

Choice-Based Housing Access System - Update

Date: November 14, 2023

To: Economic and Community Development Committee

From: Executive Director, Housing Secretariat

Wards: All

SUMMARY

The HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan ("HousingTO Plan") provides a blueprint for actions and investments across the full housing spectrum to enhance access to affordable housing options for Toronto residents. As part of the HousingTO Plan, the City of Toronto ("the City") adopted a Housing Charter, Opportunity for All, which considers how the City will support the progressive realization of the right to housing and the specific needs of historically disadvantaged and marginalized groups in accessing housing options.

In 2022, the City launched the Choice-Based Housing Access System ("the system"), a modernized and updated system for allocating rent-geared-to-income (RGI) units. In alignment with the City of Toronto's Digital Infrastructure Strategic Framework, the City recognizes the importance of an equity-focused approach in developing, deploying and maintaining a digital infrastructure. This includes uncovering and learning from digital connectivity gaps to better target equity-seeking, marginalized and vulnerable groups to ensure all people in Toronto can access the system and maximize participation with the necessary supports.

This report provides an overview and progress update on the Choice-Based Housing Access System and responds to City Council's request to establish a plan, informed by applicants and community agency partners, to explore options, in alignment with the *Human Rights Code*, to increase applicant participation in the system. City staff will report to the Economic and Community Development Committee in February 2024 with an evidence-based, targeted implementation plan to further improve and increase applicant participation in the system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Executive Director, Housing Secretariat recommends that:

1. The Economic and Community Development Committee receive this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no financial implications resulting from the adoption of the recommendation within this report.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agree with the financial implications as identified in the Financial Impact section.

EQUITY IMPACT

The HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan envisions a City where all residents have equal opportunity to develop their full potential. The HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan is centred on a human rights-based approach to housing, which recognizes that housing is essential to a person's inherent dignity and well-being and to build healthy, inclusive, and sustainable communities.

Access to housing options across the full housing spectrum provides the foundation for improving social and economic outcomes. The process of allocating Rent-Geared-to-Income (RGI) units has undergone a significant improvement with the launch of the Choice-Based Housing Access System.

The adoption of the MyAccessToHousingTO applicant portal and the Choice-Based Housing Cycles have led to efficiencies throughout the housing offer process. Applicants on the Centralized Waiting List (CWL) self-manage their application and make informed housing decisions that meet their households' current needs. The City is committed to continuous improvement, ensuring the Choice-Based Housing Access System can be more easily navigated and accessed by eligible households including equity seeking groups such as seniors, people experiencing homelessness, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, and to explore opportunities to access the system using both digital and non-digital options.

DECISION HISTORY

On October 11, 2023, City Council adopted item PH 6.1 – "HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan – 2022-2023 Annual Progress Update". This report directed the Housing Secretariat to report to the November 28, 2023 meeting of the Economic and Community Development Committee to establish a plan to reduce barriers and explore options to increase applicant participation in the Choice-Based Housing Access System for Rent-Geared-to-Income (RGI) housing.

The decision document can be assessed at the following link:

[PH6.1 - HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan - 2022-2023 Annual Progress Update](#)

COMMENTS

The Choice-Based Housing Access System

The HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan emphasizes the need to provide accessible and equitable housing opportunities, with a focus on improving health, social, and economic outcomes. To support this work, as outlined in the Toronto Housing Charter, the City adopts a human rights-based approach focusing on the right to equal treatment and access to housing options and recognizing housing as crucial to a person's dignity and well-being, promoting safe, secure, and affordable homes for Toronto residents.

In response to the Auditor General's report, *Opening Doors to Stable Housing: An Effective Waiting List and Reduced Vacancy Rates Will Help More People Access Housing*, and subsequent Council-adopted recommendations, in July 2021 the City launched the MyAccessToHousingTO applicant portal for households to submit and maintain RGI applications. In January 2022, the City modernized the way in which RGI units are allocated by launching the Choice-Based Housing Access System. This cloud-based system simplifies the application process for RGI, allowing eligible applicants to self-manage their application and express interest in housing options based on their position on the Centralized Waiting List (CWL).

An equity lens and a right-to-housing perspective has been embedded throughout the initial design decisions of the system, and will continue to evolve and be applied as the system, policies and legislative directives evolve.

Alignment with the City's Digital Infrastructure Strategic Framework

On April 6, 2022, City Council adopted a Digital Infrastructure Strategic Framework (DISF), a corporate-wide principle-based strategy that provides overall direction and guidance for all Digital Infrastructure Initiatives at the City. The DISF is being implemented to effectively respond to the opportunities and challenges associated with the use of deploying and maintaining a digital infrastructure and to provide guidance and standards for digital infrastructure initiatives, including emerging issues centred around digital equity and inclusion. The six (6) principles of the DISF are: 1) Equity and Inclusion; 2) A Well Run City; 3) Society, Economy and the Environment; 4) Privacy and Security; 5) Democracy and Transparency; and 6) Digital Autonomy. Together, these principles provide a framework for consistent decision-making related to digital infrastructure, ensuring that the implementation decisions of the Choice Based Housing Access System are not made in isolation.

The DISF principle of Equity and Inclusion includes four (4) strategic priorities, outlined in Table 1. Table 1 provides an overview of the actions taken to date to support households in navigating the system that align with the equity and inclusion priorities of the DISF.

Table 1: DISF's Equity and Inclusion Principle and the activities undertaken for the Choice-Based Housing Access System, which align with the strategic priorities.

Equity and Inclusion: Strategic Priorities	Aligned Objective	Implemented Strategies and Outreach
Digital Inclusion and Human Rights	Identifying and removing systemic barriers, bias and discrimination to the full participation of diverse communities to create equitable access to services and programs.	• An equity lens was applied to the development Choice Based Access Housing System, including development of tactics to overcome foreseen barriers to participation in the system. • Ensuring the system and support network is in compliance with the <i>Ontario Human Rights Code</i>. • Funding for technology and staffing model, along with training, to Housing Hubs to support applicants transitioning to MyAccesstoHousingTO. • On-site registration clinics provided at shelters and shelter hotels. • Information sessions provided to Community Agency Partners from various sectors including seniors, VAW, settlement and newcomer supports. • Automated phone calls were sent to all phone numbers on an applicant's file. • Five Canada Post mail campaigns were issued to inform applicants how to register and maintain their application in MyAccesstoHousingTO.
Accessible Digital Infrastructure	Accessible digital environment, where people can access web-based services, information and communication in a way that meets individual needs.	• MyAccesstoHousingTO can be translated into 51 languages via Google Translate. • 125 Registration workshops offered at Toronto Public Library computer labs throughout 2022-2023. • City website translated into 51 languages. • Instructional videos on Toronto.ca. • MyAccesstoHousingTO is cloud-based and can be used via computer, tablet or phone.

Equity and Inclusion: Strategic Priorities	Aligned Objective	Implemented Strategies and Outreach
Human Centered Digital Infrastructure	Developing services based on user needs and preferences and access to non-digital public services.	• Phone channel available through the Application Support Centre. • In-person appointments available at the Access to Housing Resource Centre. • In-person and phone support at the Housing Hubs to support applicants in participating in the system. • 800 VAW and emergency shelter staff trained and granted system access to support clients applying and maintaining their RGI application. • Free translation services, as required. • Free Tax Clinics at the Access to Housing Resource Centre in Q1-Q2 2022. • Registration workshop series at the Toronto Public Library computer labs, where households were able to receive in-person guidance from City staff on how to navigate the registration process. • Virtual Information Series throughout 2021-2023 to community agency partners, social and/or health service organizations on how to register, apply and participate in Choice Based Housing Cycles.
Connectivity and Digital Equity	Residents and businesses have access to affordable and reliable high-speed internet and internet-enabled devices.	• Funding to Housing Hubs to expand access and purchase technology to support registrations. • Computers and devices that households can use at Toronto Public Library locations and other partner organizations that provide Wi-Fi access and computer devices. • Incorporation of self-serve computer labs at the Access to Housing Resource Centre.

The Housing Secretariat is committed to supporting applicants transitioning to MyAccessToHousingTO, sustaining housing outcomes and ensuring RGI files are maintained by continuing to implement tactics and strategies, leveraging existing partnerships, tools and resources to ensure a variety of methods are used to connect households with support in navigating the system.

Table 2 below outlines further alignment with the implementation of the Choice Based Housing Access system with the remaining DISF five (5) principles.

DISF Principle	Choice Based Housing Access System alignment
2. A Well Run City	• Replacement of end-of-life technology with a modernized system for waitlist management • Enhanced reporting capabilities to improve administrative oversight and • Improved data governance, initiating data sharing with Toronto Housing Data Hub and Open Data
3. Society, Economy and The Environment	• Implementation of MyAccessToHousingTO online applicant portal, establishing a self-serve option for residents to apply for the CWL waitlist, maintain their file and express interest on available RGI units. • Establish a network of community agency partners across the City that have user access to the system and can provide residents nearby in-person support. • Establish the Application Support Centre as a dedicated phone channel for applicants • Applicants can participate in Choice Based Housing Cycles anytime during the two-week cycle, providing flexibility and convenience as to when the household chooses to participate.
4. Privacy and Security	• Collaborated with information management, TSD and CISO, to include clause within the contract that meets the City's Privacy and Security Standard • Vendor will comply with all Federal, Provincial, and municipal laws and regulations relating its role as service provider or as a processor of client data.
5. Democracy and Transparency	• Ensure that all designed system decisions can be explained in plain language • Engagement with internal and external stakeholders to incorporate their insights into system design decisions • Provision of information sessions and, where applicable, user system training to ensure applicants, community partners and City staff understand system functions and logic. • Inclusion of ranking information in Choice Based Cycles, providing applicants with bi-weekly feedback on their placement on the Centralized Waiting List based

DISF Principle	Choice Based Housing Access System alignment
6. Digital Autonomy	• Termination of convenience clause are included which allows the City to terminate the contract without cause • Transition services clause allow the city to terminate contract with up to 365 days of transition period to transition to new service. • Production database backup files are retrievable by the city at anytime via VPN tunnel and/or secure transfer server.

The Housing Secretariat is committed to applying the guidance of the DISF principles as the Choice Base Housing Access System evolves.

Progress to Date and Outcomes

Since the launch of the system in 2022, the City has been committed to improving the administration of the Centralized Waitlist for RGI and the allocation of RGI units in the system. Successes from the implementation of the system include the following:

- In 2022, 3,269 households were housed off the CWL, including the highest number of Special Priority and Local Priority households, including people experiencing homelessness.
- Since launching Choice Based Housing Cycles, the average number of calls to place a unit on offer decreased from 9.3 calls to 1.5 calls, which significantly reduces vacancy loss and ensures efficient use of RGI housing.
- Refusal rates have decreased from 23% in 2019 to 11% thus far in 2023. With the implementation of the Single Offer Rule, applicants make informed housing decisions with the building and unit information and visuals provided in Choice Base Housing Cycles.
- Efficiencies realized in the housing offer process has supported a decline in vacancy rates in Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) and Toronto Seniors Housing Corporation (TSHC) from over 4% in Q2 2022 to under 1.5% by Q3 2023.

Continuous Learning and Improvement

The Housing Secretariat is committed to continuous learning and improvement and recognizes that further enhancements can be made to MyAccessToHousingTO and the Choice Based Housing Access System to improve the applicant experience from initial application, to maintaining eligibility and obtaining an RGI housing offer. As outlined in the DISF, continuous improvement happens iteratively through information gathered from feedback loops with applicants, community partners and key stakeholders to provide input for ongoing system function and access improvements.

Aligned with City's Housing Data Strategy, the Housing Secretariat recognizes the importance of implementing procedures and alternative approaches to ensure Toronto households are provided accessible and equitable options to apply for and obtain RGI housing. Guided by the DISF, staff will focus efforts on researching applicant experiences and identify options to ease participation in the system. Findings from this analysis will inform a targeted implementation plan. City staff will report to the Economic and Community Development Committee in February 2024 detailing the implementation plan and next steps.

1. Applicant and Community Partner User Experience and System Activity Use

Using a human centred design approach, City staff will conduct data analysis and research on applicant experiences, including surveys to applicants and community agency partners. The findings from these activities will provide valuable insight about the improvement areas necessary to support increased overall participation and specific targeted strategies to support households with unique challenges in using the system.

2. Seeking administrative efficiencies to maintain an RGI application in the system

From application to housing offer, the average wait for an RGI unit can range from eight (8) to fifteen (15) years. Applicants on the CWL are required to update their information annually, including contact information, household composition and income and asset verification. To accept an offer of housing, applicants must continue to be eligible for RGI at the time of offer, particularly regarding income and asset declarations which may fluctuate from year to year. The Housing Secretariat will explore areas to streamline this process for households to promote ease in maintaining their RGI application while also ensuring applicants who are at the top of the list remain eligible and are administratively prepared to accept a housing offer.

3. Enhanced in-person supports for households and applicants

The City will explore leveraging existing community partners, including the Housing Hubs, divisional partners and other service providers to expand in-person supports and improve digital access initiatives, including providing additional training so they can continue to support applicants in navigating the system.

4. Exploring system configurations and capabilities to streamline and improve the applicant experience

The system currently has the option for an approved third-party support to update an applicant's file, including the ability for a third-party individual to express interest on available units on behalf of an applicant. City staff will explore additional system features and capabilities that may improve the applicant experience, including options to automate application maintenance and the housing offer process within the system, where possible.

5. Creating efficiencies using a cross-divisional approach

The Housing Secretariat will explore enhancing a cross-divisional strategy with Human Service Integration division partners and others to explore options for data sharing strategies and in-person service delivery opportunities to simplify applying and maintaining RGI applications on the CWL.

6. Alternative communication pathways for households with an active application in the system

For households that have an active application in the system, City staff use the communication portal built into the system to communicate upcoming announcements, improvements to the system, annual eligibility requirements and other information that a household using the system may need to be aware of. City staff will be further exploring additional system capabilities and features to communicate with active households in the system to ensure that information is received by households.

Conclusion

Improving residents' access to housing opportunities and streamlining the administration of housing opportunities are key priorities for the City of Toronto. The City recognizes that the implementation of a City system requires ongoing learning, improvement and refinements, that uses an evidence and data-informed approach and leverages the expertise from applicants and community partners. Findings from the plan outlined in this report will be used to recognise any gaps in system access and the City will bring forward a report to the Economic and Community Development Committee in February 2024 with a targeted implementation plan on key areas for ongoing learning and improvement for maximum access and participation in the system.

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SIGNATURE

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