



Nova Scotia Community Housing Sector: Capacity Building

The community housing sector's (CHS) drive and determination to create affordable housing options can be undermined by capacity gaps that organizations see as barriers to their success. These gaps may be articulated in terms of a lack of time available, volunteer burnout, insufficient expertise to navigate through bureaucratic hoops and complex funding applications, or the need for more practical skills for project management, for securing professional services, or for construction.

In a recent survey, respondents from the CHS identified the areas they wish to strengthen in their organization including accessing finance, building community awareness, and accessing land/properties. Aside from these specific competencies, respondents identified broader, overarching priorities regarding organizational growth and effectiveness as well as cross-sector collaboration. There is opportunity for capacity building across the entire sector through co-learning activities, pooling knowledge, and raising a collective voice. For example, people are seeking to bridge the expertise gap by improving coordination and collaboration with others when they need to develop proposals.

There is an encouraging spirit of cooperation, particularly among the smaller, rural organizations who repeatedly express an interest in learning from each other. They value the knowledge of organizations who have been working through similar issues to their own. Improved networking is seen as a way to overcome challenges, find strategies that can work in their regions, and reduce overlap or competition for scarce resources. Specifically in rural areas, respondents note additional challenges stemming from labour shortages, understaffing, volunteer burnout, and a lack of core funding that could alleviate the strain. Becoming aware of this strain further helps people see the importance of coordination and collaboration as a means to be more effective in achieving their goals.

“Various players have capacity regarding different aspects of community housing, but we have long been pitted against each other for funds and resources. Overall, it has created a great deficit that needs to be corrected through collaboration.”

The sector desires a commitment to ensure community housing providers have adequate organizational capacity to compete for funding, particularly with many organizations dependent upon volunteers. Identifying processes to improve the provision of “wrap around services” is also seen as a means to address the burden placed on volunteer organizations dealing with service gaps. This is needed to ensure the momentum and awareness raised carries through to tangible results.

Finally, advocacy is noted as a capacity building area, both in terms of developing organizational capacities, as well as the desired changes that must come from funders and policymakers (e.g., various levels of government, provincial departments and agencies). These changes include the need for greater clarity, more accessible and inclusive language, reductions in bureaucratic barriers and “red tape,” streamlining processes, and scaling application requirements to levels appropriate to the range of organizations within the sector.

“Our development of supported, affordable housing and our extension of our capacity to provide supports spanning the social determinants of health significantly challenges the administrative capacity of our non-profit organization. We need the support of affordable housing experts experienced with CMHC co-investment projects, community capital campaigns, and who are willing to champion our work. Instead, we largely operate in response to a government funding system that is siloed and fuels Departmental -- and subsequent community -- competition and neglect rather than cross sector collaboration and support.”

This series of thematic briefs draws upon what the Build Together team heard from the community housing sector in Nova Scotia through several consultations and a survey conducted in the spring of 2021. This brief was written by Catherine Irving with input from the Build Together team members.

