



POLICY **HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS**

MARCH 30, 2021

All Calgarians deserve a roof over their heads. In order to advance housing affordability and approaches to address homelessness, we require strong municipal leadership that can develop innovative funding mechanisms and robust collaboration across sectors.

Cities around the world are struggling with housing affordability and homelessness. In Calgary, these challenges have been magnified first by the decline of the traditional energy sector and now the COVID-19 pandemic. Our current situation will see an increasing proportion of the population in positions of precariousness related to employment, housing and social supports.

TRENDS

Even prior to the pandemic, we saw worrisome trends. In 2016, over 100,000 households in Calgary (22%), overspent on housing costs in relation to their income. We also saw income support programs consistently fail to cover the cost of housing and other basic needs for our most vulnerable. By 2019, an average of 350 Calgarians per month were admitted to a homeless shelter for the first time.

With rising unemployment further compounded by pandemic-related restrictions on businesses, many Calgarians who were just getting by are now finding themselves in situations they cannot escape through hard work alone. Losing a job can often lead to losing your home. For this reason, we must ensure that any ideas we have around housing are also rooted in access to employment, access to health or social supports, and access to mobility options like public transit.

Further, homelessness and housing affordability challenges do not impact all parts of our community equally. While Indigenous peoples make up less than 3% of Calgary's population, they represented over 20% of people experiencing homeless in 2014. Tailored, collaborative, and culturally appropriate solutions are needed to serve these and other marginalized populations.

There has also been a historic and prevailing trend towards valuing homeownership over rental. The inception of the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) in 1945 fueled the post-war ideal of: 1) positioning homeownership as a marker of financial success, and 2) separating places of work from places to live. These two sentiments dominated the dialogue around housing for decades and we are only now slowly returning to city-building practices that mix housing types and amenities for more complete communities.

HOW COMPLEX IS THE ISSUE?

Experts in homelessness, affordable housing, land development, construction and mortgage financing often frame the housing debate as one that is multifaceted. They ask tough questions that highlight the interconnectedness of housing solutions, like:

- » How do you create resilience for people who are at different stages and places on the housing continuum?
- » How do you create and fund portable support services that follow the individual who is deemed “hard to house” because a high level of support is required?
- » What is the total operating cost of a unit of housing that meets minimum standard, so we can then determine how much income people need to have safe housing?
- » Are we looking at supply, demand and price point of inventory as we are determining affordability?

These types of questions speak to the difference between affordable housing as a type of subsidized unit, and the idea of housing affordability as a way to offer access to housing. By shifting the approach from a narrow focus on non-profit affordable housing to a broader view of housing, the City of Calgary can better address underlying affordability problems across the spectrum.

This shift in approach also speaks to the dichotomy between the user and the housing provider. When it comes to the user, governments and housing agencies must understand the links between income, rent or mortgage payments, and wraparound supports required to maintain a roof over one’s head. For the housing provider, governments need to be aware of how regulatory decisions impact both the costs to build and the costs to operate housing.

THE ROLE OF THE MUNICIPALITY

The City of Calgary currently plays a dual role in promoting affordable housing: both as a subsidized housing provider (Calgary Housing Company) and as a service-based supporter of the city’s non-profit housing sector. To best serve Calgarians, there should be a concerted shift towards supporting affordability across the housing continuum, from non-market housing to market rental or homeownership. Added focus on research, capacity-building, incentives and support for innovative practices across the housing system not limited to direct provision of affordable housing would ultimately serve more Calgarians.

To best support this idea, Calgary City Council should solidify housing as a priority by adding “Housing” as a standing item to the work of the Priorities and Finance Committee, thereby elevating housing from its present status as an intergovernmental policy issue to an actual priority within the City of Calgary.

This broadened focus would enable the City of Calgary to begin work on high-impact initiatives such as:

- » Creating an interactive platform that measures the effectiveness of affordable housing incentives, and demonstrating how these incentives balance policy and profitability needs. This platform could build on the Housing Development Dashboard created by the Turner Centre for Housing at UC Berkeley.
- » Assessing regulatory variables like approval times, density, parking, mixed uses and discretionary approvals to create mutually beneficial housing outcomes.
- » Encouragement of mixed tenure housing opportunities, ranging from basic rental and ownership to housing cooperatives and perpetually affordable housing projects.
- » Working with local financial institutions to develop a methodology around credit-worthiness for consumers that goes beyond the traditional beacon score assessment which does not serve newcomers or those without established credit. Similarly, propose new methods of risk assessment for affordable housing providers to deliver housing security along the continuum.

This new approach will create value for Calgarians by filling gaps in current practices, recognizing the variety of Calgarians' housing needs, and focusing on how cost and red tape for new housing can be reduced. Through a holistic approach and improved coordination of existing resources, we can achieve better results for our citizens.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

While "Housing First" has become a successful approach, it only works when wraparound services and supports are available to the people served. These services include but are not limited to counselling, healthcare, addictions treatment and employment training. A collaborative model of funding wraparound services is needed to ensure they can be provided sustainably. This also demonstrates the interconnectedness of public, private and finance sectors in delivering housing security.

The City of Calgary must also better support Indigenous-led efforts to address homelessness. Research suggests that approaches informed by Indigenous worldviews, including elder-led service delivery, are most effective at addressing homelessness within these communities.

The City must also advocate to ensure that affordable housing programs offered by other orders of government are equitable and effective. One example is calling for the elimination of ethnocentric housing suitability requirements under *Alberta's Social Housing Accommodation Regulation*, where rules around children's gender and sleeping accommodations create barriers. Another example is the need for transition to housing benefits that are distributed directly to people in need instead of attached to units.