

Funds needed for urban aboriginal housing

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DataSpecials Ed Tanner THE \$295-million funding increase over five years for new housing on First Nation reserves announced in the Feb. 23 federal budget does not adequately address the significant need for housing in these communities. The additional funding will only build 400 houses a year for the 630 reserves across Canada -- less than one new house for each reserve in our country.

More than 70 per cent of Canada's aboriginal population now live in non-reserve areas. It is shocking that the federal budget did not allocate any new funding for urban aboriginal housing.

The Martin government's approach to urban aboriginal housing has been more sizzle than substance. As the Free Press editorial commented last week, "Mr. Martin put himself in charge of his government's aboriginal policy, raised expectations among First Nations and has done little since to satisfy them... Native people have barely registered in the Martin government's two budgets to date." Without a federal government funding commitment for urban aboriginal housing, the social housing needs of aboriginal families will not be addressed. Between 1970 and 1993 the federal government's Urban Native Housing program funded the development of more than 10,000 rent-subsidized social housing units across Canada. In Manitoba, urban aboriginal housing groups acquired and built more than 1,400 housing units.

In 1994, the federal government cut funding for new urban aboriginal housing as a deficit reduction measure. Between 1994 and 2004, no new urban aboriginal housing units were built in the province.

Waiting lists The number of families on waiting lists for the 1,400 social housing units managed by urban aboriginal housing organizations in Manitoba has grown to 4,000 families, including approximately 15,000 children.

It now takes families three to five years to get into these social housing units.

Charlie Hill, president of the National Aboriginal Housing Association, maintains that this "housing crisis is devastating our urban communities.

Federal spending in such areas as health, early childhood education and youth, without ensuring safe, affordable and stable housing is misguided." Hill adds: "Without a safe, quiet place to study, to do homework, our children will never catch up. As long as overcrowding and the risk of becoming homeless exist, our communities will remain on the margins." Many aboriginal families in the city of Winnipeg are forced to move frequently because of inadequate housing and have to transfer their children in and out of schools. More than half of the students of inner-city schools in Winnipeg transfer in and out of the school over the course of the school year. It is not uncommon for a young child to be in five schools by the time he or she is in Grade 2 or Grade 3.

The average monthly housing charge for rent and utilities for the "affordable" housing program is \$750 per month. A recent First Nations-Metis-Inuit Mobility Study for Winnipeg indicated that 75 per cent of

aboriginal single-parent families could only afford \$375 per month for rent and utilities.

The federal government's Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) generates annual operating surpluses that could be dedicated for a national social housing program. According to CMHC's most recent annual report of 2003, the annual operating surpluses of the corporation have been significant over the past five years — \$316 million in 1999, \$376 million in 2000, \$376 million in 2001, \$544 million in 2002 and \$667 million in 2003. The 2003 CMHC annual report projects that this trend towards large annual operating surpluses will continue to grow over the next five years. CMHC projects annual operating surpluses of \$663 million for 2004, \$728 million for 2005, \$732 million for 2006, \$753 million for 2007 and \$786 million for 2008.

The federal government could allocate a portion of these annual surplus funds towards a new national social housing program. It is unconscionable that CMHC racks up these massive surpluses while aboriginal children and families are forced to live in deplorable housing conditions in our community. The federal government is fooling itself if it thinks it is saving money by ignoring the needs of the large number of urban aboriginal families on the waiting lists for social housing.

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