

Successfully housing the homeless: a Finnish perspective

by *Shauna MacKinnon*

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A recent Probe Research poll shows that half of Winnipeggers don't believe governments are doing a good job tackling homelessness. Community organizations working on the front lines continue to draw attention to the core issue — there simply isn't housing available for thousands of people seeking permanent shelter.

Housing researchers have shown that for more than 40 years, housing policy in Canada has relied on the private sector to supply all our housing needs. The severe shortage of rental housing affordable to low-income households confirms that this strategy has failed. Governments are now desperately trying to correct the problem, but have yet to act quickly and sufficiently invest in what is needed.

A recent study tour organized by the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association (CHRA) to examine Finland's social housing system and "Housing First" strategy, revealed a comprehensive, co-ordinated and streamlined approach that has evolved since the 1980s. This occurred while Canada moved in the opposite direction. Our governments have only recently

begun to understand that we must expand the supply of deeply subsidized non-market housing to solve the growing crisis.



A repurposed Housing First site in a suburban neighbourhood in Helsinki was previously student housing.

Although the Finnish context is different in many ways, Finland's commitment to the expansion of social housing, along with the remarkable success of its Housing First approach, can inform all levels of government in Canada.

Approximately four per cent of Canada's housing supply is social housing, being public or non-profit owned housing for low-income households, with subsidies to allow for rents below market, typically not exceeding 30 per cent of income. In comparison, approximately 13 per cent of Finnish housing is social housing. Twenty-one per cent of the housing in the capital city of Helsinki is social housing.

A major difference in Finnish cities is the high level of public ownership of land and municipal governments committed to producing social housing on this land. For



example, the municipality of Helsinki owns 70 per cent of the land and has called for 25 per cent of all new rental housing development to be social housing.

In Canada, governments own much smaller parcels of land, but they are beginning to allocate some to “affordable” housing development through the Building Canada Homes program. It remains unclear if any of this housing will be social housing. The City of Winnipeg is building some supportive housing on city-owned land through the federal/municipal Housing Accelerator Fund.

Although government ownership of land makes it far easier for governments to expand social housing, there are other possibilities. For example, social housing advocates have been calling on governments to more quickly expand the supply through the acquisition of private stock. Governments across Canada have yet to take full advantage of this option. All too often the opposite is happening, with non-market housing being sold to for-profit entities. The 2023 sale of Lions Place in Winnipeg is one example.

Finland is committed to a Housing First approach which prioritizes housing with supports. Although there are waitlists for social housing, they are far shorter. The lowest-income tenants are prioritized, and when needed, support is in place when tenancy begins. The national government supports the development of social housing through grants and low-

interest loans. Municipalities are responsible for providing social and clinical supports, which they purchase from housing providers who employ trained and certified professionals such as social workers and practical nurses. Notably, the level of funding for services allows organizations with high-acuity tenants to have staff on site 24 hours, with ratios of one support worker to as few as three to five tenants. This level of support is unheard of in Canadian cities. Where ratios are high, training is minimal and clinical supports are rare.

Housing First providers typically engage in neighbourhood activities, co-ordinating staff, tenants and community members for neighbourhood cleanups. Housing First properties are fully integrated into neighbourhoods with minimal resistance from other neighbourhood residents. It has become the norm.

Housing First providers in Helsinki describe a streamlined process from intake to permanent housing. Short-term shelters are a thing of the past, except for one city-run service centre where people experiencing homelessness seek initial support. Here, they are assessed by city social and health-care professionals to determine the level of support needed. Staff identify suitable permanent housing providers with which they have established formal service agreements. Applicants are typically sent to a transitional unit immediately after



assessment while they wait for their permanent shelter to be available.



A Finnish intergenerational social housing complex has a separate wing for seniors housing.

In both environments, tenants are provided with comprehensive support as needed and are expected to comply with tenancy rules. Abstinence from substances is not typically required, but violence and disruption are not tolerated. Agreements can be immediately terminated for non-compliance, sending tenants back to the city service centre to be emergency housed and re-assessed.

Finland has seen a reduction in homelessness of 81 per cent from a high of 20,000 in 1985, when the national Social Democratic Party set its sights on ending homelessness. A conservative government later implemented its Housing First approach in 2008, demonstrating bipartisan commitment to social housing with support. Although homelessness continues to be a challenge that requires diligence, with a population of 5.6 million, an estimated 3,806 people are living unhoused in all of

Finland, compared with 2,469 in Winnipeg with a population of approximately 834,000.

As we grapple with what can seem to be a hopeless situation of housing precarity and homelessness in Canada, Finland shows us that there is another way. But it needs to be adequately resourced, and it begins with social housing. As they say in Finland, “You can’t have housing first without having housing first.”

Shauna MacKinnon is professor and chair of the University of Winnipeg’s urban and inner-city studies department. She recently participated in the CHRA study tour of Finland’s social housing and housing-first system.