

A STRATEGY AND ADVOCACY GUIDE

Increasing the Supply of Small-Scale, Individualized, Community-Based Housing for People who have Intellectual Disabilities



Introduction

The community living movement has always been about including people who have intellectual disabilities in the broader community, in the same ways that all people want to be included. People who have been labelled with intellectual disability want to live, work, and play in the heart of the community. They want to live in a home of their own, close to family and friends, with access to the supports they need. They want choice and control over the decisions that affect their lives.

This vision of community living is still a work in progress, and Ontario's housing affordability crisis is one of the biggest barriers to realizing it. People who have intellectual disabilities are frequently forced to take whatever housing options are available, and those options are rarely perfect. Very often, these options are in congregated developments with widely-varying quality, including group homes, residential care facilities, larger buildings for people with low incomes, domiciliary hostels, and long-term care institutions.

Additionally, thousands of people continue to live with their parents long into adulthood because they can't afford to pay for decent housing and needed supports, and they don't have access to provincial funding through Developmental Services Ontario. Others are living in hospitals, rooming houses, hostels, shelters, jails, and on the street.

It is becoming increasingly clear that we can't rely on the broader housing and homelessness sector to meet the housing needs of people who have intellectual disabilities in Ontario – the momentum needs to come from the community living movement itself.

At this moment in time, federal and provincial governments are investing billions of dollars in affordable housing. Now is a perfect moment to make a collective push to increase the availability of small scale, individualized, community-based housing for people who have intellectual disabilities in Ontario. This document provides avenues and options for concerned people and organizations to contribute to this push.

Who is this guide for?

This guide has been written with self-advocates, family members, and Community Living Ontario member organizations in mind. Not everything in the guide will apply to everyone. If you have already worked with local, provincial and/or federal partners to build new or renovate existing housing, this document may not be detailed enough for you. However, if you are just starting to think about different approaches to housing, or you are a new Executive Director at a developmental service organization, this guide is meant to get you started and point you in some helpful directions.

Want to learn more? Check out our report on nine inspirational housing models, [Innovations in Housing for People who have an Intellectual Disability](#).

How you can work to increase the supply of small-scale, individualized, community-based housing for people who have intellectual disabilities

There are many ways concerned people and organizations can work to increase the supply of housing that contributes to community inclusion and belonging. We offer four possible actions as inspiration and food for thought:

1. Advocate for large-scale policy changes at the provincial level
2. Build champions for inclusion at the regional and municipal levels
3. Work with program supervisors to improve the way housing is managed in your region
4. Actively increase supply by working with partners to build new housing or renovate existing units

1. Advocate for large-scale policy changes at the provincial level

The affordable housing sector in Ontario, and in Canada more generally, often creates housing developments that put a lot of people with low incomes together in large and mid-sized apartment buildings. This approach is the result of many factors, including NIMBYism (which can raise barriers to smaller-scale housing options) and the fact that housing advocates want to reduce waiting lists as quickly as possible. With this approach we see developments such as:

- The [Tiffin Street Supportive Housing Project](#) in Barrie, which will create “14 units to support people with mental health and addiction issues, persons with disabilities, as well as those experiencing homelessness.”
- A [five-story apartment building](#) in Brantford that will have 26 bachelor units dedicated to “individuals experiencing chronic homelessness.”
- A permanent [supportive housing building](#) with 32 bachelor units in Guelph, with 24 hour support services provided by the Guelph Community Health Centre.

These three projects, all funded through the National Housing Strategy, are informative. While they fill a need for affordable housing, we know that congregated housing developments can be stigmatizing for the people who live there. We also know that owners of these kind of buildings often struggle to maintain building quality under the pressure of artificially-low rents from tenants who depend on social assistance as their main source of income. In many urban areas, we have seen large-scale social housing become run-down and eventually be replaced in ways that exclude people with lower incomes.

Given the widespread support for this approach, we are probably stuck with it for the time being. However, with rising inflation, we are likely to see a continued rise in interest rates, which will make it more expensive to build large-scale developments. This opens an opportunity for leaders in the community living movement to push for smaller-scale approaches (for example, setting aside units in mixed-income apartment buildings, increasing portable rent subsidies, etc.) that are more sustainable and less stigmatizing, and that support a higher quality of life.

Here are a few ways that you can advocate for more investment in small-scale, individualized, community-based housing for people who have intellectual disabilities:

- Send materials to your MPP, MP, and their staff, including the Community Living Ontario reports [Building a Full Life + A Home of One's Own in the Community](#) and [Innovations in Housing for People who have an Intellectual Disability](#).
- Meet with your MPP and MP regularly so that they are aware of your work, the community living movement, and the type of housing that increases health and quality of life for people who have an intellectual disability.
- If you are an organizational leader, invite your MPP and MP to your Annual General Meeting and other organizational gatherings that are open to the public.
- Invite your MPP and MP to take action to recognize Community Living Month in May.

In the Brockville area, Community Involvement Legacy Homes has utilized rent supplements, forgivable loans from the federal government, and municipal funding to purchase seven properties with space for a total of eight tenants. To learn more, check out our report, [Innovations in Housing for People who have an Intellectual Disability](#)





Where To Find Provincial Housing Policy Documents

The provincial government has published several documents that guide its work on affordable housing:

- The Community Housing Renewal Strategy, which focuses on:
 - a. Repairing and increasing the supply and mix of well-maintained housing that meets people’s needs.
 - b. Providing opportunity for people to live in housing that meets their needs and supporting them to participate in the economy and their community.
 - c. Increasing efficiency in the system by removing red-tape, improving coordination and helping providers offer sustainable housing.
- The Housing Supply Action Plan, which aims to “cut red tape to make it easier to build the right types of housing in the right places,” and make housing more affordable. The plan includes a focus on tenant protection, and on the creation of new rental housing.
- The 2021 provincial budget made a commitment to continue to invest in the Social Services Relief Fund (with funds flowing through municipal governments and Indigenous partners), which has been a major pillar in the government’s approach to reducing homelessness. SSRF funding (with federal support) was again renewed in April 2022, with \$127 million being allocated to the program – bringing the total investment to more than \$1 billion since 2020.

The government has also performed a review of supportive housing in the province. This review has influenced work with several ministries to “establish local integrated supportive housing planning requirements to coordinate local service planning and delivery of supportive housing across the housing, health and community services sectors.”

2. Build champions for inclusion at the regional and municipal levels

Regional and municipal buy-in is crucial for the creation of new and/or renovated affordable housing, and it is often required for federal funding applications. Local leaders are likely to have inside information on sources of funding, knowledge of areas where affordable housing is being planned, and connections to key provincial leaders. They can also be helpful in opposing NIMBYism.

Every region and municipality is different in its approach to affordable and accessible housing. However, there are a few steps that people and organizations can take in every region to help increase the supply of small-scale, individualized, community-based housing for people who have an intellectual disability. For example, you can:

- Create opportunities for local politicians to talk to people, families, and developmental service sector workers about issues that are affecting them.
- Nurture connections with regional and municipal planning and housing staff (including those working in local Service Manager offices), and make sure they understand the need for housing among people who have intellectual disabilities. When necessary, voice opposition to housing developments that are likely to be stigmatizing or exclusionary of people with disabilities.

- Attend local meetings of housing and community advocates, and talk about (1) the need for small-scale, individualized, community-based housing, (2) the stigmatizing nature of large-scale developments for people with low incomes, and (3) how important it is for people with disabilities to be included in the regular life of diverse communities.

- Work to ensure that people, families, and developmental service organizations play important roles in local supportive housing planning bodies.

- In response to news articles about affordable housing, write letters to the editor calling for increased investment in small-scale, individualized, community-based housing.

- Work with regional and local media outlets to highlight small-scale, community-based housing that is affordable, accessible, and appropriate for people with disabilities.

The Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit:

An important piece of the housing puzzle

Another related step you can take at the regional/municipal level is to ensure that the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit is available and accessible to people who have intellectual disabilities in your region.

The Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB) provides households with a portable housing benefit to assist with rental costs in the private housing market. The benefit is tied to the household and can be used to help pay rent anywhere in Ontario.

The COHB pays the difference between 30 per cent of a household's income and the average market rent in the area. For recipients of social assistance, the COHB will pay the difference between the shelter allowance and the household's rent and utilities costs.

The benefit can be a valuable tool in opening up new opportunities for housing, particularly for landlords who are hesitant to rent to people receiving ODSP benefits.

While the COHB is funded by the federal and provincial governments, it is administered by regional and municipal governments, and these governments decide on which priority groups are able to access it. These governments may also have additional portable housing benefits with their own unique application processes.

It is important to understand a few key pieces of information about the COHB in your region:

- Are people who have intellectual disabilities eligible for the benefit in your region? Are they eligible for the benefit if they need support to live independently?
- How many people who have intellectual disabilities have applied for the benefit, and how many are currently receiving it?
- If few people with intellectual disabilities are receiving the benefit, what might be the reason for this?

If you don't have answers to these questions, you can reach out to regional/municipal government staff, or to local politicians who are working to increase the supply of affordable housing. Even if people who have intellectual disabilities are eligible for the benefit, there may be barriers that prevent them from accessing it to the highest degree.

3. Work with Program Supervisors to improve the way housing is managed in your region

Within the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, there are dozens of developmental service Program Supervisors across Ontario, and they all bring unique experiences and perspectives to the job.

As part of their complex roles, Program Supervisors administer funding, coordinate and monitor service delivery, provide policy and program direction, and work with senior public servants to respond to local needs. They make crucial decisions about some of Ontario's most vulnerable citizens, and they can have an immense influence on the lives of people supported. It is crucial that they understand the history of the community living movement in Ontario, and the importance of small-scale, individualized, community-based housing.

Some of our sector's most innovative services and programs operate within policy grey areas, and Program Supervisors will have different levels of comfort with innovative approaches. For example, some organizations have been able to leave group home beds vacant and transfer the funds to support people in semi-independent settings; more than one organization has emptied out and sold a group home in this manner.

Katadhin Friends, Inc – known as KFI Maine – is a service agency that supports people who have developmental disabilities across the state of Maine. The organization does not operate group homes, and was a forerunner in closing their sheltered workshops in 1989. The organization has a unique approach that revolves around getting to know and understand people's needs and preferences, and creating caring relationships between staff and people supported. To learn more, check out our report, [Innovations in Housing for People who have an Intellectual Disability](#).

At the same time, other organizations are prevented from taking these kinds of steps because of resistance from a Program Supervisor.

There is no clear guidebook for engaging with a Program Supervisor, but there are a few steps you can consider:

- Create a draft plan for increasing the availability of small-scale, individualized, community-based housing in your community. Ensure that there is buy-in from self-advocates, families, and other community partners.
- Talk with other stakeholders in your region and learn about their experiences with local and regional MCCSS staff.
- Work with Community Living Ontario and other like-minded organizations to build a case for what you are proposing.
- Engage directly with Program Supervisors to build understanding and buy-in.





**DID YOU
KNOW?**

In 2021, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services produced Developmental Services Community-Based Residential Services 2019 Case Study. This invaluable document offers a close look at three developmental service agencies (Community Living Brant, Community Living Algoma, and Community Living Upper Ottawa Valley) that have shifted their services away from group living, and instead focused on individualized housing arrangements in community settings.

The report provides convincing evidence of several advantages of small-scale, individualized, community-based housing:

- More people can be served with the same level of funding if an organization assists people they support to move from group to semi-independent living.
- People with complex needs can live successfully in an individualized community setting.
- Outside of group living, people can experience improved independence and become more satisfied with their quality of life.
- Accessing community-based resources and housing from other public and private sources can lead to funding efficiencies and, as a result of deeper community connections, successful housing arrangements.

This MCCSS report is just one of many pieces of research that demonstrates the efficiency and effectiveness of small-scale housing – a topic that we have covered in the Community Living Ontario brief, The Myth of Economies of Scale in Developmental Services.

4. Access municipal, provincial, and federal funding to build or renovate housing in your community

As noted above, many recent housing projects supported by federal and provincial funding have congregated people with low incomes and/or significant support needs in large and mid-sized dwellings. It is becoming increasingly clear that if we are going to be successful in growing the supply of small-scale, individualized, community-based housing for people who have intellectual disabilities, self-advocates, families, and developmental service organizations must take the lead.

There are currently several funding sources that can be used to build new housing, or to renovate existing housing to appropriately accommodate people who have an intellectual disability. These include (but are certainly not limited to) the following options.

Social Services Relief Fund

In 2022, the Ontario government allocated \$127 million to the Social Services Relief Fund (SSRF), which is meant to “support operating and capital expenses to mitigate the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the homelessness sector.” Many organizations in the developmental service sector have accessed this funding stream, which has distributed more than \$1 billion since it was initiated in 2020.

People who have intellectual disabilities face a very high risk of poverty and homelessness. It has been estimated that between 12% and 40% of people experiencing homelessness have an intellectual disability, and thus the developmental service sector is a crucial part of the housing and homelessness sector.

A leading objective of the SSRF is “the creation of long-term housing solutions, including more affordable and supportive housing that will make long-term progress in addressing chronic homelessness as well as housing affordability for those most in need.” Additionally, the funding can be used to “encourage movement toward client service models that are innovative, and seek to support client and organizational readiness in preparation for potential future outbreaks or emergencies.”

SSRF funds are administered by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing via municipal Service Managers, and Service Managers are responsible for determining local needs and distributing the funding.

A full list of Service Managers can be found [here](#), and more information on SSRF funding can be found [here](#).

National Housing Strategy Funding

The federal government has allocated more than \$70 billion over 10 years “to strengthen communities and cut homelessness in half.” Some of these funds are being flowed through the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, which has several programs of relevance to people who have an intellectual disability, their families, and agencies that support them. These include:

- The [Affordable Housing Innovation Fund](#), which “supports new ideas that will drive change and disrupt the industry,” and which offers “flexible financial support to test a range of innovations and leverage new

partnerships.” The program includes a special fund supporting rent-to-own initiatives that aim to transition renters to owners within a five-year period.

- The National Housing Co-Investment Fund (new construction stream), which supports the construction of new housing. The fund offers both low-interest loans (when significant financing is needed) and non-repayable contributions (to cover smaller funding gaps). The requirements for funding through this program are quite complex, and having significant partnerships in place is necessary to be considered as a recipient.

- The National Housing Co-Investment Fund (renovation stream), which provides low-interest loans and/or contributions to renovate and repair affordable and community housing. This stream prioritizes partnerships between governments, non-profits, the private sector, and other partners.

While the National Housing Co-Investment Fund requires that eligible dwellings have a minimum of five units, the Affordable Housing Fund appears more flexible and supportive of smaller-scale housing.

For a full list of federal housing funding opportunities, visit the CMHC website.

Do you have other ideas for housing that you want to share?

This guide offers just a few ideas and options to increase the supply of small-scale, individualized, community-based housing. If you have had success with these or other approaches, please send a note to shawn@communitylivingontario.ca. We will update this guide regularly to reflect programs and opportunities that we have missed.

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