

Vaughan Regional Consultations 2009 Summary Report: Grassroots Solutions for an Affordable Housing Strategy

What does the future hold for housing? What is needed for an effective affordable housing strategy? What components should be in an affordable housing strategy? What is essential to make an affordable housing strategy work in Ontario?

The 2009 federal and provincial budgets indicate that housing is back on the agenda for senior levels of government. The provincial government is currently in the process of formulating an affordable housing strategy and we understand that they will be consulting with housing communities this summer. In preparation for this, SHSC gave housing providers, service managers and sector organizations in the Vaughan region the opportunity to participate in a facilitated half-day discussion on May 26th to brainstorm and strategize on what is needed for an effective, sustainable and all-inclusive housing strategy. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and all participants contributed excellent insights to the discussion.

The many shared concerns and solutions identified in this session show potential for the unified, collective voice that will be needed to reach the provincial government in these crucial upcoming months.

Your participation also ensures that your voice will shape the content of a strategy paper currently being developed by SHSC and the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (OMSSA). The strategy paper will lay out our joint vision for affordable housing in Ontario, with a particular emphasis on the place of housing within a broader integrated human services framework.

The following document contains a summary of findings from the Vaughan consultation – we hope that it will provide you with valuable information in preparation for the upcoming provincial government consultations and would strongly encourage you to take advantage of this opportunity.

Vaughan Regional Consultation Summary Report: Grassroots Solutions for an Affordable Housing Strategy

Part A. Background Information

1. Participants by type:

Service Manager	Housing Provider	Co-operative	Local Housing Corp (LHC)	Non-Profit Board Member	Stakeholder Representative
8	3	2	2	2	1

2. Population of geographic service area:

<5,000	5,000 - 14,999	15,000 - 49,999	50,000 - 99,999	100,000 - 249,999	>250,000
0	0	0	2	1	10

3. Housing program administered/administered under:

Federal Private Non-Profit	Federal Private Non-Profit Aboriginal	Private Non-Profit	Private Non-Profit Aboriginal	Private Non-Profit Supportive Housing	LHC	Municipal Non-Profit	Co-op
6	1	11	4	5	7	8	9

4. Units in portfolio (applies to housing providers only):

<50	51 - 100	101 - 250	251 - 500	>500
0	1	2	1	5

5. Full-time staffing complement:

<5	6 - 10	11 - 49	50 - 99	>100
4	3	0	1	5

6. Total number of board members in participants' organization:

<5	5 - 7	8 - 10	11 - 13	>13
0	4	3	1	1

7. Average tenure of board members:

<5 years	5 years	6 - 10 years	11 - 15 years	>15 years
0	1	0	0	2

8. Description of portfolio mix:

Apartments	Townhouses	Scattered Homes	Rent Supplement Units	Combination
10	6	1	5	8

9. Description of household type:

Seniors	Non-Senior Singles	Families	Supportive	Combination/ Other
5	3	5	0	11

10. Average "wait time" for seniors housing based on local need:

<1 year	1 - 5 years	6 - 10 years	>10 years	Unknown
0	8	4	0	1

11. Average "wait time" for non-seniors housing based on local need:

<1 year	1 - 5 years	6 - 10 years	>10 years	Unknown
0	3	3	5	1

12. Average "wait time" for family housing based on local need:

<1 year	1 - 5 years	6 - 10 years	>10 years	Unknown
0	3	3	5	1

13. Average “wait time” for supportive housing based on local need:

<1 year	1 - 5 years	6 - 10 years	>10 years	Unknown
0	4	3	3	3

14. Reason most commonly cited for emergency shelter requests (1 = most common, 8 = least common):

1. Family breakdown
2. Spousal abuse
3. Eviction
4. Relocation to community
5. Substance abuse
6. Laid-off or loss of employment
7. Parental conflict
8. Referral from health/social agency

15. Most significant housing need missing in community (1 = highest significance, 6 = lowest significance):

1. Availability
2. Affordability
3. Community support
4. Housing mix (type)
5. Resident engagement
6. Local support services

16. Greatest financial pressure facing organization (1 = greatest, 8 = smallest):

1. Capital repairs
2. Market rent vacancies
3. Energy costs
4. Benchmarks
5. RGI reduced revenues
6. Mortgage rates
7. Insurance costs
8. Expiry of operating agreements

17. Most crucial elements for a provincial housing strategy (1 = highest priority, 7 = lowest priority):

1. Public investment in creation of affordable housing stock
2. Housing allowance programs
3. Ability of service managers to have flexibility in allocating funds
4. Emergency short-term housing
5. Repair of existing affordable housing stock
6. Inclusionary zoning
7. Leveraging of assets

Part B. Local Housing Strategy

18. “What does affordable housing mean to your community?”

- A mix of housing, rather than an elite neighborhood or a slum
- Stability for residents
- A supply of new, decent affordable housing, especially in small communities (but large communities too)
- Achieving a balance in socioeconomic realms
- Housing for workers in the area
- Upholding the vibrancy of a community
- Beneficial for all members of society
- Retaining existing stock
- To be a community, providing services

19. “What would happen in your community if there was no social housing?”

- A lowered quality of life for all

20. A local affordable housing framework:

a. “Can a sustainable housing program which could address the critical need for subsidized housing be created at the local level?”

- NO!
- It is simply not affordable
- There is need for a commitment to make a federal policy framework

b. “What are the barriers at the local level that would prevent this from happening?”

- Partly a legislative problem (i.e. inclusionary zoning exists in the US, but has yet to be implemented in Ontario)
- NIMBYism
- There needs to be an obligation, a legislative obligation

21. “What is needed to encourage inclusive, environmentally sustainable and economically feasible communities in your region?”

- There is a need to convince our society that housing is beneficial to the province, the economy and that it reduces other social costs
- A communication strategy is needed
- Housing is generally at the mercy of councilors, especially in two-tier systems
- We all know what needs to get done – we must figure out how to make our recommendations resonate with councilors
- Educate, educate, educate – the constituency, community organizations, calling politicians to account
- Social housing is a public asset and an economic generator
- It is about changing the story – the people who live in affordable housing pay the majority of costs
- Legislative requirements can provide the frameworks to reinforce this
- Also give politicians “wins” – let them know when good things are happening in social housing, allow them to be associated
- Either the province increases minimum wage or reduces the cost of rent(s)
- Garner the support of community groups – housing providers need to be politically engaged
- Combat NIMBYism by telling people’s stories
- Eliminate the OMB

22. Making social housing more accessible to individuals with physical limitations:

a. “What changes would improve accessibility to affordable housing in your community?”

- Improved transportation systems
- Make it a priority to build housing where services already exist (i.e. seniors downtown near transit)
- Ramps in bathrooms, ramping, heating ramps, increased lighting in seniors buildings, braille, etc.
- Forge partnerships (i.e. with Canadian Hearing Society) to serve clients better
- Train staff to understand impairments, especially non-apparent impairments
- Not just physical modifications – more support services need to be in the community

b. “What financial implications would result from improvements to accessibility?”

- Massive costs are involved
- The regulations dictated in the Access for Ontarians with Disabilities Act are around the corner – achieving these will be demanding
- If money is going to come our way for this, it needs to be delivered correctly – the process needs involve the government examining what housing providers and service managers actually require

23. “What do you consider to be the most critical factor in a comprehensive approach to homelessness prevention?”

- We need a housing strategy – we need a will to do it
- There is a need to revamp social assistance rates and develop strategies that do not result in asset stripping
- Energy fund and rent bank are not enough – they deplete quickly
- There needs to be support for people in their housing

24. “Is it feasible that residents of your community will have access to a full range of housing options regardless of their income?”

- If there is political will, it is feasible
- It involves massive amounts of money
- We need a pot of resources and the flexibility to do something effective with it

Part C. Affordable Housing Funding

25. “Do you believe that we as a sector are not providing sufficient affordable housing, and that the current programs provided do not support or encourage affordable housing? Are units just being moved around and little is being done to increase the supply?”

- Agree – we are losing affordable housing
- We are losing ground
- Units are being lost through conversion to condos
- Family formation rates are changing
- Intensification must increase
- Affordability and availability is needed – we must examine the issues in each area
- Housing allowances help as long as there is availability
- This is not a sector responsibility – this is a community responsibility

26. Initiatives of the Affordable Housing Program (AHP) include rental and supportive housing, housing advance/rent supplements, homeownership programs, and Northern projects...

a. “Have these initiatives been conducive to addressing the housing needs in Vaughan?”

- They have been effective, but the effects have been small
- Yes, we have been building, addressing some of the needs, but not addressing critical needs (i.e. large, single family dwellings)
- Could not implement in situ – had people moving across the hall to take advantage of it (it was ridiculous)
- Government needs to stop “slicing up” the funding – some providers could not use it because of a one-size-fits-all model (they had to turn millions of dollars away)

b. “Have the funding and unit allocation arrangements under this program been equitable and recognize demographics in your community?”

- Not necessarily
- The government needs to listen and engage the service manager
- Ministry staff did not know enough to listen
- There is a desire to over-regulate
- The fundamental problem is that policy disconnected from administration
- Whatever is prescribed, must be consulted on!

c. "What needs to be changed in the AHP, if anything?"

- We need to stop being taken for granted – doing good work with little money and lots of constraints

27. The provincial government in partnership with the federal government announced the investment of \$1.2 billion in social and affordable housing over the next two years...

a. "Would you be ready or could you participate in this initiative?"

- Large coordination challenges are ahead
- SHSC has been thinking about how to support relevant players
- Government needs to drop the one year limit (e.g. elevators take 18 months)
- Requires a level of sophistication of management to break up jobs like this
- Puts people at risk
- There are not enough companies out there to service everyone
- This is economic stimulus, not a housing benefit
- Discouraging that this is not a long-term commitment from federal government
- This is almost a distraction – the goal is long-term viability and this may knock us off our course of meeting the ultimate goal
- There are administrative shortages

b. "Do you have expertise/resources with respects to request for proposals (RFP) processes?"

- It varies – there is a high likelihood that people will be taken advantage of in the process due to the high level of demand

c. "Do you have the availability of local trades-people?"

- There will likely be competition for resources
- Manufacturers are going to have trouble supplying the need (e.g. fridges, toilet, etc.)

Part D. Provincial Housing Strategy: "Who does what?"

28. "What is needed in a provincial housing strategy which would properly identify and address geographic issues, rural issues, availability of support services, and availability of experienced staff resources?"

- Listen and plan properly
- Regional forums are excellent, everyone is invited
- Through AMO, political input
- Strategy should involve a general communications strategy
- Tool or tools that stop frivolous complaints going to OMB
- Who's going to pay for the administration dollars?

29. “Who would you say should have the primary role and responsibility for the design and implementation of strategies to address changing demographics across the province and available to housing over the long term?”

Federal Government	Provincial Government	Municipal Government	Housing Providers
5	7	6	3

30. “Who would you say should have the primary role and responsibility for the funding of the various housing programs?”

Federal Government	Provincial Government	Municipal Government	Housing Providers
7	9	1	1

31. “Who would you say should have the primary role and responsibility for the reduction of ‘wait times’ for access to affordable housing?”

Federal Government	Provincial Government	Municipal Government	Housing Providers
5	4	6	1

32. “Who would you say should have the primary role and responsibility for the implementation of effective asset management systems?”

Federal Government	Provincial Government	Municipal Government	Housing Providers
1	2	7	3

33. “Do you think that ‘public-private partnerships’ (P3s) are a viable alternative to the current social housing program structure in Ontario?”

- Inclusionary zoning is important
- Private sector is not interested in risk in this economic environment
- Might not be the right time for this type of strategy
- There is concern over the level of commitment on behalf of private parties
- Responsibility would be project-specific

34. “Do you think that it is important to engage residents in the development of a local-level housing strategy?”

- YES! It is critical
- The community in all its forms needs to be engaged

Part E. Energy Initiatives in Social Housing

35. “What information, processes and resources are currently available to housing organizations in your community in evaluating conservation efficiencies?”

- Consultants, energy consultants
- Lots of good stuff originating from GLOBE – help is on the way
- Depending on the community, there may or may not be information available

36. “What do you see as the advantage of developing a ‘green industry’ within social housing in Ontario?”

- Makes housing like any other municipal business
- Not sure if it should be separate and distinct
- Lots of advantages, but does there have to be a specific green industry?
- There is also a huge opportunity to generate money through green initiatives

37. “What do you see as the role for each of the following partners in creating and maintaining a ‘green industry’ in social housing in Ontario?”

- **Federal government** – Economic incentives such as tax credits, for example
- **Provincial government** – Providing a regulatory framework
- **Sector organizations (SHSC, ONPHA, CHF)** – Making information available in a collaborative manner

38. “Do current energy conservation measures and proposed initiatives go far enough for the social housing sector?”

- Yes, in some cases

39. “What problems have you encountered in implementing established energy programs?”

- Piecemeal strategies
- Some jurisdictions are more ready than others
- Community understanding is important

40. “If utility costs could be reduced would you consider the use of a long-term, low-interest loan for the implementation of energy retrofits?”

- The payback period would need to guarantee reasonable savings

Part F. Administration and Operational Barriers: Do they exist?

41. Financial administration:

a. “Is the current funding formula sensitive to changing economic conditions?”

- Formula is tough around legislative changes – decisions being made at federal and provincial levels will cost lots of money
- People are going to be looking for changes that reflect shifting conditions

42. Access to capital:

a. “Would you be in favour of housing providers having the ability to access equity in their current housing stock for the purpose of implementing capital improvements and repairs?”

- Yes, it should be considered

b. “What do you see as a barrier and possible solution to accessing the equity?”

- Responsibility
- Ensure there is sufficient equity to support the loan
- There should be an internal audit before and after
- Would need to be used for specific capital purposes
- Must be aware of pending expiry of operating agreements

43. The Social Housing Reform Act, 2000 (SHRA):

a. “What one area of the SHRA, 2000, negatively impacts your ability to operate effectively, if any?”

- Centralized waiting lists

44. Centralized Wait List:

a. “Is this process a fair and equitable method for the selection of available units?”

- NO!
- Should not be 100% Special priority (SPP)
- Five years is too long to wait for housing

- It underestimates the number of people who need it
- Chronology only works when you have a much large supply

b. “Does this process match the needs of the applicant with the tenant strategy of the housing provider?”

- Many applicants will agree to nearly anything, as long as they receive access to a unit (e.g. Co-op residents do not necessarily want to live in a co-op environment)

c. “Is the process of ‘Special Priority’ being administered in a fair and equitable manner which is harmonious with the current affordable housing programs?”

- It is being administered as it was intended

45. Administration:

a. “Are there efficiencies to be realized through ‘economies of scale’ and bulk purchasing of products? Does the potential exist in your community and/or neighbouring communities for the sharing of services between housing providers and/or municipalities specific to social housing?”

- There should be potential here
- ONPHA does this
- Organizing these initiatives are the tough part
- Must be low effort, high savings

b. “Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?”

- *“There is no technical support for housing providers”*

- Technical support in some places
- Do not always know where to find it
- Service managers are very helpful
- There is always room for improvement

- *“There is a crisis of accountability – there is not a clear understanding of housing provider administrative responsibilities”*

- Disagree strongly – we know what we need to do, we may not like it but it needs to be done

- *“There is a staffing crisis in the sector – there is a decreasing supply of qualified people and less consideration by college and university graduates of social housing as a career choice”*

- Property management companies are having difficulty getting people to do the job, to do it well and to stay
- Money becomes an issue
- Issues: devolution, aggravation, difficulties and dedication
- Overall, it is mixed

• *“The housing sector in Ontario needs accreditation”*

- No
- Not sure if you could set standards, since there are different sets of skills necessary for seniors and other types of housing
- Would give it more credibility, but might not be able to pay for increased wages
- Professional development, rather than accreditation, might be a better solution

46. Volunteer Boards:

a. *“What do you consider to be the single largest barrier to the recruitment and maintaining of volunteer board members?”*

- People are having trouble garnering the interest of volunteers
- Financial deficits
- Nature of the residences
- Responsibilities under the Corporation Act are onerous on volunteers
- Board dynamics, personal dynamics

Part G. Federal-provincial stimulus package

47. *“How many participants have completed Building Condition Assessments (BCA)?”*

- All participants have completed BCAs

48. *“How many participants have completed energy audits?”*

- Yes – 75%
- No – 25%

49. *“What specific support services are needed to get the money spent at the local level or within your region?”*

- Programs must have parameters and guidelines
- SHSC could lay some groundwork to suggest the best value on items such as windows, toilets, etc.

50. *“Who has project management support to facilitate participation in the stimulus program at this moment?”*

- No participants reported issues in this area

51. “What can SHSC help you do?”

- General organization
- Provide a list of qualified/recommended contractors, products, project managers, etc.
- Lay the foundation to get the ball rolling
- Technical support staff must be familiar with programs on the market
- Knowledge base to answer questions quickly and well
- Facilitating the pooling resources, purchases