

An Indigenous Housing Innovation Challenge? Start with the Foundation

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EARLIER THIS YEAR THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT LAUNCHED the Indigenous Homes Innovation Challenge. After a proposal and adjudication process, \$30 million dollars will be awarded to First Nation, Métis and/or Inuit community or organizations. Proposals must demonstrate how their project will improve people's health, safety, and security on reserves.

The goal of this incentive, according to Minister Philpot, is to alleviate the housing gap and lead to the construction of more effective, sustainable, and culturally appropriate living spaces designed by Indigenous communities.

Further, it is the hope that successful designs can be replicated in other First Nations that will reduce overcrowding, improve building quality, address housing shortages, provide local employment and training opportunities, make use of local sustainable resources, and promote energy efficiency.¹

The response to the Challenge from Indigenous analysts in mainstream and social media was largely derision and outrage that the federal government would both outsource their obligations and force communities to compete for resources—an apparent amplification of the much-maligned proposal-based funding model practiced at Indigenous Services Canada.

But lost in the critique are any in-depth, community-based responses to the Challenge. This is not the ideal solution. But if there is genuine engagement with community needs, could it offer some relief?

EXISTING CANADIAN POLICY

In 1996, the federal government introduced the on-reserve housing policy that ostensibly aimed to give First Nations control over housing, provide an Indigenous perspective and expertise on housing issues, share responsibilities, and increase access to private sector financing. This policy is still in place. Effectively **Indigenous Services of Canada (ISC)** provides funding for First Nations on reserve to build and renovate homes, contribute to costs such as maintenance, insurance, debt servicing, planning and management of housing portfolios.

But given that this funding is insufficient and does not satisfy a fraction of the housing needs, First Nations are expected to secure funding from other sources for including shelter charges (another term for rent) and private sector loans.²

Not only does this neglect the Crown obligations to provide suitable housing and infrastructure, but private sector financing often actually delays implementing housing actions. First Nations struggle to meet the accounting requirements, in part due to chronic underfunding by ISC and the related challenges. When that financing is finally available, it can result in steep interest and debt charges for First Nation governments if members cannot make payments.

To address the situation, First Nations (through the AFN) developed a ten-year strategy to support on-reserve housing. The objectives of this strategy were aimed at new housing financing options including negotiating a new funding mechanism; fostering capacity development and partnerships; promoting a higher quality of life for First Nations; and providing information for the effective development of a First Nation housing program.³ None of these objectives have yet been realized.

CHALLENGING THE “CHALLENGE”

The Indigenous Home Innovation Challenge builds on this work, at least in its aspirations. But also gives no indication yet of moving away from the 1996 policy and its consequences.

Still, given the deeply ineffective policies of the past, could there be an opportunity here for communities to lead the direction on housing projects? If we can get over competition gimmick of this initiative, what would be required to realize that opportunity? Most importantly, what are the foundational areas that require attention to accompany new housing design proposals?

- 1. The funding model must finally be addressed and not be based on population numbers or employ any of the current regulations determined by ISC.** They are simply too restrictive and do not allow for the appropriate number of homes to be built that will satisfactorily meet the needs of communities. The federal government must finally acknowledge costs of building supplies, delivery charges, and contractor fees have increased with inflation and so too must the resources. This is particularly true for rural and isolated communities.
- 2. While the federal government is largely responsible for the housing crisis on reserve, First Nation communities also have work to do.** They require a strong housing policy and steadfast administrative foundation to ensure any funding results in long term sustainability of homes and a layer of community accountability. That means membership involvement from the design phase to the construction of their homes. This in turn can result in a more concrete investment in the home from community members. Finally, leadership must consult deeply with the community on their housing needs or any long-term housing vision.
- 3. To address overcrowding and improve housing availability, communities must identify those plausible long-term solutions.** This should involve providing information to youth, and/or young parents/families preparing to move into their own homes about the umbrella of obligations involved with having a home. Homes must be built to meet the needs of varying family sizes, as well as single person and elders' dwellings. More, the federal government must move away from mobile or modular homes that fail in twenty to twenty-five years. With current concerns over climate change adaptation, designing homes that will be energy efficient in the long term must be explored.

ALTERNATIVES TO CRISIS

There are over 600 Aboriginal communities in Canada facing various housing crises. \$30 millions worth of prize money will not resolve all of them—very few in fact. But by pairing with a genuine engagement with the fundamentals, perhaps this Challenge can lead to the development and actual implementation of alternative strategies that will work in communities nationwide.

The time is long overdue to seek solutions to housing from First Nations that will accelerate change, build new partnerships, and improve people's lives.

This is an enduring journey and supporting the foundation within First Nations is the appropriate start to community driven solutions.

ENDNOTES

¹Assembly of First Nations. 2013. National First Nations Housing Strategy. Retrieved from: http://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/housing/afn_national_housing_strategy.pdf

²Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. 2018. First Nations On-Reserve Housing Program. Government of Canada. Retrieved from: <https://www.aadncaandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100010752/1100100010753>

³Indigenous Services Canada. 2018. Impact Canada Challenge. Government of Canada. Retrieved from: <https://impact.canada.ca/en/challenges/indigenous-homes>