

Background

Non-Profit Housing providers in Manitoba each manage their applications and wait lists independently. Direct service staff who work with people in housing need have found various ways to support people to apply for housing, but find the process frustrating, confusing, and full of barriers for potential tenants. As social housing is increasingly provided by non-profits, there is concern that the housing search and application process will become more fragmented. Manitoba Housing changed its application process relatively recently. While there have been a number of successes in its approach, there are opportunities to make adjustments so that it works better for tenants and for communities.

In Ottawa, The Registry was started by a consortium of non-profit housing providers to create a shared, consistent, and centralized application for their units. This resource is an example of sector collaboration that can create greater efficiency in Manitoba.

Ishbel Solvason-Wiebe presented on The Registry. Her [power point slides](#) and a [video](#) of her presentation are available with details about The Registry's operations. Harold Smith presented on Manitoba Housing's application process for its direct managed units, including sharing some lessons learned and current challenges.

Social Housing Transformations in Manitoba

Carolyn Ryan, Acting CEO of MB Housing

Manitoba Housing and Non-Profit Housing in Manitoba are on two transformative journeys. These are two journeys that will change the social housing landscape in a massive way in the next nine years.

1. The transfer of Manitoba Housing's direct management responsibilities. This started in Winkler to the Winkler Affordable Housing Inc. and increased through Requests for Proposals (RFPs). To date, management of 800 units have transitioned from MB Housing to non-profits and, in Brandon, a private property management company.

The RFP process works relatively well in urban areas, but less in rural areas, particularly because MB Housing wants local providers to be involved. The RFP process in rural areas may not work well because the MB Housing complex might be the most complicated building in town (related to building systems, e.g. elevators and boilers). However, there has not been specific feedback from rural housing providers to know this. MB Housing will know how many units and how quickly this transition might take place in the coming weeks. There are some areas where transferring housing management will not be feasible.

The RFP process is also time and energy consuming for the providers and MB Housing. We can anticipate RFPs for large scale transfers (500 units at a time). Not many providers can add this number to their portfolio multiple times per year. In Manitoba, 80% of the social housing sector manages one building of 50 units or less.

These transitions raise a number of questions:

- How do we organize around these changes as a sector? This includes organizing around potential RFPs to bring together a collection of resources and capacity.
 - How do we manage housing access? MB Housing has over 7,000 applicants on their waiting list; there are likely many applicants also on non-profit wait lists, meaning we do not have a good understanding of demand in Manitoba.
 - How does Manitoba Housing support the sector capacity to manage housing, and how is this different in rural Manitoba? We need to honour the history of the non-profits as service-based or community-based groups that were developed in particular niches, but we also need to operate in a more organized and efficient manner. We also need to build partnerships with the Co-Op housing sector.
 - How do we advance reconciliation in the transition of housing management? We have a pool of relatively small but well-established Indigenous housing providers. How do we work with that community to advance responsibility for Indigenous housing to Indigenous people?
 - There will be new and increased reporting requirements due to the National Housing Strategy. Are there ways to reduce or simplify reporting, given Canada's demand for increased information? Could this be done through an accreditation system to reduce particular types of reporting?
 - How do we protect the most vulnerable people in this process? Some groups are better at serving populations like those fleeing domestic violence, immigrants, people with mental health challenges, etc.
 - How do we deal with asset sales as part of this transition? The objective on revenue from asset sales is about \$5m per year; this is small relative to the portfolio.
 - What parts of MB Housing's core program go with the buildings, such as eligibility and priority for access?
 - What non-housing services should also be continued (e.g. tenant services, pest control, security, food services, IT systems, social enterprise relationships)?
2. The Bilateral Agreement between Canada and Manitoba for the National Housing Strategy. The funding largely replaces that which was available under the Social Housing Agreement, as well as new funding for the Canada Housing Benefit to start in 2020. There will be \$451m, tied to a commitment to maintain the current social housing portfolio (everything that was under agreement as of April 1, 2018) over the next nine years. While it would be possible for Manitoba Housing to simply renew existing operating agreements and keep housing status quo, this is not the intention. This would create a huge 'cliff' of funding loss after nine years. Subsidies can and will continue, but we need to have a clear understanding of whether they should in all cases.

Non-profit housing does not need to be self-sustaining after nine years; however, as a sector, we need to be *more* financially sustainable. Sustainability must be assessed on a project-by-project basis related to demand, the market, the state of the asset, the vitality of the board of directors, etc. There is also an opportunity to leverage other funding, such as the National Housing Co-Investment Fund. The Co-Investment fund has an onerous application process, but also requires a government 'co-investor.' For a province not planning to invest more, there is a

disincentive to partner because any results do not contribute to the province's requirements under the bilateral agreement.

How do we bring these two journeys together? They should be complimentary; the first journey can support the non-profit sector to achieve economies of scale, increase their capacity, and become more self-sufficient. But this raises more questions:

- What is the role of MNPHA in this transformation?
- What supports that MB Housing currently provides should shift to MNPHA?
- How do we develop more partnerships and connections with more providers, particularly those outside of Winnipeg?

These discussions will continue in the coming months, including at the Building Partnerships conference in November. The transformation of the sector will be moving quickly. It is expected that the Action Plan for the bilateral agreement will be released soon, and Manitoba Housing's new framework will be released in Winter.

Group Discussion

Attendees had a brainstorm discussion related to the opportunities and challenges before us.

Current Challenges in Applying for Housing

- Knowing what housing is out there for people
- Applicants are very mobile – it's challenging to update information in the various applications
- Barriers in applications: ID, Option C, credit checks
- Housing providers need to be able to do own due diligence
- Communications – there is uncertainty for housing providers related to rent supplements and operating agreements because there isn't a clear plan from MB Housing; they therefore don't advertise available housing widely because they don't know how sustainable it might be
- Some non-profits cannot accept people on Rent Assist (because they received capital funding)

Other Challenges in the Housing Sector

- The amount of time given to apply for RFPs to manage housing
- Government seems to think Rent Assist is a solution to End of Operating Agreements, but it is not
- There needs to be continued tenant support with transition from MB Housing to non-profits
- There are not housing units available to people who are 'hard to house'

Opportunities Available Through 'The Registry'

- Standardizing low-barrier applications amongst all housing providers
- Governance – The Registry has 1 vote per organization regardless of size
- Greater communication with MB Housing so everyone knows what is available; communication with EIA
- Collective advocacy with MB Housing regarding reduced reporting, flexibility in tenant documentation (e.g. Option C)

Workshop: The Registry, Waitlists, and Transforming our Sector
October 17, 2019

- Reduced arrears – a system to try to collect arrears from tenants and EIA (be cautious to not create barriers for those who may have made mistakes when young)
- The Registry means housing providers don't need to be the 'bad guy' in the application process; sets a standard of fairness for access to housing so people/advocates don't need to keep finding back doors

Opportunities for Collaboration

- Greater communication between non-profit housing providers and tenant advocates
- Grow the number of MNPHA members and the level of support provided to them
- Creation of a "Who to Call" list between housing providers and tenant support providers

Opportunities Available Through Social Housing Transformation

- Consolidation of sector partnerships – both boards and management; opportunity for democratization to maintain organizational identity but share more
- Consortium of non-profits, MNPHA, MB Housing – for there to be a notice of interest that MNPHA coordinates and members can identify what they are willing and able to take on
- COMPASS Co-Op Model – shared asset management and governance, individual building programming