



Towards Integrated Infrastructure Planning: A recognition of the need for wholistic community development to end the housing emergency

February 2021 | NAN Housing Strategy Brief #3

Since the development of the National Housing Strategy significant attention has been given to a variety of populations experiencing greatest housing need, including those living on-reserve. Alongside this attention, federal investments have been made towards housing through the Co-Investment Fund, Rapid Housing Initiative and other programs. These programs have focused on generating a maximum number of units for priority populations and are welcomed by communities who have been calling for greater investment in housing, including Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN).

NAN declared a collective housing emergency in 2014 stating, “First Nations are facing similar challenges with housing and infrastructure development which affect and limit community growth and productive family development”. This declaration joins those made by First Nations and organizations at regional, provincial and the national level recognizing the need for housing development. Accompanying many of these declarations are a series of estimates and models forecasting the number of houses needed to address the crisis at various geographies. NAN estimates that over 7,500 new units would need to be constructed, more than doubling the current number of houses in the territory. However, the strict focus on unit counts – both in programs and forecasts– ignores the critical systems requiring expansion to support housing development.

Understanding housing as distinct from community development has been embedded in Canadian housing programs and policies. This distinction is made through the separation of major versus minor infrastructure or housing versus community infrastructure. Functionally, this distinction requires that housing specific funding be limited to costs within the lot lines, excluding any service or roadway expansions. While this distinction may reflect the budgetary and planning processes present of urban Canada it acts a significant limitation to addressing the on-reserve housing emergency.

Through the development of NAN Housing Strategy, begun in 2018, housing managers and community leaders have identified the systems-level limitations which prevent large-scale housing expansion. Housing managers have described how infrastructure systems currently operate at, or near, capacity, lack regular maintenance and were developed without regard for community growth. Recent reporting has identified that within NAN territory up to 23 water treatment facilities, 22 wastewater systems and 11 solid-waste facilities would need to be replaced or upgraded to support housing expansion in addition to diesel power upgrades. Land constraints also limit current capacity for housing development; geographic and topographic limitations conditions exist in addition to communities having few serviced lots available. Currently, 19 First Nations are negotiating the lengthy processes of Treaty Land Entitlement or Addition to Reserve which can also impact community expansion timelines. The inclusion of hard infrastructure needs in NAN’s housing forecast demonstrates how without an integrated approach, the housing emergency cannot be solved.

Beyond the need to develop critical hard infrastructure in tandem with housing, there is a need to support holistic community development. Through the development of NAN Housing Strategy community members have identified how they face inequitable access to a variety of well-being supportive services in their communities. Access to food, health services, education and recreation spaces are not guaranteed for NAN community members. The understanding of the housing emergency in NAN territory moves beyond housing units and instead recognizes the need for wholistic development that allows individuals, families and communities to thrive. While a home is at the centre of this need, it is a part of a system which for generations has failed NAN members.

Housing investment must be integrated with processes of community and infrastructure planning, rooted in local goals. The need to integrate housing funding within the broader context of community development should not be seen as a mechanism for delaying the construction of the more than seven thousand units needed across NAN territory but should instead be seen as an impetus for broader discussions about what will lead to long-term community wellness. Conversations held NANHS events have allowed community members to identify the specific needs in their community, the changes– both short- and long-term– required to build better futures for generations to come.

Recent funding programs present generational opportunities for organizations to access capital funding. However, these must be seen within the context of more than three decades of federal divestment from housing. Seen alongside federal investment beginning in 2018 to end long-term boil water advisories on-reserve, infrastructure investment is only beginning to address shortages described long ago. New housing is critical to meet the needs of those currently unhoused, under-housed or inappropriately housed; however, if developed without wider systems expansion will reveal further crises. Regular brownouts and the experience of overcapacity water and waste-water systems will continue the lived experience of failed community development which continues to impact member well-being. Creating funding programs that assume a similar level of infrastructure readiness as urban Canada discriminates and will ultimately shut First Nations out from being able to fully benefit from these new opportunities without risk to existing infrastructure and community wellbeing.

Recommendations

1. Recognize and track the full, systems-wide needs of on-reserve housing systems including subdivision expansion, hard and soft infrastructure which together form the existing housing emergency;
2. End the siloed approach to housing and community development funding mechanisms; and
3. Support the development of community-based integrated planning and ensure that long-term, predictable funding mechanisms are in place to support the implementation of planning activities.