

WHITE PAPER

40 Years of Housing and Disability in Manitoba

A Grey Literature Review

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The Canadian housing landscape for disabled people

Over the past several decades, Canada has witnessed significant challenges in housing, particularly for members of at-risk populations, and disabled people figure prominently here. These struggles range from the paucity of physically accessible housing options that currently exist, to a lack of supports that are necessary for people living with intellectual disabilities, mental health issues, and health-related chronic conditions.

Unlike many of its international peers, Canada has formally declared housing a human right, which it legislated in the 2019 National Housing Strategy Act (NHSA).¹ The Act put Canada in alignment with the United Nations, which enshrines housing as a fundamental right including, specifically, for disabled people (in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights).² Despite Canada's *de jure* legislative commitment to these international standards, a substantial number of the country's residents, especially those with disabilities, face significant and debilitating barriers to housing security.

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in this problem in Canada, to the point that it has been deemed a "housing crisis" by observers across the political spectrum.³ The negative effects of the crisis have been compounded by a sharp 4.7% rise in the disability rate across Canada from 2017 to 2022.⁴ While a gradual increase in the percentage of Canadians who live with one or more disabilities has long been anticipated for an aging population, the recent jump took many observers by surprise. With no end currently in sight to the "mass disabling event" of the COVID-19 pandemic that has contributed to the rise,⁵ and negative shifts in a variety of social determinants of health such as wealth inequality and healthcare access, disability must be prominent in our consideration of how to confront housing challenges.

Manitoba provides an interesting case study for critically examining the relationship between housing and disability in Canada. Once known as the centre of disability activism in Canada, Manitoba claims a venerable history of disability advocacy. The Council of Canadians with Disabilities (CCD), the Canadian Centre for Disability Studies (CCDS; now Eviance), and the global organization Disabled Peoples' International (DPI) all trace their roots to the province. It is with this backdrop in mind that Manitoba serves as the entry point into our analysis of grey literature addressing housing and disability in Canada.

Researching the right to housing for disabled people

We are researching the right to housing for people with disabilities in Canada.⁶ Through this research we are seeking to understand the circumstances and experiences of disabled people's efforts to secure appropriate housing in Canada. We are undertaking this research through a combination of document analysis, surveys, and interviews with people directly impacted by disability. The interviews are being conducted with people with the lived experience of disablement and with service providers working with disabled people. The research is centred on three foundational questions:

1. How do disabled people experience the right to housing in Canada?
2. What discriminatory barriers to housing do disabled people in Canada face?
3. What will help disabled people in Canada overcome these barriers?

One of the early gaps we encountered in this project is the limited scholarly research addressing housing and disability in the Canadian context. As part of answering these questions, we began our review of the literature by researching 40 years of “grey literature” that addresses disability and housing in four provinces: British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, and Nova Scotia. Grey literature comprises various types of documents and sources that exist outside academic and commercial publishing routes. They are often produced by civil society organizations (CSO) and non-governmental organizations (NGO), charities, academic centres, think tanks, private companies, consultants, and government departments and agencies. Some of the materials that are categorized as grey literature include reports, working papers, government documents, white papers, brochures, and newsletters.

The choice to focus on grey literature to help us explicate the relationship between housing policy and disability was motivated by several factors. Grey literature materials are important knowledge artefacts that offer insight into a wide variety of voices, perspectives, and topics across distant eras. They may represent voices that remain marginalized or excluded altogether from academic research circles and that corporate-funded research is not interested in. Grey literature is often produced by community organizations that are in touch with the “on-the-ground” realities of the lives of precariously housed and unhoused people, and the needs of disabled people among them. Their members may have perspectives that challenge the politicians, urban planners, policymakers, researchers, and specialists who may be operating detached from the front line of service provision and lived experiences. Many of these organizations include people with the lived experience of disability who hold leadership roles, and who are particularly well-positioned to identify and explore key issues and

concerns for their community, and to propose effective strategies addressing the challenges they face.

Further, this type of literature is typically more difficult for researchers to locate than academic articles and books and is less likely to be held in university libraries, particularly if they were released before contemporary information age digital publishing. The materials may take the form of paper-based documents, such as printed pamphlets and brochures, and their archival preservation may be spotty at best. In most cases, the material is not peer-reviewed. As such, between the challenges of quickly locating the resources and the fact they are not peer-reviewed, grey literature may be passed over by those whose research originates from within an academic environment. Yet by compiling an annotated bibliography of these grey literature sources, we are making the effort and seeking to gain a better understanding of the issues, concerns, and shifts that have occurred over time that characterize disabled people's access to housing in multiple regions across the country.⁷ In constructing our comprehensive four-province annotated bibliography, which is the first of its kind on housing and disability across Canada, we hope that others in academic institutions, non-governmental organizations, and community settings will find it useful for their research and advocacy.

Manitoba

This white paper examines the findings from our research on the province of Manitoba, presenting some of the key themes and guiding us through the shifts that have taken place over time in policy, advocacy, and discussions about the right to housing for people with disabilities, as observed within the grey literature. This paper also helps us identify gaps and needs that are still not being addressed, and to understand the scale and scope of the problem, and potential pathways to realizing the right to housing for disabled people in Canada.

One of Canada's smaller provinces by population, with 1,494,301 inhabitants as of July 1, 2024,⁸ Manitoba's history as a politically progressive region (particularly its capital city, Winnipeg), the presence of multiple postsecondary institutions, a wide array of community-based organizations, and the increasingly resurgent voice of Indigenous communities, have all helped to make it a receptive place for research and advocacy on housing issues.

With a reputation for relatively affordable housing compared to larger Canadian metropolitan centres situated in more populous provinces like Ontario and British Columbia, Manitoba has long attracted those with limited means in search of a place to make their home. Yet, the province has certainly not been immune from the factors and

forces that have affected the housing market across Canada. As elsewhere, disabled people's particular housing needs have rarely been at the forefront of governments' or developers' concerns and priorities.

As mentioned, disability-oriented nonprofit work has a well-established history in the province. For instance, Manitoba Possible (formerly the Society for Manitobans with Disabilities) traces its roots back over seventy years, beginning in 1950 as a childhood disability charity organization during the polio era.⁹ A variety of advocacy organizations oriented around specific disabilities and related social and cultural identities (like Deafhood) have a longstanding presence. Interestingly, most of the grey literature on disability and housing in Manitoba that our research has uncovered does not come directly from these organizations, but from a mix of government sources and progressive NGOs with a broader mandate for social change, often with the active input of disability-focused groups.

A shifting landscape over time

When considering the multi-decade span of our review of Manitoban grey literature sources, a notable theme we observed is the relative lack of significant positive change over time for people with disabilities in terms of increasing accessible housing stock, any mass adoption of access-oriented retrofits, or widespread integration of supportive resources for physical, psychological, and substance use support. Indeed, Manitoba's available social housing stock dwindled over this period as federal subsidies declined and new social housing developments became relatively rare.¹⁰ This has had predictable consequences for low-income individuals and families, among whom disabled people are disproportionately represented. People with disabilities are roughly twice as likely to live in poverty as non-disabled Canadians,¹¹ and Manitobans have a higher rate of disability (29.2%) than the national average (27.0%), suggesting a significant need for affordable *and* accessible accommodation in the province.¹² A 2023 report by the Manitoba Non-Profit Housing Association identifies a need for at least 10,000 additional social housing units for low-income Manitobans, including disabled people.¹³

Attention to the housing needs of disabled Manitobans appears scarce in the (preserved) grey literature we accessed that was written before the 1990s. A trio of reports from 1982-1983 by researcher Jonathan P. Gunn on the types of available housing for people with various disabilities stands out for actually focusing on this issue, as well as for the systematic way in which he explores specific types of disability in relation to housing. Gunn's studies suggest the existence of many of the same needs that would come to be identified with increasing urgency over the next 30 years: more

accessible housing stock, greater funding assistance, improved resident control and autonomy, better geographical locations, and a reduction of ableist attitudes in broader communities.¹⁴ Other documents from the 1980s point to some successful initiatives like the Manitoba Marathon residences, a collection of group homes for people with intellectual disabilities that marked a departure from the institutionalization model that dominated “care” for this population throughout most of the 20th century.¹⁵ Overall, disabled people’s housing needs are rarely acknowledged in any depth outside of “niche” studies in the grey literature from the 1980s, except for some material addressing people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, the group most-readily associated with disability-related housing challenges.¹⁶

During a period of governance by the Progressive Conservative Party (PC), which spanned from 1988 until 1999, following its defeat of a New Democratic Party (NDP) that had been in power from 1981 to 1988, there is scant mention of the nexus of disability and housing in government-produced sources. This characterizes the tone of the grey literature from the 1990s. Despite the apparent paucity of government engagement with the concern at the provincial level, there were pockets of genuinely progressive thinking that came forth from other quarters, such as advocacy for disability-integrated co-housing developments in Winnipeg offered in a 1996 feasibility study carried out by local architect Gail Finkel for the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC).¹⁷ Finkel’s study presages later disability-justice advocacy by promoting a universal-design approach to housing – which aims to maximize accessibility for all people – and focusing on empowering residents, regardless of disability status or type, in both their domiciles and their broader communities. Advocacy organizations also produced materials designed to assist those they served. For instance, the Association for Community Living (Manitoba chapter) developed the 44-page “A Home of My Own” guide to help people with intellectual disabilities plan for self-directed living with as much independence as possible.¹⁸

Entering the 2000s, with the NDP in power for an extended period of 17 years (1999-2016), more government-authored grey literature on disability and housing begins to appear. In the province’s 2001 *Full Citizenship* “Action Plan” for disabled Manitobans, housing itself is not named as one of the plan’s four priority areas, which were income supports, access to government, disability supports, and employment. However, some intimations of concern are observable.¹⁹ Provincial government consultation with community members and other stakeholders was undertaken during the 2000s. One such consultation is summarized in the booklet *Report on 2004 Housing and Disabilities Forum*.²⁰ Such consultations do appear to have informed some meaningful provincial measures, such as the introduction of an enhanced Manitoba Shelter Benefit in 2009. Strong community advocacy around poverty reduction also had benefits for disabled

people, especially coupled with an emerging shift toward “housing first” strategies – prioritizing immediate, permanent housing before other supports -- that include greater recognition of disability, especially mental health and substance use, as key intersections with poverty and homelessness.²¹ During the 2000s, community-based research added texture to the general recognition of the housing needs of disabled Manitobans, by focusing on specific groups like inner-city residents,²² and those facing end-of-life circumstances.²³

The province’s late-2000s policy documents were generally more explicit and detailed on issues of disability and housing than earlier government-authored sources. Some, such as the 2009 *Opening Doors* plan, revisited and reworked the commitments expressed in *Full Citizenship*, situating housing as *the* primary need, with the government voicing a commitment “[t]o improve the availability of quality housing for persons with disabilities that is affordable, accessible, supportive and safe.”²⁴ *Opening Doors* also more clearly recognizes the diversity of access and support requirements among the diverse disability communities that exist in Manitoba, ranging from physical accessibility to financial supplements, to additional supports for those living with mental health and addiction-related barriers. The provincial government’s disability-related consultations during this decade resulted in, among other things, a recognition of the necessity of more supportive housing options, a commitment to “visitable design” for new public housing developments,²⁵ and an acknowledgement of a need for culturally appropriate housing options for disabled Indigenous people.²⁶ The late 2000s also saw the first iteration of the NDP government’s *ALL Aboard* plan,²⁷ a poverty-reduction strategy that in the early 2010s would come to include a somewhat stronger focus on disability with a recognition that the linkage between disability, poverty, and housing insecurity is a strong and enduring one.²⁸

A corruption-driven implosion of Hydra House, a for-profit multi-site housing and service organization for adults and children with disabilities, also marked the landscape of disability-specific housing in Manitoba during the 2000s.²⁹ The province would subsequently transfer Hydra’s 14 facilities to the care of the non-profit organization St. Ament by mid-decade.³⁰ Human rights complaints against the Manitoba Developmental Centre, a large facility for the institutionalization of people labelled with intellectual disabilities, began to reach public awareness by the mid-to-late decade.³¹ This would eventually lead to the facility’s closure, with the last resident moving out on December 10, 2024³², as community-based housing increasingly became the norm.³³ Finally, throughout the decade, non-governmental organizations, including the Prairie Women’s Health Centre of Excellence,³⁴ and the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg,³⁵ among others, continued to advocate for more accessible housing stock, on-site supports, less-

onerous requirements for establishing need, and increased financial assistance for disabled Manitobans.

While the provincial government continued to revise its *ALL Aboard* initiative, introducing a greater focus on housing and services, particularly mental health and substance use supports,³⁶ the return to power of the PC party in 2016 preceded a precipitous drop in government-authored grey literature on topics relevant to the right to housing for people with disabilities. A wide range of community organizations continued their research and advocacy over these years, emphasizing many of the concerns already acknowledged in previous literature. Notable during this period was an increase in literature produced by and/or specific to housing projects and community developments, which include at least some attention to access and support considerations for members of the disabled community.³⁷ The Manitoba branch of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) authored many of these documents, in addition to serving up noteworthy critiques of government shortcomings around poverty, housing, and disability.³⁸

By the late 2010s, meaningful attention was being given in the grey literature to address Indigenous health and housing needs in Manitoba. This continued to gain traction into the 2020s with an especially strong emphasis put on assisting unhoused and at-risk community members, many of whom experience disability.³⁹ The COVID-19 pandemic introduced additional challenges for Indigenous people, who already have higher rates of disability than the non-Indigenous population.⁴⁰ They experienced disproportionate COVID-19-related health impacts in the 2020s,⁴¹ and have long experienced dramatically higher rates of homelessness compared to Manitoba's non-Indigenous population.⁴² Increasing recognition of the unique social and cultural needs of Indigenous individuals and communities has, in part, come about as a result of Indigenous-run organizations contributing their own studies and advocacy documents to the grey literature.⁴³ Notably, Indigenous-authored or -influenced sources may deemphasize or omit the language of “disability,” using more specific language around health, trauma, and addictions.⁴⁴

Homelessness is a disability issue

Over the past 30 years, Manitoba has witnessed growth and shifts in advocacy around disability and housing, albeit with actual change lagging significantly behind this advocacy and any research-informed recommendations. The most profound changes have affected people with intellectual disabilities, who have experienced an increased degree of autonomy because of a shift to community-based housing. The closure of the Manitoba Developmental Centre, one of the last institutions of its kind in Canada, has

been celebrated as a significant victory by this community, both symbolically as well as substantively.⁴⁵ In recent years, there has been a growing focus on mental health and addiction in the grey literature on housing.⁴⁶

The grey literature also reveals a significant emphasis by governments and developers on physical accessibility. Yet, the biggest problem is the vastly insufficient social housing stock to meet the needs of lower-income Manitobans,⁴⁷ while increasingly expensive private-market options, including rental units that reduce control by residents of their own living circumstances (such as the ability to renovate for changing access needs), point to a situation in which disabled people's housing choices are further restricted and frequently inadequate. Legal support and advocacy measures, such as conditional orders, may help some renters to avoid eviction.⁴⁸ However, this does not address the underlying problem of both inadequate economic support for disabled people and a paucity of choice regarding accessible housing options, leaving disabled renters potentially more vulnerable to the actions of private landlords. The smattering of grey literature that takes an intersectional approach to disability and housing points to even greater challenges for Manitobans who experience marginalization along multiple axes. It may therefore come as no surprise that disabled people make up a substantial proportion of the growing number of unhoused Manitobans, despite community initiatives and governmental promises, reminding us that homelessness is also a disability issue.⁴⁹

Analyzing the grey literature

The four provinces considered in our broader research – British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, and Nova Scotia – have unique demographic characteristics; each faces a blend of locally specific and cross-Canada challenges around ensuring disabled people have a safe, accessible, affordable, and appropriately supportive roof over their heads. Regardless of the region, the inadequacy of existing housing options is obvious, and the Manitoba experience demonstrates how nationwide problems manifest in local and regional settings, even when those settings are well-populated by disability advocates. The skyrocketing cost of living, coupled with inadequate funding, is both a nationwide and a provincial problem. Likewise, the landscape of the right to housing for disabled people inside and beyond Manitoba is characterized by an aging housing stock and vast shortage of social housing,⁵⁰ a lack of laws and regulations requiring private housing be built to accessible standards, and all too often, inadequate government economic commitments to the housing needs of those with disabilities. While periods of NDP governance show evidence in the grey literature of a greater political commitment to assisting disabled Manitobans to meet their housing needs, the measures that were

introduced have generally been modest and piecemeal, even if life-changing for some individuals who benefitted from them. While some small-scale initiatives, such as supportive housing developments, have been very successful and present innovative models for those who dream of better “disability futures,”⁵¹ the percentage of disabled people that these measures can accommodate, and assist, remains minuscule.

The federal government’s plans for a new disability support payment, while initially held up by many in the disability community in Manitoba and elsewhere as a vital tool for meeting the financial challenges of housing, increasingly appears to be insufficient with quite limited per-person funding and relatively few who will be accepted after a stringent means-tested eligibility check.⁵² The province has also not moved to adequately address the rapid outpacing of support funding due to inflation. The recent provincial PC government’s introduction of the Manitoba Supports for Persons with Disabilities program in 2023 offered only an additional \$100 per month to a segment of the disabled population with the highest needs, falling well short of their actual needs.⁵³ Manitoba’s political leaders have not directly addressed the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the increasing size of the disabled community and, consequently, a growing need for housing and other supports.⁵⁴ Unfortunately, while disabled individuals and disability-conscious communities continue to be creative and resourceful in times of scarcity, and the NDP have returned to power in the province, there appears to be little by way of specific action on the immediate horizon for an improvement in the housing circumstances for disabled people in Manitoba.

One thing that the considerable amount of grey literature written over the last several decades does tell us is that there is a wealth of community and government research on many aspects of housing and disability. At this point, we have a reasonably clear picture of the general needs regarding accessible and supportive housing, with disabled people themselves increasingly taking the lead in articulating what is required. We also have a considerable collection of studies from across Canada on specific concerns, possible solutions, and successful trials of housing and support models.

This is not to say that there are no gaps in the existing literature. Countless disability communities exist without effective advocacy organizations supporting them, such as people with a variety of health-related chronic conditions like chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, and “long COVID.” People with non-visible disabilities frequently have unmet housing needs and rarely appear in disability-oriented grey literature. Autistic adults are virtually absent from housing studies and advocacy outside of those with coexisting intellectual disabilities and tend to be grouped into the “developmental disabilities” category. While Indigeneity and colonization have finally entered the conversation about the diverse housing needs of Manitobans, the significance of a

decolonial and Indigenizing paradigm shift away from conventional and colonial conceptions of and language about disability is under-explored in the grey literature.

Researchers are likely to continue studying the relationship between disability and housing, expanding and nuancing our knowledge of a growing area of crisis and concern. Targeted research is needed to address existing knowledge gaps concerning specific populations within disability communities. Meanwhile, it has become increasingly clear that what the disabled population of Manitoba most needs now for them to realize their right to housing is *action*, informed by the decades of accumulated work in this area.

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⁴⁵ “Manitoba Developmental Centre,” Community Living Manitoba, accessed December 13, 2024, <https://www.aclmb.ca/resources/manitoba-developmental-centre/>.

⁴⁶ This is especially evident in the literature focusing on homelessness and health, where the framing of substance dependency in terms of a health/wellness issue fits well with a disability analysis, whether it is explicitly named as such. For example, refer to Josh Brandon, *The Winnipeg Street Census 2022: Final Report* (Winnipeg: End Homelessness Winnipeg and Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, 2022), https://spcw.mb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/WSC_FinalReport2022_Final_reduced.pdf.

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