

Project Case Study
Metro Non-Profit Housing Association
Halifax, Nova Scotia

1. Introduction

This case study of the Metro Non-Profit Housing Association (MNPHA) is one of a series of case studies of projects funded at least in part through the federal government's National Homelessness Initiative (NHI). The case study first describes the project including: conditions prior to implementation, what the project involves and its objectives. It then describes project implementation to date. Finally, it notes outcomes to date, including comments from clients where available.

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) is producing these case studies in order to contribute to the government's understanding of how NHI is working in individual communities at the project level, to gauge the extent to which the objectives are being achieved at this mid-way stage of the three-year Initiative, and to determine what can be learned from the experiences of particular projects that may be applicable to others participating in the Initiative.

The case study is based on a review of the initial proposal for the project and other available documents describing the project and its objectives and how it fits into the community's plans to address homelessness, and on a series of interviews with people representing the following groups:

- managers and staff of the project
- clients of the project
- community organizations working in areas related to this project that might share clientele with the project or whose service to people who are homeless might be influenced by this project

2. Description of the Project

Conditions prior to project implementation

The MNPHA was established in 1988 to provide safe and affordable housing to single, low-income individuals. The MNPHA offers a range of services, including supporting tenants in recovery from substance abuse and/or mental health problems; assistance with financial issues; setting up and maintaining a home; and, making links to supports within the community for individual needs.

A 1996 research project by MNPHA found that safe, low-cost, long-term apartment style housing – with onsite support and linkages with mental health programs – is one of the most frequently

identified gaps for people who have multiple needs (for purposes of the study this included those experiencing mental health problems, addictions, physical disability, post-prison adjustment and difficulties in complying with agency rules). Homeless people also spoke of a desire to have some input into the administrative decisions required to run and maintain their living environment.

As a result, four community groups came together in 1996 to establish the unique non-profit, Creighton Gerrish Development Association (CGDA) – the Black Community Work Group, the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia, Harbour City Homes and the MNPHA. The goal was to work towards the revitalization of part of a city block in a way that would be sensitive to the community's existing usage. The initiative proposed five separate projects involving non-profit, co-operative and private groups within the city block of Cunard, Creighton, Gerrish and Gottingen streets. One of the five projects was construction by the MNPHA of a 19-unit apartment building and the housing of the Community Housing Support team.

An interest-free loan from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation project development fund allowed CGDA to do most of the planning work four to five years ago. One of the first pieces of land the CGDA wanted to secure was a vacant property owned by Sobeys, a grocery store chain. This was done once the Regional Municipality of Halifax agreed to donate the adjoining plot of land and to waive taxes over the life of the establishment of the project.

The provincial Department of Housing loaned CGDA \$500,000 interest-free to purchase the lot from Sobeys and gave CGDA a capital reduction grant of \$160,000 in order to start constructing the MNPHA apartment building. CGDA also received financial support from the Samuel and Saidye Bronfman Family Foundation and the Metro United Way to expand the Housing Support Centre program and to assist with the transition period. The Rotary Club-Halifax North West also agreed to donate \$50,000 towards the costs of setting up the Centre. Throughout this process, CGDA held and/or attended approximately 40 meetings with community groups in the area, such as churches and the Heritage Advisory group.

The ground-breaking ceremony for the apartment building was held in March 1999. The following Monday, furnace oil was found in the soil. Cleaning up the soil contamination took time and construction costs were increasing. The provincial rent subsidies that MNPHA was going to use to pay for part of the building cost was not enough to pay for the increasing costs of construction and removal of the contaminated soil. One member of the CGDA said that at this time the group "felt demoralized and started looking around for more money."

At the time, the Community Housing Support team was working with clients in inadequate, borrowed space on Gerrish Street. The majority of the clients are single people living in a variety of absolute and relative homeless situations. Approximately 175 people regularly attend the centre while others use it occasionally. The Community Housing Support team focuses on a holistic approach of bringing various service providers together with the common goal of benefiting the client.

What the project involves

When the NHI was announced, the MNPHA applied to the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI) for the additional funds necessary to proceed with the planned construction of a 19-unit studio apartment building to house people who have multiple needs. Each unit was to have a bathroom, bedroom and kitchen area. (One unit was intended for the superintendent.) The housing is for women and men. The ages of prospective tenants vary from 19 to 65 years old.

As noted above, the project had received funding from several sources but higher than anticipated construction costs and the expense of removing contaminated soil at the site were delaying the project. SCPI provided \$1.4 million in funding to help meet the additional costs and construction got underway. Having access to NHI money also meant that better quality construction materials, for example flooring and moldings, could be used which will help to slow down general wear and tear on the building.

The building houses a drop-in centre and office space for the Support Centre coordinator. The new Community Housing Support team will be based in the office but will spend time with people at the drop-in centre as well as out in the community, and will provide advocacy and support to residents of the MNPHA building as well as others who need housing support in the area. Project sustainability is dependent on a stable rental income and subsidy base. HRDC provided \$40,000 in SCPI funds to the support team as added supports while the rental incomes, subsidy process, and associated structures are fully developed.

The Halifax branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association and Shared Care – an initiative of the Dalhousie University Department of Psychiatry and the Nova Scotia Department of Health – are members of an advisory committee to MNPHA. The committee will give support on the general direction of the Community Housing Support team, but MNPHA is the employer with sole responsibility for the team, which will consist of two or three key people with experience and knowledge to assist the residents and community at large to obtain and maintain their housing.

The proposal to build the supportive housing building addressed the following Community Action Plan priorities:

- permanent supported housing to achieve the goal of community integration for people with multiple needs;
- Advocacy and Support Team to enable persons with multiple needs to address basic needs;
- provision of community-based professional assistance, mutual aid and informal support;
- working with a variety of agencies in order to promote communication and cooperation

Objectives of the project

The objectives of the MNPHA for this project are:

- to acquire a turnkey building in central Halifax to house 18 residents and provide support services;

- to create a Community Housing Support team to provide supports to individuals with multiple needs to acquire and maintain a home;
- to provide assistance with identification and referrals to appropriate community resources.

3. Implementation to Date

GCDA started construction of the apartment building in July 2001, with occupancy scheduled for mid-January 2002. This target was met. The Provincial Housing Service Division has played a key role in supporting the construction of the MNPHA building. The province has given GCDA the benefit of the services of experienced engineers, architects, building inspectors, etc. and has also taken the responsibility of performing due diligence during the construction. The province will give HRDC a capital cost audit at the end of the project. The money the province loaned GCDA will be paid back, less the money spent on the project prior to the SCPI signing in January 2001.

Nova Scotia Housing Services will continue to support MNPHA through the rent supplement program. This continuous provincial support for a building with no mortgage will allow an operating surplus from the housing operations, which will permanently fund the Community Housing Support team.

Tenants began moving in on January 2, 2002 with all units filled by the end of the month. MNPHA has a further 80 applications on file. There have been two tenant meetings to date. Tenants took part in the selection of the new superintendent, who is a tenant, and have elected two representatives to the MNPHA Board. The biggest issue is security, especially around the drug culture. Dealing with this is the biggest task ahead of both tenants and staff.

People using the services offered by the Community Housing Support team have requested programs such as self-help groups on addiction issues; educational forums on outstanding warrants; child custody and visiting rights; assistance with money management; food security; and, information referrals on consumer protection rights and banking services.

4. Outcomes to Date

Preliminary observations

While it is premature to make any assessment of the impacts of the MNPHA project on the lives of its many clients in the longer term, it is possible to make the following preliminary observations:

- Demand for safe, supportive housing amongst this group of people remains high as evidenced by the waiting list of 80 people. The new units built partially with SCPI funds are clearly helping to alleviate the demand, albeit to a limited extent.
- On an individual level there have been positive moves already. One young man was accepted for one of the units directly from the streets; after only two months in the building he has been accepted into a supported work environment. Several other tenants have joined a group in the Centre who work on compliance with their course of medications.
- The new Centre has a number of new programs operating since early February. These include a theatre group, a collective kitchen and several offshoots from the Shining Lights Choir (see below under Client Comments) including musicians' practice and keyboard and guitar lessons.
- One person said, "SCPI money was brilliant," because it meant MNPHA programs could be "sustainable through money received from rents and MNPHA did not have to spend enormous amounts of time and energy to find and complete yearly grant applications." Five people said, "SCPI helped to reinforce and raise awareness of community involvement."
- The Shared Care Mental Health Care program (between Dalhousie University Department of Psychiatry and the Nova Scotia Department of Health) became involved in the MNPHA because the community came together to discuss the community plan and how to spend SCPI funds.
- CGDA members spoken with feel the flexibility of all levels of government and agencies on the Steering Committee was one of the major reasons this project has moved forward. For example the City encouraged GCDA to view the project as community economic development, as opposed to a housing development. The city was able to leverage funds to be used in ways suitable for the community's needs and helped give GCDA a slightly different perspective on the overall plan.
- Within the CGDA, new and old partnerships have been strengthened. Everyone involved in this project is very happy to see it progress this far and several people mentioned that they now have a feeling anything is possible "with community support and involvement."

- Being open and available to community members to discuss issues and address concerns related to the CGDA plan was important because it helped to give the community knowledge and an awareness of what was going on in their community.
- Two people said that you “get better decisions when a project involves homeless people and we would like to involve more homeless people in decision making.”

Client comments

In order to get a sense of the project’s impact on clients, the researcher spent a day at MNPHA having informal conversations with 15 clients. The researcher asked clients what changes, if any, they have experienced as a result of the inception of the project or of additional services made possible by NHI funding. The responses are, by their nature, the subjective comments of those individuals willing to respond.

Three people mentioned that they are anxious to get away from their boarding houses which have crack sellers, slum landlords, terrible, constant noise, people stealing mail, windows that have been kicked out and no security.

One person said that he feels great about “the idea of having a real home, a place where I can open and close my own windows, instead of jumping from house to house.” Another person said, “people who care will be there to support me...that’s good, it will help me stay off the street.”

The majority of the 15 homeless people spoken with wanted to talk about the Shining Lights Choir (five are members) before discussing anything else. They are obviously very proud of the individual and group accomplishments of the Choir, which was established in 1997 and currently has between 20-25 members. It is self-managed by the members, who are clients of the Housing Support team, tenants of MNPHA, staff and other supporters. Although this project case study does not relate directly to the Choir, it clearly has a positive impact on the over-all well being of potential tenants of MNPHA.

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