



Rights-based and ambitious: A new chapter for housing policy in Canada

Written submission in response to the Build Canada Homes Market Sounding Guide

Submitted by:
Maytree

August 2025

Maytree
77 Bloor Street West
Suite 1600
Toronto, ON M5S 1M2
CANADA

+1-416-944-2627

info@maytree.com
www.maytree.com

ISBN: 978-1-928003-88-5
© Maytree, 2025

About Maytree

Maytree is a Toronto-based human rights organization dedicated to advancing systemic solutions to poverty. We believe the most enduring way to keep people out of poverty is to reimagine and rebuild our public systems to respect, protect, and fulfill the economic and social rights of every person in Canada.

Maytree appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on the Build Canada Homes (BCH) Market Sounding Guide. Our submission draws on Maytree's human rights expertise in support of better housing policy in Canada.

Summary of our recommendations

Recommendation 1: Include the progressive realization of the right to housing as an explicit and central component of the BCH mandate. Further require that the BCH executive team report on how they are embedding human rights across each of their portfolios, such that BCH develops a culture and capacity to apply human rights-based approaches to all aspects of its work.

Recommendation 2: The BCH mandate should give priority to the construction of deeply affordable housing for those in greatest need – that is, people with very low incomes. This should link to clear definitions of deeply affordable and affordable housing.

Recommendation 3: Consistent with a human rights-based approach, BCH should have a dedicated mechanism for meaningful engagement with individuals with lived experience of housing precarity and grassroots organizations. Those who will live in the units built by BCH must themselves have a seat at the table.

Recommendation 4: BCH should be a permanent platform for a large-scale, non-market housing development agenda centred around government ownership of new housing and employing multiple levers in tandem to make projects viable at extremely low rents.

Recommendation 5: BCH should look to military housing as a means of demonstrating its ability to deliver government-owned assets at scale through innovative techniques.

Recommendation 6: The government should replace the Canada Housing Benefit with a permanent, entitlement-based housing benefit developed in collaboration with the provinces and territories so that it enhances the existing income security system. This is part of ensuring those in greatest need can afford the rent in BCH-built units and to provide immediate support to all struggling renters.

Recommendation 7: BCH must be empowered to coordinate all required regulatory, policy and programmatic levers across government that will assist in its mission. This should result in process for continuous communication and cooperation between all involved deputy ministers, agency heads, and their senior reports.

Recommendation 8: BCH should have an accountability framework at least as robust as the broader National Housing Strategy, complete with transparent targets, actions, and reporting. In keeping with the National Housing Strategy Act,, accountability should focus on driving results for priority populations.

Ground Build Canada Homes in the right to adequate housing

Recommendation 1: Include the progressive realization of the right to housing as an explicit and central component of the BCH mandate. Further require that the BCH executive team report on how they are embedding human rights across each of their portfolios, such that BCH develops a culture and capacity to apply human rights-based approaches to all aspects of its work.

The principal omission in the BCH Market Sounding Guide is the lack of any reference to the human right to adequate housing. It is absent not only from the various lists of objectives and principles, but also as a lens to guide the specifics of BCH's mandate and activities.

The *National Housing Strategy Act*, 2019 (NHSA) declares that it is the housing policy of the federal government to “recognize that the right to adequate housing is a fundamental human right affirmed in international law.”¹

This commitment can be traced back to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which Canada acceded to in 1976. Article 2 obligates all governments to pursue the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing by leveraging the maximum available resources. Article 28 specifies that this obligation extends to sub-national governments in federal states like Canada, which is why all ten provinces consented before Canada signed.²

1 National Housing Strategy Act, 2019. *Section 4(a)*. <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/n-11.2/FullText.html>

2 *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. 1976. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>

In effect, the provinces have already accepted that they too have an obligation to fulfill the right to adequate housing, even if they refuse to admit it today. This fact gives the federal government leverage in negotiations that it would be wise to employ more vigorously.

As for human rights at the federal level, realizing the right to housing is more than an aspiration. It is a legislated requirement that obligates us to apply a human rights lens to the daily work of managing housing policy and programs in Canada. It requires going beyond *recognizing* human rights to *institutionalizing* and *implementing* human rights through committed leadership and the nurturing of organizational capacity for human rights-based policy analysis.

Maytree calls on the government to redouble its efforts to embed the right to adequate housing across the full spectrum of housing policies and programs.

Centre those who are in greatest need

Recommendation 2: The BCH mandate should give priority to the construction of deeply affordable housing for those in greatest need – that is, people with very low incomes. This should link to clear definitions of deeply affordable and affordable housing.

Maytree supports the Market Sounding Guide’s emphasis on building more affordable housing for people with low and moderate incomes. However, we urge the government to go further in its commitment to affordability, again looking to the NHSA for inspiration.

The BCH Market Sounding Guide is correct that Canada needs housing that is affordable to low- and middle-income households, but its mandate should place a greater emphasis on helping very low-income households, such as those who are unhoused and those that receive social assistance.

Consider, for example, that the NHSA commits the government to a “focus on improving housing outcomes for persons in greatest need.” The NHSA’s explicit focus on ending homelessness is in keeping with a human rights-based approach to housing that obliges governments to centre the needs of those who are experiencing the greatest denial of their rights. BCH should do the same.

It has been estimated that ending homelessness and fulfilling the right to adequate housing would require about three million deeply affordable homes for very low- and low-income households, and only 1.4 million homes for moderate- and

median-income households.³ With the latest point-in-time count data suggesting homelessness has doubled since 2018, the lack of deeply affordable housing in Canada is a crisis worthy of prioritization.⁴

Recommendation 3: Consistent with a human rights-based approach, BCH should have a dedicated mechanism for meaningful engagement with individuals with lived experience of housing precarity and grassroots organizations. Those who will live in the units built by BCH must themselves have a seat at the table.

In addition to what BCH does, it can centre those in greatest need in other ways as well. For example, meaningfully engaging with people with lived experience of housing precarity would improve how BCH does its work. At present, the Market Sounding Guide makes no reference to this in its list of partnerships and engagement.

Use the maximum available resources for progressive realization

Recommendation 4: BCH should be a permanent platform for a large-scale, non-market housing development agenda centred around government ownership of new housing and employing multiple levers in tandem to make projects viable at extremely low rents.

Maytree strongly supports the BCH vision for faster, better, and smarter building of affordable and deeply affordable housing at scale. The government is correct to position BCH as a builder and not only a financier, and it is correct to identify a broad spectrum of potential instruments that can be leveraged to deliver on the vision, including the use of public land.

As Maytree and others have advocated, BCH has an opportunity to use its many instruments in tandem to unlock deep affordability in innovative, scalable, and sustainable ways, drawing from proven practices used by governments around the world.

3 Whitzman, C. (2023). *A Human Rights-Based Estimate of Canada's Housing Shortages*. Office of the Federal Housing Advocate/Homelessness Hub. https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/Whitzman-Human_Rights_Based_Supply_Report-EN_1.pdf

4 Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada. (2025). *Everyone Counts 2024: Highlight Report Part 1 – Enumeration of Homelessness*. <https://housing-infrastructure.canada.ca/alt-format/pdf/homelessness-sans-abri/reports-rapports/pit-counts-dp-2024-highlights-p1-en.pdf>

A Maytree-funded proposal by Dr. Carolyn Whitzman and Priya Pinjani Perwani would see BCH contract with non-market developers to build on government land, with the resulting housing managed by a non-profit provider.⁵ The government would retain ownership of the built asset, thus minimizing immediate fiscal impacts by spreading the cost to the treasury over the life of the asset. These depreciation costs would then be offset by rental income remitted annually by the operator. Like a toll on a new bridge, those with homes pay rent to cover the expenses booked by the government over the life of the asset. This model could also be applied to acquisitions of market buildings or conversions of other buildings to residential use, provided the government remains the owner of the asset.

By reducing land and financing costs, and by removing profit margins through partnerships with non-profit developers and operators, BCH could make these projects viable at much lower rents. This is an important step, but it is not enough by itself to create deeply affordable units. Simulations using real pro formas suggest tax breaks, fee waivers, and direct government grants will also be necessary in many cases, requiring real and ongoing investment vertically across levels of government and horizontally across departments within the federal government.⁶

Recommendation 5: BCH should look to military housing as a means of demonstrating its ability to deliver government-owned assets at scale through innovative techniques.

Canada's military needs to build 250,000 units of new housing on its bases across the country to replace aged-out housing for its personnel. As Maytree chair Alan Broadbent has noted, this is an opportunity not to be missed.⁷ BCH could use a variation of our proposed non-market model to build housing on military bases, generating quick wins for the new entity and proving its ability to deliver at scale through innovative techniques. In addition, all expenditures would count toward Canada's NATO targets.

There's no need to stop at 250,000 units. About a dozen bases in Canada are close to major centres, as are many more defunct bases and stations. BCH could build two or three times the needed housing and rent the surplus in the non-military market. This would require setting up appropriate security to make sure bases remain secure, a manageable task. The rents on those market units would be a

5 Whitzman, C. & Perwani, P. (2025). *Scaling up affordable housing through a 'Build Canada Homes' proposal*. Maytree. <https://maytree.com/wp-content/uploads/Scaling-up-affordable-housing-through-a-Build-Canada-Homes-proposal.pdf>

6 Ibid.

7 Broadbent, A. (2025). *Scaling housing building in Canada: Leveraging military infrastructure*. Maytree. <https://maytree.com/publications/scaling-housing-building-in-canada-leveraging-military-infrastructure/>

source of revenue for either the military or more generally the public treasury, a productive asset. The resulting communities would mix military and non-military families, a rounded social environment.

Recommendation 6: The government should replace the Canada Housing Benefit with a permanent, entitlement-based housing benefit developed in collaboration with the provinces and territories so that it enhances the existing income security system. This is part of ensuring those in greatest need can afford the rent in BCH-built units and to provide immediate support to all struggling renters.

While BCH must build non-market housing at a scale not seen in decades, it is worth reiterating that these supply-side investments must be coupled with investments in a robust income security system. For those who are worst off, income supports are needed so they can afford to pay even deeply affordable rents in BCH buildings. But income security is equally necessary for the vast number of renters who struggle in the private rental market and will never benefit from a BCH unit.

Almost 9 in 10 renters live in market housing, where rents have climbed significantly in recent years. Income support has a long history as a demand-side housing policy that can quickly and effectively help people with low incomes afford their rent.⁸ That is why, for example, core housing need dropped markedly during the pandemic, and why having more income is the most cited reason why people exit homelessness.⁹ While non-market housing is certainly the ideal situation for these households, many people simply cannot wait for new housing to be built.

Recommendation 7: BCH must be empowered to coordinate all required regulatory, policy and programmatic levers across government that will assist in its mission. This should result in process for continuous communication and cooperation between all involved deputy ministers, agency heads, and their senior reports.

Devoting the maximum available resources to Canada's housing crisis requires full cooperation across the federal government. In just a few recommendations, we have illustrated direct roles for the Department of National Defence and Employment and Social Development Canada, and this is only a sample of

8 DiBellonia, S. & White, A. (2025). *Why Income Support is Good Housing Policy: A New Case for a Permanent Housing Benefit in Canada*. Maytree. <https://maytree.com/publications/why-income-support-is-good-housing-policy-a-new-case-for-a-permanent-housing-benefit-in-canada/>

9 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>

the implicated departments. There are also existing agencies, from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation to the Canada Lands Corporation, that are pivotal to this project.

It is into this environment that BCH will be placed. It must, therefore, be empowered to access all required regulatory, policy and programmatic levers across government that will assist in its mission. This strong coordinating function would align with the Prime Minister's mandate letter making housing a cross-government priority, as well as the emphasis on reforming government to deliver greater value to Canadians.

Include robust accountability measures

Recommendation 8: BCH should have an accountability framework at least as robust as the broader National Housing Strategy, complete with transparent targets, actions, and reporting. In keeping with the NHSA, accountability should focus on driving results for priority populations.

Accountability is central to a human rights-based approach because it empowers rights holders to demand better when governments are failing to live up to their commitments.

It is understandable that an accountability framework is not included in the Market Sounding Guide at this early stage in BCH's development. Nevertheless, this must be developed alongside the specifics of BCH's mandate.

Turning again to the NHSA, the Act requires that the government establish national goals relating to housing and homelessness and identify related priorities, initiatives, timelines, and desired outcomes. This basic form of accountability – clear targets, a set of actions that could achieve those targets, and transparent data collection and reporting – must apply to BCH as well.

Again, we note here the need for definitions of deeply affordable and affordable housing. This will allow for separate targets for the building of units with different levels of affordability – a lesson learned from the insufficient number of deeply affordable units produced under the National Housing Strategy. For example, some have called for Canada to at least double its stock of social housing.¹⁰ Similarly, as part of centring those who are in greatest need, there should be specific BCH targets for reducing or preventing homelessness.

10 Young, R. (2023). *Canadian Housing Affordability Hurts*. Scotiabank Economics. <https://www.scotiabank.com/ca/en/about/economics/economics-publications/post.other-publications.insights-views.social-housing--january-18--2023-.html>