Solution: Community Housing Action Group
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Introduction

Waterloo Region is the fourth largest community in Ontario and tenth largest in Canada. The population is growing and will continue to grow. With the Region already experiencing existing pressures and with the population continuing to grow we are facing an affordable housing crisis due to the demands, pressures and needs to find housing for our community members. The number of people aged 65 and older will more than double in the next 20 years. Housing size continues to decrease. These shifts will have an impact on our community's housing form and supply. Housing affordability is becoming an issue for an increasing number of households across the region, and particularly so for those households with lower incomes.

Our group started by looking at the limited supply of housing in the Waterloo region, compared to the demand for affordable housing that exists in the community. It was shocking for our group to learn of waiting lists that could last over seven years. In our research, and by connecting with community organizations and developers, we are convinced that we need to look at different housing alternatives to more steadily be able to increase the supply of housing to fall closer in line with all needs in our community. By looking at a community housing model, we can increase the availability of more affordable housing, at a more affordable rate for those in need.

We began by researching how previous community living accommodations were received in the Region. While multiple dwelling residences seemed to be a simple solution to increase housing availability, rooming houses and boarding house operations across Waterloo Region did not appear to be as well-received as hoped and created some potential issues for both landlord and tenants as a long-term housing solution. With this model in mind, our goal was to rethink how our community was creating housing solutions that meet the diverse needs of our community, especially for seniors, victims of domestic violence, persons with disabilities, the Indigenous community, and immigrants.

Who We Spoke To

In doing our research we are thankful to many that assisted us in understanding the current systems in place, the challenges with these systems, and brainstorming through some solutions. We spoke to the following individuals who broadened our perspectives and pointed us to additional resources:

- Clayton Freeborn and Lula Woldemariam - House of Friendship
- Kristin Dearlove - Habitat for Humanity
- Emma Jennings - Reception House
- Lori Trumper - Kitchener Housing Inc
- Bob Currie - WalterFedy
- Martin Asling - YIMBY

Other Resources

For more information on community housing models, feel free to visit these pages:

[Co-living trend coming to Zibi development | CBC News](#)
[Coast-to-Coast Affordable Housing Innovations — Kehilla Residential Programme](#)
[Canadian Cohousing Network](#)
[Live better, together | Cohousing Options Canada](#)
[Region of Waterloo Housing Action Plan 2014-2024](#)

What we Learned

There are many organizations and individuals working to solve the housing crisis that faces our Region, and looking at the problem from a variety of different angles.

There are a variety of different needs in our region and that there is not a "one-size fits all solution". We believe it will be a variety of unified solutions working in tandem together that will make significant progress to solve the issue of limited supply.

The current method of developing neighbourhoods is not most effective for our community as a whole. Developers are building for middle to high-income families and leaving the lower-income families behind. We need to start thinking outside the box and develop mixed communities and shared housing to not only make sure people have a roof over their head but they also feel included, supported, and have the resources they need.

There is a negative connotation related to "lodging houses" and "boarding houses" that were poorly managed in the past

What is Missing

- Solutions that are being proposed today to increase the supply of housing relies on a system for the "traditional" 1 or 2-bedroom apartment-style unit. While this can assist a variety of needs, it does not provide the solution to all the needs.
- The concept of community is being lost in our society today, and homegrown social supports are lost in the traditional apartment-style model if there is a limited sense of community.

Proposed Solution

Community housing was developed formally in Denmark in the 1960s and is based on the independence of private dwellings, but has the advantages of sharing resources and community living. Common living space creates a sense of community and connection, while the private bed and bath provide a sense of private dwelling. Community housing is already starting to enter into the Kitchener housing market, but we believe that there can be more use of this development to solve the housing crisis and that by building expertise in this area and providing this to those interested, it will save time, money and resources for those who are exploring this model as an option for their clients.

We suggest a group in the Waterloo Region create a Community Housing Action Group, a coordinated group of people that are in alignment around the need for a Community Housing model, to create opportunities for multiple community housing models to be used across the region. This model can be developed for many in mind but will is intended to be customized based upon the diverse needs of several community groups or non-profit organizations. We believe that a Community Housing Action Group can spread awareness of the benefits of community housing to non-profit organizations and organizations that are already exploring these options. This group can bring knowledge and understanding of the barriers that typical organizations may face, along with solutions on how these barriers can be overcome. We do not believe that we will find timely solutions with each group exploring options on their own, but a Community Housing Action Group can provide the much-needed expertise to bring these visions to reality much quicker to these groups.

Community housing can be created in new developments or by repurposing an existing building to meet modern standards while still maintaining the original construction of the structure (Adaptive reuse). This process can breathe new life into an older building and improve upon the efficient use of built assets. Adaptive reuse is often associated with recycling and conversion efforts.

Community housing can be applied in a variety of levels for affordable rental property across the housing continuum and would look to accommodate people at all stages of life. For this solution to become a reality, a range of community housing options would be necessary to meet the various needs in our community. We believe these models will not only decrease the waiting lists, but it will align with the Region's goal of being a place of integration, mixed-use communities with distinct senses of place and character that provide people with choices about where they live, work and play.

The community housing model requires an organization to "operate" the housing unit and ensure that the building is kept and that the tenants are respectful in sharing the space. We see that this could be done by both non-profit and for-profit organizations.

Next Steps
Develop a team comprised of multiple representatives from those with experience in community housing models, including those from non-profit organizations, representatives from the Region, and developers with an interest in this area (This could also be a group within The Region as well)

- Identify: What is the current status of the community housing that exists in the Region? What organizations have started to develop and build community housing? What organizations or user groups are interested in exploring a community housing development further?

- Align the community housing vision for the Waterloo Region with support from the Region and local municipalities

- Develop the framework for sharing community housing resources with other non-profit organizations and private developers to allow for more streamlined access to information to support funding, bylaws, and regulations, access to developers/architects/engineers, developing policies, and other required resources to create a successful community housing unit

- Share this information broadly with non-profit organizations that may be exploring these options, with developers that may be interested in this model, and with the community as an awareness of different housing models that exist in the Region of Waterloo.

Intended Outcomes

We would expect that by pursuing this solution, there will be like-minded people coming together to start to think collectively about how we can provide different solutions to our community. Community housing rates will vary depending on the design and the intended client it is built for. For our purposes to assist with the housing crisis in Waterloo Region, we would suggest that a model for affordable housing be built to allow for a community housing unit to be more affordable than the cost of a 1-bedroom apartment. This will provide a greater supply of more affordable housing solutions.

This model is intended to provide housing support to a variety of needs and levels on the affordable housing continuum, by understanding the needs of the tenants, and what will set them up for success. For example, a community housing unit may be operated by a non-profit organization on the lower end of the continuum, keeping in mind the needs of safety, shelter, and helping individuals to integrate into a community. This model would provide a more affordable housing option than a regular 1-bedroom apartment.

This model is not limited to the lower levels of the housing continuum and could also be applied through the continuum and on the higher end as well. It has proven to be successful in other countries, where units in a community housing development can be purchased at a significantly decreased cost compared to a traditional condo. Seniors and new grads have been identified as groups that could be seen to easily benefit from the community housing model.

In addition to assisting with providing more options for units to meet different needs, there is a secondary benefit to community housing that must not be overlooked. This housing model creates community, and social interaction, which can help to influence how one lives when in a community and with a sense of belonging.

Ontario is facing a demographic shift of an ageing population and smaller family structures. Seniors are the fastest-growing age group and community housing could provide seniors with additional income, the ability to remain out of long-term care homes, and find support and strength in others within the home. Apartments and condominiums can feel sterile for many people, and by thinking outside the box we can support our senior community members by providing a community housing model that will offer them social networks, and placing them in locations with access to pharmacies, medical offices, and groceries.

Financial Implications

Both new and adaptive reuse projects can prove to be costly and there may be some setbacks to development. Cost of materials, location of housing, permits, property management, and maintenance fees to name a few.

Suggested Partners

This model can be applied in both private and non-profit organization development and we believe that the model is scalable. We have numerous non-profits in the Region all working independently to provide solutions, but often lack the required resources and areas of expertise to allow their vision to come to reality.

The more knowledge in the Community Housing Action team the better. Engaging architects, developers, property managers, regional employees in the housing department, non-profit organizations in the region, and other experts as deemed necessary, to build these community housing models throughout the region.

A collective body of expertise in this area may remove barriers and allow for additional non-profit organizations to more quickly determine how this model may work for their organization. The Region could work with developers best suited to build these models and they could be subsidized, purchased by approved non-profit organizations in the region that are focused on community housing for their clients. This could even include working with them to develop a plan to have their clients live in the house, and have a property manager oversee the housing needs/concerns.