



**Government of the Northwest Territories Response to Committee
Report 47-19(2): Homelessness Prevention: Supporting Pathways to Housing NWT
Residents**

Background

The Standing Committee on Social Development (SCOSD) presented their Committee Report 47-19(2): *Homelessness Prevention: Supporting Pathways to Housing NWT Residents* on March 7, 2023. This report contains 17 recommendations for various social development departments to prevent or reduce the number of Northwest Territories (NWT) residents who may experience homelessness in the future, as well as to provide interventions for those who are currently experiencing homelessness.

Recommendation 1

The Standing Committee on Social Development recommends that Housing NWT establish a youth housing fund by the 2023-2024 fiscal year with sustainable, multi-year funding available to Indigenous governments and nongovernmental organizations to purchase, operate and manage safe housing for children and youth in care.

GNWT Response

The Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) recognizes that youth homelessness is an important and increasingly visible challenge across the NWT and Canada. Working with community partners, the GNWT may be able to help prevent chronic homelessness by developing targeted supports for youth involved with the criminal justice system and youth aging out of care.

As part of the development and future implementation of the GNWT Homelessness Strategy “*A Way Home: A Comprehensive Strategy to Address Homelessness in the Northwest Territories*”, engagement is being conducted with Indigenous governments, community governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to determine needs and options in their respective communities. The GNWT will work to ensure targeted supports are available for youth, especially youth involved in the criminal justice system and youth aging out of care.

Recommendation 2

The Standing Committee on Social Development recommends the Department of Health and Social Services create an Indigenous Child and Family Services Navigator position dedicated to youth who are aging out of care find stable housing and other supports.

GNWT Response

The GNWT agrees that youth in care have the right to positive supports, resources, and safe housing as they transition to adulthood to enable them to thrive as adults.

Extended Support Service Agreements (ESSA) are offered to young persons who were in the permanent care and custody of the Director of Child and Family Services (CFS), the Department of Health and Social Services (HSS), on their 19th birthday and until they turn 23. ESSAs are a voluntary agreement that can provide supplementary support (financial and non-financial), service navigation and connections to other supports/services to help the young person transition to adulthood. Young persons may opt in or out of ESSAs at any time.

Despite having ESSAs available, the GNWT recognizes the need for increased support for young persons during this critical life stage. This commitment is outlined in the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Action Plan (Action 47), which includes exploring potential changes to the *Child and Family Services Act* (CFSA) to better support young people in the NWT. As part of this process, HSS proposed increasing the age of eligibility for ESSAs (23-29) in a discussion paper on proposed amendments to the CFSA in April 2022. A What We Heard Report, which summarizes the feedback HSS received on that proposed change and others, will be available on HSS's website in Spring 2023.

Ensuring the right supports are available to youth transitioning out of care requires a holistic integrated approach that is informed by youth. As such, the CFS Action Plan will include a dedicated focus on youth supports. The Action Plan is anticipated for public release in August 2023. The implementation of the action plan will inform any potential future need for additional funding, including human resources, which would be subject to established business planning processes.

Recommendation 3

The Standing Committee on Social Development recommends Municipal and Community Affairs (MACA) lead an all-of-government approach to ensuring all children and youth have access to sports with increased funding, subsidies and vouchers for sports equipment and registration fees.

GNWT Response

The Department of MACA supports community governments and sport and recreation organizations to ensure children and youth have access to sport and recreation activities.

MACA remains committed to completing the Sport, Physical Activity and Recreation (SPAR) Framework, which will guide future investments from the Physical Activity, Sport and Recreation (PASR) Fund. MACA is actively engaging sport and recreation organizations, Indigenous governments and Indigenous organizations, nongovernment organizations, territorial sport organizations, community governments, and individuals who are passionate about sport and physical activity. Once completed, the SPAR Framework will provide a coordinated and broad approach to support the sport, recreation, and physical activity sector.

MACA currently supports the several sport and recreation organizations under the PASR Fund: Sport North Federation, the Aboriginal Sports Circle NWT, the NWT Recreation and Parks Association, the Mackenzie Recreation Association (MRA) and Territorial Sport organizations. Existing programs and initiatives that support access to sports for children and youth include Kid Sport NWT, the Rising Star Program, MRA's Recreation Initiative Grants, the Inuvik and Sahtu Sport and Recreation Reimbursement Program and specific community government initiatives that support access to recreation facilities such as the City of Yellowknife's Access for All Program.

In addition to funding provided under PSAR, MACA provides \$825,000 annually to community governments specifically to support the delivery of community-based recreation programming for all residents. MACA also provides funding to community governments for infrastructure projects through the Community Public Infrastructure funding, and through the Federal Community Capacity Building Fund (formerly called the Gas Tax Agreement), which is used to support the development of recreation infrastructure.

To improve and expand the use of local recreation infrastructure, MACA is working with the Department of Education, Culture, and Employment (ECE) and Education Authorities to support increased implementation and usage of Joint Use Agreements to support reciprocal usage of school and community government facilities by community user groups.

Collectively, all funding that MACA provides for recreation supports community governments to carry out their mandate for local recreation programming. In addition to funding, MACA also supports community governments through advice and assistance, mentorship, training and development, and intercommunity coordination and communication about available funding and program opportunities.

Recommendation 4

The Standing Committee on Social Development recommends that Housing NWT establish a women's housing fund by the 2023-2024 fiscal year that provides sustainable, multi-year funding to Indigenous governments and non-profit organizations to purchase, operate and manage housing for women and their children who are at risk of violence or have experienced violence.

GNWT Response

As noted above, as part of the development and future implementation of the GNWT Homelessness Strategy, engagement is being conducted with Indigenous governments, community governments and NGOs to determine needs and options in their respective communities.

Housing NWT and the Department of Executive and Indigenous Affairs (EIA) are looking to expand the Northern Pathways to Housing to include women and children fleeing domestic violence, based on the federal funding received pursuant to the National Action Plan to End Gender Based Violence. Over the next four years, this pilot project expansion will look to partner

with community organizations to increase the amount of transitional housing units available to women and children fleeing domestic violence.

Housing NWT is also negotiating an amendment to their bi-lateral funding for the Canada-NWT Housing Benefit that will see an additional allocation of funding targeted to support a rental subsidy for families fleeing violence. Housing NWT will share the details on the implementation of this funding with Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) once available. It is currently understood that this additional funding is multi-year funding available at least until the end of the current bi-lateral arrangement in 2028.

Recommendation 5

The Standing Committee on Social Development recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services lead the development of 2SLGBTQIPA+ guidelines for emergency shelters, transitional housing and non-profit organizations providing housing and homelessness prevention supports by the 2023-2024 fiscal year.

GNWT Response

The Department of HSS will lead the development of 2SLGBTQIPA+ guidelines for emergency shelters, transitional housing and NGOs to incorporate into their policies and Standard Operating Procedures. Next steps include the establishment of a working group to oversee the creation of these guidelines. This working group will include partners from other relevant GNWT Departments. The working group will make linkages to the Northern Mosaic Network and will gather feedback from various NGOs delivering shelter or transitional housing services.

Recommendation 6

The Standing Committee on Social Development recommends that the Department of Justice increase funding to the Men's Healing Fund to support regional healing programs for the holistic health and well-being of men.

GNWT Response

The Department of Justice recognizes the interest for additional Men's Healing Funding and has made a request for additional funding under the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence.

Recommendation 7

The Standing Committee on Social Development recommends that the Government of the Northwest Territories complete Truth and Reconciliation Call to Action #21 and secure substantive federal funding for an NWT Indigenous healing center to support Indigenous individuals who have been harmed and/or traumatized by the Indian Residential Schools system, Sixties Scoop, and other acts of colonization.

GNWT Response

The GNWT is committed to advancing the Calls to Action in collaboration with Indigenous Governments, the federal government, and other partners. Several Indigenous Governments in the NWT have expressed interest in pursuing healing centres within their regions to provide Indigenous residents with healing environments that are close to home and grounded in their distinct cultures, land, languages, and healing practices. The GNWT fully supports Indigenous Governments in this vision for Indigenous health and healing centres in the NWT and is committed to supporting Indigenous Governments in pursuing federal funding support to achieve that vision.

Recommendation 8

The Standing Committee on Social Development recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services expedite the application, approval and reporting requirement process of the On the Land Healing Fund to uphold Indigenous governments' and organizations' self-determination and ensure allocation of annual funds.

GNWT Response

The Department of HSS has combined three funds that are geared towards community-based mental wellness and addiction recovery programming, including on the land (OTL) programs. This combined fund will help to reduce the administrative burden of applying for multiple funds and will provide Indigenous governments with enhanced flexibility to determine the kinds of programming they deliver. Priority for this funding is for Regional and Community Governments between April 1 and September 1. After September 1, Community Governing Authorities and non-government Indigenous organizations can apply for any unused funds.

Beginning in 2024, application deadlines will shift to January 31 for Regional and Community Governments and April 1 for all other organizations. These staggered application times are to allow for the expediting and approval of applications from Indigenous governments. Moving to a January 31 application deadline will ensure that recipients have confirmation of funding prior to the start of the next fiscal year, which will allow for programs to be planned for in advance, increasing the amount of time residents can access OTL programs.

Recommendation 9

The Standing Committee on Social Development recommends that the Government of the Northwest Territories take an all of government approach to providing sustainable, multi-year funding for emergency shelters, transitional housing with wrap around sobriety and mental health supports, and supported living housing with managed alcohol and harm reduction programs.

GNWT Response

This recommendation is being taken into consideration and is consistent with actions proposed in the forthcoming GNWT Strategy to address homelessness.

Recommendation 10

The Standing Committee on Social Development recommends Housing NWT work with Indigenous Governments and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation to establish an Indigenous Housing Fund that will provide Indigenous Governments and/or Indigenous non-governmental organizations financial support to purchase, operate and manage housing aimed at Indigenous individuals and families.

GNWT Response

Housing NWT has established a funding program to support Indigenous governments and community governments to implement innovative and community-driven housing projects of their own design. This funding program is called the Community Housing Support Initiative (CHSI). Communities have an opportunity to design their own programming, target population and types of repairs they see as a priority. This initiative is intended to leverage other community supports in partnership to address community housing needs.

Housing projects under the CHSI will provide community benefits such as affordable housing for families, seniors and single member households. Funding support is available through a grant, grant-in-kind, or contribution to implement affordable housing projects. Support may come in the form of program and policy design, technical expertise and knowledge, land management activities, and surplus units where appropriate.

In recent years, the Government of Canada has directly funded Indigenous governments with a significant amount of funding to support their own housing and infrastructure-related priorities. Housing NWT supports the provision of this funding and has offered in-kind assistance to Indigenous governments in the implementation of their efforts.

Recommendation 11

The Standing Committee on Social Development recommends that the Government of the Northwest Territories work with Indigenous Governments, architects, engineers, and other professionals to develop a suite of Indigenous-led, climate change responsive designs for emergency shelters, transitional housing, affordable housing, housing for seniors and housing for those with disabilities.

GNWT Response

As noted above, the Government of Canada is providing significant funding directly to Indigenous governments to support their own housing and infrastructure-related priorities, which may include opportunities for Indigenous-led, climate change responsive designs for emergency shelters, transitional housing, affordable housing, housing for seniors and housing for those with disabilities. Housing NWT supports the provision of this funding and has offered in-kind assistance to Indigenous governments in the implementation of their efforts.

For units constructed by Housing NWT, efforts are made to engage with Indigenous governments and other stakeholders on the design of new construction projects. Further,

Housing NWT will be releasing an Energy Management Strategy that supports Housing NWT's energy goals and objectives, and the strategic objectives of the GNWT's 2030 Energy Strategy.

Another GNWT project, the proposed Wellness and Recovery Centre in Yellowknife, has involved discussions with Indigenous stakeholders in the design phase, including the Northwest Territories Indigenous Advisory Body. The facility is targeted to exceed the 2020 National Energy Code of Canada standard by 10% and will look to incorporate sustainable, cultural appropriate materials.

Recommendation 12

The Standing Committee on Social Development recommends the Government of the Northwest Territories meet its commitment to develop an all of government homelessness prevention strategy by April 2023.

GNWT Response

The GNWT tabled the draft strategy to address homelessness on March 30, 2023, which includes homelessness prevention measures. Following further engagement with Indigenous governments, community governments, shelter operators and other related non-governmental organizations, and the public, the GNWT is working to table a final homelessness strategy during the May-June 2023 sitting of the Legislative Assembly.

Recommendation 13

The Standing Committee on Social Development recommends the Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) partner with the northern private sector, non-governmental organizations, and Indigenous Governments to develop one-year lease agreements and rental assistance payments to accommodate private sector lease requirements to support housing partnerships and increase access to affordable housing.

GNWT Response

The Department of ECE does not enter into lease agreements between landlords and tenants due to the fact that the Income Assistance (IA) program is month-to-month and there is no guarantee that an applicant will qualify for benefits each month. The IA program does pay landlords directly on behalf of an eligible applicant to assist with their shelter needs. ECE is developing a new IA program for Seniors and Persons with Disabilities that will be an annual program. This will better support both applicants and landlords as they will know in advance how much rent will be covered by the IA program each month for the upcoming year.

Recommendation 14

The Standing Committee on Social Development recommends Housing NWT amend the Collection Policy and forgive any arrears up to \$30,000 for Indian Residential School survivors as an act of reconciliation before the end of the 19th Legislative Assembly.

GNWT Response

The GNWT continues to work to assess circumstances under which arrears can be forgiven. This is being done to ensure that a fair policy is applied in all cases.

Debt forgiveness is governed by the *Financial Administration Act* (FAA), with which GNWT collection policies must be consistent. Under the FAA, Housing NWT has authority to forgive debt amounts not exceeding \$500. Debt forgiveness in excess of this amount would have to be approved by the Financial Management Board (FMB).

Recommendation 15

The Standing Committee on Social Development recommends Housing NWT implement the principles of the Collections Policy and develop a strategy by the 2023-2024 fiscal year to forgive arrears that cannot be collected despite demonstrated effort.

GNWT Response

The GNWT continues to work to assess circumstances under which arrears can be forgiven. This is being done to ensure that a fair policy is applied in all cases.

Each year, Housing NWT participates in a government-wide process, coordinated by the Department of Finance, to identify debts that satisfy the requirements of the FAA for debt forgiveness. These debts are then brought forward to the FMB for forgiveness approval. Among other factors, the FMB may consider a summary of collection actions taken and the associated results in deciding whether to forgive arrears.

Recommendation 16

The Standing Committee on Social Development recommends Housing NWT eradicate the Residency Policy and update the Public Housing Point Rating System with community membership as an additional factor with corresponding points and significant weight.

GNWT Response

Community residency requirements for access to public housing are set at the local level, subject to a maximum. During the Strategic Housing Renewal exercise undertaken by Housing NWT (then NWT Housing Corporation), the issue of residency requirements was one specific topic that had strong support from Indigenous governments and local housing organizations for retaining this authority at the local level. Incorporating a community residency requirement in the territory-wide points rating system would remove this authority from the local level and create a uniform territorial requirement that does not allow for variation at the community level.

Through the Strategic Housing Renewal, Housing NWT is implementing a number of changes that are intended to improve relationships with clients and strengthen efforts to address and prevent homelessness. These include:

- Increasing the number of points allocated to people experiencing homelessness when determining the priority for housing allocation, which increases priority for allocation if a home is available (effective April 1, 2023);
- Amending the “Eligible Tenant” policy so that if a former tenant applies for public housing and can demonstrate they have made an effort to address the factors that led to their eviction they may still be eligible for public housing;
- Developing a new, plain language tenant handbook and tenancy agreement that more effectively communicate the obligations associated with being a public housing tenant and help avoid evictions;
- Providing more support for housing stability programming to prevent homelessness, including a pilot program in several communities in 2023-2024 modeled on British Columbia’s “Rent Smart” program that helps individuals and families maintain their tenancy; and
- Changing the approach to evictions to replace the “Last Chance Agreement” with a “Tenant Success Plan” so that even if a person is not currently suited to public housing, Housing NWT would take a more person-centered approach, making referrals to other programs or services.

Recommendation 17

The Standing Committee on Social Development recommends Housing NWT develop a first right of refusal clause in leasing agreements to ensure family members of tenants receive the first opportunity to lease a public housing unit before the unit goes to market.

GNWT Response

Housing NWT only disposes of public housing units when those units are no longer economically viable to operate. Typically these units are aged and have a low condition rating. Currently Housing NWT does have a disposal policy for these units and we engage with the local Indigenous government asking if they have interest in the units before posting the units for sale in the community.

Housing NWT currently follows the *Residential Tenancies Act* and allows occupants of a leased housing unit to stay in the unit pending any transfers required to an appropriately-sized unit. Individuals and families with a demonstrated need for the supports public housing offers are prioritized over family members who may not have the same need. Family members are able to submit an application for public housing and should be point-rated along with the rest of the applicants, as the intention would be to ensure that the clients in the house are eligible for the program supports being offered.

If Housing NWT was to consider making those units available to family, there would be a number of considerations including whether the family has the ability to afford to operate the unit as a homeownership unit (as Housing NWT is not planning to continue to operate the unit as a public housing unit). Housing NWT would also want to engage with the family regarding the condition of the unit and the cost of repairs, as Housing NWT home repair programs tend not to be intended for significant repair projects.

Housing NWT has, in at least one case, worked with the Indigenous government and the clients when the Indigenous government asked that the units be transferred to the families with their support and cooperation. Housing NWT would continue to consider this type of engagement with families noting the above considerations prior to them taking on the unit.