

Community Housing Canada

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# Overview of Fostering Social Inclusion through Community Housing

From Community Housing Canada's Area of Inquiry III

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**Community Housing Canada Description:** Our mandate is to combine expertise from the academic and community housing sectors to strengthen the sector’s capacity so it can better meet the needs of the 1 in 8 Canadian households who need support realizing their right to housing.

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## Executive Summary

This report introduces Area of Inquiry III: Fostering Social Inclusion through Community Housing and gives an overview of the Area's activities in its first year of operations. Our activities were significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic; however, the first year provided an opportunity to reflect on the Area's goals and develop collective objectives that our team will work toward meeting in the coming months and years.

## A Note from the Deputy Director

The past year has presented several challenges to social science research. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a need to maintain physical distance from one another, which creates particular challenges for those of us who strive to understand the nuances of daily social life. Despite this, we have begun our work toward building a strong alliance of academics and community members who are interested in understanding and promoting social inclusion within community housing settings. This is extremely important given the current global social, health, and economic contexts. COVID-19 exposed a variety of weaknesses in the ability of our present community structures to support the basic human right to housing. Although we have always experienced housing inequity in Canada, I argue that these inequities in access to inclusion in and through housing became even more glaringly apparent in the past year.

Since the start of our project, we have met several times as a collective area to discuss plans for our work. We determined that social inclusion is already well-defined, and we include a discussion of CMHC's recently released definition, written by Dr Katie MacDonald (Athabasca University), in this report. However, we have identified a need to better understand how to construct and foster inclusive communities within today's social and economic contexts. A scan of literature that focuses on this topic is currently underway.

In 2020-2021, our Area supported a master's student, Caitlin Grogan, who worked on understanding social inclusion through untraditional community housing arrangements for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Social distancing requirements from COVID-19 delayed the data collection for her work, but a report is expected in 2022. We have recently added new students to our team for the 2021-2022 academic year. **Imad Dweik** is a PhD student in Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of New Brunswick (UNB) who will be exploring mental health and social stigma in New Brunswickers who

are waiting for and receive publicly subsidised housing. **Emily Forte** is a MA Student in Sociology at UNB who will be studying barriers and facilitators to inclusion through housing experienced by mothers who parent with addictions. We have also welcomed Post-doctoral Fellow Dr **Chloé Reiser** to our team. Dr Reiser is currently working with area contributor Dr **André-Anne Parent** at the Université de Montréal, and she will begin a fellowship at UNB in September 2021.

Our goals for the upcoming year include the continuation of our work on understanding how to foster social inclusion in community housing; building and nurturing existing partnerships with community housing organizations and identifying opportunities to understand and measure social inclusion in real-world housing contexts. Throughout this process we will share research and host platforms for knowledge exchange to facilitate community engagement with the work being conducted by this area and to learn from the experiences of our community partners.

It has been an immense pleasure to work with our dedicated collaborators and investigators in Area III over the past year and I look forward to a productive and insightful second year.

Julia Woodhall-Melnik, PhD

Associate Professor, University of New Brunswick

Saint John, New Brunswick

## Area III Overview

Community Housing Canada's Area of Inquiry III focuses on research, knowledge dissemination and translation, and high-quality student training in social inclusion and community housing. Our goal is to conduct, promote, and broadly share research that assesses the role of community housing in promoting social inclusion and economic opportunity. Many of these activities are carried out through the Housing, Mobilization & Engagement Research Lab (HOME-RL) at the University of New Brunswick. This work feeds into and is sponsored in part by a larger, national project co-supported by Capital Region Housing, the University of Alberta, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation. This national project's mission is to bolster the community housing sector's functions and capacity so that it can better meet the needs of the 1 in 8 Canadian households who require assistance in realizing their right to housing.

Specifically, our research addresses the critical question:

*How can inclusion be conceptualised, measured, and achieved in the community housing sector?*

Our goal as a research team is to undertake a series of projects over the next four years that engage with this question and with community partners to share knowledge and support policy development and best practices in community housing.

This Area of Inquiry has four objectives:

- 1) Investigate barriers to and opportunities for social inclusion within neighbourhoods and buildings;
- 2) Develop a broader set of measures for neighbourhood-level inclusion;
- 3) Document community housing residents' experiences of inclusion and integration; and
- 4) Examine how inclusion contributes to the sustainability of community housing and resilience.

These objectives align with the priorities outlined in Canada’s National Housing Strategy. For example, the first objective is situated within the Strategy’s definition of inclusion and how that can be achieved by organizations. The other objectives consider what inclusion is, why it matters, and will supplement efforts to conceptualise and measure tenants’ social integration. As such, key outputs for our Area of Inquiry will include identifying strategies for promoting and measuring social inclusion in community housing and any associated outcomes.

Led by researchers at the University of New Brunswick, our research is further supported by UNB’s Institute of Urban and Community Studies, which aims to work with community-based partners to improve social, economic, and health equity for those experiencing vulnerability. The area is also supported by the Housing, Mobilization & Engagement Research Lab (HOME-RL), which specifically investigates these vulnerabilities within the context of housing and neighbourhoods. In this context, community housing must also provide access to basic facilities that support full participation in society and in the economy, such as access to employment, social, healthcare, and childcare services, education, and public infrastructure (i.e., transit) to facilitate mobility between these services and housing.

## Area III Collaborators

Our interdisciplinary team is led by **Julia Woodhall-Melnik** (UNB) and supported across the country and globally by **Katie MacDonald** (Athabasca), **Robert Wilton** (McMaster), **Edward Hall** (Dundee), **Yushu Zhu** (Simon Fraser), and **André-Anne Parent** (Montréal).

Together, these scholars provide varied expertise to support an intersectional framework of analysis of the relationship between social inclusion and community housing along the following axes: social

inclusion/exclusion, and housing access for adults with disabilities, older adults, members of visible minorities, immigrants, and adults who live in economically precarious situations.

Our team engages with community partners who provide valuable insight into the realities of social inclusion from front line housing and policy perspectives. Collaborators include **Leigh Bursey** (City of Brockville), **Esther De Vos** (Civida), the Province of New Brunswick's **Department of Social Development (NB)**, the **Teen Resource Centre**, and the **Human Development Council** in New Brunswick. Over the coming years, we will work with these partners to ensure that our results are translated to and used by the community housing sector.

We also provide learning opportunities for graduate students and post-doctoral fellows. To date, we have supported 1 doctoral and 2 master's students, and we are welcoming post-doctoral fellow Chloé Reiser (Montreal) to UNB this fall. Edward Hall is currently recruiting a graduate student who will also work on social inclusion in housing. Our graduate students play a key role in expanding our knowledge on social inclusion in a variety of community housing contexts and they engage in knowledge translation training and initiatives as part of their own studies and academic development through Community Housing Canada.

Our team also works with external partners who are central to our Area of Inquiry, such as **Horizon Housing**, an affordable housing provider in Alberta which has been supporting vulnerable Calgarians for more than 30 years. Focusing on mixed income, mixed use approach to reduce stigma, Horizon Housing supports residents with a variety of needs, including those with mental health or mobility challenges, the working poor, and those leaving vulnerable situations related to addiction, homelessness, and domestic violence.

**Adrienne Brady**, Horizon Housing's Director of Stakeholder Relations, is actively involved in the project and is leading two research projects: the first is a real estate needs assessment to better understand the

needs of their community and social service agency partners when it comes to built form and the built environment. The second is an Indigenous housing assessment to understand what Horizon Housing as a housing provider can do to improve housing outcomes for Indigenous people who make their homes with them.

## Reflections on Social Inclusion by Dr. Katie MacDonald

Social inclusion is a cornerstone of the National Housing Strategy. Within the National Housing Strategy, inclusion is seen as being fulfilled when communities are diverse, sustainable and people are able “to build secure, productive and meaningful lives ... [and] participate fully in society and the economy.” To this end, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) commissioned and designed a Social Inclusion Index (2021) to address the need to measure social inclusion, to report on social inclusion in market and non-market housing, and to consider associations between social inclusion and other factors such as economic, health and social variables.

### **The five indicators from the Canadian Housing Survey that were identified included:**

- 1) How satisfied are you with your dwelling?
- 2) How satisfied are you with your neighborhood?
- 3) How satisfied are you with feeling as part of your community?
- 4) How safe do you feel from crime walking alone in your area after dark?
- 5) In the past 12 months, how difficult or easy was it for your household to meet its financial needs in terms of transportation, housing, food, clothing, and other necessary expenses?

These five indicators were chosen to measure dwelling satisfaction, neighborhood satisfaction, satisfaction with feeling part of community, sense of safety, and economic hardship.

Unsurprising to many readers will be that the findings demonstrated that when these measures are implemented, respondents who experience different forms of oppression or inequities (such as those who reported poor mental health, those in core housing need, LGBTQ2S+, had experiences homelessness, etc.) are more likely to have a lower social inclusion score.

The development of this index is an important way forward for considering the non-housing outcomes for social and affordable housing, and for getting a clearer picture of what inclusion looks like for Canadians. With increased attention on social inclusion and wellbeing in the community housing sector, having a measure can help the sector in several important ways:

- Housing providers will be able to demonstrate their impact on social inclusion using the Canadian Housing Survey and through the analysis of their own program data; and
- The measure can help identify areas for growth and partnership for supporting social inclusion. For example, if there are low scores for feeling a part of community, a housing provider may want to partner with other organizations providing social network and community development.

While this is an important step forward, for social inclusion to centre the needs of those most impacted by inequity, some of these measures require critical scrutiny. For example, understandings of what is safe may vary drastically amongst and between populations. Further, the causes of these feelings can also vary. Feeling unsafe could stem from street harassment to feeling unsafe because of the presence of people who are houseless. For some, law enforcement is associated with safety, whereas for others, they are not. Safety cannot be considered a neutral term.

Additionally, any opportunities for intervention that arise from measures of inclusion must centre on those impacted by inequity—for example, adding increased police presence in areas with low perceived safety will not make everyone feel safer and could make some people feel less safe.

As Area III continues to explore and understand how community housing can measure, impact, and frame social inclusion, it will be worthwhile to consider differences in communities and understandings of social boundaries. How might those in community housing define inclusion? What kinds of communities (social, political, and economic) do people want to belong to and does this mean creating

more entry points and more accessibility into current communities, or does it mean rethinking and reimagining community?

## Highlights from Our Team

As we began our work this year, we discussed plans for engaging with social inclusion in community housing as a multi-disciplinary, multi-jurisdictional team. In this brief report, we highlight the work and goals of Dr Katie MacDonald, Dr Robert Wilton, Adrienne Brady, and Dr Julia Woodhall-Melnik.

### Dr Katie MacDonald: Assistant Professor, Athabasca University

Katie is a newly appointed Assistant Professor of Sociology with Athabasca University. She has considerable experience working with community agencies and recently completed her post-doctoral fellowship with Civida in Edmonton, Alberta. Her current research examines the emotional work of affordable housing frontline workers in Alberta and how they understand housing inequity. We asked Katie about her work, and she said:

*“One of the priorities of the National Housing Strategy is for housing providers to be people-focused and increase capacity amongst staff and advocates. This includes the centering of vulnerable populations as well as supporting professional development. This shift means that those working in the housing sector will be expected to work with people applying for and living in affordable housing with more frequency and expected to both understand the context of intersecting oppressions as well as regulate their emotions as they do so.”*

Katie is conducting a pilot qualitative inquiry into experiences of housing staff in Alberta as they engage in the important work of facilitating access to housing. This has important implications for those working on the frontlines, as frontline workers are instrumental in shaping inclusive landscapes within community housing. Understanding their realities and definitions of inclusion is critical as frontline workers provide support to those living in and looking for affordable community housing.

We asked Katie about her goals for Area of Inquiry III in the coming years and she said:

*“I am excited about the possibility for creating connections between researchers and housing providers on how to both promote and understand social inclusion. I would like to see projects supported that think critically about the promotion of social inclusion, not just those that measure them—this would help housing providers achieve parts of the National Housing Strategy too.”*

Katie is fundamental to the construction and oversight of Area III’s initial work on exploring social inclusion. She is working with Julia Woodhall-Melnik to supervise a summer student who will explore mechanisms for fostering inclusion in community housing.

Katie is deeply committed to the meaningful practice of knowledge translation and says that it “should be included throughout all of the projects [that we engage in].” She would like to see a “commitment that for all of the research conducted through Area of Inquiry III, we ensure that there are accessible formatted reports that prioritize what social inclusion means for those working in affordable housing, or people supporting those in affordable housing.”

#### **Dr Robert Wilton: Professor, McMaster University**

Robert is a Professor of Social Geography with McMaster University. His early research focused on ‘NIMBY’ (Not In My Back-Yard) reactions to the siting of housing for people with disabilities, mental health problems, and addictions. He found that community opposition can constitute a major barrier to social inclusion and can frustrate efforts to develop an equitable housing geography. We asked him about this interdisciplinary approach to his more recent research:

*“I examined the changing geography of the addiction treatment system. This involves tracing the varied accommodations (shelters, withdrawal management programs, residential treatment*

*programs, therapeutic communities, sober living homes, etc.) available to people as they navigate the treatment system.”*

His work has also taken him to partner with a tenants’ coalition in Hamilton, Ontario, examining the living conditions of the city’s residential care facilities. These facilities provide low-cost housing to several marginalized groups, including people with psychiatric disabilities and low-income seniors. However, they are also poorly funded, custodial settings that offer little privacy and security. Additionally, many tenants deal with chronic poverty that presents further challenges in finding other housing options.

We asked Robert about his goals for Area of Inquiry III in the coming years and he said:

*“I am particularly interested in exploring the housing experiences and needs of people with intellectual disabilities over the lifetime of the grant. The last institution for people with disabilities did not close in Ontario until 2009 and the range of housing options available to many people remains limited. While most people with intellectual disabilities live with family members or in congregate/group home settings, existing studies indicate that many desire other housing options and, importantly, the opportunity to exercise more control over their living arrangements.”*

Robert will be working with Sabine O’Donnell (MA candidate, McMaster) to examine some of the innovative initiatives underway to create these housing opportunities through a mix of research, engagement, and knowledge exchange. He will also be looking to capitalise on the project to develop stronger connections with organisations run by, and for, people with intellectual disabilities.

**Dr Julia Woodhall-Melnik: Associate Professor, University of New Brunswick**

Julia is an Associate Professor of Social Science at the University of New Brunswick in Saint John. Prior to accepting her current position, she was a CIHR Post-Doctoral Fellow with Dr Jim Dunn of McMaster

University. During this time, she focused on the role of Housing First programs in providing stable housing to men who experience chronic homelessness. She has significant experience working with community partners to understand the social housing sector in Ontario and she brings that experience to her current projects in Saint John. Julia stresses the “importance of true meaningful community engagement to the development and utilization of best practices in the community housing sector.”

Julia is currently leading a 5-year project funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research that works with the local provincial housing agency (Social Development) to determine the mental health, financial, social, and physical health status and needs of low-income New Brunswickers as they wait for and move into social housing. Julia notes:

*“My team has been very busy surveying applicants for social housing across New Brunswick. The baseline data already point to increased financial, health and social needs among this population. Once we understand the needs and contexts of this population, we can work with social development and persons with lived experience of housing precarity to develop interventions that meet the needs of folks who are waiting for access to housing.”*

This study is longitudinal, and the team expects to release baseline findings later this year. Julia intends to engage with Community Housing Canada and Area of Inquiry III to interpret and disseminate her findings. Julia notes:

*“The baseline period is as important, if not more important, as the follow-up surveys. Although we hope to see what changes occur over time and to see the impact of movement into social housing on outcomes, we know that there are gaps for people as they wait for social housing. Across most jurisdictions in Canada, the wait for access to affordable community housing is long and often stressful. This system needs to be revamped and we are encouraged by recent Federal commitments to increase funding for social housing. However, for some folks, short waits can*

*represent huge barriers to stability and wellbeing. We need to figure out what we can do to intervene and produce the best outcomes for all Canadians who live without access to affordable accommodations.”*

The team has surveyed several older adults and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities who are not stably housed. Julia says:

*“We have had a lot of people reach out to us. Even those who don’t qualify for the study have provided us with interesting insights. Parents of adults living with disabilities are concerned about their children who are living in rooming housing while waiting for access to housing. Older adults are suffering under the weight of financial strain while trying to maintain housing which often does not meet their needs for accessible accommodation. Persons with mental illness are experiencing isolation while concurrently experiencing uncertainty about their housing.”*

In the future, Julia plans to conduct a large qualitative study that focuses on the needs of groups that are identified through the survey as having complex unmet needs and who view community housing as a pathway to stability. The needs of these groups are multifaceted and vary from one another. A deeper understanding of these needs will help Julia, her team, and their community partners work toward evidence informed initiatives that can address the specific needs of these groups.

**Adrienne Brady: Director of Stakeholder Relations, Horizon Housing & Calgary Chamber of Commerce**

Our team also works with external partners who are central to our Area of Inquiry, such as Horizon Housing, an affordable housing provider in Alberta which has been supporting vulnerable Calgarians for more than 30 years. Focusing on mixed income, mixed use approaches to reduce stigma, Horizon Housing supports residents with a variety of needs, including those with mental health or mobility challenges, the working poor, and those leaving vulnerable situations related to addiction,

homelessness, and domestic violence. Adrienne Brady, Horizon Housing's Director of Stakeholder Relations, is working with her team on two research projects. She notes that:

*"The first is a real estate needs assessment to better understand the needs of our community and social service agency partners when it comes to built form. The second is an Indigenous housing assessment to understand what we as a housing provider can do to improve housing outcomes for Indigenous people who make their homes with us."*

The goal of these projects is to ensure that the community housing sector in Alberta can respond to the needs of Indigenous peoples and the needs of the low to moderate-income community in general. These projects will provide Horizon Housing with critical information which is needed for the development of a more robust and responsive community housing sector in Calgary. Area of Inquiry III will support Horizon Housing and Adrienne by providing an additional platform for disseminating the lessons they learn to stakeholders in other regions across Canada and globally.

## The Next Four Years

Over the next four years, Area of Inquiry III has identified some key areas in which we will work. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of our timeline and goals.

Year One provided us with the opportunity to continue to build partnerships and identify our plans and goals as an Area of Inquiry.

Since May 2021, Katie MacDonald and Julia Woodhall-Melnik have been working alongside graduate student, Emily Forte, to review literature on elements of inclusive communities and on mechanisms for promoting social inclusion through community housing. Over the course of years two and three, we will work with the findings from the literature review to solicit feedback on social inclusion from our community partners. Our goal is to determine how existing research resonates with their experiences of social inclusion. We hope to build on this review and feedback to explore, demonstrate and measure approaches to foster inclusion in years four and five.

Over the lifespan of Area III, graduate students will provide Research Assistant support while working on their own projects which contribute directly to our understanding of social inclusion and community housing. Our anticipated timeline of activities is displayed in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Anticipated Timeline of Activities**

	Year One	Year Two	Year Three	Year Four	Year Five
<i>Identify Goals</i>					
<i>Build Partnerships &amp; Knowledge Translation</i>					
<i>Area project: how can we create inclusive communities?</i>					
<i>Development of a Toolkit on Social Inclusion for the community housing sector</i>					
<i>Provide avenues for accessible dissemination of research results</i>					
<i>Graduate student explorations of inclusion</i>					

The team from Area of Inquiry III has identified a variety of strategic goals and partnerships. Two of the most prominent goals are to: 1) Develop evidence informed strategies for developing inclusive communities; and 2) Create opportunities for dissemination and uptake of these strategies in communities across Canada and abroad. Current plans include the development of a toolkit that can be used by the community housing sector across Canada and abroad to foster social inclusion in housing. The area will work alongside Community Housing Canada to create and identify opportunities to disseminate knowledge learned through our various projects and initiatives to the academic community and stakeholders in the community housing sector.