

## **Solution Direction 5**

# **A renewed role for community housing to set tenants up for success by building on existing ties with the surrounding community and local support service providers**

This research paper is part of the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association (ONPHA) Solutions Lab on “Community Housing for the Future: Taking Collective Action Toward Resiliency.” This paper is for use by Lab participants and attendees, as part of their pre-read materials.

This document covers an introduction to the Solution Direction (one of five), an overview of the policy or environmental context within which this intervention lives, and a summary of the implications Lab participants should be aware of when designing for this Solution Direction.

## **Solution Direction Overview**

There is a clear need to support residents to thrive in community housing. In part, this can happen from ensuring access to needed supports, and feeling connected and a sense of belonging with the surrounding neighbourhood. Providers expressed an interest in being able to look to other organizations and the community to find shared value in strategic relationships. This solution sets providers up to be seen as local connectors of services and supports. This solution tasks housing providers and service managers to expand the possibilities of what supportive housing options can be offered within the broader ecosystem of housing options.

### *“What if...”*

This Solutions Lab aims to ignite new conversations among housing providers, service managers, and other stakeholders in the housing system in Ontario. When reviewing this paper and participating in the next workshop, consider envisioning the possibilities around the following potential scenarios:

- What if providers of all sizes had the resources and capacity to support their tenants as they age and as their needs change over time?
- What if the surrounding community saw community housing as an asset in their neighbourhood?
- What if we broke down some of the barriers between community housing buildings and the surrounding community by creating more opportunities to transcend this traditional divide?

## **Potential Components**

To bring this solution direction to life, we could build:

- New approaches to involve residents in different capacities to offer them opportunities to develop skillsets, knowledge, sense of control, and self-worth (e.g., tenants on boards or committees, or other ways to contribute to their buildings and communities)
- A transition program for new residents moving in after experiences of homelessness (e.g., understanding the Residential Tenancies Act, access to support services, etc.)

- Tools for providers to support community integration (e.g., identifying potential partners in your local community, setting up partnership agreements)

## Outcomes

Through this Solution Direction, we are seeking to design interventions that support...	
<b>Changing relationships between players</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthening existing relationships with other community agencies, neighbours, and partners</li> <li>• Develop relationships with new, non-traditional partners to connect residents to supports</li> <li>• Bridge the social ties between people in community housing and the surrounding area</li> </ul>
<b>Changing the way we work and the impact we can create</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make use of supports that exist in the community, instead of providers having to be “all things to all people”</li> <li>• Continue to build a deep understanding of tenant needs so we can create (built and social) environments that set them up for success</li> </ul>
<b>Changing roles in the system.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have providers act as local connectors to supports and services</li> </ul>

## The Surrounding Context

The opportunity to reimagine community housing is now—with new federal funding through the National Housing Strategy, impending consultation on regulation development under the provincial Community Housing Renewal Strategy and enhanced municipal initiatives to support housing and community inclusion (ONPHA, 2018). The motivation for this Solution Direction comes from a desire to demystify community housing for the surrounding neighbourhood, so community housing providers, their residents, and their buildings can be seen as valuable parts of a thriving community.

### Access to Supports Needed in Community Housing

According to ONPHA’s 2015 report on Strengthening Social Housing Communities, approximately 23,000 adults with a serious and persistent mental illness were living in Ontario’s social housing (as of 2015 available data<sup>1</sup>). This figure is more than twice as many who live in all provincially funded supportive housing combined. In addition to mental health and addictions challenges, community housing is home to people with a wide range of other disabilities and support needs. Many of these tenants are doing well, but some are not—the costs of unsuccessful tenancies are borne not only by themselves, but also by their neighbours, housing providers, and emergency services. In addition to folks requiring supports, an estimated 75,000 seniors live in community housing in Ontario, with an additional 50,295 senior households waiting for housing that is geared to their income (ONPHA, 2015).

There is a clear need to support residents to thrive in community housing. In part, this can happen from ensuring access to needed supports and feeling connected and a sense of belonging with the surrounding neighbourhood.

### The Role of Portable Housing Benefits

Portable housing benefits (such as the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit) have the potential to shift some of the dynamics surrounding access to support services and housing. This approach may make it easier to accommodate people’s changing needs, by encouraging service and housing providers to be well-coordinated to connect housing and supports in more places.

<sup>1</sup> Please note our data limitations: these figures are from 2015 and thus are not current. The Solutions Lab team estimates these figures are likely underestimated, as we are aware that support needs have been intensified as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Supporting New Tenants with Transitions

Ontario's Community Housing Renewal Strategy calls for embodying the principles of enabling flexibility for Service Managers and transparency for future community housing residents when it comes to housing waiting lists. In addition, one of the strategy's pillars is to "provide opportunity to people"—this includes better connecting people to housing assistance and supports that are responsive to their changing needs.

Being responsive to resident needs does not mean community housing providers have to offer a wide range of supports themselves, however there are some approaches proposed in Pomeroy, 2017 that help ensure the fundamental mission to provide sound resident services. These include:

- Promoting models that retain on-site building services, instead of call centre approaches: this can help strengthen connections between tenants and management
- Benchmarking tenant satisfaction and financial indicators with standardized bi-annual tenant satisfaction surveys
- Facilitating mobility among housing options, such as through portable housing benefits

In 2015, ONPHA proposed a framework to support social housing tenants. This framework included ideas such as:

- Matching local priority applicants with supports at point of application
- Recognizing the importance of prevention—fund both supports for new tenancies and existing tenancies
- Clarifying social housing's status as permanent rental housing for people to be able to live independently (not housing of last resort)

## Making Connections with Local Agencies

Addictions and Mental Health Ontario (AMHO) published a paper in 2017 providing recommendations for the provision of support services in the province. Their guiding principles for support models for housing for people with mental health and addictions reinforce the need for community housing providers to make connections with local community agencies who can provide supports, programming, and other community activation opportunities to enhance community connection. Some of these principles include:

- **Flexibility and customization:** providing supports that are flexible to meet the needs of individuals and can be customized for every person
- **Community integration:** housing should be integrated into the community to foster social engagement and connections to the community
- **Core and complimentary services:** have the ability to provide a set of core services and some complimentary services, as needed

Some of these support services and programming elements can include tenancy support, life skills training, social support, health and wellness, personal support, community linkages, crisis intervention, eviction prevention, clinical support, and peer support (AMHO, 2017).

During the Solutions Lab Discovery Phase workshops, providers expressed an interest in being able to look to other organizations and the community to find shared value in strategic relationships, to set providers up to be seen as local connectors of services and supports.

## Supporting Indigenous-Led Housing Solutions

The ongoing impacts and legacy of colonialism have left lasting and detrimental impacts on Indigenous populations in Canada. Across the country, Indigenous people experience higher rates of poverty and core housing need than the non-Indigenous population and more often live in housing that is unaffordable, overcrowded, not culturally-appropriate and/or in poor condition, both on-reserve and off-reserve in urban, rural and northern areas. This Solution Direction provides the opportunity for turning

over control over Indigenous programming to Indigenous-led organizations (e.g., organizations such as Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services and other Indigenous housing providers).

In addition to turn over control of these culturally relevant supports to Indigenous organizations, further work would be required to make additional funding sources available to these organizations seeking to support their residents (e.g., Ontario Ministry of Health rent supplements). Often, housing providers are working to support residents to maintain their homes, despite not having access to sufficient funding to pay for the additional staff time and services.

## *Community Connections*

Another important theme for Solutions Lab participants was to consider ways community housing can **foster social integration** between residents and the surrounding community. There are examples of community housing providers having resources to dedicate towards resident success and igniting connections among people within buildings. There are fewer examples of creating intentional two-way exchanges between the surrounding community and individuals living in community housing.

### **Moving to Mixed-Income Models**

Connected to the other Solution Directions proposed in this Lab, the notion of moving towards mixed-income housing models for community housing in Ontario has been discussed widely over the last several years. Many of the supportive housing documents reviewed suggest providing future tenants with more choice and reducing the need to concentrate residents requiring high levels of supports in a small number of buildings. This can, in part, be enabled through a portable housing benefit.

In addition to these suggestions, moving to mixed-income housing options can support this Solution Direction's efforts to demystify "community housing" and perceptions from the surrounding community.

## **Implications**

### *The Reframed Role*

The Lab Participants working on this Solution Direction may want to prioritize the focus of this Solution Direction by thinking about what their "reframed role" for community housing within the broader community might look like. Some key questions might be related to weighing the importance of:

- Repositioning the role of community housing from the surrounding community's point of view, versus
- Repositioning the role from the point of view of a resident needing supports, versus
- Repositioning the role from the point of view of a resident seeking to one day move on to market housing (either within community housing or elsewhere).

### *Context*

Lab Participants working on this Solution Direction may also want to consider the role of **portable housing benefits** in enabling more mixing of tenants of different backgrounds and incomes and the potential for more fluid movement of people accessing housing subsidies throughout a community. In addition, linked to Solution Directions 1 and 2, the end of mortgages and operating agreements can present an opportunity to reinvest in buildings and consider income-mixing potential within buildings.

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