

Ottawa should change its housing policies for urban aboriginals; Creative programs exist in some big cities but too many Indians still live in poverty

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There is a shortage of affordable and adequate rental housing in many cities across Canada and this is felt most acutely by many aboriginal households. In the 2006 census, for example, 15 per cent of aboriginal people in Vancouver were living in housing in need of major repair, compared to six per cent of non-aboriginal people. The 2001 census showed that in Saskatoon 21 per cent of aboriginal households were paying more than 50 per cent of their income for housing, compared with 15 per cent of non-aboriginal households.

Housing hardship among aboriginal peoples in urban areas is well known. What is less well known is that there are aboriginal housing organizations in most major urban centres, and some small ones, that have been finding innovative ways to deliver culturally appropriate affordable housing to aboriginal households for two decades or more. They emerged to deal with the growing number of aboriginals who were moving to urban centres from reserve and rural communities, and faced challenges finding and keeping mainstream public and private market rental housing. This was due to overt discrimination based on race or larger household sizes and less overt forms of discrimination, such as eviction due to having family and community members stay over when in the city. By virtue of having community ties to reserve and rural communities, a home in the city could be a periodic base for others in town seeking employment, education or urban services such as health care.

Aboriginal housing organizations, with aboriginal staff and boards, emerged to deal with cultural difference in housing needs and aspirations and by most accounts were successful. Over time some of these organizations expanded their programming to include daycare, cultural and recreational programs, employment assistance and architectural and construction management services. Most have a counsellor on staff to help tenants. With the links between good stable housing and positive outcomes in health, education, employment and community stability well documented, an investment in culturally appropriate housing for aboriginals in the city is in an investment in all of these policy sectors.

Most aboriginal housing organizations started under the "urban native" housing program funded by the federal government. Development of new units under that program was discontinued after 1993. The organizations themselves have tried to adapt and continue delivering housing to those most in need. During the past 15 years, aboriginal housing organizations have responded innovatively to the challenges, but they have been prevented from realizing the full potential of their program ingenuity or from matching their activities to community needs, because government funding has not been directed toward a coherent national social housing program that is goal- and target oriented. They have been unable to develop more than a handful of new housing units.

Examples of program innovations by aboriginal housing organizations are present across the country. In Vancouver, for example, Lu'ma Native Housing Society created the Art Zoccole Aboriginal Patients' Lodge in 2004. This provides support for permanent residents and those in the city temporarily for medical care. Associated services include transportation for residents, daycare and housekeeping. In partnership with the Aboriginal Mother Centre Society, Lu'ma is trying to complete the full spectrum of housing tenure types, from shelters, to transitional, social and ultimately assisted home ownership.

The six member organizations of the Métis Urban Housing Association of Saskatchewan have been able to negotiate more efficient operating agreements with the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation than those they held previously with CMHC, and through this self-government arrangement have been able to negotiate new mortgage terms with lower rates, banking the savings to create a reserve fund for maintenance, new building and associated services.

Kinew Housing in Winnipeg built 20 new units of social housing in partnership with the Centennial Community Improvement Association. Centennial neighbourhood is one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Canada, by standard socio-economic indicators. About half of the people in the neighbourhood have aboriginal ancestry.

The Corporation Waskahegen in Quebec is the country's largest and longest established provincial aboriginal housing organization. It has been building and managing housing for off-reserve aboriginal people since 1972.

There was a time when it might reasonably have been said that aboriginal housing organizations in urban areas needed to build up their capacity to work with other partners beyond government and be more self-sufficient. That time has passed. The organizations discussed above, and many others like them, have reached the bounds of agency creativity, innovation and partnership. There is a need for governments, led by the federal government, to re-engage these organizations in sustained programs of financing for developing new units according to annual targets over an extended period of time. The language of partnerships and capacity-building has become sorely overused and the language of government responsibility for social redistribution needs to be recentred.

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