

# OMSSA and the future of housing in Ontario: A commitment to healthy communities

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The province of Ontario is poised to make significant changes in housing and homelessness policy and programs. The change is needed. Many of the programs and tools our members are working with were designed more than 20 years ago. Since then, there has been significant change in our society, our economy, and the structure of our governments. Consequently, there is an opportunity to move housing and homelessness—and service system management more generally—to the next level, thus improving outcomes for service managers, housing providers, tenants and ultimately, all Ontarians.

OMSSA has drawn on many years of observation, engagement with, and service to Ontarians in preparing this paper, which is based on analyses, reports and previous submissions to the provincial government on housing and homelessness issues in Ontario. It summarizes OMSSA's position on the continuum of housing within the context of a system of human services. The intent is to provide the province with an overview of our recommendations for the Long Term Affordable Housing Strategy (LTAHS).

Our shared goal is to ensure that all Ontarians have housing that provides a solid foundation on which to secure employment, to support individuals, families, and seniors, and to build strong communities.

## Who is OMSSA?

OMSSA members are the provincially designated service system managers for a range of human services, including social housing, homelessness prevention, and early learning and child care. Service managers and their respective municipal and regional governments also fund, administer, and deliver many income and employment support programs across Ontario. They are involved in the broader systems of urban planning and economic development that significantly affect housing affordability and services to the homeless. Together, these programs and services make Ontario's communities physically, socially, and economically healthy places to live, work, and grow.

## Vision and key principles

OMSSA believes that, for the LTAHS to be effective, there must be a clearly articulated vision for housing and homelessness in Ontario against which efforts can be measured, with defined outcomes and short-term, mid-term, and long-term goals for reaching those outcomes.

OMSSA's commitment to constructing a strong human and housing infrastructure for Ontario is based on a vision that "all Ontarians have access to a secure, stable, and environmentally sound home in a healthy and supportive community." This vision is supported by a number of key principles that guide our decision-making on housing and homelessness in the context of human services:

**Housing is fundamental to Ontario's economic and social development.** Investments in housing and homelessness programs have proven to be an effective way of reducing poverty and of building healthier and more vibrant communities. At the same time such investments can do much more than power solutions to poverty. New affordable housing contributes to the economic health of

communities, the province, and the nation through job creation, building, and the buying of goods and services. Investing in housing and related supports has been shown to reduce the demand on other public services, particularly health care and emergency responses. A long-term, sustained, and predictable commitment to investing in housing, both new units (capital) and through human services spending to keep individuals, families, and seniors housed is essential.

**Effective integration of the system of human services.** Affordable housing and homelessness prevention are intrinsically linked, and their solutions must be addressed through a broader service integration focus. Housing and homelessness service managers bring such a focus and play a key role in the success of their community's housing system, through integrated planning, resource allocation, and accountability. In this way service system managers act as community stewards and situate housing within a context of broader community prosperity and success. Links to other human services such as employment services, income support, early learning and child care, and long-term care give service system managers a human services integration approach that helps people to achieve their maximum potential, enhance their quality of life, and contribute to their community.

**Housing is not just a program, it is where people live.** Affordable and appropriate housing is fundamental to a person's self-sufficiency, but many people have associated human services needs that are inseparable from their housing needs. Communities must do more to ensure that human services supports are available within housing environments, whether through co-location of services within a social housing community, or through improved access to visiting services like Home Care. The more people can thrive in their own homes, the stronger their community will be.

**Funding flexibility and service planning.** "One-size-fits-all" programs do not allow the flexibility needed to manage the housing services system nor do they support social housing and homelessness service managers to achieve better outcomes for their communities. Current rules and regulations create barriers to effective planning and innovation. The desire for more flexibility in moving funding around to best serve the system is balanced by a willingness to engage in more sophisticated service system planning. Through an integrated service planning process supported by a mutually developed accountability framework, housing and homelessness service managers can ensure accountability to the province and the community.

**Inter-governmental partnerships.** Building a new housing system that speaks to both the housing and human service needs in a community requires the cooperation and collaboration across all levels of government and communities. Roles and responsibilities need to be defined, and there needs to be formal recognition of the equality of the partnership required to achieve the vision for housing in Ontario. The provincial government must take a leadership role by investing again in a sustainable housing system that is built upon an accountability framework jointly developed and shared by the provincial and the 47 designated service managers and their respective municipal or regional governments.

**Clarity of definitions.** The LTAHS must clarify how we talk about housing and homelessness. For example, the consolidation of homelessness and housing programs presents an opportunity to redefine a more inclusive vision for the continuum of housing services. As well, particular terms require clarity. Consider that "affordable housing" means different things in different programs and in different places. The provincial *Places to Grow Act* contains one definition of "affordable," the "80 percent of market rent" rule in the Canada-Ontario Affordable Housing Program is beyond the reach of most low-income Ontarians, and some community members consider only rent-geared-to-income "truly" affordable. Municipalities must be able to refine program definitions to meet local circumstances.

## Recommendations

**Articulate a clear provincial structure for housing.** Like service managers, the province is involved in housing in ways well beyond the narrow confines of the Social Housing Reform Act. Defining and clarifying provincial roles, responsibilities, and impacts on the housing system will allow for clarity of roles within the government and between the province and its local government partners. Our vision is that the province defines high-level standards and expected outcomes for housing and related services, and provides the resources to achieve those goals. Service managers and their respective local governments should have the authority for local decision-making to address the local context. This includes clearly addressing what happens when current social housing agreements expire.

**Support the service system management role through a shared accountability framework.** A new housing system must be based on an accountability framework between local government partners and the province, a framework that speaks to positive outcomes for people rather than tallying service outputs. The framework must build on the recommendations of the Provincial-Municipal Fiscal and Service Delivery Review (PMFSDR) with its clear impetus to move Ontario to an outcome-based system for housing and human service delivery. It also must have clearly articulated outcomes, benchmarks, and timelines for implementation. Service managers must be equal partners in this system beyond collaboration for one-off programs. We need a structured process set up to ensure predictable and regular engagement of both partners in on-going problem-solving and developing new ideas, policies, and programs.

**Focus investments on housing.** The provincial government must carry through its commitments made in the PMFSDR to consolidate all housing and homelessness funding into a single envelope, thus giving communities the flexibility to address local needs within a broad accountability framework as noted above. The administrative structure of rent-geared-to-income administration policies must be reformed as well, including shifting income verification and benefit calculation processes to an income-tax-based subsidy system. It is also important to recognize the role that housing plays as infrastructure, and the role that service managers play in maintaining the housing portfolio and planning for redevelopment and new investments. Future infrastructure investment programs should include dedicated funding for social housing initiatives.

**Provide sustainable resources to administer housing service systems.** To capitalize on our proven success in managing the housing and homelessness service system, service managers require adequate and sustained technical expertise, information systems, training, and other administrative resources. Current outdated regulations and program requirements mean that too much money is spent on administration rather than service delivery. The province must recognize its role in supporting service managers by providing adequate levels of funding for delivering, administering, and reporting on housing and homelessness programs over the long-term, as well as developing province-wide infrastructure supports, such as databases to consolidate information on housing waiting lists, asset management, and program funding.

**Re-invest in social housing.** The current social housing administration regulatory system disables service managers and housing providers from maintaining the quality of their stock. It is critical that the current rules be changed to allow an asset management approach to the administration and delivery of social housing programs that reduces risks and protects and reinvests in those significant public assets. For example, the current legal and financial encumbrances to redevelopment of existing social housing must be removed. New funding, financing, and refinancing options to invest

in building repairs, energy retrofits, and redevelopment of the existing social housing portfolio must be created and sustained.

**Develop a national housing strategy.** The province must negotiate actively with other provinces and territories to continue to pressure the federal government to develop a national housing strategy focused on community-based outcomes within a successful housing and human service system. The strategy must be based on measureable outcomes, with an implementation timeline to give all Canadians access to appropriate housing. This must include reinvestment of federal money previously invested in expiring social housing mortgages to preserve the existing social housing stock, to attack the backlog of need, and to preserve rent-geared-to-income housing.

**Build affordable communities.** The growing pressure on social housing in many parts of Ontario directly results from the growing unaffordability of many of Ontario's communities. In addition to supporting existing investments in affordable housing (including retention of the affordability of existing market housing), the province should encourage, support, and improve Planning Act powers such as inclusionary zoning, Section 37 provisions, and secondary suites to ensure that the housing system addresses the full range of community housing needs.

**Improve income and social supports to improve access to housing.** The recent report of the Social Assistance Review Advisory Council (SARAC) also speaks to housing issues that need to be addressed in the LTAHS. SARAC's recommendations include increasing the shelter component of Social Assistance, updating the asset limit rules for social assistance, continued augmentation of minimum wages, and aligning the federal Working Income Tax Benefit with provincial tax rules. The province should also continue to work with the federal government to improve Employment Insurance benefits. Each of these actions will improve the ability of Ontarians to find and keep suitable housing they can afford.

## Conclusion

OMSSA members have a long history of understanding housing and homelessness services. The recent inclusion of the Service Managers Housing Network within OMSSA has brought a renewed focus on the importance of ensuring that Ontarians have access to adequate, suitable, and affordable places to call home.

Housing is part of a larger system of human services that collectively help ensure that Ontarians have the supports they need to live healthy, productive lives.

The LTAHS cannot expect to be successful if it ignores the broader system in which housing operates, often as the foundation for other services and supports. Many of OMSSA's recommendations speak to improving the connectivity, synergies, and flexibilities necessary in any system to ensure it responds to needs and local contexts. A list of additional documents, some previously submitted to the provincial government, are attached as reference and support for this summary of principles and recommendations.

OMSSA believes that investing in housing will build a better, stronger Ontario for all citizens, and we look forward to seeing our vision reflected in Ontario's new strategy.