



CASE STUDY |

THE NATIONAL HOUSING COLLABORATIVE: WORKING TOGETHER FOR GAMECHANGING HOUSING POLICY

GALEN MACLUSKY

How can social labs change social policy? As leaders on the ground it's often clear in our minds how our systems lead to marginalization and inequity, as well as what needs to change. But many of us struggle to create broader systems change. In this Case Study we explore how a collaborative wrestled with that challenge and worked together to support the launch of a game changing housing policy.

OVERVIEW

On November 22, 2017 the Canadian government announced a national housing strategy. This comprehensive strategy included new measures for new builds and repairs, as well as a Portable Housing Benefit (PHB) which provides direct financial assistance to low-income households. Unlike other approaches to affordable housing that focus on increasing the quantity of affordable housing units, the PHB is a form of social assistance that stays with the family irrespective of where they live. Families in housing need can carry this benefit with them as they move to private, non-profit, or social housing. As Tim Richter, President and CEO of the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness puts it, "The Canadian Housing Benefit is potentially transformational, if it puts choice and buying-power directly in the hands of lowest-income renters and people experiencing homelessness." [from the National Housing Collaborative]

About the National Housing Collaborative

The National Housing Collaborative is "an alliance of non-profit and private housing associations, charities, and major foundations," [from the National Housing Collaborative] including the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, the Canadian Federation of Apartment Associations, and the National Association of Friendship Centres, to name a few of the many contributors. The collaborative, with the United Way of Greater Toronto acting as the secretariat, formed shortly after the October 2015 Federal election with three objectives: [from the National Housing Collaborative].

- Identify a limited number of shared priority areas for policy development
- Produce a set of action-oriented policy proposals, within priority areas
- Advocate for their adoption in a national housing strategy by the federal government, starting with Budget 2017

Learn more about the collaborative on their [website](#).

The PHB is an important addition to the other approaches that form a comprehensive housing strategy, but it also comes with unique implementation challenges. It requires changes to how the federal government, provincial governments, and multiple different types of social assistance programs work together.

How did this transformational change in policy come about? And, what can those of us seeking to effect systems and policy change learn from it? In this Case Study, Pedro Barata, Senior Vice President Community Impact & Strategy at United Way Greater Toronto; Noah Zon, Director of Policy and Research at Maytree; and, Michelle German, Senior Manager Policy and Partnerships at Evergreen share their perspectives as members of the National Housing Collaborative – a cross-sectoral group that played a critical role in driving and supporting this change.

LESSON 1: BE PREPARED TO BE IN THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME

The seeds of this work date back to 2008, after the government of Ontario introduced the provincial poverty reduction strategy and the announcement of the Ontario child benefit, considered at the time to be a gamechanger for income security in Ontario. Those who were excited by this development started thinking about the next step: What could the next policy gamechanger be? [from the Toronto Star]

However, 2008 was not the right time to be advocating for more policy change related to poverty. The recession and economic slowdown were driving governments to focus on infrastructure programs, while the success of the child benefit meant that government was interested in demonstrating change in other areas such as education. Even if there had been a strong case for a PHB, the time was simply not right.

Instead, this became a period of planting seeds: making connections, holding conversations, sharing ideas, and exploring where the momentum and interest lay across all sectors. Ultimately these explorations revealed a shared sense that the government was not focusing on housing, and one result was the creation of the GTA Housing Action Lab: a multi-sectoral collaborative working to change a fragmented housing system.

Drawing upon Social Lab and Collective Impact frameworks, the Housing Action Lab brought together people from the private, public, and voluntary sectors to create a collective vision for change and a plan to work together. The Lab produced reports and recommendations on housing in the GTA, built groundswell for change in the public and across sectors, and ultimately contributed to the Government of Ontario's updates to the Long-Term Housing Strategy which included a pilot program for a PHB in Ontario.

When the federal government then announced its intention to establish a national housing strategy in 2016, the foundation was already set. The GTA Housing Action Lab had already convened many passionate contributors, and their experiences provided a window into the work required to support

“ Policy ebbs and flows. The best thing that you can have is a continuum of tools that you can use as policy and fiscal times change. ”

-Pedro Barata, United Way Greater Toronto

this type of change. There was also a body of work that explored the potential of the Portable Housing Benefit and the models it could follow. Finally, there was momentum and enthusiasm for change within the collaborative and government.

But even with these starting points, the work seemed impossible. The time needed to develop a clear vision and evidence for change, as well as the scale of collaboration needed to build a case for change was daunting. **What galvanized the effort was the recognition that this was a unique window of opportunity to effect change.** For those who had been exploring this work for nearly a decade, this was a clear time for action.

What is striking about how this work evolved is that it did not begin with the formation of the National Housing Collaborative. It began almost a decade earlier, through explorations and conversations to identify where change could happen. Even though the initial catalyzers may have had approaches such as the Portable Housing Benefit in mind at the outset, it was critical to plant many seeds and identify the unifying issues that galvanize others. Sometimes we rush to make the change that we want to see, but the groundwork laid before the National Housing Collaborative tells a different story: one of building networks and relationships, one of identifying the right places to act, and one of working patiently while waiting for the right time.

LESSON 2: COLLABORATE FOR CREDIBILITY, NOT CLOUT

Through the work of establishing shared goals, a collective vision, and holding conversations across the country to identify national housing needs, the collaborative identified four core areas of need that helped focus their work. With these areas as starting points they formally engaged government decision-makers to identify *their* needs. Here, the Lab did not focus on leveraging their breadth and influence to ‘force’ change. Rather, they used their collective assets to identify what they could do to support change.

Another benefit of having a diverse group of stakeholders working together around a common vision was the credibility this gave their recommendations. Governments are wary of potential opposition to new approaches – what’s popular with one group is just as likely to be unpopular with another. However, having a table that included the private sector (home builders and rental unit owners), the voluntary sector (homelessness and poverty advocates), indigenous perspectives, and foundations demonstrated that the collaborative’s proposals had appeal across all sectors.

“ In 2016 everyone thought the national PHB was a crazy idea. ‘It will never happen. There’s no way that we’ll come out of a 1.5-year process with a united view, let alone one that the government will adopt.’

-Pedro Barata, United Way Greater Toronto

“ Coalitions are a pretty common tool used by civil society to make change. What was unique here was the level of time, the financial investment, collective patience, and the transparency behind the work.

-Noah Zon, Maytree

Sometimes it's easy to think about the work of effecting policy change as the work of flexing the largest muscles, but this case provides an interesting counterpoint. The National Housing Collaborative used their assets and reach to bring the perspectives of community to the forefront, to proactively find the evidence that would help rather than force a government decision, and to demonstrate that theirs was an idea that would resonate across the country.

Bringing together this type of cross-sector collaborative is not easy, nor does it happen organically. In this case, not only did the United Way Greater Toronto provide a neutral platform for this collaboration, as the group's secretariat they also galvanized efforts, raised resources to support the collaborative's work, provided project management supports, and facilitated a network for cross-country engagement. This type of role is critical for successful collaboration but it requires committed investment. As Pedro Barata puts it, "This work can't be done off the side of someone's desk. It requires significant, dedicated resources to do properly."



To work with government, you need to demonstrate that your idea is palatable across political, geographic, and interest group lines. It becomes a much more compelling idea with this kind of support.

-Michelle German, Evergreen



LESSON 3: WORK WITH, NOT AGAINST, GOVERNMENT

Michelle, Noah, and Pedro all emphasized how important it was that this work approached government in a collaborative, not combative way. It can be tempting to view governments as adversaries to be won over. Instead, the National Housing Collaborative sought ways to work with governments constructively in much the same way that they sought to work within themselves to bridge connections between different perspectives and values.

In all stages of the work, the members of the collaborative connected with government stakeholders to understand their needs and perspectives: Were these issues relevant to decision-makers? What did they need to advance these ideas or make decisions on them? Where and how did they want to get involved? Just as it was important to get the perspectives of residents across Canada to make sure that action reflected their needs, it was also important to understand the perspectives and needs of those in the public sector.

The PHB was only one of four major areas of focus for the National Housing Collaborative. In each area the collaborative pooled their resources to gather evidence, make refinements to respond to questions and issues that government decision-makers posed, and ultimately deliver something that helped rather than hindered the decision-making process. Working on multiple areas also helped to build consensus across the collaborative itself, rather than trying to decide on a sole issue to focus on.



We often heard that our housing markets lack supply, that housing benefits will lead to rent inflation. It's not enough to say we don't agree. Instead we brought evidence and experiences from elsewhere to show how those negative outcomes can be avoided. We made a point of investing energy in responding to concerns that we heard.

-Noah Zon, Maytree



SUPPORTING GAMECHANGING POLICY AT ALL LEVELS IS AN ART

While this is an example of a federal policy change that was supported by organizations with national reach, not all of us are part of organizations or networks that have such broad connections. However, these lessons do provide guidance on how we can work to effectively work with our political systems for change at scales from community to nation.

1. Recognizing that change will not happen instantaneously, we can instead focus our efforts on building a platform for change that gives us the power to act when the time is best. We can prepare to be in the right time and the right place.
2. While we may be tempted to use collaborative clout to force an issue, this case provides a compelling reason to use our collective assets to build credibility instead. The diversity of perspectives we can gather around our issue is an opportunity to demonstrate just how broad the support is for this change.
3. Even if we find ourselves on opposite ends of the table from those who manage the systems that affect our communities, this case provides a clear reason why we need to find ways to work with those leaders, understand their perspectives, support them, and bring them into our fold to create real change. Instead of our ideas winning over theirs, this is an example of everybody working together to create change.

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Learn more about the work of the National Housing Collaborative on their [website](#), by exploring an article published in [the Hill Times](#), or in an article about the process published by [Maytree](#). You can also read [their final submission to the national housing strategy](#).

REFERENCES

Brown, Jennifer. "Proposal Addresses Income and Rental Gap." Toronto Star, 3 Jan. 2009.

MacLusky, Galen, and Noah Zon. "Discussion on the National Housing Collaborative." 15 May 2018.

MacLusky, Galen, and Michelle German. "Discussion on the National Housing Collaborative." 17 May 2018.

MacLusky, Galen, and Pedro Barata. "Discussion on the National Housing Collaborative." 10 May 2018.

"The National Housing Strategy: A Brave New Chapter for Housing Affordability in Canada."
National Housing Collaborative, nhc-cpl.ca/en/home/.