

Inuit Housing in Ottawa: Looking Forward

A planning report prepared with
Tungasuvvingat Inuit and Inuit NonProfit
Housing Corporation

Submitted to Tungasuvvingat, Inuit Non-Profit Housing
Corporation and the City of Ottawa Housing Branch

Submitted by Havi Echenberg and Robin Wisener
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Background:

As part of the community capacity building component of the Supporting Community Partnerships Initiative, the City of Ottawa Housing Branch allocated the time of one consulting team to work with the Inuit community to work with Tungasuvvingat Inuit (TI) to provide some basic research on the housing needs and services, to identify gaps, and to make recommendations on how to fill the gaps in housing for Inuit in Ottawa. In consultation with TI, the consultants identified a meager amount of popular literature for review, interviewed managers of four emergency shelters, and facilitated a half-day planning meeting with representatives from TI and the Inuit Non-Profit Housing Corporation to discuss current needs, priorities and steps for moving forward. It was also agreed that a brief report on findings would be provided to TI and to the City of Ottawa. This is the promised report.

Scanning the literature:

In general terms, literature that addresses Aboriginal homelessness in Canada is virtually non-existent. The gap in knowledge was identified in 1997 in a CMHC study that called for further research on counts of Aboriginal homeless, causes of homelessness among Aboriginal peoples, and the appropriateness of current services.¹ The search for this project indicates that these questions have yet to be answered, but some progress has been made in terms of material that sheds indirect light.

In a literature review prepared for the Federation of Canadian Municipalities a year ago, the authors identified characteristics of urban aboriginal populations, some of which can be expected to have an impact on their housing status and needs. Among these were the mobility of Aboriginal peoples, the increasing urbanization of Aboriginal peoples, and the youth of Aboriginal peoples.² These same authors, in an unrelated study, developed a model of interaction between housing and other policies that described housing as the stabilizer and facilitator of other social policies.³ The impacts of not having the stabilizer and facilitator in place are, regrettably, not articulated.

¹ Mary Ann Beavis, Nancy Klos, Tom Carter and Christian Douchant, "Literature Review: Aboriginal peoples and Homelessness – Executive Summary", prepared for Canada Mortgage and Housing, 1997. Available on-line at http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/imquaf/ho/abpeho_001.cfm.

² Tom Carter and Chesya Polevychok, "Literature Review on Issues and Needs of Aboriginal People", prepared to support work on "Scoping" Research On Issues For Municipal Governments And Aboriginal People Living Within Their Boundaries, Federation of Canadian Municipalities, October 2004, available on-line at http://www.chra-achru.ca/CMFiles/Literature_Review_on_Issues_and_Needs_of_Aboriginal_People_19LQE-1122005-5735.pdf.

³ Tom Carter and Chesya Polevychok, *Housing Is Good Social Policy*. CPRN Research Report F150. Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2004.

A document that provided a national context for the housing issues facing Inuit in Canada was developed to support the work of the National Roundtable on Aboriginal Issues in 2004. Focused on housing conditions in Inuit communities, the data cited showed that overcrowding among Canadians in general was less than 10 percent, while the overcrowding among Inuit was more than 50 percent.⁴ As noted later, the same overcrowding is replicated in Ottawa.

A recent conference on urban Inuit identified housing and homelessness as a primary concern for Inuit in Canadian cities. More than two-thirds of Inuit in Ontario are estimated to live in Ottawa.⁵ At that conference, Mary Simon, Canada's past Circumpolar Ambassador, described Inuit moving to Ottawa, and "getting lost in poverty and homelessness."⁶

For Inuit coming to Ottawa from their home communities in the north, life is often incomparable to anything they have known. Immediately apparent are the obvious physical differences, such as office towers, highways, public transit, shopping mall and superstores. However, it is often the less obvious social differences that contribute to feelings of isolation and dislocation. For an Inuk, getting lost in the city implies more than just taking the wrong bus; it is indicative of the potential loss of the Inuit way of life that shapes his or her identity.⁷

Inuit arrive in Ottawa through a number of personal journeys; many are here because they are in need of medical treatment, they are pursuing a special secondary school program or pursuing post-secondary studies or employment, or they are unable to remain in their family homes because of violence or other breakdown. Many return to Nunavut; some come back to Ottawa; some move from south to north with some regularity.

Six years ago, a feasibility study on the best approach to meeting the needs of Inuit who were homeless in Ottawa was carried out.⁸ The study considered four population groups among Inuit without stable housing to determine which had the most urgent need, and whether other organizations might be able to meet that need. The five groups were homeless Inuit, Inuit with HIV/AIDS, Inuit elders in need of emergency shelter, students, and Inuit medical patients from Baffin Island.

⁴ "Backgrounder on Inuit and Housing", prepared by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, November 2004, p.

⁵ Capital Submission: Full Proposal – Tungasuvvingat Inuit Submission", June 21, 2004.

⁶ Mary Simon, quoted in "Urban Inuit seek voice at Ottawa gathering", *Nunatsiaq News*, October 28, 2005, available on-line at

http://www.nunatsiaq.com/archives/51028/news/nunavut/51028_01.html.

⁷ Inuit Rights in the City: A Guide to Understanding the Rights of Inuit Living in the Ottawa Area", *Tungasuvvingat Inuit*, 2000.

⁸ David A. Boulton and Consillium, "A Feasibility Study for Housing for Transient Inuit in Ottawa-Carleton", prepared for the Inuit Non-Profit Housing Corporation, August 1999.

While the researchers found a dearth of statistical data on the number of Inuit in any of the categories, key informant interviews identified that the number were small in each category, and that the needs of several were being met by other institutions. Yet the experience of INPHC indicated that the need for shelter for transient Inuit was not being met, based on their waiting lists and the demand for their units. The decision at the time was that the need wasn't sufficient to merit seeking funds for housing for transient Inuit.

A year later, TI began to offer a residential addiction treatment program, and found that its graduates had nowhere to go. Not only was affordable rental housing in short supply, the housing that was available was in locations that did not support their abstinence, often populated by people using the very substances that these people were seeking to leave behind. The same was true for emergency shelters. TI submitted a grant application to the City of Ottawa for capital funds under the Supporting Community Initiatives Program (SCPI) in 2004, for funds to meet this need.⁹ That application was unsuccessful, and housing for Inuit exiting addiction treatment programs has not been built or provided. Both of these reports identified the need for culturally-sensitive housing solutions for Inuit in the south, with an emphasis on community and Inuit practices.

Regrettably, no other literature was found that was relevant to the topic at hand.

Other data:

In addition to literature, other data were available to provide a more complete picture of the priority housing needs of Inuit in Ottawa. Under the first round of SCPI funding, TI was providing data on those using its transitional housing services provided to homeless people through the [RW1] residential treatment program. Compared to other programs in the same category, the TI provided fewer services, and consequently was making more referrals to agencies in the mainstream. Services provided by mainstream agencies cannot cultural sensitivity. Also, more of its clients in the program were not absolutely homeless, but were likely to be living with friends or relatives at the time they sought treatment from TI's program.¹⁰ This same trend, generalized to urban Aboriginal populations, was described as a contributor to Aboriginal

⁹ "Capital Submission: Full Proposal", by Morgan Hare for Tungasuvvingat Inuit, June 2004.

¹⁰ These data were drawn from reports provided by TI to Dr. Tim Aubry, and were released to the researchers with the express permission of TI. The data were included in more aggregated data provided as part of program monitoring of the City of Ottawa's performance with regard to homelessness, from March 2001 to December 2002.

homelessness in a recent federal backgrounder announcing new federal money for Aboriginal housing.¹¹

Further insight was gained from interviews with managers of the four shelters identified by TI as being the most likely to serve Inuit in Ottawa: Shepherds of Good Hope, Union Mission, Salvation Army and Cornerstone. The last of the four serves homeless women; the first three serve homeless men. All the shelter providers reported that they had no data on how many of their clients were Aboriginal, though the men's shelters guesstimated that about 20 percent of their clients were Aboriginal. Among Aboriginal clients, they reported being unsure of how many were Inuit, except where the program staff had asked specifically or clients had volunteered the information. Nonetheless, those operating the men's programs – emergency overnight shelter and day programs – guesstimated that five percent of their clients (or one-quarter of Aboriginal clients) were Inuit.

As Cornerstone provides longer-term shelter and serves fewer clients, the staff was more knowledgeable about those they served. Although they do not formally collect data on Aboriginal status in general, or Inuit in particular, Cornerstone staff estimated that one-quarter of clients were Aboriginal, and of those, half were Inuit.¹²

Shelter providers were also asked what complexities – if any – were involved in serving Inuit clients. The shelter managers did not distinguish between Inuit and more general Aboriginal issues facing their clients: recovery from addiction, often involuntary relocation from smaller communities with the attendant culture shock and mental health issues, were identified as issues by all shelter managers interviewed. Only Cornerstone management indicated that services designed for First Nations women did not seem to be appropriate for Inuit women, because of cultural and historical differences.

An effort was made to draw upon the panel study being conducted by Dr. Tim Aubry from the University of Ottawa, following people who were homeless in 2000 to determine their housing status in 2004. The panel was constructed to be representative of the homeless population in general in 2000. Researchers have found it particularly difficult to track men who were homeless at that time; one researcher interprets this as evidence of the greater transience of men compared to women.¹³ The panel most recently interviewed, for whom data is currently being analyzed, included only three Inuit women, all with children, all

¹¹ "Backgrounder on Aboriginal Housing", released with press release entitled "The Government of Canada announces \$1.2B in Aboriginal Housing", November 25, 2005, available on-line at <http://www.news.gc.ca/cfmx/view/en/index.jsp?articleid=186209&>.

¹² Cornerstone staff also indicated that the proportions of both Aboriginal in general and Inuit in particular clients was higher before Oshki kizis Lodge opened in ?. Staff at this facility were not interviewed.

¹³ Interview with Dr. Fran Klowlaski, of Carleton University, October 2005.

literate. Two had been in Ottawa for less than six months, while the third reported having lived in Ottawa “off and on” for more than five years.

Planning session:

Participants in the planning session were drawn from TI and INPHC. TI’s representatives included managers and front-line workers who had been working with homeless Inuit for several years; INPHC’s general manager participated in the meeting. The agenda for the meeting focused on a presentation of results of literature search, shelter managers’ interviews, and other data sources, followed by a discussion of current needs and gaps, and an identification of important next steps in filling the existing gaps.

Current needs and gaps:

TI identified the continuing need for second-stage housing for “graduates” of their residential addiction treatment program, and a need to relocate the current program, because of the proximity of suppliers and users of the very substances treatment clients were trying to leave behind them. While some of those receiving treatment are clients from Nunavut, sent to Ottawa by Nunavut health officials, others are living in Ottawa, and will be looking for housing following their treatment. Frequently, TI staff report, they will end up in neighbourhoods and sometimes “crashing” with friends where substance abuse is present, making it extremely difficult for people to sustain their abstinence. This need was identified as the most pressing.

INPHC, the only organization providing subsidized housing for Inuit, identified a chronic need for housing for single Inuit, as most of its housing stock is family housing. The waiting list for bachelor and one-bedroom units is long, resulting in overcrowding in existing units as singles “couch-surf” with friends and relatives living in other units in INPHC housing. Although there have been positive signs that social housing construction will resume in Ottawa in the near future, this will not permit the addition of units for INPHC, since the existing programs will not provide for sufficient subsidies.¹⁴ Participants at the meeting also indicated that the dearth of units for singles is a likely contributor to over-representation of Inuit within the emergency shelter system. They also noted that while Inuit are eligible for subsidized units in other social housing projects, their social housing registry’s priority system makes it unlikely that Inuit singles would be given priority for the limited number of subsidized one-bedroom and bachelor units available. Housing for singles, then, was identified as a second gap with a high priority.

¹⁴ INPHC’s general manager reported that of 43 units, only one was being rented at market rents; all the others were occupied by tenants whose rent was geared to limited incomes.

INPHC also flagged the end to subsidies under the Aboriginal Housing Program, which permitted the subsidization of more units than was permitted in other programs. Once those subsidies end, it is likely that INPHC will not be able to meet the needs of low-income Inuit for affordable housing, even with existing units. A gap, then, will exist between demand and supply of housing for those who need the subsidy to afford the rent.

All participants also identified the characteristics that make the needs of Inuit unique in Ottawa, so that their needs cannot be met by more conventional housing providers, even those run by and for First Nations. Aside from spiritual practices and other significant cultural differences, the urban population of Inuit tends to be much more transient than other groups within Ottawa. There is a growing trend of people choosing to live in the south, and returning to the North after a short time. Some will repeat this cycle many times, creating high turnover in units.

Combined with the overcrowding described above, this turnover also creates higher costs for maintenance, also not funded under conventional social housing programs. In short, it is anticipated that in the absence of a new housing initiative to replace the Native Housing Program, the gaps in services to people who are homeless will increase in number and magnitude in coming years.

Next steps:

Participants reached the following conclusions:

- Efforts would continue to use current and new housing initiatives to meet the most urgent needs, second-stage housing in particular. Participants noted that the priorities established in the draft Community Action Plan included allocations to meet such needs.
- Efforts would continue to encourage federal and provincial governments to recognize and meet the particular needs of Inuit for different social housing programs that permitted higher subsidies, and higher maintenance costs than conventional social housing programs.
- Data related to housing and homelessness that identified Aboriginal users of services, and which of them are Inuit, are essential to determine the extent of the needs of Inuit people for services and housing.
- The City's recognition of the distinct needs of Inuit in providing the funds for this planning process is welcome. The ability of the Inuit community to have a relationship with funders at all levels that is distinct from First

Nations, is an important prerequisite to moving forward to meet the needs of Inuit in Ottawa.¹⁵

¹⁵ An example of the importance of direct communication with Inuit groups was a roundtable on urban Aboriginal housing hosted by CMHC, as part of the process to develop a national housing strategy that did not include any Inuit organizations. Evidence nationally and locally suggests that combining First Nations and Inuit proposals, for example, results in the needs of the Inuit being marginalized.