

Response to the Interim Report, Prime Minister's Task Force on Urban Issues

Introduction

The National Aboriginal Housing Association wishes to commend the Task Force Chair, Judy Sgro, fellow members of the Task Force and the Prime Minister on the Urban Issues initiative. We were pleased the Prime Minister chose to appoint Senator Thelma Chalifoux, to the Task Force. Her input has ensured our voice was heard.

NAHA-ANHA is a member-based organization and represents off-reserve housing providers in all provinces and territories. Created in 1994, our mission is to represent the needs of housing providers with both national Aboriginal political organizations and orders of government. In addition, NAHA-ANHA is a centre for best practice and housing management expertise.

NAHA-ANHA is pleased to comment on the *urban Aboriginal people* and *adequate shelter* components of the Interim Report.

Urban Aboriginal People

As Aboriginal housing providers, we experience first hand the impact of lower incomes, staggering rates of unemployment and welfare dependency among urban Aboriginal peoples. Many of our tenants are struggling mother-led families. We also see an increasing number of older single people in need of support and assistance. We believe that safe, affordable and stable housing is the cornerstone in eradicating the troubling statistics enumerated in the Task Force's Interim Report.

Many of our members are in the forefront of initiatives aimed at combating poverty, substance misuse, domestic violence, improving health and educational opportunities. Over the years, housing providers have come to serve as both referral agents and participants in healing, health and head start programs across the country. In many instances, we incorporate day care programs, employment and work skill upgrading initiatives as part of our assisted housing programs. Although not our original mandate, we have responded to these challenges because we are in most instances, the 'front line'. We provide a culturally safe environment and we hope, create an element of trust, which strengthens our direct involvement and our partnerships with other Aboriginal agencies. Our tenant counsellors are an integral part of these initiatives. However, much of these activities are not recognized in our housing operation budgets.

We believe that Aboriginal housing providers have a continuing role to play in the eradication of poverty and the improvement of urban life for Aboriginal peoples. We therefore urge the Task Force, in its final recommendations to the Prime Minister, to recognize the important role that housing providers play in the larger context of urban Aboriginal peoples.

Under the federal Urban Native housing programs being transferred to provinces, the costs of tenant counselling up to now have been recognized. The federal-provincial

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social housing transfer agreements, however, do not protect or ensure that these funds will continue.

We recommend the federal government guarantee that provinces and territories will not cut funds for tenant counsellors in federally funded Urban Native Housing projects under their administration. We also recommend the federal government create financial and recognition¹ incentives to encourage Aboriginal housing providers to continue and expand these additional services.

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We recommend the federal government ensure that our representation is sought in any future discussion of homelessness, affordable housing, or changes that impact urban Aboriginal housing providers. In some instances, this may require financial assistance to prepare briefs and reports.

Senator Chalifoux noted that the transfer of the federal urban native programs to provinces has created confusion over jurisdiction. In its Final Report, we urge your Task Force to address this serious issue.

Our organization, as well as a wide cross section of our community, objected to the transfer of responsibility for Aboriginal housing. Our fundamental objection to the transfer remains. The federal government refused to consult with Aboriginal organizations impacted by the transfer, or to consider, as it has done with the non-Aboriginal co-operative housing sector, self-management options. To-date, only British Columbia has showed any interest in a third party self-management arrangement, and there is absolutely no assurance that the new provincial government will continue to pursue devolution.

We recommend the federal government now create incentives for provinces and territories to enter into third party arrangements to devolve administration of the programs to the Aboriginal community. In provinces where the transfer has not been completed, we further recommend that the federal government be

¹ An annual award and recognition to those Aboriginal housing providers who make an outstanding contribution to improving the quality of life of their community.

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instructed to begin negotiations with Aboriginal organization to administer their own programs.

We further recommend, in order to make this option attractive, the federal government provide seed funding (as it has with the co-operative housing sector) to NAHA-ANHA, to explore the requirements for community-based administration.

The Report also raised concern about the preference of some Aboriginal housing providers to provide housing exclusively to Status, Metis, and Inuit tenants. While many of our members already have a “status-blind” approach to tenant selection, we recognize that in some communities, there is a continuing need to prioritize housing selection. We believe promoting cultural sensitivity and a sense of well being among specific groups of urban Aboriginal peoples, where the demonstrated need continues, outweighs, at the present time, any need to change the current agreements.

We would also caution that opening up current project agreements would require (under the *social housing transfer agreements*) the approval of provinces and territories. We are concerned that some provinces may see this as an opportunity to eliminate the “Aboriginal ancestry” requirements all together. Ontario for instance, already has moved to a ‘co-ordinated access’ approach for other federal housing programs now under their jurisdiction, essentially removing tenant selection from the non-profit or housing co-op’s jurisdiction.

With respect to the six specific interim Task Force recommendations, we endorse without reservation, recommendations # 16, 18, 19, and 21.

Regarding **Recommendation # 17** pertaining to partnerships with “*other orders of government and community Aboriginal groups*”, we believe the federal government’s first responsibility is to seek out partnerships *with the Aboriginal community*. This priority was expressed very well in the Liberal Party of Canada’s 1993 Red Book: *trust, mutual respect and participation*. It was also inherent, in the self-government provisions of the landmark 1992 *Charlottetown Accord*; and was articulated again in the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

We recommend # 17 be amended to place the priority on partnerships with the Aboriginal community.

Concerning **Recommendation # 20** on the targeting of “*the special needs of the urban Aboriginal population*”, we believe this recommendation should be strengthened.

We recommend #20 be amended by attaching a timeframe within which this review will be completed; and a recommendation to create a responsibility centre (a Minister Responsible for Urban Aboriginal Issues) to carry out the review. We further recommend

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that the final recommendation include a commitment to undertake this review in partnership with representative Aboriginal organizations.

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Adequate Shelter

We were pleased to see the Task Force's endorsement of a national affordable housing program and a return by the federal government to an active role in affordable housing supply. We also applaud the recommendation to extend the Supporting Community Partnership Initiative beyond its current three-year mandate.

The Task Force recognized the housing challenges facing urban Aboriginal peoples and the need to '*expand the stock of affordable housing*' for Aboriginal people. But we know from past experience, if there are not specific Aboriginal programs, or targets, we will get left behind. The federal government, over the past fifty years, has funded almost 600,000 assisted housing units, but as the Task Force Report acknowledges, only 11,000 are specifically targeted to urban Aboriginal People². This is a dismal comparison. It is even more of a disgrace when one considers Aboriginal households make up a disproportionate percentage of Canadians who are homeless, at risk of being homeless, or in 'core housing need'.

Based on our very preliminary analysis, we have 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.

We recommend the federal government commit to an initial target of 20,000 new off-reserve Aboriginal units over five years.

It is important that existing housing providers be targeted to deliver new assisted housing. They have a proven track record; they have current up-to-date waiting lists and they are experienced property managers. Building on this existing capacity will ensure maximum benefits will be achieved.

We recommend the federal government target existing urban Aboriginal housing providers as the primary delivery agents of new community-based affordable housing programs. Where this capacity is not available, we further recommend the government ensure that there are sufficient resources to develop delivery systems within the Aboriginal community.

There is an absence of substantive data on urban Aboriginal housing need. Studies undertaken by organizations such as the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) and the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association (CHRA) have produced sound forecasts of housing need and affordability problems generally, but have not refined their data to identify Aboriginal-

² In 1972, the then minister for housing, Ron Basford committed to 50,000 off-reserve Aboriginal housing units. Before cancellation of all off-reserve housing in 1993, only 11,000 urban Aboriginal units were produced, and another 9,000 *Rural and Native Housing* units. The latter units are located in smaller rural communities and in the north.

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specific need. We need to undertake a substantive analysis of urban Aboriginal housing need.

We recommend the federal government fund NAHA-ANHA to undertake a substantive analysis of urban Aboriginal housing need, in partnership with national organizations such as the Metis National Council, the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, etc.

Our organization, as well as FCM and CHRA, has urged the government, during its deliberation on the new *Affordable Rental Housing Program*, that there must be an Aboriginal specific program, delivered by the Aboriginal community, and meets both the economic and cultural needs of the community. While there are few specific details on the new federal program, it does appear to seek to achieve “affordable rents” that are on average twenty percent below market comparables.

Urban Aboriginal incomes, as the Task Force acknowledges, 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 housing costs twenty percent below market, will remain inaccessible to the Aboriginal community. If this assumption is correct, this will create a serious obstacle to ensuring that the Aboriginal community will be able to fully participate once funding becomes available.

Current average rents³ in urban Aboriginal housing in Ottawa, for instance, are in the range of \$350.00 to \$450.00 monthly; approximately 60% below market comparables! In Vancouver, a sample⁴ of 276 units produced an average rental of \$330.00 monthly. Many tenant households are on social assistance, where the lower end of the monthly shelter allowance in most provinces is \$350.00 and the upper end is only \$650.00. A new program that delivers average ‘affordable rents’ of \$800.00 will not work in our community.

We recommend the federal government ensure any affordable Aboriginal housing produces average economic⁵ rents are comparable to current rents in the Urban Native Housing programs.

Aboriginal housing needs champions within the federal bureaucracy, as well as within government. The F/P/T Aboriginal Steering Committee was established in 1999 to work with national Aboriginal organizations on important matters of public policy. Over the past three years, the FPT Committee has focussed on strengthening Aboriginal participation in the economy, and the national Aboriginal youth strategy.

³ Current average rents charged to tenant households, after application of the 25% RGI formula.

⁴ Data provided by United Native Nations.

⁵ Without ongoing operating subsidies, rental revenue must equal the total operating costs.

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**We recommend the federal government place housing on the F/P/T
Aboriginal Steering Committee 2002-2003 agenda.**

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Closing

We are encouraged by the tenor of the interim recommendations and enjoin Task Force members, in their final report, to offer specific direction to the federal government on urban Aboriginal issues. Our members are prepared to assist the Task Force by providing additional information or further elaboration of the above recommendations.