



What We Heard:

Report on the Affordable Accessible Housing Roundtable | June 14 2018

Overview

In June 2018, Disability Alliance hosted a roundtable with community and government partners to seek advice on how best to utilize our remaining time and resources for The Right Fit Pilot Project, given what we had learned and accomplished to date. The facilitated dialogue explored why housing providers and wheelchair users still struggle to match supply and demand for affordable accessible housing in Metro Vancouver, and offered clear advice on how the RFPP partnership could advance solutions.

We heard a clear consensus that priority issues were affordability and the very limited supply and turnover of accessible housing, particularly for wheelchair users in urban areas near transit who earn less than \$20,000 per year. We also heard a clear message that RFPP could play a valuable role in helping to advance a mix of short, medium and long-term solutions. Current federal and provincial commitments promise longer-term investments in new supply, but we can play a role in advancing short- and mid-term measures.

Other clear messages included the value of partnerships and the need for stronger data collection to quantify gaps and shape more effective, targeted solutions.

We wish to sincerely thank the Roundtable participants for their valuable insights and advice. Their input, along with commitments from our Right Fit Pilot Project partners, are outlined in this report and will drive our work and priorities for 2018-2020.

Background

The Issue: People who use wheelchairs often wait years to find affordable housing with the right accessibility features and supports to meet their needs. Some housing providers also struggle to find wheelchair users when vacancies arise. Challenges include:

- Inadequate supply and very low turnover of accessible affordable housing.

- No common standards to describe accessibility needs and unit features with sufficient precision to determine what's a good fit.
- No single central marketplace to match accessible housing vacancies and applicants.
- Length of time to secure disability supports and special equipment for a new home.

About RFPP

The Right Fit Pilot Project (RFPP) is a 3-year initiative to address these challenges by helping wheelchair users, housing and service providers in Metro Vancouver explore systemic changes to better match availability with needs.

The pilot is led by Disability Alliance BC (DABC) in partnership with the Individualized Funding Resource Centre (IFRC), BC Housing, City of Vancouver, Fraser Health Authority, Vancouver Coastal Health Authority and the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (MSDPR), with funding from the Vancouver Foundation and BC Rehab Foundation.

Launched in 2017, RFPP partners have been testing solutions such as a new case management model to support and connect landlords and applicants, a standardized Accessibility Checklist, and streamlined approvals for the special equipment and home supports required to support independent living in a new home. The pilot supports wheelchair users aged 19 - 64 who receive provincial PWD benefits and need housing in Metro Vancouver. Project partners are also learning more about systemic barriers and solutions and strengthening inter-agency collaboration. Lessons learned will be shared more broadly.

Accessible Housing Roundtable:

Disability Alliance BC hosted the June 14 Roundtable, with the City of Vancouver kindly providing the meeting venue. Participants were invited from all levels of government, non-profit housing providers, support agencies, wheelchair users, housing specialists and partners.

The roundtable opened with a brief recap of lessons from our first year, including initial research indicating that inadequate supply is a far greater challenge than previously understood. Despite strong support for the pilot from non-profit housing providers, the extremely low inventory and turnover of subsidized accessible units is undermining our ability to match wheelchair users with suitable homes. BC Housing and MSDPR shared preliminary data highlighting the supply/demand gap, particularly for those at lower income levels.

Our objectives for the Roundtable included receiving advice on how best to focus the pilot's remaining time, resources and partnerships to advance housing security for low-income wheelchair users. Specifically, we asked how RFPP could help advance needed policy changes and investments, and about innovative models, data gaps, investments, partnerships or synergies that we should explore.

What We Heard: Key Messages

1. Focus on Affordability as a Key Barrier

MSDPR noted that housing affordability was the #1 issue identified by British Columbians in every community when the ministry recently held consultations on a proposed BC poverty reduction strategy.

Many wheelchair users, like other people with disabilities, live in poverty or on low incomes, so housing affordability is an especially acute challenge for this population. Roundtable participants noted that the “Affordable Rental” model is not affordable for most people with disabilities, particularly those with income below \$15,000 per year, including those living on PWD benefits.

Our work so far indicates that the need for affordable accessible housing is concentrated, both geographically and at the lowest income levels. Most BC wheelchair users who rely on PWD benefits live in urban areas with better transit. Recent provincial data showed more than half are living in the Lower Mainland. And half of those in the Lower Mainland live in an arc from the Downtown Eastside, through Burnaby and New Westminster, to Surrey.

A BC Housing snapshot in December 2017 showed 450 Housing Registry applicants were waiting for wheelchair-accessible housing in Vancouver Coastal or Fraser Health regions. Just over half were living in Vancouver or Surrey and around 65% had income below \$20,000/year. In recent years, BC Housing has seen regional turnover of between 30 - 45 units annually for vacancies listed through the Housing Registry.

2. Better Utilization of Existing Supply

Given the supply/demand gap and very limited turnover, participants discussed the need for measures to ensure that any accessible vacancies are allocated to wheelchair users as a top priority.

But despite the supply gap, some housing providers still have trouble finding suitable wheelchair users for their units when vacancies arise. The intense need for social housing can result in subsidized accessible units being lost through long-term rentals to individuals without mobility challenges, thus worsening the supply gap for low-income wheelchair users.

Potential policy solutions include incentives to allocate accessible units to wheelchair users (e.g. tied to funding/subsidies, to market density bonuses or removal of market disincentives).

Participants also explored the benefits of establishing a single centralized registry to help providers and RFPP navigators better match accessible unit vacancies with wheelchair users. Suggestions included exploring new partnerships to improve information sharing on social housing vacancies (e.g. including those co-ops not listed through BC Housing’s centralized Housing Registry). However, it was agreed that our immediate focus should be on alleviating the supply gap as the top priority, not developing a new registry.

Other suggestions included making the social housing application process more user-friendly and exploring ways to track how accessible market rentals are being utilized.

3. Address the Supply Gap

Roundtable participants agreed that supporting solutions to the supply gap should be a top priority for RFPP going forward, with a focus on the needs of those at the lowest income levels — i.e. wheelchair users living in poverty or on PWD benefits.

Priorities include providing immediate relief through measures to address affordability and supporting accessibility retrofits for existing social housing stock, given the potential for existing provincial and federal commitments to offer longer-term solutions.

The need for more ambitious accessibility ratios was emphasized, given that BC’s 5 percent accessibility targets for social housing have not kept pace with demand. For example, Affordable Housing Societies, which manages 3,700 social housing units in Metro Vancouver, report-

ed just two wheelchair accessible vacancies in the past year. Under Canada's new 10-year \$40 billion National Housing Strategy, all new projects funded through CMHC's Housing Co-Investment Fund will have minimum ratios of either 20 percent accessible units, or 100 percent of units meeting universal design standards.

Other suggestions included:

- Consider how RFPP can help non-profits with limited capacity to access federal and provincial resources that support new projects and retrofits to improve accessibility.
- Encourage more municipalities to adopt the optional Adaptable Building Standards in BC's new provincial building code to increase market supply. Also consider making these new standards mandatory.
- Promote broader understanding and adoption of Universal Design, Adaptable Building Standard and innovations in accessible home design that offer affordable and market friendly-alternatives to traditional non-accessible housing. In particular, more focus on Universal Design can avoid a two-tier system where only a portion of homes are accessible.
- Promote a better understanding of the favourable economics of building accessible or adaptable housing to help drive market solutions.
- Support more public-private partnerships to boost affordable supply.
- Emphasize the need for better data — for example, to better quantify and document the demand /supply gap to drive long-term investments and build the case for more ambitious accessibility targets, especially at the lower end of the market, in urban areas close to transit.

Participants also discussed the need to update and standardize accessibility design standards to meet the needs of modern electric wheelchairs. It was suggested that RFPP, which is using a standardized Accessibility Checklist to map social housing inventory in our study area, can help answer questions such as how much of the current "accessible" inventory is fully accessible for electric wheelchair users.

Next steps: Action Plan

In the weeks since the roundtable, our first steps included drafting this report capturing key insights for wider distribution, along with an action plan to start implementing the advice received and our RFPP partner commitments to advance solutions, which include the following:

BC Housing:

- Work with RFPP and the new Accessibility Checklist to document new and existing inventory.
- Pilot portable rental supplements for wheelchair users through RFPP.
- Expand retrofit eligibility criteria for social housing providers to include accessibility.
- Enhance information on wheelchair accessible units listed through BC Housing Website.

City of Vancouver:

- Share information on existing housing inventory through its Open Data program.
- Engage RFPP advice in developing new Social Housing Design Guidelines.

Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction:

- Housing affordability to be a key focus of the promised Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Disability Alliance BC:

- Explore ways to expand RFPP capacity to help address the affordable accessible housing gap, including through new partnerships, research, outreach and advocacy.
- Engage community partners and add our voices to conversations on affordable housing to strengthen the community consensus and support development of more affordable, accessible housing.

Appendix

June 14 2018 Accessible Housing Roundtable Participants

Jane Dyson	Disability Alliance BC	Stephen Bennett	Affordable Housing Society
Christine Gordon	Disability Alliance BC	Ken Fraser	Vancouver Resource Society
Justina Loh	Disability Alliance BC	Murray Hamilton	Vancouver Resource Society
Dawn Steele	Right Fit Pilot Project	Ulryke Weissgerber	Metro Vancouver Housing
Rick Campbell	Right Fit participant	Abi Bond	City of Vancouver
Paul Gauthier	Individualized Funding Resource Centre	Brian Butt	City of Vancouver
Chris Hofley	Individualized Funding Resource Centre	Tom Patch	Vancouver - Disability Advisory Committee
Dalton Finlay	Individualized Funding Resource Centre	Fiona Jackson	Co-op Housing Federation BC
David Galbraith	Ministry of Social Dev. & Poverty Reduction	Jacqueline Cardwell	Vancouver Coastal Health
Steve Forland	Ministry of Social Dev. & Poverty Reduction	Daniela Gardea	Office of Minister Selina Robinson
Susan Mader	Ministry of Social Dev. & Poverty Reduction	Jai Birdi	Community Living BC
Shayne Ramsay	BC Housing	Elizabeth Tang	CMHC
Sarah Rutherford	BC Housing	Tom Ainscough	City of Surrey
Debbie Kraus	BC Housing	Karla Verschoor	Inclusion BC

About The Right Fit Pilot Project (RFPP)

RFPP Website: RightFitProject.org

June 14, 2018 RFPP Roundtable Presentation: <http://disabilityalliancebc.org/june-14-2018-rfpp-accessible-housing-roundtable-presentation/>

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