

Organization Name: District of Nipissing Social Services Administration Board (DNSSAB)

Submission Date: April 29, 2022

Question 1: What are the key barriers impacting your municipality in meeting its housing needs that may be unique to northern and rural communities?

Lack of Rental Housing

The Nipissing District experiences a lack of supply related to purpose-built non-senior 1-bedroom RGI units with no new projects like this being built in decades. Although this is likely not unique to Nipissing, it has been noted to be our greatest need. Over the last decade, there have been efforts to increase the number of affordable market-rent 1-bedroom units, however, these are not RGI, which is the highest level of affordability. The DNSSAB has endeavored to provide rent supplement funding to subsidize 1-bedroom units, though these efforts have been limited because available rent supplements are municipally funded.

To continue, due to the lack of rental housing in municipalities outside of North Bay, West Nipissing (Sturgeon Falls), and Mattawa, the majority of households in rural municipalities are homeowners. This has resulted in high demand for home renovation funding as low-income homeowners struggle with the costs associated with home repairs. Available funding for the Ontario Renovates program has been insufficient to meet the local demand for home renovations and repairs.

During the pandemic, northern and rural communities have experienced a dramatic increase of people moving to the district from urban areas in southern Ontario to purchase homes in northern and rural locations. Residences that were previously occupied by renters have been sold to homebuyers at alarming rates which have resulted in large numbers of renters in our area being evicted. The competition to buy and secure a house in northern and rural areas also resulted in the average cost of homes in our area increasing by approximately 28.6% from January 2020 to January 2021, making homeownership even more unaffordable and also consequently increasing the cost of rent for newly purchased units.

Further to this, with many employment opportunities allowing for remote work, households have chosen to relocate from urban areas to northern and rural areas which have significantly driven up home and rental prices in the Nipissing District. Also of note, the influx of remote workers and real estate speculators from large urban areas compound the problem as it is creating big-city housing pricing without the big-city household incomes.

See: <https://www.nugget.ca/news/supply-shortage-driving-house-price-gains#:~:text=The%20North%20Bay%20board%20says,the%20same%20month%20in%202020.>

Mental Health and Addictions

Growing concerns have been noted with regard to mental health and addictions in the Nipissing District. Between 2016 and 2020, opioid-related Emergency Department visits increased by 616% in the North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit region. This is the second-largest increase in Northern Ontario. Opioid-related deaths in 2020 compared to 2019 increased by 168% in the North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit region. Again, this is the second-largest increase in Northern Ontario.

The 2020 and 2021 homelessness counts held in our district have shown that upwards of 70%+ of the homeless population experiences substance use and live with ongoing mental health concerns. These individuals have also been noted to use a large portion of the available resources in the District (police, EMS, hospital, emergency). This is compounded further by the lack of available housing units for this population and the hesitancy of private market landlords to rent to these individuals without the necessary support services attached to the tenancy. Further mental health and addiction support in the Nipissing District is necessary to reduce homelessness and further ensure successful housing efforts.

Regional Service Hub

The City of North Bay makes up 62% of the District's population and is a regional service hub. Notable services include the North Bay Regional Health Centre, which provides acute care services to North Bay and its surrounding communities including specialized mental health services to all of northeast Ontario, and the North Bay Jail. In some cases, individuals that came from outside of the district for treatment/services and have been discharged from the hospital or jail end up staying in North Bay, which places further pressure on shelters and outreach services.

Communities within the District and outside of North Bay also do not have access to public transportation within their communities resulting in fewer employment options, reduced access to supports and services, and difficulty obtaining necessities (ie: groceries). Consistent access to affordable and reliable transportation throughout the district along with access to other necessary human services would promote individuals to try to find housing within their own community rather than only in the urban hubs of the district.

Question 2: What kind of flexibility is needed to address housing needs in your municipality?

Construction Deadlines & Funding

The availability of construction materials and available contractors has affected how quickly a housing project can be completed and occupied. In addition to this, these factors also determine whether contractors are willing to take on additional jobs because they too are also spread quite thin. The construction season in the north is also generally shorter in comparison to central and southern Ontario making tight ministerial deadlines a reason that contractors will turn larger projects down in the north or are unable to complete the project within the timeline provided. As such, program construction deadlines should allow for some flexibility in northern and rural communities.

The overall cost for construction materials and labor is higher in Northern Ontario. For instance, the transportation of materials to the north has resulted in higher construction costs overall, and additional funding for new housing must take this into account and provide flexibility on per-unit funding thresholds.

Providing northern and rural area service managers with additional flexible funding and or grants to acquire or build new housing, would allow for additions to the District's current stock. Specifying that this funding would be used for adaptive re-use of pre-existing government/publicly owned buildings (parcels of land, schools, hotels, gov't buildings, etc.) means that affordable housing can be built for a variety of household sizes and the rental would not be based on a specific age. This type of acquisition/funding could assist with costs associated with a campus model which could include transitional housing with the potential of including a harm reduction framework.

This would also provide flexibility and options so individuals on the BNL with the highest priority/acuity could be eligible for transitional housing and could be housed with transitional supports in place. This would mean housing the more complex and vulnerable individuals by meeting them where they are, and would result in a large cost saving to taxpayers and would have a positive impact on resources here locally in the Nipissing District.

Program Funding Paired with Operating Funding

Housing and homelessness funding programs often do not include the provision of ongoing operating costs. The operating costs tend to fall on the member municipalities. The need for transitional and supportive housing

was expressed in the consultation for Nipissing's 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan, however, it is a major barrier for municipalities who have to carry the operating costs once occupied. Support funding could also be tied to rent supplements. For example, one support position could be tied to a specific number of rent supplement units. This would assist in promoting successful tenancies.

Municipalities are not responsible for funding health care and the success of community housing programs for vulnerable individuals with mental health and addictions (The 2020 and 2021 homelessness counts held in our district have shown that upwards of 70%+ of the homeless population experiences substance use and live with ongoing mental health concerns.) is contingent on wrap-around health supports onsite. Health funding in housing for the vulnerable homeless is a growing fundamental gap in the system given the rise in mental health and addictions. Specific funding for supports to housing and homelessness housing programs is a critical concern and need for Ministry of Health support.

Administration Fees

New and existing programs should consider a flexible administration fee allocation. Administration fees are critical to ensuring that programs are delivered effectively and efficiently while meeting the associated reporting demands. Program funding allocations tend to be smaller in Northern Ontario, therefore typical administration fees between 5-10% do not result in sufficient funding for staffing.

Question 3: What potential tools or policies could the government consider to address housing needs in your municipality while balancing other provincial priorities?

Sustainable Funding & Acquisitions

Long-term (ideally permanent) funding for operating costs associated with transitional and supportive affordable housing projects is required. Often affordable housing funding is explicitly for capital work and does not include operating funding. This makes it challenging to build supportive and transitional housing as municipalities are often called upon to fund the operating expenses for these housing projects and rent supplement units.

Provide northern and rural areas with the ability to acquire at no cost or minimal cost any pre-existing publicly owned buildings in the community (schools, gov't, etc.), and in conjunction with this, provide additional funding to be specifically used to retrofit the pre-existing buildings so affordable housing can be built for a variety of household sizes and the rental would not be based on a specific age.

Additional Funding

Overall, the current funding is insufficient to meet the housing needs within the Nipissing District. As previously mentioned in question one, the district requires funding for the development of additional rental housing including 1-bedroom RGI and affordable housing. Moreover, funding is required to meet the needs for home repairs and renovations. Both of the needs are expressed and noted through the lengthy program waiting lists.

Additional funding is also required for community housing repairs. When funding becomes available for community housing repairs, the requests submitted consistently far exceed the available funding. Finally, funding is needed to further increase the number of rental subsidies available and specifically subsidies that can be tied to the By-Name List.

Improved Data

Access to quality housing data is critical, unfortunately, the CMHC data collection and reliability is poor for the Nipissing District. The Nipissing District often scores poorly in data reliability and as such, figures including

Average Market Rent (AMR) and vacancy rates inaccurately portray the rental situation within the District. Furthermore, CMHC only covers two municipalities in the Nipissing District (North Bay & West Nipissing). The lack of data on the remaining 9 district municipalities poses a substantial barrier to evidence-based decision-making.

Miscellaneous

The introduction and implementation of limitations regarding how much landlords can increase rent amounts upon unit turnover, while increasing minimum wage, and increasing the shelter allowance for social assistance recipients would be a forward-thinking approach to increasing affordability overall. One of the largest barriers to housing in the District is the fact that housing and rental units are inaccessible to those in need due to the combination of low income and high rent amounts.

Strengthen the recent legislation to make open rental bidding mandatory. A transparent bidding process could alleviate pressures on the rising cost of rental market units.

Limiting the increase to rental amounts upon unit turnover will prevent the cost of living to spike as we have noted throughout the past 2 years. In addition to this, a substantial increase in the minimum wage would thus increase the average household income and provide individuals with more affordable housing options.

Providing the District agencies with the ability to register for training/educational courses associated with Coordinated Access service systems without having to worry about costs and/or dates would increase awareness and understanding surrounding the new policies. Providing online courses with free registration would be ideal as agency staff could register and attend based on their schedule instead of trying to coordinate everyone's time to attend a scheduled session.

Question 4: Do you have other suggestions for ways to improve housing supply and needs in rural and northern municipalities?

Equitable Municipal Funding Contributions

It would be beneficial to compare all Ontario municipalities to see the amount of municipal (property tax) funding being allocated to housing and homelessness programs/development. Housing and homelessness efforts should be equitably funded across the province to curb the municipal funding increases through an increase in available provincial/federal funding. Some municipalities may be diverting more property tax dollars to housing out of desperation and lack of provincial/federal support.

Transportation

It is critical to explore options to increase access to services for vulnerable households in rural communities. This could include funding for transportation services and outreach services. Outreach services could include medical services (para-medicine), food and grocery deliveries, etc.

Rent Controls & Income

Legislation around landlord rent controls for a common understanding of how to ensure that landlords maintain their business livelihood while also putting some parameters around how high rent can go. For example, a few years ago a 1-bedroom apartment would have been rented for approx. \$800 and over the past year 1-bedroom units have been rented for well over \$1000 per month. Providing limits on how much a unit can increase upon unit turnover would be beneficial to mitigate this upward trend.

The cost of rental housing overall does not match the average wages of full-time minimum wage workers and grossly exceeds being affordable for people on social assistance. Individuals that work full-time at a minimum wage job are currently struggling to afford and maintain a suitable home/unit, and that is if they can find a suitable home/unit in the first place. The creation of more affordable market, or below-market rental units would be beneficial to the area and if the units included a variety of unit sizes, then that would be even more beneficial to filling gaps in homelessness.

Unit Vacancies & the BNL

Ensuring that there are clear provincial requirements around how vacancies in social housing, transitional housing, rent supplements, etc. must be filled via the BNL. The introduction of a provincial mandatory benchmark for how Service Managers across the province fill vacancies in housing, supports, and services including the BNL would be beneficial. This would provide a provincial minimum requirement allowing Service Managers across the province to be more in alignment with each other. Other considerations could include aligning the *Housing Services Act* and its associated regulations to include references noting the BNL. This could also include the revision of service level standards that set minimum requirements for housing supports. This would align with the housing and homelessness plans in Ontario and the goal to end chronic homelessness by the end of 2025.

Exploration of Different Types of Housing

Different types of housing developments should be further explored and researched.