

Five Ideas about Housing for People Who Have Intellectual Disabilities

The 2021 federal budget included several welcome announcements about affordable housing, including the Federal Community Housing Initiative and the Affordable Housing Innovation Fund. These programs will add to the already substantial funding provided by the National Housing Strategy, which includes a goal to create 2,400 new affordable housing units for people who have developmental disabilities.

As these programs are rolled out, it is crucial that funds be used to support the greatest possible choice and independence in housing for people who have intellectual disabilities. Here are five ideas that offer direction moving forward:

1. People are demanding choice and control over housing

Any discussion of housing must begin with guidance from people who have intellectual disabilities themselves. [People First of Canada](#) has been very clear:

“At the heart of the People First movement is the right to live in community. People First believes in the right of every individual to live in their community and will work to close institutions and educate Canadian society about the better options available.

“An institution is any place in which people who have been labelled as having an intellectual disability are isolated, segregated and/or congregated. An institution is any place in which people do not have, or are not allowed to exercise control over their lives and their day to day decisions. An institution is not defined merely by its size.”

The Council of Community Living Ontario (which is composed of self-advocates from across the province) has also been clear on this issue. The Council has stated that “living independently increases skills, abilities and community involvement, and institution-like settings decrease autonomy and dehumanize the people who live there... It is time we stopped perpetuating the negative attitude and stereotypes from the past that lead to people being shut away, and instead welcome them into an inclusive and accepting community.”

2. Canada’s United Nations commitments require increased individual choice and control over housing

[Article 19](#) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ratified by Canada in 2010) directs UN member states to ensure that “persons with disabilities have the opportunity to choose their place of residence and where and with whom they live on an equal basis with others and are not obliged to live in a particular living arrangement.”

Article 19 also states that persons with disabilities must “have access to a range of in-home, residential and other community support services, including personal assistance necessary to support living and inclusion in the community, and to prevent isolation or segregation from the community.”



While the language is complex, Article 19 supports a common-sense approach to housing for people who have intellectual disabilities: people want a safe and stable place to live in the broader community, close to friends and family, with the supports they need, where they can control their own lives.

3. High income countries have mostly abandoned large scale congregated housing facilities

In 2010, the International Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual Disabilities released an official [statement](#) on large congregate housing facilities:

“The gradual abandonment of large residential institutions and their replacement by small-scale services to enable people to live well in the community has probably been the most significant policy development in intellectual disability in the post-war period. This process of ‘deinstitutionalization’ is well-advanced in Scandinavia, the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australasia. In these countries, the policy debate about whether to provide institutions or community services is largely resolved.”

While some jurisdictions continue to house people who have intellectual disabilities in large, controlled access facilities, they are mostly a thing of the past in Canada. Unfortunately, while we are celebrating the [closure](#) of the Manitoba Development Centre as one of Canada’s last institutions, new proposals for large facilities continue to pop up despite overwhelming evidence against this model.

4. Smaller and more independent housing settings support a higher quality of life

A recent U.S. [study](#) of more than 1,300 people with intellectual and developmental disabilities showed clear quality-of-life advantages among people who lived with family or in their own home. When compared to people living in group homes and larger facilities, people in small supported independent situations reported having more and higher quality relationships, greater choice and control over their lives, and more involvement and participation in the broader community.

This study builds on decades of research showing that people have a higher quality of life in small, semi-independent settings in the broader community. Larger congregated settings tend to be highly structured and monitored, with a constant staff presence. They isolate people from the broader community and prevent the formation of unpaid relationships. People who live in their own home or with family are more likely to develop unpaid relationships and therefore need less staff support. This lowers the cost of support and increases quality of life (though the need for substantial increases in support for family supporters and caregivers is a major unresolved issue).

5. Separating housing and support is the next frontier

In Ontario, people with an intellectual disability who are eligible for provincially-funded supports generally get a package deal if they are offered the opportunity to leave the waiting list: they are connected with a service provider that provides housing and the various supports they need. They are unable, unless they pay out of pocket, to pick and choose multiple service providers for housing and supports. As a result, people have very little choice in their housing. Often, the only choice is to accept or refuse what is offered.



A recent [study](#) led by researchers from Centennial College and Community Living Toronto discusses the separation of housing and support, noting that “significant positive change in the housing landscape could result from separating support from housing.” This change would increase the flexibility of housing and the responsiveness of supports. It would allow people to change their living situation while keeping needed supports, or vice versa. It could also open the door to growth in funding for people who live with family members, thereby taking pressure off the overburdened and waitlisted developmental services sector, and addressing the unsustainable crisis of care among aging parents of people who have intellectual disabilities.

For more recommendations on housing, see our recent Policy Snapshot, [The Myth of Economies of Scale in Developmental Services](#).

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