

The Lack of Accessible Housing in Edmonton, Alberta

**A Submission to The National Housing Council's Review Panel on the Lack of
Accessible Housing in Canada**

Prepared by

The Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness

www.ecohh.ca

June 2026



The Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness

The Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness (ECOHH) was created in 1986. While the majority of the members are associated with local non-governmental associations, both individuals and the private sector are represented in its membership. Representatives from the municipal government also participate at the ECOHH table.

OUR VISION

To have dignified, accessible, affordable, culturally-appropriate, and safe housing, in healthy communities, empowers all people in Edmonton.

OUR MISSION

The Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness is a member-driven coalition working to raise awareness, advocate, and educate for actions and solutions to housing and homelessness issues.

OUR PRINCIPLES

- Housing is a human right.
- Home is more than four walls and a roof – it is housing, supports, and community.
- Collaboration: Diverse individuals and groups share responsibility, in relationships, to effectively address housing and homelessness.
- Participating together: All voices, especially those most negatively impacted and marginalized, are heard and incorporated when making decisions.
- Commitment to evidence; openness to creative thinking; transparent and accountable processes

ECOHH acknowledges we are on Treaty 6 territory – the traditional and ancestral territory of the Nêhiyawak (Cree), Anishinaabe (Saulteaux), Niitsitapi (Blackfoot), Dene, and Isga Nakoda (Stoney Nakoda). ECOHH acknowledges this territory is home to the Métis Settlements and the North Saskatchewan River Territory of the Otipimisiwak Métis Nation of Alberta. We acknowledge all the many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit who have lived in and cared for these lands since time immemorial. We believe a treaty is an inheritance, a responsibility, and a relationship. We hope by recognizing our status as treaty people it will help us to be good stewards of the land, good ancestors to all our children and good neighbours to one another.

ECOHH's vision for accessible housing is closely tied to our vision for all people in Edmonton; that dignified, accessible, affordable, culturally-appropriate, and safe housing, in healthy communities, empowers everyone. We believe this vision has been

proven accurate throughout the last 40 years of Edmonton's history, and will continue to be true. Simultaneously, a lack of such housing negatively impacts the quality of life for everyone. This is especially true given the strong interconnections between sub-populations: everyone has family, friends, or neighbours that need accessible and affordable housing, and this need increases as the population ages.

The following response provides statistical support and specific recommendations for ensuring that accessible housing is given a higher priority in government funding and planning. For ECOHH, it is a message we will continue to repeat until our organization is no longer needed: affordable, accessible, culturally-appropriate housing is a human right, and it is our responsibility as a society and as individuals to ensure this basic human right is recognized and honoured.

Quinn Strikwerda (co-chair)

Nazret Russon (co-chair)

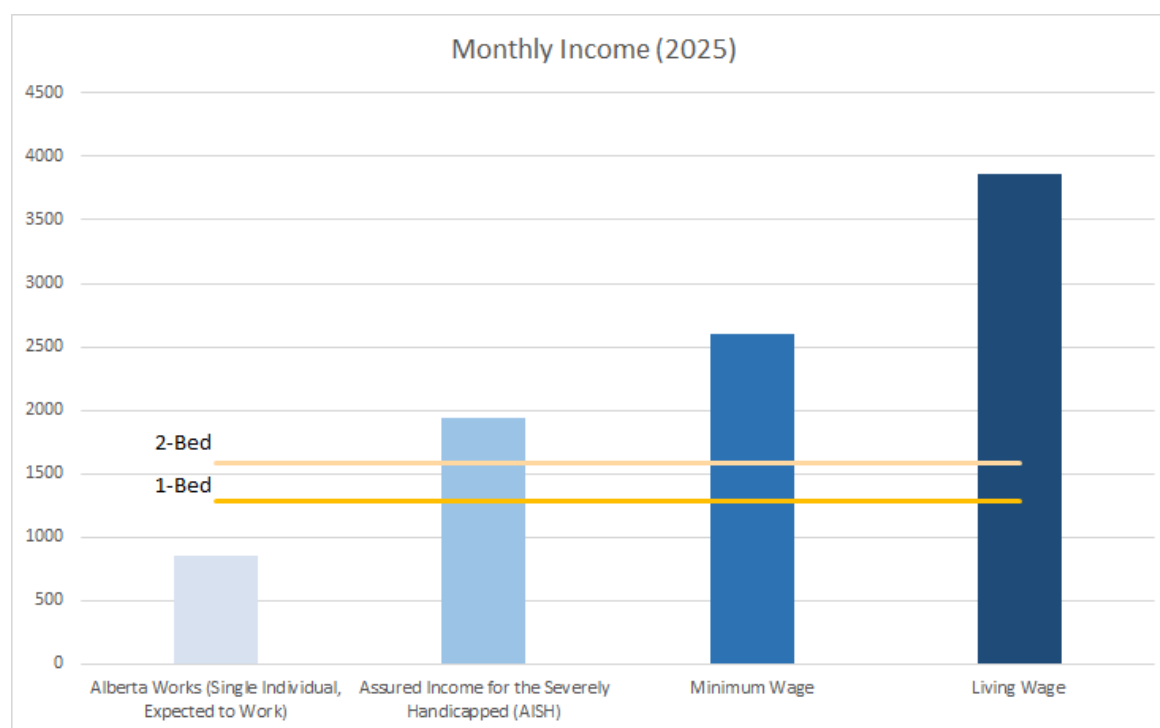
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1. Accessible Housing in Edmonton: What We Know and Do Not Know

The Canadian Survey on Disability conducted in 2022 estimated that around 315,000 or 28% of Edmonton's population aged 15 and over was disabled (Government of Canada, 2025). While Edmonton is relatively affordable compared with other Canadian cities, housing costs are rising. This has created affordability challenges for low income households including people with disabilities receiving benefits from the Government of Alberta through its Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) program. In Edmonton, the average cost of a 1-bedroom apartment (\$1,285/month) is a whopping 68% of the AISH income benefit, well beyond what is considered affordable, and three times the core shelter benefit offered under the Alberta Works program (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Monthly income versus average cost of rent



Source: CMHC (2025) [2025 Rental Market Report](#) Ottawa, ON: CMHC.

Inadequate social assistance means that a majority of people living with disability receiving AISH are in core housing need. Disabled people are, arguably, Edmonton's largest priority population in core housing need (City of Edmonton, 2022). The [City of Edmonton \(2022\)](#) identified 30,230 renter households that include people with physical health or mobility challenges, of which 22% live in core housing need. Other disabled renter populations experience similar levels of housing vulnerability (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of Households in Core Housing Need

Priority Population	2021 Renter Households	Renter Households in Core Housing Need	% in Core Housing Need
People dealing with mental health and addiction issues	15,955	2,540	16
People with developmental disabilities	5,325	1,240	23
People with physical health or mobility challenges	30,230	6,760	22
Total	51,510	10,540	21

Source: [City of Edmonton Housing Needs Assessment \(2022\)](#)

Not surprisingly, disabled people are disproportionately represented in community housing.¹ Yet, 37% of social and affordable housing structures across Canada have no accessibility features (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2024). This shortage is pronounced in Alberta. Municipally-owned, social and affordable apartment buildings that are barrier-free are less abundant in Alberta than in Ontario and British Columbia. In fact, the number and percentage of social and affordable housing buildings with accessibility features has decreased consecutively over the past 4 years from 2,812 buildings in 2021 to 1,489 buildings in 2024 (Table 2). *Currently, there is no data*

¹ Community housing is also commonly referred to as social and affordable, or non-market housing.

available regarding the amount of housing with accessibility features in Edmonton, in both the private and community housing sectors.

Table 2. Number and percentage of social and affordable housing structures with accessibility feature(s) in Alberta

	2021	2022	2023	2024
Number of Structures	2,812	2,177	1,618	1,489
Percentage of Total	75	60	39	32

Source: CMHC Social & Affordable Housing Survey 2021, 2022, 2023,

Although community housing is a crucial component of Edmonton's housing system, it faces significant challenges in meeting growing demand. A snapshot of the sector in March 2023 identified that there were 7,902 households on the Civiда's waitlist,² 498 on the Greater Edmonton Foundation's list, and 410 waiting for Métis Urban/Capital Housing (City of Edmonton, 2023). HomeEd, which maintains a notification list rather than a formal waitlist, reported over 200 new households requesting to be added each month (City of Edmonton, 2023). As Edmonton's population and housing costs continue to rise, these numbers have likely increased substantially. By late 2025, Civiда reported more than 10,000 applicants on its waitlist, with approximately 700 new applicants added each month (Fournier & Mohamud, 2025).

In addition to limited supply, Edmonton's community housing also struggles with an aging stock. Regardless of provider, most of the city's community housing was built between 1970 and 1989 (City of Edmonton, 2022). As a result, most units predate modern accessibility standards and require significant investment to address maintenance needs.

Edmonton has experienced significant gains in the supply of social and affordable housing over the past three years. For example, the [City of Edmonton's Affordable](#)

² This includes both Civiда's social housing and near market housing (rent 10-20% below current market rental rates) (City of Edmonton, 2023).

[Housing Investment Program \(AHIP\) program](#) has resulted in the construction of 2,473 new social and affordable units (2020-2025), including the addition of 579 new accessible units. This exceeds requirements outlined in the Alberta Building Code which stipulates that 10% of units must be accessible. However, at this rate it will take two decades to meet the need that existed in 2021.

Key Takeaways:

- People with disabilities are Edmonton's largest priority population in core housing need;
- There is currently no inventory, let alone estimate, of the total stock of accessible housing in Edmonton;
- Edmonton has experienced an increase in the number of new social and affordable housing units; however, the number of new accessible units is well below the amount needed to address unmet need for accessible housing;
- The mismatch is likely due to the fact that a significant proportion of this development is led by the private sector.

2. The Impact of the Accessible Housing Shortage on People with Disabilities and Recommended Actions

This section brings together three sources of information that shed light on the need for accessible housing and recommended actions that governments should take. The first source of information is a survey administered to ECOHH individual and organizational members in June 2026. The second source of information is the *Equity and Inclusion in Housing Design* project led by ECOHH member Dr. Joshua Evans. The third source of information is the *Accessing Home* project led by ECOHH member Meagan Miller.

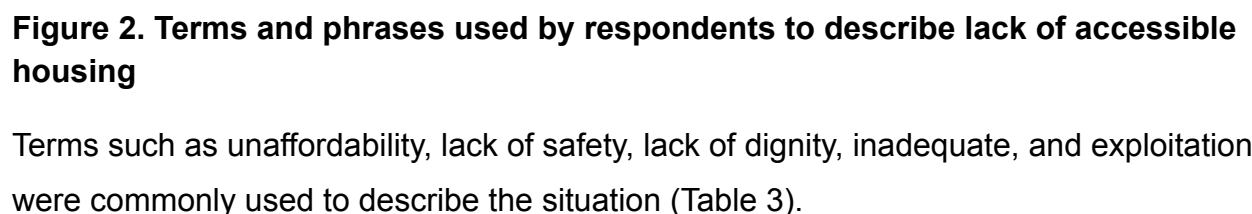


Table 3. Frequency of common terms used by respondents to describe lack of accessible housing.

Term	Frequency
Affordability	5
Housing should be a human right	5
Unaffordable housing	4
Crisis	4
Lack of dignity	4
Unsafe	3
Inadequate	3
Unhoused	3
Precariously housed	3
Injustice	3
Exploitation	3
Dangerous	2
Unstable	2
Capitalism	2
Predatory housing	2
Bad policy	2
Essential need	2
Accessible housing	2
Affordable housing	2
Harmful	2
Inequitable	2
Life-threatening	2

Disastrous	1
Disheartening	1
Misunderstood	1
No rent controls	1
Lack of public transit	1
Failure to meet duty of care	1
Shameful failure	1
Opportunity	1
Proper location	1
Needed	1

Survey responses covered many topics including the lived experiences of people living with disabilities, the barriers disabled people regularly encounter, and the systemic drivers of this housing injustice. These responses can be summarized as follows:

Human Impact and Injustice: The situation is described as a "shameful" and "disastrous" crisis that denies residents dignity, puts people at risk of homelessness, and negatively impacts mental and physical well-being.

Economic Strain and Affordability: The high cost of rent, lack of rent controls, inflation, and insufficient income are highlighted as critical barriers preventing access to stable, safe, accessible housing.

Operational and Infrastructure Barriers: Specific challenges include restrictive waitlists and complex paperwork, inadequate public transit, and a lack of available housing stock, including the prevalence of underutilized land.

Systemic and Economic Drivers: Respondents frequently identify capitalism, wealth inequality, corporate exploitation, colonialism, and political failure as the primary factors contributing to the scarcity of accessible housing.

Recommendations from Survey Respondents

Survey respondents provided recommendations regarding the actions governments should take to increase the supply of accessible housing in Edmonton. These recommendations can be summarized as follows:

Policy and Regulation: Implement robust rent controls, caps on rental fees, and stricter regulations on corporate and financialized landlords to prevent gouging and exploitation. Establish mandatory accessibility requirements for new developments through updated building codes and zoning policies, rather than relying on optional incentives or "soft" guidelines.

Direct Government Investment: Shift away from reliance on private developers by publicly funding and building social, cooperative, and non-profit housing. Prioritize the use of public land for these developments through long-term leases and by creating a dedicated public housing developer.

Comprehensive Support Systems: Integrate housing with essential services by expanding supportive, harm-reduction, and "Housing First" models. Increase financial supports such as AISH and living wages to ensure housing is truly affordable, while improving public transit and proximity to healthcare and community services for residents.

Inclusive Planning: Engage directly with people living with disabilities and those experiencing housing insecurity to design solutions that meet diverse needs, including multi-generational, intergenerational, and varying supportive living arrangements. Implement a major retrofit program for older social and private rental housing to improve accessibility without forcing displacement.

b. Learnings from the Equity and Inclusion in Housing Design Project

The [Equity and Inclusion in Housing Design Project](#) was carried out in 2024-2026 and involved people living with disabilities, industry partners and University of Alberta researchers³ in the co-creation of an equity-centered design process that can be used in the creation of accessible housing. Funded by the Alberta Real Estate Foundation, the project's main goal was the creation of [a toolkit](#) to help developers meaningfully involve people living with disabilities in design processes.

Toolkit development was informed by one-on-one and group interviews with fifteen people (Table 3) living with disabilities in Edmonton (n=8) and Calgary (n=7). These interviews [shed light on some of the barriers to accessible housing](#) and the impact of these barriers on people's day-to-day lives.

Table 3. Participant Description

Participant #	Disability Category
01	Mental/Sensory
02	Physical
03	Physical
04	Physical
05	Physical
06	Physical
07	Physical
08	Mental/Sensory
09	Mental/Sensory
10	Physical

³ This study was conducted in accordance with the University of Alberta's Research Ethics guidelines and the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS 2). Ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Board 1 (Approval ID: Pro00143459).

11	Physical
12	Mental/Sensory
13	Physical
14	Physical
15	Physical

Barriers to Accessible Housing

Participants identified many different types of barriers that blocked the realization of accessibility in housing. These barriers can be organized into three main categories: (1) functionality of the built environment; (2) the availability of services and supports; and (3) affordability.

Functionality of the Built Environment

The functionality of housing, as a built environment, is a fundamental dimension of accessibility for people with disabilities. All participants but three, were living in multi-family housing such as duplexes and apartments. Those three living in their own dwellings had adapted them to varying degrees.

Discussions of the built environment were wide and varied. Participants were quick to point out that barriers were routinely encountered at entrances, in common areas such as foyers, and in hallways. Door width and door hardware presented challenges. Additionally, residents in multistory housing faced the additional barrier of negotiating stairwells in the absence of other means such as elevators.

Within dwelling spaces, kitchens, bathrooms, bedrooms and balconies presented significant barriers. Kitchens are essential spaces in any home and were a focus of concern for participants. One of the primary concerns was turning radius in the kitchen space for wheelchair users. Another concern was the height of countertops and appliances. Bathrooms proved to be inaccessible in instances where they were not customized or universally designed. The sizing issue common to bathrooms was also

an issue in bedrooms. Finally, balconies are a valued amenity in apartment living, providing an outdoor living space and access to fresh air. Not surprisingly, access to balconies presented barriers to many participants with mobility impairments.

Lighting and acoustics were commonly identified as building elements that raised barriers, particularly for participants with sensory impairments and issues. Noise in particular was commonly identified as a concern. For participants with hearing impairments, the size of rooms and height of ceilings were an issue.

Availability of Services and Supports

Many people living with disabilities utilize services within and outside the home. The functionality of the built environment can limit access to these services and in turn detrimentally impact residents. Participants with visual impairments supported by service animals commonly experienced issues related to access in this regard. In one instance, a participant was living in accessible housing that met her needs. But when the building was acquired by a new organization the rent was raised and she was no longer able to afford the new rate.

Affordability

A final barrier to accessibility that was commonly cited in discussions with participants was the affordability of housing. Accessibility often came at a cost. This could be remaining in housing that was accessible but spatially inconvenient or undesirable due to its location. In other instances, the accessible housing that was available was well above the price range that participants could afford.

Impact on People's Everyday Lives

Barriers to accessible housing had profound impacts on participants. First and foremost was the loss of housing. Several participants reported being evicted from housing because rental costs increased and they fell behind on rent. For example, one participant shared:

I've been fighting for a long time and passionate about having the proper accessibility. As far as income, it's been a struggle for me for many years. When my kids were young, because of my health issues, I could only work so long and all the things. And so, my income was limited, and I was constantly getting evicted. And it took me ten years to get into housing.

Second, barriers within the home contributed to a loss of independence. One participant who used a wheelchair did not have an accessible washroom in her suite and was forced to use the toilet in her accessible van:

I can't even go to the bathroom here. I have to go outside every single time I have to pee. And, again, that's opening all three of those doors multiple, multiple times a day, at least 15. And then I go pee in the van.

Another wheelchair user described a common barrier experienced outside the home:

Every time I want to go to somebody's house, there's definitely, I have to be carried up their steps. It's definitely a barrier, I guess. And I feel like as I get older, it becomes more of a barrier. I just am like, I don't want to be carried up. You just maybe lose your... You like to be just in your routine.

Third, several participants reported experiences of isolation and loneliness. One participant who lived in an apartment building without an elevator remarked:

I'm on the ground floor, and it's a walk-up, so I can't visit neighbours. I can't socialise.

Fourth, inaccessible housing added significant stress and participants reported that it negatively affected their mental wellbeing. One participant described constant struggles to force the landlord to address issues in the suite:

I feel trapped. I've been there for over 20 years. I can't move because they're so strapped, and I can't switch to the other programme, where maybe they would subsidise my rent instead, so I have some freedom. So, I feel trapped in this house that I'm not enjoying.

Recommendations from Equity and Inclusion in Housing Design

- accessibility is a multifaceted concept and is strongly linked to a sense of home, independence and social inclusion. All of these are impacted by the functionality of the built environment, the availability of services and supports, and affordability. Accessibility guidelines and standards must go beyond a narrow focus on the built environment and consider other dimensions that impact upon accessibility
- all study participants were living in housing that complied with existing building codes and regulations; nonetheless, these minimum standards did not ensure that housing was accessible and their human rights were fulfilled. Developing accessible housing requires going well beyond the existing building codes and should meaningfully involve people with disabilities in design decisions from the beginning of the process to the end

c. Learnings from the Accessing Home Project

[*Accessing Home*](#) is a podcast developed as part of a research project on the accessibility of community housing in Edmonton. The purpose of *Accessing Home* is to explore how accessibility is understood and experienced by disabled tenants, and in so doing to amplify their voices and lived experiences. It features interviews with eight tenants who have physical and/or sensory impairments. Across five episodes, the series delves into the multifaceted and relational meanings of access, examining how community housing can better meet the needs of disabled people, who are disproportionately represented in this sector.

Participants described both positive and negative experiences of accessibility within community housing. Most positive interpretations came from participants living in the Artspace Co-op, a building intentionally built with accessibility in mind: one-third of its units are wheelchair-adapted, and it includes a program for supported independent living. As a result, the building is largely barrier-free, and members have access to

supports that facilitate autonomy. Furthermore, members participate in collective decision-making, enabling disabled residents to contribute their lived experience to shape building policies and everyday practices. Participants reported that this involvement in housing governance fosters a stronger sense of community and belonging.

This experience of community inclusion was not limited to co-operative housing. For example, in Episode 5, Yael Neville described feeling heard and valued by participating in Civida's Tenant Advisory Committee. Additionally, her building—owned by Civida but operated by E4C, a local non-profit focused on poverty alleviation—offers mental-health programming alongside subsidized rent:

We have a community garden downstairs. And so I have my own little plot. We plant stuff: fruits, vegetables, plants, whatever we want. They even give us some seed packs to start out. We also participate in wellness Wednesdays, so we do all sorts of different things. They're involving us in deciding for the whole month what we are going to do each Wednesday. So we get to make that decision. So we had karaoke night, karaoke day a few weeks ago. One of our residents in the building, she owns a karaoke machine. A very large one, about four foot tall. And at the number three settings, you can make the walls rumbling and the frames shake on the wall. And she's renting it right now. But hey, she likes it. I like it, too. It's got lights.

Overall, the co-operative housing model gives residents greater flexibility to customize their homes compared with traditional rentals. This allows disabled residents to modify their units to better meet their needs. For example, at Abby Road Co-op, Jamie Graham and his mother completely renovated their unit to accommodate Jamie's power wheelchair. However, such renovations are often cost-prohibitive for individuals receiving income support and do not guarantee long-term housing security. Despite receiving a small subsidy, Jamie and his mother must now search for alternative housing due to rising housing charges, as he explained in Episode 2:

I need to move because, here, the rent will be up to 1600 in the next two years, nobody can afford that. [...] Because I'm not made of money. Neither is my mom. Neither is half the people that need accessible housing.

Negative experiences of accessibility were generally related to aging infrastructure, deferred maintenance and slow bureaucratic processes. These issues were particularly acute for residents living in Civida's non-profit housing, especially in units not designated as accessible. For example, Crista Christensen lives in a two-level townhouse, with the bedrooms and only bathroom upstairs, requiring her to navigate a steep set of stairs to carry out daily activities. Additionally, her complex has persistent maintenance issues such as black mold. Yet, accommodation and repair requests are often delayed or denied, as Crista describes in Episode 3:

It's incredibly hard, because you have, you know, homecare coming in and assessing you and going to bat for you and their social workers and nonprofit agencies and saying, "Okay, she needs a ramp, she needs this." And then there's the RAMP program. And you filled out the paperwork. And either got to get, you know, housing to sign off on it, or one of the representatives to sign off on it, and they know you need it. But they're being told, "No, we don't do this. We don't allow any ramps or lifts or anything done to our units." And it's like, okay, well, you obviously don't understand federal and provincial law, because I have rights here. And so I personally have found that in order to get anything that I may need out of housing, I literally have to get a lawyer involved. So, the question that I have is: Why do I have to go to such great lengths to get these people to realize, hey, I need a lift. Or, hey, I need a ramp. Or hey, I can't have mould in my house for eight years.

These challenges are not unique to non-profit housing. The two co-operative buildings included in this thesis were also older, and participants raised concerns regarding health, safety and functionality. For instance, one unit had ungrounded electrical wiring, posing risks for tenants who rely on assistive devices or medical equipment.

Across both non-profit and co-op housing, accessibility was often narrowly defined—most commonly in terms of wheelchair access, and specifically manual-wheelchair access. Units labelled as accessible were barrier-free but also had features such as lower counters in both the kitchen and bathroom. While these modifications support manual-wheelchair users, they can be unsuitable for others. Several participants noted that such units did not meet their or their family's needs, and that they would prefer to leave these units available for those who required them (despite most participants needing some form of barrier-free housing). Moreover, accessibility was often isolated to these particular units, meaning other areas of the complex remain inaccessible. As Skyler Morgan explains in Episode 3:

So, for me to get through the parking stall, I have to go down those three stairs, on my walking device, which is a scooter, technically. To go down those three stairs, then I have to get into the parking lot and go around every car to get out to my car [...] I should be able to get in my own complex without having to go down a bunch of stairs all the time.

This research has shown that accessibility is multidimensional and relational. Within community housing, disabled tenants experience accessibility in varied ways. Co-operative housing models designed with disabled residents in mind provided greater autonomy, flexibility and opportunities for community participation; however, aging buildings and rising housing charges limit the extent to which these benefits are realized. In comparison, non-profit housing models are generally more affordable, but accessibility is often narrowly defined and applied, and tenants face ongoing challenges with maintenance, accommodation and infrastructure. By engaging tenants with disabilities directly, this research highlighted both the supports that enable inclusion and the persistent gaps that continue to impede it across the community housing sector.

Recommendations from Accessing Home:

- Community housing requires a diverse range of accessible units that extend beyond standard wheelchair accessibility. Participants emphasized

accommodating varying mobility needs, including differences among wheelchair users. Units with adaptable features, such as adjustable cupboard and counter heights, respond to individual tenant requirements. Incorporating universal design principles ensures units are safe, usable, and flexible for people with diverse physical, sensory, and functional abilities. Adaptable housing promotes independent living and long-term housing security, allowing units to evolve alongside tenants' changing needs.

- Accessible housing extends beyond the building itself to the surrounding neighbourhood. Residents need independent access to essential services, shops, and community spaces to fully participate in daily life. While the City of Edmonton has undertaken neighbourhood renewal projects, including sidewalk repairs and curb cuts, accessibility must also be considered in local businesses, public spaces, and amenities. Supporting accessible neighbourhoods enhances independence, inclusion, and equitable participation for all residents.
- Alberta is one of only two provinces in Canada without a formal Accessibility Act. While such legislation would not directly expand the availability of accessible housing, it could significantly improve employment opportunities and broader inclusion for disabled people. An Accessibility Act would establish clear legal standards for eliminating barriers in employment, services, and public spaces, enabling disabled Albertans to participate fully in economic and social life. By addressing systemic barriers beyond housing, the province could foster a more inclusive environment that complements initiatives to improve accessible housing, transportation, and income supports. Such legislation would provide a framework for long-term, province-wide accessibility improvements and demonstrate a commitment to disability rights and equity.
- Currently, the *NHS* establishes accessibility minimums for only some of its initiatives. In November 2024, the CMHC removed accessibility and energy-efficiency requirements from the Apartment Construction Loan Program. Consequently, new rental housing developed through this program is required only to meet provincial building code standards, which often provide minimal accessibility features. Expanding accessibility requirements and applying them

consistently across all *NHS* initiatives and programs would increase the availability of accessible housing beyond the community housing sector. Strengthened standards would support independent living, housing choice, and inclusion, while addressing the broader shortage of accessible housing for disabled Canadians.

3. Final Reflections

People living with disabilities in Edmonton face numerous barriers when it comes to adequate housing, not least of which is the accessibility of housing understood in terms of the functionality of the built environment, the availability of services and supports and affordability. These barriers are also pronounced in the community housing sector where a significant number of people with disabilities live.

These barriers prevent the realization of the right to housing for thousands of people with disabilities in Edmonton. Some individuals have experienced homelessness as a result. Many have experienced a loss of dignity and their quality of life and wellbeing has been negatively impacted over the course of their lives.

There is currently no inventory, let alone estimate, of the total stock of accessible housing in Edmonton. Statistics Canada and the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation gather data on accessible housing; however, there is significant room for improvement in these statistical programs both in terms of the type of data that is collected and the availability of this data at the local level.

ECOHH recommends the following immediate actions: direct government investment in accessible housing; mandatory accessibility requirements for new developments rather than optional incentives or "soft" guidelines; increased financial supports to ensure housing is truly affordable; programs to support and

facilitate the direct and meaningful involvement of people living with disabilities in the design of accessible housing.