

Chapter 24

Saskatchewan Housing Corporation—Providing Adequate Social Housing to Eligible Clients

1.0 MAIN POINTS

Through its Social Housing Rental Program, SaskHousing uses various local housing authorities in over 300 communities across the province to place eligible clients in over 18,000 rental units. This Program is to provide safe, quality housing at affordable rents to households where income is too low to obtain accommodations in the private market.

By November 2020, SaskHousing strengthened its processes to provide adequate social housing to eligible clients through implementing the four recommendations we first made in 2017.

Housing authorities consistently followed SaskHousing policies and procedures to calculate point scores prior to placing clients in suitable rental units. Those policies expect authorities to determine eligibility and priority for social housing placement based on a client's assessed needs (i.e., by calculating point scores for each client). Housing authorities also retained sufficient documentation to show they placed clients in rental units based on greatest need (e.g., highest point score).

In addition, SaskHousing set timelines for housing authorities to assess client applications and notify applicants of decisions regarding program eligibility. Housing authorities contacted applicants regularly about the status of their applications.

These improvements should help ensure housing authorities place eligible applicants in suitable homes within reasonable timeframes, and applicants do not live in housing not meeting their needs for longer than necessary.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Under *The Saskatchewan Housing Corporation Act*, SaskHousing is responsible for providing programs and services to help Saskatchewan people in the greatest need for housing. One way SaskHousing does this is through its Social Housing Rental Program. The Program provides safe and adequate housing to families and seniors with low incomes and people with disabilities.

The Program provides subsidized rental housing. Local housing authorities manage and administer SaskHousing's housing programs and units.¹

¹ Local housing authorities are agencies of SaskHousing with their own Government-appointed boards of directors. SaskHousing funds them.



2.1 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This audit assessed the status of four recommendations first made in our *2017 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 27 about SaskHousing’s processes to provide adequate social housing to eligible clients.

To conduct this audit engagement, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate SaskHousing’s progress toward meeting our recommendations, we used the relevant criteria from the original audit. SaskHousing’s management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

To complete the follow-up audit, we interviewed key staff at SaskHousing and four housing authorities. In addition, we reviewed relevant documents (e.g., policy manuals, point score forms), conducted data analytics, and tested a sample of client files.

3.0 STATUS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This section sets out each recommendation including the date on which the Standing Committee on Public Accounts agreed to the recommendation, the status of each recommendation at November 30, 2020, and SaskHousing’s actions up to that date.

3.1 Point Scores Correctly Calculated Prior to Placing Applicants in Suitable Housing

We recommended the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation have its housing authorities follow its policies to calculate point scores prior to placing applicants in suitable social housing. (2017 Report – Volume 2, p. 212, Recommendation 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement September 26, 2019)

Status—Implemented

We recommended the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation maintain accurate and complete point score data for social housing in its provincial database. (2017 Report – Volume 2, p. 212, Recommendation 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement September 26, 2019)

Status—Implemented

Housing authorities are following SaskHousing’s policies to calculate point scores for applicants seeking subsidized rental units. While inconsistencies between the point scores in SaskHousing’s database and those kept by the housing authorities continued to exist, the inconsistencies did not affect the prioritization or placement of applicants in rental units.

SaskHousing policies require housing authority staff to use a standard form for calculating point scores for all eligible applicants and to base the calculation on information provided

on applications.² Housing authorities are to use point scores to prioritize placement of applicants (e.g., placing the highest scoring applicants into the first suitable available rental unit). They are also supposed to enter the point scores into SaskHousing's provincial database.

In January 2018, SaskHousing reminded all housing authorities of these requirements.

For each of the 30 social housing client files we tested, housing authority staff calculated point scores using the standard form. However, when comparing point scores in the housing authorities' client files to SaskHousing's provincial database, we found 12 of the 30 scores did not match. Differences in point scores ranged from 5 to 50.³

SaskHousing management indicated that a difference of 25 in point scores would be a significant difference. They noted differences could be a result of the individual's circumstances changing (e.g., became homeless temporarily after being evicted) or changes in calculation resulting from later receipt of missing/updated application information (e.g., current income information).

Our further analysis of the 12 client files with differing scores found 3 clients where the point scores differences were greater than 25. We found, for each of these files, the housing authorities had revised the point scores because of their receipt of updated information after the application was initially assessed. For these three files, we also found:

- In two files, the additional information decreased the point scores (i.e., housing placement became lower priority). However, because chronic vacancies exist in the communities where the applicants were applying for housing, no prioritization of applicants is needed in these communities. Hence, the decrease in point scores did not affect placement.
- In the other file, the additional information increased the point score (i.e., became higher priority). We found the applicant viewed the rental unit within six business days of being approved and signed the lease within the month. This indicates appropriate prioritization and timely placement.

Calculating and using the correct point scores ensures housing authorities place eligible applicants in suitable homes in a timely manner.

3.2 Timelines Set to Notify Applicants of Decision

We recommended the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation set timelines to assess applications for social housing and notify applicants of decisions regarding program eligibility. (2017 Report – Volume 2, p. 213, Recommendation 3; Public Accounts Committee agreement September 26, 2019)

Status—Implemented

² Points score provides an objective numerical score based on the applicant's core needs (affordability, suitability, and adequacy of current shelter).

³ For the twelve-month period ending July 31, 2017, the time of our original audit, the differences in point scores ranged from 8 to 214.



SaskHousing set clear timeframes in which it expects housing authorities to assess applications and notify applicants of decisions regarding program eligibility. While housing authorities did not always meet the target timeframes, they maintained regular contact with applicants about the status of their applications.

In April 2018, SaskHousing updated its policies requiring housing authorities to notify applicants, in writing, of the status of their applications within 20 days of receipt (unless the applicant had already been allocated a housing unit).

For 27 of 30 applicants we tested, authorities notified them within 20 days either in writing (4), via phone calls and emails (16), or by signing a lease agreement within 25 days (7). For three of 30 applicants, the housing authorities notified them later than 20 days after its receipt of the application.

For these three applicants, we found housing authorities maintained regular contact with applicants and had adequate reasons for the delays. For example,

- For one applicant notified 94 days after receipt of the application, the housing authority put a hold on the application until the individual paid a previous landlord outstanding money. Once the housing authority determined the money was paid, it notified the applicant within 20 days stating they were approved.
- For the two applicants notified 12 and 14 days later than 20 days, the housing authority sought and awaited its receipt of missing relevant information (e.g., references, income support) and notified applicants the same day of their receipt of all of the information stating the applicants were approved.

Setting clear timeframes for completing assessments and informing applicants of the results helps ensure applicants do not live in housing not meeting their needs for longer than necessary.

3.3 Documentation Sufficiently Retained

We recommended the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation require housing authorities to retain documentation to verify applicants are offered social housing units based on their point score priority. (2017 Report – Volume 2, p. 213, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement September 26, 2019)

Status—Implemented

Housing authorities retain sufficient documentation to support decisions about verifying the appropriateness of an individual's placement in a social housing unit.

In January 2018, SaskHousing clarified its prioritization process to require housing authorities to retain records to document offering and placement of approved applicants. It communicated the clarified process to all housing authorities.

For the 30 client files we tested, housing authorities placed applicants with the highest point scores in rental housing units first or had adequate reasons for the delays.⁴ For our sample:

- In three communities, both applicants with the highest point scores were placed in homes quicker than those applicants with lower scores.
- In one community, both applicants with the highest scores were not placed in homes quicker than the other applicants with lower scores. However, the client files noted adequate reasons for the delays (e.g., required information such as references and income support not received).

Our testing found the housing authorities kept sufficient information about the progress of application and delays (if any) on an applicant's file. For example, we saw housing authorities noted the date it held interviews, received missing information, and when applicants viewed units. Housing authorities also kept notes from interviews with applicants in the client files.

Retaining sufficient documentation, such as key dates and interview notes, to support decisions helps the housing authorities and SaskHousing verify the appropriateness of an individual's placement in a social housing unit.

⁴ In our testing, we assessed the applicants with the two highest point scores in each of the four locations sampled to determine if housing authorities placed them before other applicants with lower scores.



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