



Nova Scotia Community Housing Sector: Values and Beliefs

Community housing sector (CHS) organizations are recognized for the close relationships they maintain within their communities. The mission-based motivation and values of these non-profit—often volunteer-driven—organizations provide inspiration in their commitment to improve access to affordable housing in the province. People involved in the CHS highlight their position, “not in it for the money,” as a key advantage in finding efficient and cost-effective solutions that bring a people-centered approach. Solutions must not only be practical but also have the dignity and inclusion of people at their core, as these observations indicate:

- People on boards must look like the people boards exist to serve
- A focus on profit can prevent other solutions from growing
- Persistent stigma or misunderstanding thwarts collaboration and public support
- Recognizing and promoting the contributions of refugees and other newcomers is key
- Housing should be designed to promote community involvement
- Housing solutions need to be tailored for different regions and populations, both urban and rural
- In this brief, the values and beliefs motivating the CHS are summarized in five areas: stigma, inclusion, human rights, rural/urban equity, and navigation.

“Housing doesn’t happen in a vacuum...Everything is connected. Look at all angles to find solutions.”

Stigma

Throughout the consultation, participants repeatedly raised concern regarding the stubborn perpetuation of negative attitudes against people facing homelessness. Responses to stigma involve education and awareness raising to overcome negative biases against people based on income, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, and other categorizations of exclusion. Respondents note the importance of training across all sectors involved with affordable housing to address stigma, stereotyping, and other exclusionary social attitudes. The CHS must advocate for social justice to redress historic and contemporary injustices, such as how African Nova Scotian communities have been discriminated against in land use and tenure policies. Cultural competency training has been identified as a key area that can be developed within organizations and with other partners to promote awareness raising and deepen understandings of the implications of racism, sexism, homophobia/heteronormativity, ableism, and other systemic biases.

“We are one of the few housing organizations led by and including first voice, African Nova Scotians in Halifax. It has taken long and we’ve had challenges around building and rebuilding trust because of historical dispossession, trauma. I wouldn’t call it a “success story” but rather living into our values.”

Diversity and Inclusion of First Voice

Overcoming stigma is not only an action taken on behalf of marginalized groups. First voice is a term increasingly used to draw attention to the need for people experiencing housing vulnerability to have a meaningful role in decision-making at all levels of housing work. This is both a strength of the CHS but also an area for continued capacity building. Organizations speak to the importance they place in engaging with marginalized people in their communities to ensure their perspectives are integrated into planning and activities, and that their roles are not tokenistic. That said, there is a call for greater representation of first voice both within the CHS as well as broader policy and planning areas that work on affordable housing. Achieving the meaningful inclusion of marginalized groups must be considered within the CHS to inspire positive change as these biases, often hidden, continue to influence policies and procedures, compounding barriers rather than removing them.



Housing as a Human Right

Community awareness raising around the need for affordable housing must also address the negative assumptions and perceptions that continue to blame people who experience poverty and homelessness. Housing must be recognized as a human right that ensures everyone has access to a safe place to live. This is important not only for individuals, but also for community wellbeing as a whole. A few areas of focus identified by CHS consultation participants include:

- Advocating for deepening knowledge on sources and effects of discrimination
- Recognizing the importance of the gendered aspects of the stigma of homelessness, and identifying the root causes, such as domestic violence
- Including a decolonizing and antiracist lens to uncover the persisting effects of generations of discriminatory policies and practices
- Advocating for livable incomes through improved income assistance, increased minimum wages, and other basic income supports

“Our connection to vulnerable people is our greatest strength. When COVID hit, we had to scramble to ensure the needs of this population were not forgotten.”

Rural and Urban Equity

Half of participants in the consultation process represent rural areas of the province. Residents of smaller communities repeatedly raised concerns about being overlooked and having to intensify their efforts to bring to light the homelessness situation in their regions. CHS organizations in rural areas have noted how the problem is often hidden outside the urban areas of the Halifax and Cape Breton Regional Municipalities. The increased pandemic-related housing market pressures in rural communities have finally drawn wider attention to the problem as more people find themselves “priced out” of their home communities. CHS groups see that many of the financial resources invested in addressing housing shortages still disproportionately favor urban organizations and housing projects. Rural organizations, often volunteer-driven, struggle to gather the technical and administrative expertise to compete for funding opportunities whose criteria are developed to favor larger urban projects. Such criteria are often beyond the scale that is feasible and appropriate for smaller communities. The issues of rural/urban equity must be integrated within discussions of capacity building, funding, and policy development.



Navigation and Supportive Services

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- Demonstrating to policymakers the links between inadequate income and homelessness
- Information sharing with service providers who are working with clients facing similar issues
- Identifying the need for “single entry” service provision that enables different departments to access services that do not fall under the umbrella of one agency, as well as the need for more flexible and accessible funding mechanisms across agencies to support people
- Advocating on behalf of people who are unable to get responses from government departments or agencies

The community-grounded and collaborative strengths of the CHS demonstrate that staff and volunteers already make tremendous efforts to assist people to bridge service gaps. They identify access points that will help people gain access to health services, food security, income supports and other factors to improve their wellbeing that, in turn, helps to improve their housing stability. Members of the CHS are already working at the limit of available resource and need more funding for trained navigators. The need for such navigation services speaks to a disconnected social services system where different departments appear to be “siloes” from the perspective of end users. Calls for streamlining and connecting government services more effectively are commonplace.

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.

