

# Response to NWT HC Housing Survey

January 2017

**Alternatives North** (AN) is a social justice coalition based in Yellowknife including members from labour, church, environmental, anti-poverty and women's groups. This submission provides input into the NWT Housing Corporation's housing survey by answering many of the questions posed along with added comments and links.

Not all questions are answered but the original numbering of the questions from the survey is retained to make tracking easier.

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## Housing - General Community Needs

- 7. In your view, how have housing conditions (affordability, living conditions, availability, selection, etc.) changed in your community over the past 4 years.*

AN response: The problems with housing extend beyond the last 4 years. The NWT and its peoples have suffered from the downturn in the economy related to the boom and bust of resource extraction. According to NWT statistics (2014), of the 14,729 households, 2,919 are in core need, indicating a problem with affordability (requiring more than 30% of total household income), adequacy, and suitability. According to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM), the federal government provides subsidies for 2,350 households across the NWT (at a total cost of \$25 million annually) through federal social housing agreements. The percentage of home owners has steadily decreased since 2000 (53.2% to 51.4%). The average home price in Canada has increased 67% since 2000 but the average household income only 13%. This is a gap that cannot be overcome by the lower mortgage rates.

There has also been a significant decline in the availability of low cost rental units across Canada. There was a loss of 850,000 units with rent less than \$800 per month between 2001 and 2011. Lack of access to low cost rental units results in renters paying more than the CMHC recommended 30% of total household income

In the case of Yellowknife, there is a growing number of homeless people as evidenced in the appendix of the report of Homelessness in Yellowknife Community Partnership (HYCP) forum (April 26-27, 2016) which stated: "Homelessness in Yellowknife appears to be increasingly protracted, multi-generational and sharing more characteristics with 'southern' communities," and includes the "emergence of younger adults and youth cohorts that are more vulnerable to protracted and dangerous living."

Furthermore, the cost of housing in Yellowknife makes ownership very difficult for young couples, people living on a single income, new workers or low income families. Several new apartment buildings have been built, some as condominiums, but there is no requirement that any units be

designated as low cost rental. The existing low cost rental units are old and deteriorating despite renovations in some.

8. *How would you rate the job the NWT Housing Corporation has done?*

AN response: Two examples of innovation are the Housing First program in Yellowknife and the recently introduced Shelter Enhancement Fund that has resulted in higher safety standards and more supportive living. The NWT HC offers several other good programs but there are shortcomings that need to be addressed. For example, the Homelessness Assistance Fund only allows one time funding but homelessness tends to be a revolving problem and ongoing support is required. All of the Small Communities Homelessness projects presented on the website address the issue of lack of food but do not address the issue of lack of stable housing. The Northern Pathways to Housing is a good initiative but it is limited because it only offers transitional housing. It should be part of a continuum approach including a Housing First program with wrap around services.

An ongoing dilemma is that despite a rent scale for public housing that allows clients to pay a lower percentage of income than the recommended 25%, many clients still end up with rental arrears that lead to their eviction. There are two types of debts that arise, one is from unpaid rent but the other is from damages to housing. The issue of debts related to housing must consider that many of public housing units are old and in need of repair to begin with. A better system would be to separate these two debts and offer a client-centred pay back system.

Problems individuals experience being able to maintain residence in housing stem from lack of employment, multi-generational trauma, low graduation rates, lack of affordable child care and high rates of addictions. Housing provision cannot function as a silo but needs to consider other factors and work with other departments. All levels of government need to be involved. This is what AN means when it refers to “wrap around services.”

The number of programs makes it difficult for people and organizations to know where to start. A more proactive communication of the programs would be useful, as would greater access to local housing agencies or the creation of a housing navigator position as a resource for accessing programs.

Ultimately, the biggest issue is that the NWT HC functions on a bottom line business model as opposed to seeing itself as the vital social agency that it should be. Adopting the vision of it being a social agency would allow more flexibility and the introduction of a case management approach with the goal of housing for everyone.

9. *What types of housing programs does your community need most?*

|                  |           |   |   |   |
|------------------|-----------|---|---|---|
| Homeless support |           |   |   |   |
| <b>x1</b>        | 2         | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Public housing   |           |   |   |   |
| <b>x1</b>        | 2         | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Rent-to-own      |           |   |   |   |
| 1                | <b>x2</b> | 3 | 4 | 5 |

|                        |            |   |           |   |
|------------------------|------------|---|-----------|---|
| Market rental housing  |            |   |           |   |
| 1                      | 2          | 3 | <b>x4</b> | 5 |
| Homeownership repair   |            |   |           |   |
| 1                      | <b>x2</b>  | 3 | 4         | 5 |
| Homeownership purchase |            |   |           |   |
| 1                      | <b>x 2</b> | 3 | 4         | 5 |

AN comment: There are various measures that the GNWT needs to consider. To date, it has not taken a lead on rent control and yet, this issue is a common and consistent request from NGOs and people living in poverty. As noted above, public housing is very important in the NWT but many clients accumulate rental arrears. Several types of programs exist elsewhere that would help with self-sufficiency and potential home ownership. These include rent being put into an incentive account for home ownership, linking social housing to self-sufficiency activities based on client's choice, sponsor-based housing vouchers where a non-profit organization that works with people who are homeless administers a number of voucher functions on behalf of public housing or better subsidies for first time home owners and low interest loans for home ownership. There has been a recent interest in community built homes reported in the media (e.g. Deline) and initiatives like Habitat for Humanity.

To increase the rental market, the FCM is calling for a Rental Incentive Tax Credit that would credit property owners for selling affordable units to eligible non-profit agencies including municipalities. This would help to preserve low cost rental options. Any new housing initiatives or major repairs to housing units should be linked with building community capacity to carry on these tasks. For starters, basic carpentry and home maintenance skills should be taught in high school to students of both genders.

10. *Who most needs housing programs in your community?*

|                           |   |   |   |   |
|---------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Single people             |   |   |   |   |
| 1                         | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Couples                   |   |   |   |   |
| 1                         | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Families with children    |   |   |   |   |
| 1                         | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Elders                    |   |   |   |   |
| 1                         | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Persons with Disabilities |   |   |   |   |
| 1                         | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

AN comment: It is difficult, maybe even inappropriate, to rate one group over another (to pit one against another), as every person deserves a home. One approach to consider is setting an income limit for people in social housing, meaning that people who earn over a certain amount are no longer eligible for social housing. (They should still be eligible for programs to assist with rent and work towards home ownership.) This may alleviate the long waiting lists of people who are in greater need and have fewer choices.

## Support for Aboriginal Governments and Cultural Housing

11. *Aboriginal governments may be interested in delivering social housing. How can the NWT HC support Aboriginal governments in meeting their goals for providing social housing?*

*By sharing knowledge*

**x1**      2      3      4      5

*Through operating agreements to manage current NWT HC programming*

1      2      3      **x4**      5

*By selling NWT HC units to Aboriginal governments*

1      2      3      **x4**      5

*By providing incentives to developers*

1      2      3      4      5

AN comment: Signing operating agreements and selling current units sounds a lot like downloading the problems of housing to Aboriginal governments. Instead, the focus should be on helping Aboriginal governments build new units heated with biomass and according to cultural principles of multi-generational housing. Housing projects should focus on building community capacity and skills in construction and home maintenance. In addition to creating skills, housing construction is an important economic driver. According to the FCM, the housing sector makes up 20 % of Canada's Gross Domestic Product (this includes both rental and construction).

The fourth question was not answered as we are not sure who the "developers" are. If the intent was that developers would be Aboriginal corporations, it could be an important and worthwhile approach.

In some communities, NGOs could play a role, especially in the provision of low cost housing supported by tax incentives or through the use of sponsor based vouchers. This does not mean transferring old stock housing to the NGOs as this would be financially non-viable for them to absorb.

12. *What traditional features would you like to see added to the design of housing units?*

Gathering spaces in multi-residential buildings

**x1**      2      3      4      5

Workspaces for crafts and/or butchering

**x1**      2      3      4      5

Larger home designs for multigenerational families

**x1**      2      3      4      5

Open floor plans

1      2      **x3**      4      5

Outbuildings (e.g. sheds, smokehouses, etc.)

AN response: A guiding principle should be creating more inclusivity in housing and helping to build better neighbourhoods and stronger communities. Some appropriate measures would be space for gardens and playgrounds. It is not ideal to build a large number of social housing units together as it creates a ghetto-like environment. A better approach is to scatter low income housing in small groupings across mixed income neighbourhoods. The consistent use of universal accessibility guidelines would help house elders as they age and integrate people with disabilities by minimizing the distinction between “normal housing” and “accessible housing”. If all public housing were accessible there would be less segregation and less tension over access to accessible housing.

### Energy Efficiency

13. *The NWT HC asks residents to use energy efficient products and to conserve energy. How should the NWT HC help with this?*

Provide a utility rebate program

**x1**      2      3      4      5

Educate people on how to conserve energy

**x1**      2      3      4      5

Provide more funding for an energy-retrofit program for homeowners to complement existing programming

**x1**      2      3      4      5

AN response: Though energy efficiency measures are good, it is more important to develop and implement a “green building guide” for new social housing based on use of renewable and local energy for heating as the cost savings are greater and will contribute more to decreasing greenhouse gas emissions. Specifically, this would include using biomass to heat homes. Returning to the use of wood heated homes using pellets or wood chips would actually be a progressive step.

District or neighbourhood heating or co-generation systems based on wood or pellet boilers should be utilised.

The total cost of rent by tenants could be more linked to utility rates encouraging tenants to use less energy and save money. It should not result in increased rent but to an ability to save costs.

### Homelessness

Homelessness is defined as not having stable, permanent and appropriate housing

14. *What can the government do to help community members who are homeless?*

Housing First (independent housing with supports)

|                                     |           |           |   |   |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|---|---|
| <b>x1</b>                           | 2         | 3         | 4 | 5 |
| Build or support emergency shelters |           |           |   |   |
| 1                                   | 2         | <b>3x</b> | 4 | 5 |
| More public housing                 |           |           |   |   |
| 1                                   | <b>x2</b> | 3         | 4 | 5 |

AN response: Housing First, coupled with supportive services possibly based on a harm reduction model, is currently considered to be the most effective and least expensive measure for dealing with homelessness, especially for the chronically homeless. It is idealistic to think that all people with complex histories and long term addictions are going to suddenly recover and not require ongoing services when given a home. Housing First is part of moving away from a judgmental approach to social services and recognizing the chronic nature of some people's conditions. However, to be successful the Housing First approach requires the availability of low cost rental units and ongoing funding and support programmes. As previously stated, the funding should come from all levels of government.

When possible the building of life skills is important. As noted in the HYCP forum appendix:

“The life skills programs that the GNWT had implemented in the 1980s were very effective and should be re-established through partner organizations. These most basic life skills and vocational type training are used by some NGOs but there is potential to expand the reach to others who would typically not participate.”

A different approach needs to be taken to help the increasing number of youth get out of a vicious cycle of living on the street or “couch surfing”. As noted in the HYCP forum report, we need to “target the younger homeless population for support and additional education before they become trapped in the street culture.” Youth between the age of 20 and 30 years often present with some evidence of mental health and addiction problems. There are not enough services targeting this group to help stop their downward slide. A more established outreach program with education and counselling is urgent or we create a context that will push these youth into lifelong homelessness.

5. *What can communities do to help their homeless community members?*

AN response: There is an ongoing need for community members to be involved in offering solutions (e.g. Habitat for Humanity) and a particular role for the business community that needs to be further developed. The Inuvik business community has shown good initiative by creating the warming shelter there. More investment in the rental market is also required with some dedicated units for low cost rental.

16. *Besides housing, what other help do community members who are homeless need?*

|                                 |           |           |           |   |   |
|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|---|---|
| Addictions                      | <b>1x</b> | 2         | 3         | 4 | 5 |
| Mental health                   | <b>1x</b> | 2         | 3         | 4 | 5 |
| Physical health                 | 1         | <b>2x</b> | 3         | 4 | 5 |
| Peer support                    | 1         | <b>2x</b> | 3         | 4 | 5 |
| Career development and training | 1         | 2         | <b>3x</b> | 4 | 5 |
| Financial management course     | 1         | 2         | <b>3x</b> | 4 | 5 |
| Developing a housing plan       | 1         | <b>2x</b> | 3         | 4 | 5 |
| Attending follow-up counselling | 1         | <b>2x</b> | 3         | 4 | 5 |

AN response: For chronically homeless people with addiction problems, Housing First with a managed alcohol program and safe injection site program in Yellowknife would help to decrease danger, hospital admissions, and ultimately, public costs. For other populations with addictions, better access to treatment is urgently required. As mentioned, an aggressive approach directed at youth needs to be developed and implemented. However, it is important not to put all the emphasis for the cause of the problem on the individual as lack of affordable housing and employment that does not pay a living wage continues to play a key and causal role.

### Supportive/Transitional Housing

Supportive or transitional housing bridges the gap between homelessness or emergency shelter use and permanent housing.

*It may include addictions support, mental health support, career development and other life skills training.*

*For example, in recent years, the NWT HC has supported two transitional housing projects in Yellowknife:*

- *Bailey House – 32 units for men – NWT HC contribution: \$1.8 million*
- *Lynn’s Place – 18 suites for women and women with children – NWT HC contribution: \$2.3 million*

Some examples of supportive housing are Bailey House and Lynn’s Place in Yellowknife.

18. *Is supportive housing needed in your community?*

- No
- Yes x

19. *If supportive units are needed in your community, how should they be developed?*

|   |   |           |   |   |  |
|---|---|-----------|---|---|--|
| Use space in existing shelters                  |   |           |   |   |  |
| <b>x1</b>                                       | 2 | 3         | 4 | 5 |  |
| Build a supportive housing building             |   |           |   |   |  |
| 1   | 2 | <b>3x</b> | 4 | 5 |  |
| Use market rentals for supportive housing       |   |           |   |   |  |
| <b>1x</b>                                       | 2 | 3         | 4 | 5 |  |
| Support Aboriginal governments to develop units |   |           |   |   |  |
| <b>1x</b>                                       | 2 | 3         | 4 | 5 |  |

AN response: The specific approach in any given situation should be determined by consultation with the local community. The answer will be different for different locations and for different populations. Supportive living for people with mental health problems can help increase safety as well as help develop life skills. All will require financial support and capacity building.

## Rental Housing

Nearly 1 in 6 households (2,400 units) in the NWT live in subsidized public housing. In public housing, tenants pay between 4% and 19% of their household income toward rent.

Across Canada, the standard for public housing rent is 25% of overall household income, plus full power costs. NWT Public Housing tenants pay less for power than the standard rate.

Federal funding is less and less every year and will end completely by 2038. This will affect the GNWT's ability to provide public housing. To keep the public housing program going, which includes maintenance, operating and administrative costs, more annual core funding is needed.

**On decreasing federal funding:** AN believes northern governments need to lobby more strongly against the federal government's plan to get out of housing. Divestment of housing involvement is a political decision that can be changed. In the face of provincial/territorial governments not having the fiscal capacity to assume the costs of housing without the proper support of the federal government, it is essential to return to our historical approach of collaboration by all levels of government. If the federal government proceeds regardless, any additional funds need to be dedicated to housing initiatives.

21. *Federal funding for public housing is shrinking every year. The NWT Housing Corporation has to look at ways to keep the program going. In what ways could the NWT Housing Corporation increase revenue or cut costs to support the public housing Program.*

Decrease the number of public housing units

1    2    3    **x 4**    5

Raise rents in public housing

1    2    3    4    **5x**

Have public housing tenants pay for utilities

1    **2x**    3    4    5

Make housing units more energy-efficient.

1    **2x**    3    4    5

Raise rents of the NWT HC market rentals

1    2    3    **4x**    5

AN response: Any empty homes owned by government should be used for public housing prior to new construction. Many homes will require repairs (some buildings are beyond this and need to be demolished). Inclusion of low income housing should be mandated in any major housing construction project, including apartment buildings. In addition, it would be appropriate to charge tenants more for utilities and less for rent, as this would encourage energy conservation practices. Total costs should not be increased with this change. As previously stated, tax incentives to support low cost rental units would be helpful to decrease the number of people living in public housing.

*22. How can communities use surplus public housing (units that are no longer suitable for social housing programming)?*

Warming shelter

1    2    **3x**    4    5

Soup kitchen

1    2    **3x**    4    5

Daycare

1    2    3    4    **5 x**

Library

1    2    **3x**    4    5

AN response: Most of these measures would require retrofitting houses. Some units are beyond repair and need to be demolished. The first priority should be to create enough housing for people in a community. Early childhood programs have high standards that would not be met in used housing.

*23. What kind of training could help public housing tenants move towards living independently, without government help?*

Budgeting

1    2    **3x**    4    5

|                    |           |   |           |   |   |
|--------------------|-----------|---|-----------|---|---|
| Home maintenance   | <b>1x</b> | 2 | 3         | 4 | 5 |
| Home purchase      | 1         | 2 | <b>3x</b> | 4 | 5 |
| Credit counselling | <b>1x</b> | 2 | 3         | 4 | 5 |

AN response: Home maintenance and determining a strategy for possible home ownership could help build capacity. Developing “budgeting skills” for people on income support is questionable as the income levels are inadequate to start with. Certainly, in the area of nutrition, limited funds lead to lower quality food. As previously stated, it is essential not to put “all the blame” on individuals. This is a system wide problem that would be greatly improved with the introduction of a basic income guarantee that takes a less punitive approach to providing basic needs and dedicates more public funds to sustaining families. Again, greater life skills orientation in education would help.

24. *Do you have any further comments or solutions around public housing?*

AN response: Integrating space for universal child care into housing programs and neighbourhoods would be a great improvement.

25. *In small communities, important services and programs are being affected by the lack of housing options. To help change this, the NWT HC is building more housing units at market prices. The NWT HC currently operates 151 market rental units. More units are under development.*

*Do you have any comments or solutions around market housing?*

AN response: Mixed income communities with dedicated supportive living units are a valid approach. Other financing ideas suggested include rent being put into an incentive account for home ownership, linking social housing to self-sufficiency activities based on client’s choice, sponsor-based housing vouchers, better grants for first time home owners and low interest loans for home ownership. Also, the tax incentive for low cost rentals would help meet this need.

## Homeownership

In smaller NWT communities, buying a home can be risky because it may be difficult to resell. Other people may find it difficult to buy a home because they have trouble getting bank financing for mortgages and home insurance.

26. *What services could help a renter buy their first home?*

Rent-to-own program

|                                   |   |   |           |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|-----------|---|
| <b>x1</b>                         | 2 | 3 | 4         | 5 |
| Down payment assistance           |   |   |           |   |
| <b>x1</b>                         | 2 | 3 | 4         | 5 |
| Public housing purchase incentive |   |   |           |   |
| 1                                 | 2 | 3 | <b>x4</b> | 5 |

AN response: One option would be for NWT HC to buy back units when a home owner wants to leave and can't sell a home that is still in good condition. A grant for first time home owners is available but needs to be assessed for adequacy. Any loan programs need to have a "client centred" pay back schedule that allows the new owner to pay back as possible and not based on predetermined amounts. Matching funds for rent put into savings account for home ownership would be a very determined action to take.

27. *Are there other homeownership options that should be considered?*

|                            |   |   |   |   |
|----------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Cooperatives               |   |   |   |   |
| <b>x1</b>                  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Tiny houses                |   |   |   |   |
| <b>x1</b>                  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Volunteer (in-kind) labour |   |   |   |   |
| <b>x1</b>                  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

AN response: Not enough attention is given to different approaches to housing. Yellowknife has good examples of cooperative housing projects and the interest level in tiny homes is rising but facing many administrative and legislative barriers. Different sized lots and zoning to allow granny suites would help. A former program called the Home Ownership Program provided home building material packages and the person/community organized to build the house(s). This program had good results and should be repeated, especially as it helped to build community capacity.

28. *What kind of training or courses could help renters become homeowners?*

|                    |           |           |   |   |
|--------------------|-----------|-----------|---|---|
| Budgeting          |           |           |   |   |
| 1                  | 2         | <b>x3</b> | 4 | 5 |
| Home maintenance   |           |           |   |   |
| <b>x1</b>          | 2         | 3         | 4 | 5 |
| Home purchase      |           |           |   |   |
| 1                  | 2         | <b>x3</b> | 4 | 5 |
| Credit counselling |           |           |   |   |
| 1                  | <b>x2</b> | 3         | 4 | 5 |
| Home financing     |           |           |   |   |
| 1                  | 2         | <b>x3</b> | 4 | 5 |

AN response: The issue with the above list is that it places a lot of onus on problems with the individual without recognizing the context. The ability to “budget” with inadequate funds is a social problem not an individual one. Credit counselling, however, is important because of the rise in the number of aggressive loan companies with their “instant cash” programs. The high cost of homes in the NWT frequently makes the idea of home ownership impossible.

*30. What kinds of repairs are needed on your home?*

AN response: On the issue of home repairs, the common practice is to minimise requirements and give contracts to the lowest bidder. Too often this can result in poorer quality work that leads to other problems like energy inefficiency and invasion by pests. As the current stock of public housing is aging, quality repairs will help extend their useful life and offer better quality of life to tenants.

*31. Do you have any further comments or solutions around home repair?*

AN response: Most communities do not have the capacity to do basic home maintenance resulting in the need to bring in tradespeople to do the work. Ultimately this contributes to the decline of public housing and community infrastructure and a disempowerment of community members. Any housing project should seek to address this longstanding problem.

## Final Comments

*32. Do you have any other comments or suggestions that you would like the NWT HC to consider during our review of all policies and programs?*

AN response: As shown by the work of the anti-poverty strategy, many factors contribute to poverty and related housing and homelessness problems. At several of the anti-poverty roundtables, contributors affirmed the need to continue to offer healing programs that come from and respect peoples’ heritage and culture. This underlying foundation needs to be addressed in concert with initiatives to improve the housing situation. As previously stated, housing cannot be a silo operation and needs to be integrated into an overall effort to reduce poverty and the obstacles it presents.