

Fixing Your Band's Housing Crisis

Housing is the toughest government program that First Nations oversee. The reason is simple: First Nations are expected to collect monthly rents from their own relatives.

Worse, the Band is responsible for all rents that are not paid by delinquent tenants. This formula has spelled disaster for many First Nations. Some Bands have lost millions because of unpaid rent. For many Bands, there seems to be no end in sight to their losses.

A few First Nations have found a way out of this mess. They have pulled themselves out from massive debts and now operate decent housing programs. There is a common theme to their turnaround stories. Here are the five biggest housing mistakes that First Nations make—and the solutions to overcome these mistakes.

Mistake 1: Lack of Political Will to Evict

Some band members don't pay their rent and some abuse their neighbours. Worse, some members get involved in illegal activities that put other community members at risk. When First Nations let problem tenants get away with bad behaviour, they send a clear message: It's okay to behave irresponsibly.

When dealing with persistently bad tenants, the only option left to Councils is eviction. Yet many Councils fail to pull that trigger. Sometimes it's because of fear. Sometimes it's because the Council has too soft a heart. The result is the same: the Band incurs major losses.

Create political will by pressing Council to evict bad tenants and by not defending bad tenants—even if they are close friends or relatives. Ultimately, let everyone know the actual amount that the band loses every year from lost housing income. In effect, show that the benefit to solving this problem greatly outweighs the price.

Mistake 2: Poor Policy Development

First and foremost, housing policies are valuable only if they are used. So, don't waste money creating policies if you're not fully committed to using them. This may seem obvious. However, I have seen far too many communities get into a housing crisis because they didn't follow their policies.

Second, developing housing policies can get bogged down, sometimes for years. To prevent this from occurring, assign the right person the task of developing housing policy. A good housing policy development



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process shouldn't take more than a few months from start to finish. Finally, make sure that your policies are clearly understood by all. This includes Council and community members, who often need several rounds of consultations and messaging. It is much better to over-communicate than under-communicate your pending housing policy changes.

Mistake 3: Poor Governance Structure

Role clarity is a critical part of governance structure. Make sure that the roles of Council and the housing committee are clear and distinct.

Poor governance structure exists when Council overrules its housing staff, even though the staff followed housing policies.

Poor governance structure exists when the housing committee has lots of meetings but gets little done.

Speaking of housing committees, they are a mixed bag. If they are set up properly and have decent committee members they can serve an excellent purpose. But I have seen far too many that were either poorly structured or had poorly trained committee members.

There is no cookie cutter governance model for First Nations housing. Just be sure that roles are clear and that good people are chosen for key positions.

Mistake 4: Hiring and Keeping the Wrong Staff

Housing officers must have a wide range of skill sets. They have to be organized, literate, good with numbers, good with people and good at problem solving.

That's a tall order to ask, especially when these positions don't typically command big salaries (especially with small bands, which have correspondingly small budgets to work with).

If I had to choose one quality for a housing manager it would be that the person be organized. A second quality is to have good people skills. The housing manager needs to be able to work with politicized Councils, problem tenants and cagy contractors. A reasonably mature, organized person is a necessity for any First Nations housing office.

Any hope of getting your housing mess turned around is virtually impossible without a strong housing manager.



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Mistake 5: Poor Record Keeping

Filing systems and record keeping are fairly simple endeavours, if they are properly set up and maintained. Each file should contain the tenant's application, the rental agreement, the forms that confirm rental amount and a record of the tenant's payments.

The record of payment is the most important record to maintain. Not having it can lead to hefty arrears and huge losses for the Band.

Indeed, if you take a look at why most First Nations get into housing trouble, it often starts with poor record keeping.

For example, if a tenant fails to pay his rent and doesn't get any notice about it (because of poor record keeping), he soon learns that not paying rent is acceptable.

Staying on top of your rental income starts with good information. And that means keeping good, accurate records of your housing files.

Summary

Make any of these five mistakes and you are setting your Band up for housing failure. Alternatively, here are five steps to creating a successful First Nation housing operation:

1. Set Up an Effective Governance Structure
2. Set Up a Good Information System
3. Hire the Right Staff
4. Have Good Policies in Place; Use Them
5. Evict Bad Tenants.



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