

Federal council says key housing programs doing little to help those in deep need

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OTTAWA -

A federal housing body is telling the federal Liberals to rethink parts of the government's housing strategy so they better target rental units to those who need the help most.

[The report from the National Housing Council made public Monday](#) said the three programs under review have done little to help households who live in homes that are too expensive, or too small, for them.

The council's report said that thousands of households could be left behind by the Liberal plan unless there is a shift within the programs to help build units targeted to those most in need.

Among those the council said could be left in need are homeless people the government wants to house, women and children fleeing domestic violence, newcomers and Indigenous people.

The first research report from the council, created as part of the decade-long housing strategy launched in 2017, focused on a rental construction financing program, another for housing providers that partner with a local government, and the rapid-housing program.

Together, those programs aim to repair some 66,000 units and create just under 35,000 units.

But those numbers mean the national housing strategy could "fall well short" of lifting 530,000 households out of what's known as "core housing need," a benchmark under which a household is deemed to be spending too much on housing that is substandard or doesn't meet their needs.

The housing being produced through two of the three programs is not reaching the people who need it the most, usually because the units aren't affordable or plentiful enough, said Tim Richter, co-chair of the housing council.

"You need to get much more focused on where the investment is going, but also make sure that you have investment commensurate with the demand, which is significantly higher than I think where we're at today," Richter said.

In an interview, Housing Minister Ahmed Hussen said he planned to look at the findings that touch on a portion of the housing plan, now billed as a \$70-billion strategy.

Hussen said he would look to see what changes could be made to the programs, noting a recently announced \$50-million carve out in the rental initiative to build housing for Black families.

The rental program is designed to create units affordable to middle-income families who tend to have lower rates of housing need than those at lower-income levels, while the co-investment fund is supposed to create below-market-rent units.

Only the oversubscribed rapid-housing program is specifically targeted for those in severe housing need.

The report estimated that only three per cent of units in the rental construction fund could actually be deemed affordable for low-income households.

The review also noted that the program does little to help reduce rental costs because it often permits funding to help build "units with rents that are well above market rent in the areas in which they were located to be counted as affordable."

The report also said that about half of the units in the co-investment fund could lift the median household out of core housing need.

About one-third of units in projects funded through the program are suitable for, and affordable to low-income households, the report said.

The report concluded that of the three programs, only the rapid-housing initiative created during the pandemic shows some promise as a way to help low-income Canadians find an affordable place to call home.

Hussen said the national strategy is designed to address a variety of housing needs.

His mandate letter from the prime minister implores Hussen to do more to help make home prices more affordable, and Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland has hinted help may be coming in this year's budget.

"My job is to advocate for what I believe should be in the budget, and I've made my feelings known, obviously," Hussen said. "If recent history is any guide, for the last five budgets, consistently, we've increased funding for housing. So that's a good indicator."

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