



Nova Scotia Community Housing Sector: Learning from Success

Amid chronic housing shortages made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic, it can be difficult for workers and volunteers in Nova Scotia's Community Housing Sector (CHS) to pause to celebrate what has been achieved by their organizations and in their communities. However, recognizing progress when it is achieved acknowledges people's hard work and dedication, and provides lessons and inspiration.

During the *Build Together* consultation process, 166 people shared success stories and the factors contributing to their achievement. Highlighting insights from these stories reveals the CHS's strengths and raises its visibility as a viable contributor to housing solutions.

These success stories capture a broad spectrum of actions and results. At the individual level, people described efforts to find safe shelter for those in need at a critical time, or to assist seniors with needed house repairs. They also described larger-scale initiatives like building new units or creating multi-faceted supports for people that show the interconnections between housing and other challenges impacting health status, food security, family stability, access to education, or secure employment.

Notably, the most frequently identified success factors focus on collaboration, delivering housing supports, advocacy, and building community awareness. These "people skills" and relationship-building efforts are key attributes of CHS organizations, yet they are the very assets that are often overlooked in an environment where the emphasis is placed primarily on financing and project management activities to create affordable housing. This brief focuses on three themes emerging from the success stories: support, collaboration, and knowledge building.

"The regional survey was a turning point that highlighted how precarious housing is, when people are one payment away from losing housing...once highlighted, it can't be ignored anymore. The Municipality is now on board and is growing now to partner. It has been an incremental process to get them engaged."

Individualized Supports

People in the CHS expressed frustration regarding the burden placed on volunteers and staff to find creative solutions in the absence of public services. Yet this very ability to problem-solve through collaboration and community-based efforts also demonstrates an important strength of the CHS, leading to concrete results:

- A recipient of an affordable housing unit can finish their education and find a good job.
- A resident with complex challenges receives personal assistance to access a range of financial and programming supports.
- A person leaving an institutional setting is not left to fend for themselves to find housing but is accompanied to ensure other pressing needs are met so the transition to a permanent, safe, and affordable home is successful.
- Staff maintain essential services during the pandemic by finding creative solutions for service provision.



Key lesson:

People who have the training and knowledge of the multiple layers of government and social services play an important role in offering “wrap-around supports” to people who are precariously housed or homeless and are experiencing multiple challenges. These service providers work hard to bridge the gaps of public services siloed in disconnected government departments or agencies. Dedicated paid navigators contribute to tenants’ longer-term success in escaping the poverty trap.



Organizational Effectiveness through Collaboration

The work of the CHS extends far beyond activities related to property development and management. Sustaining and growing CHS organizations requires multiple sources of support and creativity. For example:

- Through identifying government funding programs, an organization invests in retrofits to improve the energy efficiency of their units, passing the cost savings along to their tenants.
- An organization successfully lobbies the municipal government to improve local infrastructure that, in turn, improves accessibility and community connections for the residents of their affordable housing units.
- A young organization points to the day when their volunteers met a person who shared an inspiring story of success that reinvigorated their own commitment to grow and succeed.

“We are a smaller organization, and a big part of our role is systems navigation. Connecting to some of these organizations and agencies has allowed me to support my clients in a way that I could not have done on my own.”



Key lesson:

CHS organizations provide cost-effective, and responsive front-line services to their communities—their skills have grown far beyond strictly housing-related work. There is a need to acknowledge the impact of this work, and the capacity building and resources required to support the critical and creative roles they play.



Community Knowledge: Awareness Raising, Research and Advocacy

Organizations in the CHS have contributed tremendous energy to raising awareness of the housing disparities at the community level for many years. Through education, awareness-raising, and advocacy work, predicated on strong research to provide sound supporting evidence, the CHS has made significant contributions to elicit action from the various levels of government and other funders.

The growing strain on affordable housing in Nova Scotia, compounded by the effects of the pandemic, has resulted in a greater need to ensure data accurately reflect the current situation. This is of particular concern in rural areas of the province where housing vulnerability is often a hidden reality. Community groups have identified examples of how they were able to document these hidden realities to raise awareness in the community and to demonstrate need to elected officials and other agencies:

- An anti-poverty group facilitates information sharing among service providers attempting to deal with the diverse income-related barriers their clients face and reach out to policymakers to address root causes of poverty that affect people's access to safe housing.
- A group's decade-long process of awareness raising with several municipalities has enabled them to have a voice in several planning reviews.
- Advocates document and share local housing issues to bring the topic into discussions and debates during a municipal election.



Key lesson:

CHS organizations, through collaborative engagement in their communities, are well placed to identify emerging issues and changing priorities. When they possess the skills and resources to conduct community-level research, their ability to document these trends and to advocate based on sound evidence are valuable in a responsive decision-making process.

