



# Stuck in crowded homes with nowhere to go: How COVID-19 demonstrated the failures of an incomplete housing continuum in Nishnawbe Aski Nation territory

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On March 16, 2020 Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) announced the formation of a COVID-19 Task Team, “taking extraordinary steps to ensure that everything possible is done to keep our First Nations and members safe and supported”<sup>1</sup> in response to the onset of COVID-19 in Ontario. As public health recommendations and response frameworks emerged from Health Canada and Public Health Ontario it became clear that a critical component of safety was the ability to physically distance, self-isolate or quarantine. An immediate focus in containing the spread of COVID-19 was reducing individual non-essential trips away from home. Less than a month into the provincial response, cases had been identified in fly-in First Nations in NAN territory. In response, the Task Team worked closely with First Nations to identify existing infrastructure that could be converted to isolation or quarantine space and identify the percentage of the on-reserve population that could be housed in existing infrastructure were an outbreak to occur. This response came as recognition of the unique challenges facing NAN First Nation located remotely from the social and health services in urban centres and with insufficient housing. While the spread of the virus generated an increased focus on emergency housing, the need for housing in NAN territory extends beyond this pandemic. .

## The NAN Housing Context

NAN Chiefs-in-Assembly declared a collective housing emergency in 2014 expressing the similar conditions they faced, “deplorable housing conditions that lead to extensive health issues, short housing life, overcrowding and extreme mold that further enable extensive and chronic health issues”.<sup>2</sup> The lived experience of housing is substantially different in NAN territory from the rest of Ontario. Houses in the territory are 4.5 times more likely to experience crowding; and have more than double the number of people per house.<sup>3</sup> In addition, housing in the territory is seven times more likely to be in need of major repair; speaking to the widespread lack of safety in housing in the territory.<sup>4</sup> However, beyond the lack of housing and inappropriate and inadequacy of existing housing in the territory, lies another critical problem: gaps in the housing continuum.

Housing in most NAN First Nations is limited to family-sized, detached units.<sup>5</sup> As a result, individuals or families with needs outside of this form are not served and are often forced in situations of precarity or into urban centres. A feature of appropriate housing models is the availability of housing options for all community members. Housing Continuums, Wheelhouses and other models have been used to demonstrate the variety of tenure and support options required to achieve the outcome of housing for all.<sup>6</sup> These models recognize that the dignity of appropriate housing should be afforded to all members of a community; regardless of whether they are experiencing a crisis, are in need of housing which includes social or health support or are choosing to live independently. However, generations of colonial policy interventions into the housing systems of First Nations have instead created a model which only allows for independent living. Despite the interventions of informal networks and grassroots resistance providing housing for all by taking in family, neighbours and those in need; the model of housing available simply cannot provide for all situations.

## Nishnawbe Aski Nation Housing Strategy

The NAN Housing Strategy is a three-year project creating occupant-focused housing need assessments, determining localized housing need, and developing housing solutions at the community and regional level. The NAN Housing Strategy will centre First Nations knowledge and lived experience to support the creation of local institutions responsible for the planning, governance and design of their housing systems.

NAN represents 49 First Nations within northern Ontario with the total population of membership (on and off reserve) estimated around 45,000 people. NAN encompasses James Bay Treaty No. 9 and Ontario's portion of Treaty No. 5, and has a total land-mass covering two-thirds of the province of Ontario spanning 210,000 square miles. The people traditionally speak four languages: Ojibwe in the west, Ojibway in the central-south area, and Cree and Algonquin in the east.

NAN continues to work to improve the quality of life for the NAN territory. Through existing partnerships and agreements with Treaty partners (governments of Canada and Ontario), NAN continues to advocate on behalf of the communities it represents for self-determination with functioning self-government.

Continuing their ongoing partnership with NAN, and providing technical, training and community engagement support on this project, is Together Design Lab at Ryerson University. A team of students, staff and faculty with training in planning and architecture, Together Design Lab has extensive experience partnering with First Nations to create change in housing systems within northern Ontario.

## The Impacts of COVID-19 on Housing and Infrastructure

The public health recommendations and orders noted above, put in place to contain COVID-19, exacerbated pressure on the limited housing supply. In particular, those experiencing housing precarity, living in unsafe situations or without adequate space have been unable to follow health protocols and faced significant risk of further harm. While the experience of housing precarity in northern First Nations had previously been epitomized by cycles of hypermobility, with individuals accessing housing through a variety of family members, friends and services in urban centres, now mobility was removed as an option. In NAN territory, as with communities across the country, there were rises in intimate partner violence (IPV), family violence and individuals becoming unhoused as people were forced into permanence, and with many social supports temporarily or permanently made unavailable.<sup>7</sup> Without emergency or supportive housing, individuals and families were left with few options and many were left in unsafe situations.

## Why a Complete Model of Housing Matters

While COVID-19 created a unique set of circumstances revealing specific risks to safety caused by the ongoing housing emergency; the need for a more holistic model of housing extends beyond this pandemic. The housing emergency has forced those experiencing life crises or with supportive-housing needs into inappropriate or unsafe living situations. Through the development of NAN Housing Strategy, underway since 2018, the stories of those most marginalized by the current housing system and their families have been recorded; below we identify three of the areas of need shared in this process. Each of these demonstrates the ways in which the socio-economic challenges and barriers faced by NAN community members intersect with housing to create further marginalization.

### *Housing for those Experiencing IPV/Family Violence*

Currently only three First Nations in NAN territory have housing designated for members who have experienced violence. In other First Nations, members shared a reliance on services and service providers in urban centres for individuals or families experiencing violence. However, being forced away from your home community to find safe housing and access health services can act as a second trauma breaking ties to family and community critical to the long-term healing process.<sup>8</sup> In addition, research demonstrates that when forced to access urban services many women, children and families encounter racism and the services they are offered are ill-prepared to offer culturally-informed care or deal with intergenerational trauma and grief. The NAN Women's Council have advocated for the creation of designated housing units in each First Nation to support victims of violence; importantly, these units must be accompanied with the required investment in related service to support healing journeys. The provision of safe housing can play a critical first step towards healing and long-term well-being, ending cycles of violence and trauma at levels of individual, family and community.

### *Homelessness and Transitional Housing*

The lack of housing in NAN First Nations leaves many members on housing waitlists in their communities for years, forcing them into precarious situations to find shelter. Often, individuals are forced into hypermobility where they move from couch surfing with various friends and family to accessing urban services or sleeping rough. Access to appropriate housing is a critical determinant of health and remaining unhoused for a significant period of time leaves community members at significant risk to adverse social and health outcomes. NAN members who are unhoused can often end up between systems, falling through jurisdictional cracks between federal on-reserve systems, municipal systems and regional social services. Emergency housing available on-reserve would stop the forced mobility to urban centres and prevent the significant health and well-being risks associated with being unhoused.

### *Older adults/ Elder Housing*

Older adults in NAN communities in need of supportive housing are forced to leave their communities. Home and Community Care is only funded on-reserve during business hours, Monday-Friday and there are no assisted living or long-term care facilities available on-reserve in NAN territory. While an accessibility-adaptation program exists, it has been noted that in many cases houses are in too poor a condition to add accessibility features. As a result, existing housing does not address the full lifecycle of needs experienced by community members. Without supportive housing options a colonial cycle of disconnection, removal from communities and breaking of intergenerational learning opportunities is continued. The ability to age in place is recognized as an important determinant of health and community well-being that isn't available to NAN First Nations.

## Recommendations

1. Develop a specialized continuum of housing recognizing the specific housing needs present in NAN territory;
2. Begin developing emergency housing units which address the gaps in service provision already identified by NAN First Nations, including: housing for victims of violence which supports healing journeys, emergency and transitional housing for those who are currently unhoused and supportive housing for those with healthcare or memory care needs;
3. Ensure that emergency infrastructure developed includes funding strategies for relevant support services, operations and maintenance; and
4. Review on-reserve housing gaps identified through the COVID-19 process and support emergency preparedness planning.

<sup>1</sup> Nishnawbe Aski Nation. (March 16, 2020). "NAN Announces a COVID-19 Task Team". Retrieved from <https://nancovid19.ca/?p=1475>

<sup>2</sup> Nishnawbe Aski Nation. (2014). Chiefs-in-Assembly Resolution 14/40 (August 7, 2014). Thunder Bay, ON.

<sup>3</sup> Statistics Canada. (2017). Ontario [Province] and Ontario [Province] (table). Census Pro-file. 2016 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001. Ottawa. Re-leased November 29, 2017. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E> (accessed January 10, 2020)

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada. (2017). 2016 Census of population: Census Profiles for Mattagami 71, Chapleau 74A, Duck Lake 76B, Chapleau 75, Matachewan 72, Abitibi 70, Fort Albany, Factory Island 1, Constance Lake 92, Moose Factory 68, Flying Post 73, New Post 69A, Ginoogaming First Nation, Long Lake 58, Aroland 83, Osnaburgh 63A, Fort Albany, Attawapiskat 91A, Marten Falls 65, Fort Hope 64, Cat Lake 63C, Osnaburgh 63B, Lac Seul 28, Weagamow Lake 87, Poplar Hill, Deer Lake, Sandy Lake 88, Sachigo Lake 1, Pikangikum 14, Fort Severn 89, Webequie, North Spirit Lake, Wunnumin 1, Wapekeka 2, Neskantaga, Bearskin Lake, Kasabonika Lake, Muskrat Dam Lake, Kingfisher Lake 1, Wawakapewin, Kee-Way-Win. Retrieved from: <http://dc.chass.utoronto.ca.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/cgi-bin/census/2016/displayCensus.cgi?year=2016&geo=cs-d#vars>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> CMHC. (August 7, 2019). The Wheelhouse: A New Way of Looking at Housing Needs". Retrieved from <https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/blog/2019-housing-observer/wheelhouse-new-way-looking-housing-needs>

<sup>7</sup> Moffitt, P., Aujla, W., Giesbrecht, C. J., Grant, I. & Straatman, A-L. (2020). Intimate partner violence and COVID-19 in rural, remote, and northern Canada: Relationship, vulnerability and risk. *Journal of Family Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-020-00212-x>

<sup>8</sup> Curry, K. (2018). Violence against women shelters and the experiences of indigenous women: Policy brief for the house of commons standing committee on the status of women. House of Commons Canada. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/FEWO/Brief/BR10222933/br-external/NativeWomensAssociationOfCanada-e.pdf>