

# ANTIGONISH AFFORDABLE HOUSING SOCIETY

## Evaluating for Continuous Improvement

### INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

Antigonish Affordable Housing Society (AAHS) is committed to ongoing improvement of its affordable housing initiatives. In 2022, with financial support from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, AAHS contracted with an independent evaluator (Sarah Bowen, PhD) to conduct a developmental evaluation of its work to date, including exploration of the three-part mission of financial, environmental and social sustainability.

Preliminary evaluation activities included a half-day workshop with board members and other key partners to ensure that the evaluation addressed issues of organization concern; as well as to build consensus on evaluation approach and priorities. A review of the relevant literature was also conducted in order that the evaluation be based on current knowledge. The purpose of the evaluation was to explore the three-pronged AAHS housing model in order to:

- determine the benefits and strengths of the current AAHS housing provision, along with any suggested improvements
- provide the AAHS board and its partners with information that will help guide the continued development of effective housing solutions
- inform development of other not-for-profit housing initiatives, and advocacy for effective housing policy and programs at various levels of government.

The evaluation plan was approved by the AAHS Board in September 2022. Phase 1 (October 2022 to March 2023) included document review and 34 individual, confidential interviews with a) tenants, b) current and former board members, and c) Antigonish area and sector representatives. Interview questions focused on the impact of the organization's three-pronged vision of economic, social and environmental sustainability in affordable housing; and on the policies, processes, and relationships that best support such initiatives. All three groups welcomed the evaluation and many stressed the importance of evaluation (*"being well intentioned, doesn't mean you aren't misguided"*).

In order to optimize trustworthiness of findings, a draft report was completed for each of the three stakeholder groups, and the relevant report circulated to each interview participant for review and comment before it was finalized and submitted to the AAHS Board.

A high degree of consensus was found within and among all three groups. As a result, in addition to providing focused information specific to AAHS, findings provide important guidance for both other community housing organizations, and government programs seeking to address the current housing crisis. This report both summarizes the impacts of the AAHS initiatives, and – based on evaluation findings - presents considerations for broader planning.

### A HIGH LEVEL OF SUPPORT FOR AAHS AND ITS ACCOMPLISHMENTS

**Both tenants and community partners were highly supportive not only of the quality of housing units developed by AAHS, but also the commitment shown by the organization.**

All tenants interviewed spoke highly, and most with great appreciation, of the opportunity to live at Riverside or Appleseed. Many outlined a number of advantages: affordability, quality of housing, personal health and safety, stability, experience of community, and additional supports.

While some tenants noted some design issues that could be improved for future builds, in general tenants were extremely happy with their units and the buildings, and felt that the housing was of much better quality than what they had lived in before. Health and safety benefits included security, better insulation, air quality, access to outdoors, and freedom from mold. Many gave practical examples of how the opportunity to live in the units decreased their stress and increased a sense of well-being. Additional benefits, including greater mobility, were noted by those in accessible units. There was strong support for the initiatives of solar panels and heat pumps, which many recognized as contributing to lower operating costs.

All of the tenants interviewed spoke positively about the sense of community within the buildings. Tenants shared many examples of tenants helping each other out when needed (offering child care, 'rescuing' an elderly person who was having difficulty walking in challenging weather, sharing meals, helping with minor repairs) and felt that support would be there if they needed it. Some provided examples of emotional support provided by other tenants in difficult times. All felt that the role of the community navigator/property manager was an essential component of their experience at Riverside and Appleseed.

### **More than just providing 'housing'**

Benefits described by tenants went beyond the benefits of a clean, affordable place to live. Many stressed the opportunity it provided them to take a new direction in life.

*This is a bridge for me that I'm unbelievably grateful for, and is providing me with an opportunity to move forward.... I also think that, like mentally and psychologically, if people feel a sense of possibility, it changes everything. What we really need is a platform you know, to raise our children and that platform is a home. And it's like the safety, the services, and amenities, that's what we need.*

Others discussed how stable and decent housing was providing additional opportunities for their children – the financial ability to have their children engage in community activities, and feel safe and unembarrassed by their accommodations. As one tenant commented: *At the other places (name of child) would never ask if anyone could come over, ever. Here, s/ he's not embarrassed."*

Interview participants in all three groups stressed the difference between AAHS and "public housing", some contrasting Riverside and Appleseed with other 'affordable' units, many of which were described as run-down, poorly maintained, and often unsafe. Some community partners noted that the units at Riverside and Appleseed were addressing some of the stereotypes of affordable housing units ("*breaking down some of the barriers around that*"). It was noted that "*people can take pride how their place looks and outsiders, you know, they don't necessarily see it as an affordable housing complex."*

### **The confidence of the community**

All community sector and area representatives spoke in glowing terms about the AAHS housing units.

*Awesome, well-designed, energy efficient, just really nice, really nice...Some of the nicest places in town. Very modern, well-kept, bright, spacious, well-designed, great units.*

In addition to the positive aspects of the housing units, community members also highlighted their confidence in AAHS as an organization (“*They’ve been awesome, I really can’t say enough good things*”; “*Their image and their relationship in community is really positive and has a lot of legitimacy*”). The organization was described as “*community champions and community builders*”, “*dedicated volunteers*”, “*collaborative and willing to partner of projects*”, “*tremendous advocates*”. It was noted that AAHS had been able to bring together “*key municipal partners and all levels of government*” and build bridges among these partners. Many highlighted the tremendous and ongoing volunteer contributions that had been required to achieve these accomplishments.

## **ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL AFFORDABLE HOUSING INITIATIVE**

Analysis of data emerging from evaluation of the AAHS initiative highlights key considerations for developing and implementing other effective housing solutions.

### **The importance of the three-pronged goal**

An important aspect of AAHS housing is commitment to the three-pronged vision of ***economic, environmental and social sustainability***. Interviews indicate that these are overlapping and mutually supportive aims. Board members and community and sector partners made strong links between environmental actions, housing affordability, and organizational financial sustainability. It was noted that even though not all board members were initially supportive of the commitment to solar panels and heat pumps, the realized savings had convinced all of their benefit. Although tenants were generally unaware of the commitment to environmental sustainability when they moved into the units, they also discussed the benefits, particularly of aspects such as heat pumps, solar panels, and garden plots. Some were interested in learning more about environmental features, and provided concrete examples of the economic savings and improvements in air quality/personal health that resulted.

Provision of common spaces (the community room, gardens) was perceived to support the organization’s commitment to social sustainability: supporting community building (educational and social events with other residents), and enabling tenants to maintain relationships with family and friends (e.g., booking the community room for a birthday party). Shared outdoor space was appreciated – raised garden beds provide opportunities for informal social interaction as well as fresh vegetables. Many of those interviewed felt that environmental considerations should include more than simply ‘energy efficiency’ and include design features that, while providing private living space, also promoted opportunities for community-building between tenants and with the local community.

### **Confidence of and support from the community**

The image and reputation of the sponsoring organization was seen to be essential: respect and confidence of community is necessary in order to gain financial and other support. In the case of AAHS, the early leadership and financial commitment of the Sisters of Martha, the Town of Antigonish and the Municipality of the County of Antigonish, as well as leadership from well-known and trusted individuals in the community was seen as critical in enabling the organization to become established and embark on the first building project, as well as receive community support for on-going funding initiatives.

### **Developing and managing a diverse governing body**

Findings provided an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by volunteer-run housing associations in creating and developing effective governing bodies. Unlike many other voluntary organizations, board members are required to dedicate tremendous amounts of time in sometimes

stressful situations (including taking on long-term multi-million-dollar financial obligations). This stress is exacerbated by the fact that many such organizations, like AAHS, have no employees or contracted staff to support the operation of the organization. Many felt that core leadership needed a “passion” for their work.

A unique aspect of community-based boards addressing affordable housing needs is the requirement for a diversity of skills and orientations: not only experience in financial management, development and construction, but also the so-called ‘soft’ skills that bring understanding of the needs of communities, and insights into strategies for working with them. At the same time, an effective organization must be built on shared priorities and values. Significant skill is required to build consensus around a shared vision, and facilitate productive discussions around areas of contention. Organizations are advised to a) ensure that organizational values are central to recruitment and orientation efforts; b) structure board and committee roles to allow for diverse forms of participation; and c) develop and maintain internal strategies to both monitor respectful board functioning and to facilitate constructive problem solving,

The need to develop sustainable structures and processes to capture and build on organizational learning was also stressed. The absence of such mechanisms can lead to reliance on a small number of experienced and dedicated individuals to carry the organizational history, a situation that can create significant organizational vulnerability. Documenting actions, establishing clear processes for decision-making and action, and ensuring initiatives are monitored and evaluated, are essential to building organizational stability and avoiding confusion and conflict.

#### **A multi-faceted communication plan**

Effective communication throughout the planning, building, and operational phases is essential, and requires specific skills and dedicated resources. Strategies for internal communication, two-way tenant-board communication, media relations, communication with government departments and politicians at all levels, as well as for ongoing community awareness/education are all needed.

#### **Developing a nuanced conception of ‘community’**

Results indicate that tenants have varied ideas on what positive community means for them: ranging from a safe environment for them to be alone; to confidence that neighbours can be called on if needed; to participating in group activities: to developing meaningful relationships with those with shared interests. Organizations are advised to focus on creating an environment which provides open opportunities for tenants to meet and form relationships, but also to recognize that tenants wish to define and create “community” that is meaningful to them. Simply living in the same building does not create community.

It is critical to establish, and adapt as needed, strategies to optimize tenant engagement in the life of their buildings. This can include a) clear communication processes; b) timely identification and response to tenant concerns and maintenance issues; c) mechanisms for input into new tenant selection; and/or d) dedicated positions on board and relevant committees.

#### **Taking action to address stigma around low-income housing**

Those from all three groups discussed commonly held negative views about affordable housing, and tenants living in affordable units. Key actions to avoid and minimize stigma identified include a) location and design of affordable housing units so they are a “fit” with the neighbourhood, and do not decrease local property values; b) involving and educating the local community; c) ensuring prompt attention to

any maintenance and repair issues; d) swift action to deal with any difficulties with tenants; and e) ensuring board recruitment, organizational and publicity events avoid re-enforcing negative stereotypes.

### **Planning for the challenges of selecting and managing tenants**

Selecting tenants for available housing units in a time of a tremendous need for housing and inadequate supply can pose difficulties. While those selected were positive about the application process (“*I never felt less-than*”), review of early selection processes identified a need for: a) clarity and consensus on those considered a priority for selection; b) ensuring that those selected do not require greater supports than a community-based non-profit can provide; c) anticipating and proactively addressing concerns of qualified applicants who are not selected; d) including the insights of current tenants in the selection process; and e) ensuring ongoing review and evaluation of tenant selection criteria and processes. Tenants also stressed that if one of the goals is to create and support community, attention must be given in the selection process to the potential of applicants to contribute to this goal.

Organizations must also make preparation for dealing with any tenants who are coping with additional difficulties or are disruptive. It was noted that a community navigator role was effective in preventing minor tenant issues from escalating but members of the governing body sometimes also need to be involved, and are advised to plan for tenant management challenges.

*The construction, the fundraising, the governance, all of that stuff is really easy compared to being landlords and being good landlords. It really is. I mean the things that we have to deal with are just heartbreaking, shocking. And really, really burdensome. They really take a lot of energy.*

### **Promoting evaluative thinking**

Openness to monitoring and evaluation can assist an organization achieve its aims. This includes integrating evaluative thinking into planning and decision-making, and ensuring ongoing evaluation of development and building processes, tenant relations, operation and maintenance of housing units, as well as organizational structure and processes.

## **ONGOING CHALLENGES**

### **Systemic barriers to providing community-based housing**

Many board members and community area and sector partners expressed deep frustration with dealing with the ‘red tape’ and hurdles posed by a housing funding system that was perceived to have been designed to support large developers rather than the needs of communities. Some noted that various levels of government were funded and staffed to provide services (though in many cases were providing them poorly) that AAHS volunteers were providing for nothing, but this operational work was not supported, either financially or in kind. Structural issues, and under-servicing in other areas (e.g., shortage of mental health/addictions services; tenancy board backlogs; lack of action on bylaw enforcement; protection of existing housing stock; absentee or “slum” landlords) were also mentioned as exacerbating factors. This situation was described as having impacts on the broader community: community and area sector representatives gave specific examples of the impact of housing shortages on the ability of businesses and social services to attract staff; and longer-term societal costs to the health and social systems.

### **Sustainability of community volunteer resources**

Despite the high community regard of AAHS by community representatives (and the support given by board members to each other) the current situation (and the resulting level of stress on volunteers) was

viewed as presenting a threat to sustainability of such community-based initiatives. Achieving the kind of success that AAHS has accomplished was recognized as requiring enormous commitment of time and energy: the challenge of maintaining adequate volunteer human resources was identified as a major source of vulnerability. The issue of sustainability is described as closely linked to a current lack of government/funding support for community-based (particularly small, rural) initiatives.

*It's a process that's falling almost completely on small community groups that are mostly volunteer. And just, you know, how can they expect them to go through all of these time-consuming processes that are expected to access this stuff?*

### **A need for greater collaboration**

Several of those interviewed felt that there would be benefits from greater collaboration to address housing issues, especially given the size and complexity of the housing problem<sup>1</sup>. In addition to greater collaboration and shared learning among those working towards affordable housing solutions, this would also include exploration of strategies to promote more in-kind support from community businesses and organizations (including on-going operating costs such as accounting, snow removal), and from various levels of government with the skills and paid staff to assist over-stretched volunteer organizations.

### **CONCLUSION**

This independent evaluation provided in-depth feedback to AAHS on its initiatives to date. It found a high level of community and tenant support for the housing developed, as well as strong confidence in AAHS as an organization. Results also supported the organization's three-part commitment to social, financial and environmental sustainability: these three aims were found to be mutually supportive and re-enforcing. Findings have allowed the organization to take immediate action on key issues identified, and to integrate findings into strategic planning activities and on-going organizational management.

Several key elements associated with success were identified: evaluation findings, therefore, provide potential guidance to organizations looking to develop similar initiatives.

It is important to note, however, that there is significant concern about sustainability of volunteer labour to manage such complex endeavors. Such initiatives are believed to be hindered by government funding programs that do not appropriately support community-based volunteer initiatives, even though they are often viewed as providing higher quality services.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the evaluation was conducted during the time the Nova Scotia Non-profit Housing Association, intended to support collaboration, was in formation.