



Sustaining and Growing the Supportive Housing System in Ontario

AMO Submission to Provincial Supportive Housing Consultation

January 30, 2023

Introduction

AMO commends the government's efforts to fix what needs fixing through various housing initiatives and welcomes the opportunity to respond to the provincial supportive housing consultation. Municipal governments and District Social Administration Boards share an interest in achieving the same goals.

Supportive housing is an essential component of the housing continuum that meets the unique needs of people to maintain successful tenancies. We will not effectively address homelessness without growing the system. Nor will we address the challenge of rising mental health and addictions, including alcoholism and the opioid overdose emergency, that is taking a devastating toll on people and communities across Ontario. Vulnerable people, including seniors and persons with disabilities, rely on the system. There are too many individuals living in inadequate housing or shelters for long-stays without the supports that they need.

Supportive housing is also integral to the success of other provincial initiatives such as Social Assistance Renewal with a municipal service manager focus on improving life stability outcomes for people on their pathway to employment. People need to be able to navigate the system, get the housing they need, and connect to other social and health services. It can also help alleviate hallway health care by easing pressure on emergency health services and hospital emergency departments.

There is a role for the province, as system steward across the province, to facilitate growth in the system, improve access, and to connect the health and housing systems for the benefits of tenants. This will require an integrated 'whole of government' approach'. Government-to-government consultation and joint planning are essential for the province to achieve the sought-after outcomes. Municipal service managers have the expertise and the on the ground knowledge, from both the housing and homelessness service systems, to inform provincial direction.

Local Solutions

1. What kinds of solutions are working on the ground to address issues related to supportive housing (e.g., lack of supply, lack of local and system level coordination, barriers to cross-sector partnerships)?

Much has happened locally across Ontario to address issues related to supportive housing. Municipal service managers across the province are well positioned to provide examples of these solutions should the province wish to collect, document, and disseminate promising practices that could be scaled up and across the province. This is an exercise worth doing and the province is encouraged to do so. Local solution examples can help inform policy and funding changes at the provincial level to address system-wide issues.

2. Are there unique challenges or opportunities within this region that we should be aware of as we continue our work on improving supportive housing in Ontario? For example, through efforts to strengthen local coordination across sectors, helping connect people to the right services without having to tell their stories multiple times, etc.

The primary challenge in Ontario is the lack of supply, however, we do not have good data to demonstrate the need. According to a report released in 2017, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic,

the estimated need for more units just for people with mental health and addictions was approximately 33, 000.¹

However, we do not have a provincially generated number based on wait lists to build the business case to grow the system on an evidence informed basis. Nor do we have economic impact or Return-on-Investment (ROI) data that demonstrates the savings we know that occur to other provincial systems such as health, police, and justice. The government is encouraged to complete the Cost Avoidance Study and publicly release the report so that it can inform evidence-based growth of the supportive housing system. Reporting should aim to provide consolidated information on the demand for supportive housing. The province should set targets and measure success against these aspirations.

A supportive housing access system should meet the needs of people, housing providers, and service system managers. They must be responsive to diverse populations. A lack of coordinated access systems for people across Ontario remains a problem. Improving access through a more coordinated access system should help people in need of supportive housing and has the potential to simplify administration. There is an opportunity to pilot and test new approaches that will benefit tenants. However, a 'one size fits all approach' without local flexibility is not the answer. This needs to be explored further with municipal service managers.

There are challenges with a fragmented system delivered by three ministries, which is not well coordinated and integrated centrally by government. This plays out on the ground in communities. It means service manager interaction with three different ministries on supportive housing administration. This makes service system management planning difficult. A suggestion is to establish a one-window approach between municipal service managers and the province for accessing funding and tracking results. This could be done through the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. More discussion about how to improve effectiveness is needed. There is an opportunity to expand the scope of 'government to government' consultations through a strategic planning table with the three provincial ministries and service managers to determine the best way forward to achieve this outcome.

Access to supportive housing is uneven throughout the province. It is more difficult to access in rural and northern areas, as the housing is most often located in regional urban centres. This causes residents in need to leave their home communities or continue living in precarious housing situations without the services that they need. Some service managers have reported difficulty in accessing capital funding through the federal Rapid Housing Initiative (RHI), especially in rural and northern Ontario. The reasons for this must be examined further and brought to the federal government's attention. This could be done collectively through an inter-governmental mechanism by reconvening the National Housing Strategy Trilateral Coordination Forum with participation by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH), the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), and municipal service manager representatives.

Another challenge is that community housing in many cases has become de facto supportive housing, most often without the provision of adequate independent living and health supports. This type of housing was never designed for this purpose. At the same time, as attention is paid

¹ Wellesley Institute, Canadian Mental Health Association - Toronto, & Addictions & Mental Health Ontario. (2017). [Supportive Housing in Ontario: Estimating the Need.](#)

to supportive housing, there must be better connections to the health and mental health and addictions system for residents of community housing. There needs to be better integration of municipal human and provincial health care services provided by the Ontario Health Teams.

Working Together

1. Please share with us how you are working with local partners to deliver supportive housing in your community.

Municipalities and DSSABS are forging new and creative solutions through local community partnerships, including with Indigenous Peoples' partners. More of this innovation is needed. What is lacking is a good inventory and initiatives to collect and disseminate promising practices so that service managers can learn from one another.

2. Are there additional areas that we can be working on together – across governments, ministries, and with all of you to improve supportive housing?

Yes. There is also confusion about who is doing what and when, which does not result in effective management across the system from all the parties involved. For example, various housing subsidies are administered by service managers, the Ministry of Health and in some cases local Public Health Units.

More discussion is needed on how to manage this most effectively from a systems perspective including the potential benefit of municipal service managers administering all housing subsidies. Again, there is an opportunity to explore this further by expanding the scope of 'government to government' consultations through a strategic planning table with the three provincial ministries and municipal service managers.

3. What can the province do to support your efforts in working together to continue to deliver supportive housing in your community and support clients?

Most importantly, the province must work with the municipal sector to build the business case to grow the system. Municipal governments and District Social Services Administration Boards (DSSABs) are doing their part, albeit aided by provincial and federal support, but also contributing their own funds from the property tax levy. They are filling in the gaps where other funding programs are insufficient.

AMO has called for the creation of new supportive housing units based on a consolidated assessment of need in Ontario. It is near impossible to grow supply in a meaningful way without new government investments.

The provincial Social Services Relief Fund (SSRF) was instrumental in enabling local solutions through the creation of new supportive housing, as is the federal Rapid Housing Initiative (RHI). These were significant and critical investments by government, at the right time to mitigate the worst impact of the pandemic on vulnerable people.

However, continued funding, including both capital and sustainable operational funding for supports is still needed for the success and maintenance of supportive housing to address homelessness. The federal government needs to be encouraged to continue to scale up the RHI

with successive phases of capital funding. As the SSRF has ended, another solution is required immediately including increased base funding for the Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP) through the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Flexibility should be afforded as much as possible to meet local need and circumstance. It is important that not all support funding be tied necessarily to new units. There are many existing options for which supports will help people secure and maintain successful tenancies.

Sustained and escalating investments from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services for their programs, including for seniors and people with developmental disabilities, is needed as well. A continuing effort by all will further the goal of preventing and reducing, and ultimately ending homelessness.

Along with funding, the provincial government should consider land donations as a contribution to facilitate new supportive housing and other forms of affordable housing. There should be flexibility with the option to create mixed used housing buildings. The province should also build on the synergies of housing co-development opportunities, including with the long-term care sector (e.g., campuses of care, adapting older long-term care homes slated for redevelopment for supportive housing rather than demolition). The government should talk further about this idea with AdvantAge Ontario, the association representing municipal and non-profit long-term care homes and seniors housing. It would help to efficiently add supply and leverage existing resources in other sectors. This is needed on an urgent basis as the window of opportunity exists now before redevelopment decisions are made to demolish the buildings and/or sell the land.

The government must also engage with Indigenous Peoples' partners to further culturally respectful and inclusive supportive housing options. This should include advocacy to the federal government to accelerate the development and implementation of an Indigenous-led urban and rural Indigenous housing strategy with adequate funding including for supportive housing.

Further, better connections are required between the housing system as a whole and the health care and mental health and addictions system, and independent living (life skills) support system. This includes ensuring that there are sufficient health care providers available to provide services to those in housing. The province needs to recalibrate its system stewardship role to include coordinating and bringing the systems together in an integrated manner. Ontario Health Teams need to play a role with direction from the Ontario Health Agency. As well, people need system navigators to help access appropriate services effectively.

It is critically important to work collaboratively together to achieve the shared goals and achieve better outcomes for people and communities. Government-to-government consultation on a strategic and system planning level is essential to getting the job done right by leveraging the expertise, experience, and knowledge of municipal service managers. Attention is required to program design and ensure that application processes and timelines help support the objectives of what we are trying to achieve.

Lastly, the federal government must also be encouraged to do its part with an effective design of its capital grant and financing programs. To do this with one provincial and municipal voice, it is also recommended that National Housing Strategy Trilateral Coordination Forum, under the bilateral agreement, is reconvened with participation by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH), the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) and municipal service manager representatives.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into this consultation. Further information or questions about this submission can be directed to Michael Jacek, Senior Advisor for Human and Health Services, by email to mjacek@amo.on.ca.