

Northern Shuswap Housing Alliance



Four neighbouring First Nations work together to develop common and successful housing policies

The four First Nations in the Northern Shuswap Tribal Council were looking for a solution to the same problem. Each had its own housing policy but was struggling to collect rents and manage relationships with the residents.

The Chiefs and Tribal Council took the lead by deciding they were going to change the culture of housing in their communities. They created the Northern Shuswap Housing Alliance, made up of a Tribal Council representative and the housing managers and administrators from each community. Since there is a lot of transmigration between the four communities (people moving from one to another), it was important that the Alliance work jointly to establish fairness throughout the system and to help people understand what was expected from them.

“Our challenge was the community’s perception of the Housing Department,” says Janine Alphonse, Housing Manager for the T’exelc (or Sugar Cane) First Nation in Williams Lake, British Columbia. “Housing was seen as a bad thing. People didn’t like coming into the office”. The T’exelc First Nation couldn’t afford to maintain the existing housing, so it had to make the decision to stop building rental housing altogether. It was slipping further and further into debt because of accumulated unpaid rent.

A primary consequence of unpaid rent was that the First Nation often had to take money from other Band programs in order to cover the mortgage. This left those other programs short. The lack of rent revenue also meant that replacement reserves were not properly funded and, therefore, funds were insufficient to pay for

maintenance of the housing. Both regular repairs and the replacement of capital items that wear out over time, such as roofs and windows, could not be done when required. “Basically, 10-year-old houses looked like they were 25 years old,” says Alphonse. “And the operating costs, such as fuel and lighting, for example, made it seem like the house was even older.”

In 2007, the Tribal Council hired a consultant to help the Alliance consolidate the communities’ separate housing policies. With regular meetings, hard work, a lot of cooperation and some compromise, the Alliance members achieved their goal—they all agreed on a single housing policy document. Each First Nation used its own process to achieve approval by the community and ratification by the leaders. For example, the Canoe Creek First Nation gave the policy to each household for review. The Soda Creek First Nation implemented a family steering committee with representatives from each family to review the policies.

Like the other three First Nations, the T’exelc people enthusiastically took part in the process. There was some resistance, but the Housing Department held workshops and education sessions, bringing one chapter of the policy to their community at a time, and targeted the audience (renters, homeowners) to make sure the information was relevant.

By 2010, after intense community participation, the Northern Shuswap bands were all working off the same housing policy. One of the most positive results of the process was that the relations between the housing

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departments and the members of the First Nations improved dramatically, as both groups began to better understand their roles.

The shared housing policy was just the start. "It's a living and dynamic document," Alphonse says. "The Housing Alliance continues to meet regularly. With policies in place, we are now at work on procedures; they were pretty general. We keep working on them to make them more specific, to really give housing managers good solid directions on rent collection, notices and how to coordinate with Social Assistance. We try to make the procedures similar, but at the same time, each community writes them in a way that will work best for them."

Each First Nation brings a particular skill to the Alliance. For instance, the T'exelc First Nation brings an interest in policy development, while the Canoe Creek First Nation works on creating procedural tools to improve housing processes. "Each First Nation has a role at the table," Alphonse says. "We started with the housing policy, and the work just keeps growing."

Throughout the policy development process, the Northern Shuswap First Nations have completed more than a dozen training sessions, most with

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, in order to ensure all the communities are up to date and well informed about all aspects of housing delivery.

Like Alphonse, Norma Theodore-Archibald, Housing Manager for the Canim Lake First Nation, has been with the Alliance since the beginning. Her First Nation approved the housing policy and tailored the procedures to fit with the community.

The Alliance is working. In one community, the monthly rent collection rate is now 97 per cent. The rate in the T'exelc First Nation has gone from 30 to 40 per cent, to more than 70 per cent, and the historical unpaid rent has been reduced by almost 80 per cent.

One important result for Alphonse is that her job is getting easier. The business of housing in the T'exelc First Nation has gone from conflict to co-operation. And, its successes have been shared with, and enhanced by, all Northern Shuswap First Nations.

The Housing Alliance is truly a case of how First Nations can work together, support one another and create a common and successful housing policy.

CMHC works with First Nation communities to support their efforts to take charge of their housing, to build new and improve existing housing and to further develop their capacity to manage and maintain all aspects of their housing.

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