

# Thoughts on a National Aboriginal Housing Strategy

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The release of the Interim Report of the *Prime Minister's Task Force on Urban Issues* in April of this year has rekindled the hopes of Canada's off reserve housing providers that the federal government is setting the stage for a new relationship. It recognized urban Aboriginals face overwhelming problems, including housing, that are rooted in cultural dislocation and powerlessness, discrimination and economic hardship. Failure to address these issues, the Task Force acknowledged, will have adverse economic conditions for cities in the coming decades.

The language alone is a major departure from the years of silence and denial of federal responsibility beyond the reserve.

Of particular importance to organizations such as the *National Aboriginal Housing Association (NAHA)*, was the need to 'expand the stock of affordable housing' for Aboriginal people.

But the enthusiasm is tempered by past experience. Without specific programs, or national targets, the Aboriginal community knows it can be left behind. In 1972, the then minister for housing, Ron Basford committed to 50,000 off reserve housing units. It was only after 1985 that there was a specific urban Aboriginal housing program. Prior to that, federal funding was patched together from a variety of other programs. Before the federal government cancelled its supply program in 1993, only 11,000 urban and 9,000 rural Aboriginal units were produced.

If Aboriginal housing is to be part of the federal government's new urban strategy, its time to start laying out the cornerstones of that strategy.

Firstly, it has to respect the principle of self-determination. The Aboriginal community must be consulted and must deliver any future programs. Housing and related facilities are so closely intertwined with the rest of life, that the quality and appearance of housing are important indicators of a culture as a whole. Aboriginal housing providers allow other needs such as employment, education and cultural retention to be addressed. Because they are experienced property managers with up-to-date waiting lists the take-up will be more immediate, and in the long run, more cost effective.

Secondly, there must be a specific housing supply program, which addresses both homelessness and permanent affordable housing. The *Supporting Community Partnership Initiative (SCPI)* homelessness funding, if it is renewed beyond its three-year mandate, should create a separate stream, with Aboriginal-based community plans and delivery mechanisms. While progress has been made under the current SCPI structure, much more effort has to be put into the planning and capacity building phase if the Aboriginal community is to participate fully in a renewed program.

On the affordable housing front, the federal government did not create a separate funding stream, or specific Aboriginal targets under the new affordable housing program being negotiated with provinces.

It's unlikely that there will be much take-up by Aboriginal housing providers. Urban Aboriginal incomes are 33% below the average income of the non-Aboriginal population. This means that capital grants which might work in most urban centres to bring rents ten to twenty percent below market, will not work in the Aboriginal community. A national Aboriginal housing strategy must deliver economic rents comparable to the existing urban Aboriginal housing portfolio. This may mean more substantial upfront capital grants, or a combination of grant and operation support.

Based on very preliminary analysis, there is a current backlog requirement of well over 20,000 units. Meeting this figure will satisfy current priority waiting lists, but will not address the continuing migration of Aboriginal people to the larger cities. NAHA has recommended the federal government commit to an initial target of 20,000 new off-reserve Aboriginal units over five years.

Thirdly, the federal government must reassure the Aboriginal community that its current housing portfolio will be protected. The transfer of responsibility to provinces for the existing 20,000 off reserve units continues to cast doubt about protecting Aboriginal access, ongoing management control and future subsidies as the portfolio ages and is in need of major capital repairs. This reassurance would help undo much of the mistrust that has arisen over the past few years.

The good will and opportunity afforded by the Task Force's recommendations must be followed by meaningful dialogue between Ottawa and the urban Aboriginal community. We have the tools to work out a new national Aboriginal housing strategy. We now need the commitment.