to include such factors as accessibility and increase of social capital while matching household type and need and promoting living conditions that ensure health and safety. Again, the broad goal of promoting healthy, vibrant communities could be facilitated by providing municipalities with the authority to introduce inclusive zoning policies for any new developments.

Through our discussions with partners and stakeholders the following recommendations were prevalent and significant to each group:

1. The Affordable Housing Subcommittee (AHS) wholeheartedly supports the AMO's 2007 recommendations made to the Ministry of Housing.
2. The AHS endorses providing local service managers with increased autonomy and flexibility. This, in our view, can be achieved with block funding.
3. We recommend that wait times in WEC should not exceed a maximum of 2 – 3 years for any size unit.
4. To ensure accessibility and improving tenant social capital, we recommend ongoing funding for maintenance cost be provided to social housing providers.
5. All new housing developments should include a percentage of affordable housing units.
6. The Social Housing Reform Act regulations must reflect and support families assisting each other in times of emotional &/or financial crisis and not penalize tenants for helping each other.
7. We recommend expanding the number of months from the current limit of 12 and establishing a "rapid reinstatement" process, allowing families greater opportunity to establish themselves in the work force and/or build up savings for items such as education or home ownership and ensuring that economic instability does not lead to housing instability.
8. We recommend a stated maximum percent of 5% of the person's net income be utilized when considering rent arrears or maintenance costs to ensure that individuals are able to maintain their current shelter costs as well as other essentials.
9. We strongly recommend an increase in funding for rental supplements for both "in-situ" and newly dedicated units. We feel this allows the best opportunity for socio-economic integration and healthy communities.
10. We strongly recommend housing costs at 25% versus 30% of net income including utilities especially in light of the rising costs of said utilities across the province.

Conclusion

The Affordable Housing Subcommittee of the Housing Advisory Committee and Windsor Essex County's Pathway to Potential Poverty Reduction Strategy welcomes the recent initiatives which

support housing providers and low income people in our community. These initiatives will assist low income individuals and families striving to overcome the effects of poverty and alleviate barriers to community revitalization.

References

Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO).(2007). AMO Principles and Strategic Considerations for Social Housing in Ontario. Toronto: Author

SHS Consulting.(2009). Windsor HARS Special Initiative Study: Background Report (Draft)

Housing Network of Ontario (Affordable Housing Declaration) Website---stable and affordable.com

