

POLICY PRIMER



Blueprint for a Canada Housing Benefit System

A proposal in brief

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About the authors

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About Maytree

Maytree is a Toronto-based human rights organization committed to advancing systemic solutions to poverty and strengthening civic communities. We believe the most enduring way to fix the systems that create poverty is to ensure that economic and social rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled for all people living in Canada. Through our work, we support non-profit organizations, their leaders, and people they work with.

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This policy primer highlights key insights from *Blueprint for a new Canada Housing Benefit System: Architecture and design features*. The report proposes the architecture and design needed to transform housing benefits in Canada into a simple, adequate, and integrated system of support for renters with low incomes.

Read the full report here: <https://maytree.com/publications/blueprint-for-a-canada-housing-benefit-system-architecture-and-design-features/>



This report builds on Maytree's previous report, *Why income support is good housing policy: A new case for a permanent housing benefit in Canada*, which explains why a stronger system of housing benefits is needed.

Read the full report here: <https://maytree.com/publications/why-income-support-is-good-housing-policy-a-new-case-for-a-permanent-housing-benefit-in-canada/>

The problem: Low-income households can't afford rent

Many people can't wait for more housing – they need help today

In 2022, about 22 per cent of renter households experienced core housing need.¹ Most of them – nearly nine in 10 households – lived in unaffordable housing, meaning that they spent 30 per cent or more of their before-tax income on shelter costs.²

Rising homelessness is also linked to having insufficient income. While there are many complex factors that contribute to homelessness, the 2024 national point-in-time count of homelessness found that, of the nearly 60,000 people surveyed, most cited not having enough income as the reason behind their housing loss.³

In the long term, Canada needs more housing of all kinds – but especially social and supportive housing, where rent is based on the ability to pay and people have access to wrap-around supports. In fact, many housing experts have called on Canada to at least double its stock of social housing to bring us closer to the OECD average.⁴

But building this kind of housing takes a lot of time and money. Many households simply cannot wait years for today's pro-supply programs to build the next generation of deeply affordable housing. Even the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) has said that other policies beyond supply are needed to improve affordability for low-income renters.⁵

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- 1 Statistics Canada. (2024). Table 46-10-0085-01: Core housing need, by tenure including first-time homebuyer and social and affordable housing status. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=4610008501>.
 - 2 Statistics Canada. (2024). Table 46-10-0086-0: Dimensions of core housing need, by tenure including first-time homebuyer and social and affordable housing status. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/cv.action?pid=4610008601>.
 - 3 Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada. (2025). *Everyone Counts 2024: Highlights Report Part 2 – Survey of People Experiencing Homelessness*. <https://housing-infrastructure.canada.ca/alt-format/pdf/homelessness-sans-abri/reports-rapports/pit-counts-dp-2024-highlights-p2-en.pdf>.
 - 4 Young, R. (2023). *Canadian Housing Affordability Hurts*. Scotiabank Economics. <https://www.scbank.com/ca/en/about/economics/economics-publications/post.other-publications.insights-views.social-housing--january-18--2023-.html>; Pomeroy, Steve. (2025). *It's Time for a Double-Double in Canada's Housing Strategy*. Canadian Housing and Renewal Association. https://chra-achru.ca/blog_article/its-time-for-a-double-double-in-canadas-housing-strategy/.
 - 5 Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. (2024). *Fall 2024 Rental Market Report*. [Rental Market Report](#).

The solution: An integrated system of housing benefits

Housing benefits are a proven tool

Housing benefits are a demand-side housing policy that helps people with low incomes pay rent. We know this approach can have an impact – that’s why provinces and territories spend about \$18 billion a year on social assistance programs, most of which goes to helping over a million Canadian households pay for monthly housing costs.⁶

Moreover, core housing need, especially among renters with low incomes, dropped markedly during the pandemic, thanks to a boost in income support from the Canada Emergency Response Benefit.⁷ According to the 2022 Canadian Housing Survey, having more income is also the most cited reason why people exit homelessness.⁸

If designed correctly, housing benefits do not cause rent inflation or create disincentives to work.

Income support moves people out of homelessness and stabilizes existing renters

For new renters, such as those who experience episodic or transitional homelessness, newcomers, youth, and survivors fleeing domestic violence, a housing benefit can help them secure long-term housing. For existing renters, a housing benefit can bring stability to their current living situation by helping to pay for rent when costs go up, preventing evictions into homelessness. Housing benefits, when designed as an income support, can also increase portability and, in turn, renter mobility, giving people the confidence to find a new housing situation that better reflects their work, family, or other needs.

6 Author calculations are based on data compiled by Open Policy Ontario from provincial public accounts.

7 DiBellonia, S. & Talwar Kapoor, G. (2023). *Modernizing Core Housing Need*. Maytree. <https://maytree.com/publications/modernizing-core-housing-need>.

8 Espinoza, F. & Randle, J. (2025). *Exiting homelessness: An examination of factors contributing to regaining and maintaining housing*. Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/46-28-0001/2025001/article/00002-eng.htm>.

New renters	Existing renters
<p>People who are unhoused or looking to find rental housing.</p> <p>No single estimate of homelessness exists. Estimates range from nearly 60,000 people who experienced homelessness on a given night across Canada in 2024 to about 85,000 people who experienced known homelessness in Ontario alone in 2025.</p>	<p>Those who are forced to spend too much of their income on housing. They are housed, but their rent is not affordable.</p> <p>Affects roughly 1,010,200 renter households (872,800 renter households in market housing and 137,400 renter households in social and affordable housing).</p>

Much of the foundation for a housing benefit system already exists

We consider housing benefits as a form of income support – much like disability benefits or child benefits – that help low-income renters afford their housing costs. The good news is there are already a wide range of housing benefits offered by all levels of government, but they do not form a coherent system, nor are many of them designed like a true income support. Instead, Canada has a patchwork of housing benefits that offer different support to different people, leaving some low-income households with inadequate support and others excluded entirely, often based on where they live or the program’s eligibility criteria.

From an income support perspective, provincial and territorial social assistance programs are the main type of housing benefit available to low-income renters. Unfortunately, social assistance benefits are deeply inadequate.⁹ Single social assistance recipients living alone often fare the worst, with most benefits so low that even the maximum amounts aren’t enough to afford the average asking rent for a room in many regions.¹⁰ On top of that, people who are unhoused often cannot access shelter support from social assistance simply because they do not have shelter costs to reimburse – a contradictory rule that can keep people stuck in a cycle of homelessness.

Some provinces and territories provide other housing benefits outside of their social assistance programs. However, they are usually targeted to a specific population, like British Columbia’s Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters program, or provide minimal support compared to the cost of rent, like the Ontario Energy and Property Tax Credit.

⁹ Laidley, J. & White, A. (2025). *From data to action: Policy implications of Welfare in Canada, 2024*. Maytree. https://maytree.com/wp-content/uploads/Welfare_in_Canada_2024_brief.pdf.
¹⁰ *ibid.*

We propose to build on this patchwork, making it into a coherent and more meaningful system of support for renters with low incomes.

Manitoba Rent Assist and the Canada Housing Benefit show the way

The exemplar among provincial and territorial housing benefits is Manitoba Rent Assist, which more adequately supports low-income renters regardless of whether they receive social assistance benefits. The benefit design has also been shown to protect against rent inflation, since benefits are not tied to actual rent paid, so landlords do not know whether, or how much, a household receives.¹¹ Unfortunately, this program is only available to private market renter households in Manitoba.

Similarly, the Canada Housing Benefit (CHB), part of the National Housing Strategy, shows a potential path for different orders of government to come together to support low-income renters across Canada. But the CHB is not a true income support – rather, it’s a time-limited pot of money that isn’t nearly enough for the number of renters who need it. This limits its portability and reach. Provinces, territories, and even municipalities also have a great deal of flexibility in the design of the CHB in their jurisdiction, making it inconsistent across Canada.

Even with its challenges, the CHB is having a positive impact. It’s estimated that as many as 300,000 households are being assisted by CHB benefits,¹² and it has successfully helped house many people experiencing homelessness.¹³ However, without a long-term vision for what this program could look like after 2028, these gains are at risk.

For more on the design of CHBs across Canada, [see p.21 of our full report](#).

11 Cooper, S. Hager, J. & Plaut, S. (2020). *Assisting Renters: Manitoba’s Rent Assist in the Context of Canada’s National Housing Strategy*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Manitoba & Manitoba Non-Profit Housing Association. https://eppdscrmssa01.blob.core.windows.net/cmh-cprodcontainer/sf/project/archive/publications/nhs/research_and_planning_fund_program/assisting-renters.pdf.

12 Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada. (2025). *Progress on the National Housing Strategy - December 2025*. <https://housing-infrastructure.canada.ca/housing-logement/ptch-csd/reports-rapports/prog-nhs-dec-2025-dec-snl-eng.html>.

13 Chamandy, A. (2025, September 30). New provincial cuts will compound Toronto’s shelter system crisis, warns Chow. *The Trillium*. <https://www.thetrillium.ca/news/municipalities-transit-and-infrastructure/new-provincial-cuts-compound-torontos-shelter-system-crisis-warns-chow-11283376>.

The proposal: An integrated system of housing benefits across Canada

Our full report explores potential models for a Canada Housing Benefit System and recommends a specific system architecture and benefit design. Rather than layering new benefits on top of an already overly complex system, the evidence supports streamlining and enhancing what we have. We are not proposing a new benefit, but a restructuring of Canada's housing-related income supports into a simpler, more accessible, coherent, and adequate system where governments work together to make it happen.

The idea in brief

In brief, we propose a Canada Housing Benefit System where:

1. The federal government, provinces, and territories work cooperatively to develop a national housing benefit standard that promotes consistency across Canada. Provinces and territories negotiate some flexibility to adapt program design to local circumstances.
2. The national housing benefit standard largely mirrors the design of Manitoba's Rent Assist program – the most adequate, broadly available, and effective housing benefit in Canada. We need to adapt Manitoba's approach across Canada.
3. The default benefit calculation follows a simple formula: Recipients contribute 30 per cent of their income towards rent, and the benefit fills the gap between that contribution and 80 per cent of the median market rent for an appropriately sized unit in the jurisdiction's most populous region.
4. Federal, provincial, and territorial governments contribute as equal partners in both financial and non-financial ways. Provinces and territories are incentivized through new funding to consolidate their existing housing-related benefits into a simpler, more meaningful benefit that meets the new national standard, with today's leading jurisdictions rewarded for their past investments.
5. Provinces and territories retain responsibility over administration. Most households receive their benefit through the tax system, leveraging existing

arrangements with the Canada Revenue Agency. A transitional stream operating through social assistance systems responds to urgent needs.

[Consult the full report](#) for more on why we chose our proposed approach, the alternatives we considered, and further details about the architecture and design of a Canada Housing Benefit System.

Implementation will require multi-year intergovernmental alignment, program consolidation, and phased rollout. Recognizing that this new system could take time and money to develop and implement, we also recommend that governments explore ways to expand existing housing benefits in the interim. This includes extending the existing CHB agreements and funding, enhancing social assistance benefits, and developing a new, or enhancing an existing, tax-based benefit for low-income households.

The proposed Canada Housing Benefit System should be considered a nation-building project – one that brings governments together to reimagine how housing benefits, a critical form of social infrastructure for low-income people, can work better to unlock new growth and prosperity. It deserves a place at the top of Canada’s policy agenda.

A key guiding principle: Advancing the right to adequate housing

The right to adequate housing is recognized in international law and through the National Housing Strategy Act, 2019. While this right cannot be fulfilled immediately, governments are obligated to progressively realize it over time using all available tools. Our proposed Canada Housing Benefit System advances this commitment by encouraging governments to focus policy efforts on those in greatest housing need, applying an equity lens to designing housing support, assessing how to mobilize resources across all orders of government, and by incorporating the insights of people with a diverse range of expertise in its design.

Cost of the new system

Our vision for a Canada Housing Benefit System will create a simpler, more accessible, and efficient model of housing support that will help address housing affordability challenges across the country. It will also significantly reduce the societal costs associated with widespread housing instability.

However, this comes with a material upfront cost. The specific amount will depend on myriad design choices and the way the system is phased in, and future Maytree publications will explore impacts, interactions, phasing, and costs in different jurisdictions.

For a rough sense of scale, Blueprint, a leading non-profit policy research organization, projected that extending existing Canada Housing Benefits to all eligible households living in the provinces in 2022 would have cost an additional \$3.5 billion. Similarly, a 2023 proposal from the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness estimated that covering the gap between incomes and average market rents for households experiencing chronic homelessness and renter households in deep need would require an annual expenditure of roughly \$3.4 billion.

Why Manitoba Rent Assist is the model housing benefit

Manitoba Rent Assist is one of the most adequate and broadly available housing benefit designs among those for low-income renters in Canada. That's why we're using it as our starting point for what housing benefits should look like in each jurisdiction in the new system.

How it works

Rent Assist benefits are not based on the actual amount of rent that a household pays. Instead, benefits are calculated by taking a proportion of the median market rent (MMR) in Winnipeg – the largest city in the province – adjusted for the size of the unit each household needs.

For people who receive support from social assistance, Rent Assist is equal to 77 per cent of MMR. Benefits differ depending on whether utilities, like electricity and water, are included in the rent.

Manitoba Rent Assist (social assistance recipient)

Benefit amount = 77% * MMR for the unit needed by the household + utilities

For those who do not receive support from the province's social assistance programs, Rent Assist is equal to the difference between 30 per cent of the household's adjusted family net income (AFNI) and 80 per cent of the MMR.

Manitoba Rent Assist (low-income renter)

$$\text{Benefit amount} = (80\% * \text{MMR for the unit needed by the household}) \\ - (30\% * \text{AFNI})$$

One important implication of this formula is that the benefit amount decreases by 30 cents for every additional dollar of family income. It reaches zero when 30 per cent of family income is equal to 80 per cent of MMR for a suitable unit size.

Table: Comparison of Manitoba Rent Assist benefits, social assistance vs. non-social assistance recipients, as of July 2025¹⁴

Example household	Rent Assist – social assistance		Rent Assist – non-social assistance	
	Maximum monthly benefit, rent with utilities	Maximum monthly benefit, rent without utilities*	Maximum monthly benefit	Maximum yearly income
Single under 55, not disabled	\$676	\$601	\$702	\$28,096
Single age 55+ or disabled	\$780	\$685	\$811	\$32,432
Couple without children	\$885	\$786	\$919	\$36,768
Single parent or couple with a child	\$1,140	\$960	\$1,185	\$47,392

* When rent excludes utilities, households can receive an additional supplement for the monthly cost of reasonable utilities.

¹⁴ Government of Manitoba. (n.d.) Assistance Regulations. https://www.gov.mb.ca/fs/eia_manual/regs/index.html.

Why it works

- ✔ Benefits are meaningful to the people who need them. They are based on the reasonable cost of rent for a unit that a household needs in the area they live, not an amount that's detached from the reality of the housing market.
- ✔ Benefits are portable – tied to the household not the unit – so people can move to where they need to be for work, family, or other needs.
- ✔ Social assistance and housing benefits form one integrated system. People who receive social assistance benefits are automatically enrolled in Rent Assist, and households are not discouraged from leaving social assistance for work because they don't lose their housing benefit, since they can also apply as low-income renters.
- ✔ Benefits increase with annual rent increases, maintaining affordability for households and incentivizing the government to use its supply and regulatory levers to keep rent affordable.
- ✔ Benefit amounts are tied not to actual rent paid, but to a modest and reasonable proportion of the real median cost of rent in the province. Individual landlords don't know who receives the benefit and they cannot capture its value by raising rent, thus mitigating the potential for rent inflation.
- ✔ Using adjusted family net income (AFNI) when calculating the benefit amount causes the formula to consider income from social assistance and seniors' benefits without clawing back the support from other targeted benefits, like the Canada Child Benefit, Canada Disability Benefit, and Canada Workers Benefit.

For more on the design of Manitoba Rent Assist, [see p. 55 of our full report](#).

Innovations for the new system

A system architecture where governments work together

The idea of creating a Canada-wide housing benefit is not new. But in addition to digging deeper into the benefit design, our report explores how governments can work together to create and fund the proposed Canada Housing Benefit System.

We drew from past successes and missteps in cooperative federalism to build our proposal. In particular, we looked at the National Child Benefit Initiative of the 1990s and the early learning and child-care agreements of the 2020s, which illustrate how to forge a long-term, rights-informed, collaborative vision for a housing benefit system that helps more people move out of homelessness and stabilize their housing across Canada.

At the centre of our proposal is a new national framework that would require agreement by federal, provincial, and territorial governments. In addition to setting out shared principles and reporting expectations, the core of the framework would be a national housing benefit standard that balances the need for consistent outcomes with some local flexibility in benefit design.

Bilateral cost-sharing arrangements would accompany the framework. The federal contribution would be determined using a typical formula that combines a base amount to each province and territory with an additional per capita amount. Provinces and territories would meet the national housing benefit standard through a combination of consolidating their existing benefits, allocating new federal dollars, and covering any remaining gap through their own budgets. Jurisdictions that are already offering more adequate benefits will have less of a gap to close.

Importantly, total system funding should be driven by the scale of need rather than fixed budget envelopes, with federal, provincial, and territorial governments collectively assuming the financial risk. Agreements should also incentivize provincial and territorial governments to use other policy levers to advance human rights, improve rental affordability, and strengthen wrap-around supports. For example, provinces and territories could agree to build on the precedent of the National Housing Strategy Act by passing their own legislation that advances the right to adequate housing; strengthen rent regulation to mitigate upward pressure on rents; and expand integration with provincial health and social

supports, including by increasing investment in supportive housing for individuals experiencing chronic homelessness and complex health needs.

For more on how governments at different levels would be expected to contribute to the new system, [see p. 36 of our full report](#).

Two complementary benefit pathways balance access and efficiency

Provinces and territories would be responsible for the administration of benefits in the new system because they can leverage their existing infrastructure and expertise in social services. By contrast, a federally administered housing benefit would be too difficult to integrate with the many provincial and territorial housing programs that already exist, and a single benefit would struggle to meet the varying housing needs in each jurisdiction.

With this in mind, and echoing calls from the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness and the National Housing Accord, we propose that the Canada Housing Benefit System use two parallel intake and administrative pathways that can be accessed depending on the applicant's housing status: one for existing renters and one for new renters. The dual stream approach makes use of the efficiency of the tax system and the accessibility of social assistance. No one is excluded, and administrative costs are minimized.

1. The housing stability stream would support households already renting in the private market by helping them maintain their current housing. As with many existing provincial and territorial benefits, it would be administered through the tax system for maximum efficiency. Required information would be collected when households file taxes, with benefit amounts based on income in the prior tax year. The Canada Revenue Agency would distribute benefit payments monthly.
2. The transitional or emergency response stream would support people who are moving into rental housing from homelessness or facing a sudden loss of income, necessitating immediate housing support. It could also be used to provide ongoing additional support in certain cases, such as for the direct payment of rent to a landlord.

This stream is intended to address three drawbacks of delivering benefits through the tax system: access barriers resulting from non-filing, a lack of responsiveness to immediate need, and a lack of caseworker support for those who need it.

Therefore, the transitional stream would make use of provincial/territorial social assistance intake and benefit systems in place across the country. New applicants would be assessed quickly by a caseworker when they require support, instead of having to wait until tax time to apply.

Once a recipient's situation has stabilized, and if they do not need ongoing caseworker support, their caseworker would assist them in shifting to the housing stability stream administered through the tax system.

For more on how these two streams could work, [see p. 86 of our full report](#).

Responsibility for proving renter status shifts onto landlords

With Rent Assist as the starting point and parallel access pathways offering accessibility and efficiency, our report builds out a complete benefit design, drawing further on best practices from across Canada.

For example, to use the tax system as a delivery mechanism, our housing benefit needs a non-intrusive, low-cost method of proving that a household is paying rent. The housing component of the Quebec Solidarity Tax Credit offers a model where landlords annually submit a list of their tenants to tax authorities. Expanding this approach across Canada in partnership with the Canada Revenue Agency would enable the delivery of housing benefits through the tax system.

For more on how the Quebec Solidarity Credit asks for proof of rent, [see p. 66 of our full report](#).

Next steps

Our report looks at the proposed Canada Housing Benefit System from a national perspective. Future reports will explore jurisdiction-specific questions and considerations, such as how to address benefit interactions. We also plan to assess the potential fiscal and recipient impacts of our proposal in more detail.

[Consult the full report here.](#)



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