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How to improve the TCHC

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This week, city council officially confirmed a new 13-member board of directors for Toronto Community Housing Corporation, Canada's largest landlord. Mayor Rob Ford dissolved the former board in March after the release of two scathing audits on TCHC's staff expenses and procurement practices. Given so few of the new board members have any experience with public housing, the *Star* asked housing experts to provide them with some valuable advice.

Sell some houses and retrofit others

In what's being called a crisis, the biggest challenge facing the TCHC is the dire state of its buildings and houses. The housing corporation's \$650 million repair backlog prompted departing interim manager Case Ootes to recently recommend that TCHC sell more than 900 of its single-family homes and plow more than \$400 million into the backlog. City council approved the sale of 22 homes this week.

It may not be a bad idea, if it means a considerable amount of money can be poured into overall repairs, said Robert Murdie, a professor emeritus of geography at York University — as long as displaced residents are relocated.

"That's the big caveat here. That's the concern I have. What happens to those tenants?"

Glenn Miller, a planner with the Canadian Urban Institute sees energy savings as another solution.

"One approach (to addressing TCHC's capital repair backlog) is oriented to the energy retrofits that would reduce your upgrading costs. There are quite a few companies that are expert in the retrofit business — and here you're talking apartment blocks, rather than small units — where you pay for the investment through future energy savings," he said.

"There are loads of examples in Ontario. We know it can be done. These partnerships are long term and they work really, really well."

More programming for tenants

With 164,000 residents living in TCHC units, programming is a prime concern — especially given many are youths living in vulnerable circumstances rife with negative temptations. A large proportion of young and old tenants also face mental health challenges and physical impairments.

Programs promote the physical and mental health of residents and connect them to their community, says Cyril Borgai of the Black Creek Community Health Centre.

But funding is an issue, explains the community health worker. The centre received federal funds to run a year-long program at Roding Park Place, which includes exercise classes and health-related workshops. But the money runs out in October. Hopefully, he says, the programming is sustainable and residents will continue the classes themselves.

Promote diverse communities and home ownership

New mixed-income neighbourhoods — like the one emerging in Regent Park, or the one that's already been born on a smaller scale in Don Mount/Rivertowne — are considered the best way to improve tired TCHC housing projects.

David Hulchanski, a housing professor at the University of Toronto, believes the housing agency should consider working with private landlords to renew the clusters of aging and energy inefficient highrises that are owned by both TCHC and the private sector.

“You use the open (green) space, to add shopping, places for small businesses and more housing. And then you mix up the neighbourhood a bit more. And you get money to do interesting things, in terms of further renovating the buildings.”

Jehad Aliweiwi, executive director of Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office, wants to see TCHC residents encouraged toward home ownership.

“Social housing is not a place where people should feel stuck. Whether it's a place where people feel they can start and build and grow and move on to ownership, or other forms of housing such as long-term rental ... that provide dignity and pride,” he said.

“We have an opportunity to reimagine social housing as not only a means to provide emergency housing and shelter for desperate people, but also long-term housing solutions.”