

Nova Scotia's Public Housing Assets Underutilized While 6,000 on Waitlist – Auditor General

For release June 21 -- Nova Scotia doesn't have an effective governance structure in place for public housing and is failing to provide adequate oversight of the regional housing authorities across the province, says the Auditor General in a new report.

"It is important that eligible Nova Scotians are provided access to public housing in a fair, consistent and timely manner that ensures existing public housing units are used to their maximum potential," says Auditor General Kim Adair.

The Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing needs to take action now to improve governance and create a culture of accountability, says the Auditor General.

The province's public housing portfolio consists of over 11,000 units from Yarmouth to Sydney, with the majority located in Halifax and Cape Breton regional municipalities. As of December 31, 2021, there were close to 6,000 applicants on the waitlist for housing, more than half the total number of units in the province.

While there is an average wait time of about two years, some applicants can wait much longer than that for a unit, depending on the location and size required.

The audit found that regional housing authorities are not effectively managing public housing application and tenant placement processes. Inconsistent and poor processes were identified throughout the audit period, which covered January 1, 2019 to December 31, 2020.

One issue the audit identified stems from regional housing authorities not adequately monitoring continued eligibility for public housing. This has resulted in tenants living in units that exceed their size requirements, while families remain on the waitlist.

Management estimates over 1,500 units are underutilized as a result, outlines the report.

When units are vacated, housing authorities all too often missed the target to get new tenants moved in. The audit reveals that, on average, it takes more than double the 60-day target to place a new tenant into vacated units.

However, there are few performance measures, and no clear accountability or action taken when targets are not met, outlines the new report.

The audit also reveals the current operating structure has little accountability due to missing or outdated management agreements, and there are no business plans or reporting requirements.

In 2020-21, the province spent just over \$54 million on regional housing authorities, or roughly one-third of the total \$152.9 million operating costs. Tenant rent, or revenue, covered \$67 million with the remaining \$31 million shared between the federal and municipal governments.

The audit makes 20 recommendations, including implementing an effective governance structure, and creating a fair and consistent public housing application process and accurate waitlist ranking system.

The Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing agrees with the recommendations and is actively working toward resolutions.

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