

Innovative Approaches to Community-Based Housing for Precarious Migrants and Refugees: A Policy Report

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 2023, Toronto's Shelter, Support and Housing Administration reported a 440 percent increase in refugee claimants in the shelter system since 2021 (City of Toronto 2023). In Canadian cities like Toronto, demanding conditions for rental applications and structural barriers negatively affect the ability of refugee claimants to secure housing. These challenges, plus limited financial resources, social networks, cultural familiarity, and official language familiarity, place refugee claimants at particular risk of homelessness (Kissoon 2010; Sherrell, D'Addario, and Hiebert 2007). Austerity and state withdrawal from housing provision has led to similar housing crises in other cities in North America (Ngueita 2020), Europe (Meet et al. 2021), Latin America (Magliano and Perissinotti 2020), and Africa (Paller 2015). In response, local non-profits and community-based housing organizations (CBHOs) have assumed greater responsibility in supporting unhoused refugees. However, a critical knowledge gap exists in understanding how these community-based practices of hospitality provide holistic alternatives to accommodation for precarious migrants.

This research shares findings from a comparative study that investigates innovative approaches of local governments and community-based organizations to provide adequate housing for refugee claimants and undocumented migrants., the objectives are (1) to inform multilevel policymaking of best practices in housing solutions for precarious migrants and refugees; and (2) to expand links for transnational learning and collaboration between community-based housing organizations across sanctuary cities in Canada and beyond.

This report proceeds as follows. First, we provide a short background to the policy issue at hand and review our methodological approach for collecting data on existing housing solutions for precarious migrants. Second, we present a typology of existent housing models that were identified through our initial analysis. Then, we review innovative housing initiatives implemented by solidarity cities across Canada, Latin America, and Europe. Finally, we conclude with a comparative discussion of these diverse initiatives and of the leading role that community leaders and organizations play in standing in solidarity with migrants to offer alternative shelter solutions (Carter 2023).

II. BACKGROUND

This project has been supported and funded by the partnership project, '[Urban Sanctuary, Migrant Solidarity, and Hospitality in Global Perspective \(Soli*City\)](#)' led by Dr. Harald Bauder. It was inspired by conversations with Toronto's Mayor Olivia Chow, ongoing Soli*City work with the [Romero House](#) and executive director Francesca Allodi-Ross, input by Jennifer Chan and Dusha Sritharan at the City of Toronto, and consultation with Vera Dodic from the Refugee Response team at Toronto Shelter and Support Services. Given its international expertise and networks, especially the Berlin-based [Moving Cities](#), a team of Soli*City researchers offered to conduct this study to help cities like Toronto to develop effective local housing policies for refugees and other migrants in precarious situations.

In Toronto, community-based housing organizations (CBHOs) have assumed increased responsibility in supporting unhoused migrants (Matthew House 2018; Romero House 2023; Sojourn House 2021). This increased responsibility is also the case in major cities across Europe where innovative programs like Refugees at Home (UK) and Accommodate Ukraine have connected thousands of precarious migrants in need of housing with hosts and supports to find safe, affordable and sustainable accommodation (Refugees at Home 2023; Unterkunft Ukraine 2023). These organizations rely largely on a constellation of funding from municipal, provincial and federal governments, charity donations, individual contributions, and foundation grants. Other innovative approaches at the city-level have involved public-private partnerships to repurpose vacant property and church-based shelter (Fard and Mehan 2018; Journey Home Community 2023). Across many of these initiatives, housing is approached in a holistic way to provide newcomers with resettlement needs such as legal aid, health and financial support, and referral services to employment opportunities (COSTI 2023). By offering wrap-around support, community-based housing organizations are integral actors in the successful transition of precarious migrants into safe and sustainable housing arrangements. In the following sections, this report will review and highlight leading organizations in Canada and around the world which support the housing of precarious migrants.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research is guided by the following question: What are some best practices in the collaborative governance of local migrant and refugee housing? To answer this question, we undertook a purposive systematic review of the leading policies and programs that support the housing of precarious migrants and refugees (Davis et al. 2014). Our initial search was guided by data provided by Romero House and the Moving Cities project. Then, snowball sampling was conducted to collect additional cases of community-based housing practices from journal articles, NGO reports, news outlets (CBC News; CTV News; Global News) and city websites. In total, we comparatively evaluated 51 cases of housing support for precarious migrants. The following section will detail the major findings that emerged from this thematic analysis,

including the typology that was developed to categorize organizations based on program type, governance structure, and funding model.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Program Type: Through an inductive thematic analysis, we have developed the following typology of community-based housing organizations:

Temporary housing is CSO-led and often a holistic approach that provides transitional support and shelter to precarious newcomers (often regardless of status).

Collective accommodation often place migrants in non-temporary housing in collective spaces, sometimes mixed with locals. Some have appointed housing coordinators to facilitate the transition into rental units in the city.

Reception centres, common in some European states, mandate placement of asylum-seekers and refugees into facilities until applications are processed. These centres do not often reflect a “best practice”.

Home share / citizen hospitality includes the programmes that connect migrants with individual citizens to support housing needs.

Emergency shelter includes short-term solutions for unhoused migrants and non-migrants.

Related programmes do not offer accommodations but provide other services such as housing placement support, financial benefits to secure housing, and qualitative assurance programmes that confirm the standard of housing available to migrants.

Governance Structure: We then analyzed CBHOs for their organizational governance structure by reviewing publicly available material, “about us” website pages, journal articles, or financial reports. A majority of the Canadian cases reviewed were governed solely by civil society organization (CSO) actors. Although many have received funding from federal agencies (e.g., IRCC), accountability mechanisms or federal involvement in the governance of the organization activities was not often publicly available information.¹ The number of CBHO by governance structure identified are shown in Figure 1.

1. In Canada, there are a growing number of federally administered initiatives that directly provide funding and support for local actors to develop a collaborative model of governance over integration and settlement matters. In Toronto, for example, there are four local immigration partnership (LIP) grants from IRCC to local community actors. However, as of April 2024, none of the four LIPs in Toronto have a working group specific to housing.

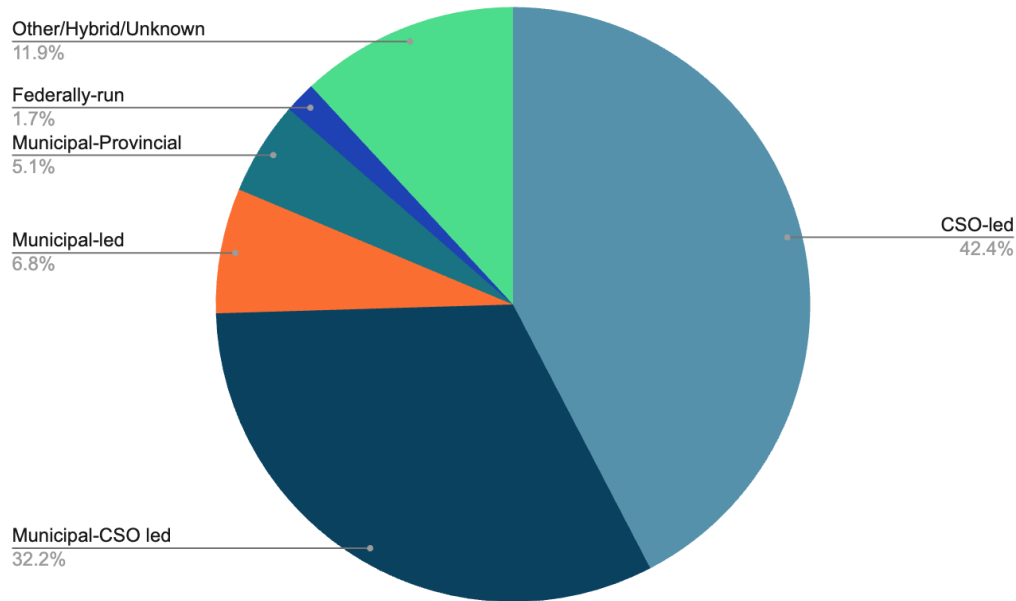


Figure 1. Pie chart of CBHOs by governance type.

Funding Model: To identify the funding model of CBHOs, we analyzed publicly available information including news reports, granting agency data, and financial reports. A majority of the community-based housing organizations rely heavily (more than 50% of budget) on volunteers and civil society for donations. Others (e.g. Sojourn House) rely on government grants to fund and to coordinate their initiatives. Based on the available data, it is not clear what accountability measures are in place which accompany these grants.

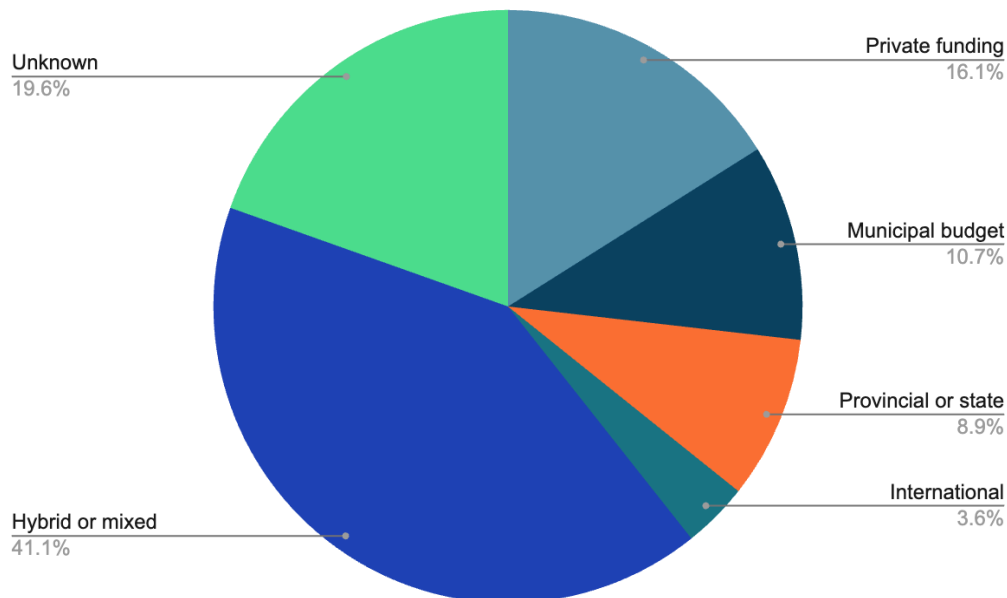


Figure 2. Pie chart of CBHOs by funding model type.

V. RESEARCH FINDINGS - Best Practices

In **Winnipeg, Manitoba**, the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba House (IRCOM) has been providing housing support to newcomers since 1991. Beyond the array of integration programs it offers, the non-profit charitable organization has been operating a block of apartments in the city of Winnipeg that newcomers are eligible to apply to within their first 12 months in Canada (IRCOM 2024). Since 2016, IRCOM (2024) has managed a 64 unit 2 and 3 bedroom apartment block, and an apartment building with 48 units with 2, 3 and 4 bedroom apartments. Information regarding how these properties were acquired is not publicly available as of April 2024. These units are under a rent-geared-to-income program administered by IRCOM and newcomers may occupy these units for up to three years. Government assisted refugees account for 60% of the total population of the IRCOM apartment blocks, followed by privately sponsored refugees (32%), refugee claimants (4%), and provincial nominees (2%) (IRCOM 2024). On average, the IRCOM apartments house 110 families. IRCOM also facilitates workshops for residents on matters relating to housing, financial literacy, healthy families and legal issues. Funders of the non-profit organizations include TD Bank, the Government of Canada, the Province of Manitoba, Manitoba Housing and Renewal Corporation among many others. In their financial reports for 2022-2023, their yearly income was \$3,602,675 which came from federal funding (48%), provincial funding (10%), municipal funding (1%), foundation/private (23%), donations (13%), and other (5%) (IRCOM 2024).



Image 1. *IRCOM Isabel*. (IRCOM Inc. 2024)

The Refugee Centre in **Montreal, Québec**, offers “wrap-around support” for refugees and is currently working on a temporary housing project to acquire units for newcomers through “a regenerative model of community financing” (Canadian Refugee Initiative 2022). This model seeks to break down some financial barriers that migrants experience upon arriving in Canada and will be aimed at helping newcomers to build a credit history and gain essential resources to qualify for private rental housing in the city. Currently, they are also working on a project called AlloCanada, in collaboration with the Canadian Red Cross and DevBloc, which centralizes resources into a searchable map displaying available help centers and resources for newcomers. The specifics of the funding model (e.g. financial report) were not publicly available, but the Refugee Centre does list the city of Montreal, the province of Québec, the Canadian Red Cross, UNHCR, and the IRCC as some of its partners (Canadian Refugee Initiative 2022).

Journey Home, a settlement organization in **Vancouver, Canada** offers transitional housing and emergency housing for newcomers through the repurposing of vacant properties in the city. It partners with developers and other refugee serving agencies to locate empty spaces or homes that are being prepared for demolition (Journey Home Community 2024). Journey Home then coordinates the short-term repurposing of these properties for migrants, and provides furniture and household goods. Once repurposed, these spaces are rented “at well below market” to eligible refugees (Ibid.). The organization also takes a holistic approach to settlement and housing provision, and offers referrals, settlement support, and assistance to newcomers with finding safe and affordable housing in Vancouver.

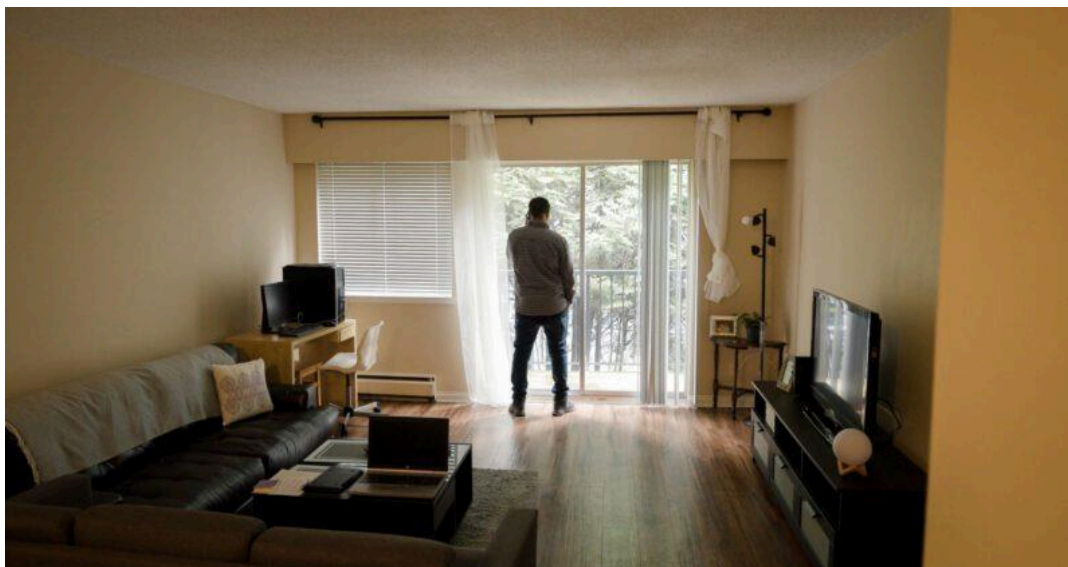


Image 2. Journey Home Community. *Meanwhile Spaces*. (Bhatia 2024).

Since 1992, Tür an Tür (*Door to Door*) in **Augsburg, Germany** has helped to supply housing for newcomers to the city. Like many other growing cities around the world, housing has become an increasingly pressing policy issue for Augsburg, where over 8,000 people have registered with the Housing Office in search of housing. Tür an Tür has sought to establish

opportunities for connection and community between newcomers and locals to break down barriers to housing access. It currently manages and operates the Europadorf, a 36-apartment block offered to newcomers, regardless of status, with guaranteed affordable rents and cross-generational living (Tür an Tür 2022). This project is financed through various funds and grants from government organizations, including but not limited to:

- The Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs
- The Federal Ministry of Education and Research
- European Union
- European Social Fund (ESF)
- European Integration Fund (EIF)
- Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF)

Tür an Tür is currently in the process of building an additional 17 socially connected apartments with a communal green space for residents which are aimed at supporting newcomer integration and at building community of Augsburg residents (Tür an Tür 2022).

In **Leverkusen, Germany**, a model of “best practice” in the governance of refugee housing and integration has existed and endured for over twenty years, while inspiring neighbouring cities to follow suit. In a study on the multilevel governance of refugee housing and integration, Auslander (2022) sheds light on the collaborative governance dynamics in Leverkusen, where the municipal government has collaborated with a leading non-profit, Caritas, and a Refugee Council (hired municipal government workers) to govern and support the housing of newcomers to the city. Leverkusen has permitted migrants to enter the private, decentralised housing market, “from the moment they arrive, regardless of protection status granted by the German government” (Auslander 2022, 949). This model of collaborative governance centralizes volunteer efforts, facilitates transition to the private rental housing market, coordinates community-building events like language cafes, and has established representative groups for refugees to directly communicate with the municipal government (Ibid.). Though smaller than Toronto, the city of Leverkusen has also struggled with housing solutions for newcomers: at the time of Auslander’s (2022) research, there were 1105 spaces in the federally administered accommodation centres and approximately four thousand refugees seeking accommodation. Prior to the arrival of large numbers of Syrian refugees, the interconnected, collaborative governance model in Leverkusen allowed the municipal government to close 11 of the 12 accommodation centres, while saving over seventy-six thousand euro.

In 2015-2016, and as a response to the movement of many Syrian refugees into Europe, over 30 cities in **the Netherlands** opened “Bed-bath-bread” (BBB) shelters to offer housing, food, and legal support to asylum claimants in the country. These shelters were municipally governed, yet funded through both a federally administered Municipalities Fund and city-level funds. In December 2016, Hess (2016) documented that 37 municipalities were offering shelter

to 1435 irregular persons and 25 families. As of 2019, only 27 municipalities were receiving financial contributions from this fund. These shelters stood in contrast to the Federally operated pre-departure facilities established in 2017, the *Landelijke Vreemdelingen Voorzieningen* (LVV). The purpose of the LVVs was to provide shelter for only two weeks to unhoused asylum claimants, “after which they should cooperate with their return in order to keep their right to shelter” (European Social Charter 2019, 4) The LVVs were only operational across 5 major cities in the Netherlands, and exclusion clauses led to many irregular migrants still being refused shelter. Image 3 depicts a BBB shelter still in operation as of April 2024 called the Ubuntu house in Utrecht which offers wrap-around integration and housing support for undocumented migrants in the Netherlands.



Image 3. *Utrecht Denzel with tour group.* (Migrantour 2024).

In **Berlin, Germany**, social housing acquisition and coordination units help to manage housing access and affordability for migrant populations. The State Office for Refugee Affairs (*Landesamt für Flüchtlingsangelegenheiten* [LAF]) oversees approximately 30,000 units across 90 facilities in Berlin (Senate of Berlin 2018). These include state-operated reception facilities, but also community and emergency accommodations within all twelve city districts. According to the Senate of Berlin the capacity of the community accommodations has increased to around 22,000 spots. Additionally, the municipal housing stock should be expanded to 400,000 flats by 2026 (Senate of Berlin 2018). An interdepartmental body, the Refugee Management Coordination Unit, has been established to help coordinate the “responsibilities of refugee

management in the government of Berlin” across many dimensions of integration (Council of Europe 2024). In addition, city districts such as Neukölln have established coordination offices that offer a “centralised contact person for all matters related to refugee policies” and an office to “coordinate the efforts of civil society organizations” (Council of Europe 2024). Neukölln has developed a set of recommendations for policy makers seeking to build capacities for refugee housing (Council of Europe 2024):

- “Install a coordination office for refugee integration in your city in order to better be able to channel civil society organisations and to offer a centralised contact person for all matters related to refugee policies;
- Have the refugee coordinator reach out actively and regularly to civil society and charity organisations in order to improve the flow of information and coordinate the efforts of all organisations and the city departments through regular meetings, and by creating tools such as online databases and apps;
- Develop an online and offline network for volunteers and civil society organisations to create synergies, and to facilitate knowledge sharing and the exchange of best practices;
- Make use of the expertise and creativity of the grass-roots whenever possible” (Council of Europe, 2024).

In **Medellín, Colombia**, a city-led initiative called the 123 Social Line (est. in 2020) connects migrants in need with immediate, emergency housing. The telephone line acts as a bridging mechanism to connect unhoused migrants with safe, secure shelter in the city. Upon connecting with 123 Social Line via telephone, trained city staff will pick people up and transport them to the available housing where people can stay for up to three months. The phone line can also be used to receive information about legal, medical, social, and job-training services in Medellin (Saliba and Yu 2022). According to a report by the Mayors Migration Council (2023), within the first year of the project, the city provided housing to over 300 refugee and migrant families, a total of over 1,250 people. Housing types included (Saliba and Yu 2022):

- *Hotels*
- *Shared houses* retrofitted to accommodate between 8 and 10 families
- *Inquilinatos*, private rooms provided to families with shared kitchen and laundry facilities on the same floor of a hotel.

These types of housing provide a private space while also “maintaining a communal spirit” (Mayors Migration Council 2022). A progress report issued by MMC (2022) found that approximately 75 percent of families who found housing through Medellín’s assistance program were able to transition into permanent housing in the private rental market on their own. Others were able to begin paying rent to stay in the inquilinatos at the end of the three months stay.

According to the report, this was only made possible through the city's active role in (Mayors Migration Council 2023):

- Identifying dignified housing in locations within proximity to social services and jobs;
- Negotiating the terms of stay with property owners;
- Creating nurturing living conditions within *inquilinos* and shared housing units;
- Connecting migrants and refugees with specific legal, medical, social, and job-training services depending on their needs;
- Offering means of transport to services that were not within walking distance;
- Establishing coordination mechanisms with over 18 local and international service providers, such as UNHCR, IOM, and World Vision, to bridge service gaps.



Image 4. *123 Social Line Housing Assistance Program*. (Special District of Science, Technology and Innovation of Medellín 2024).

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As local governments continue to allocate more funding to migrant housing initiatives, policies to support the housing of precarious newcomers must continue to support, engage, listen, and learn from the collective effort of local actors working already within these communities. This research has revealed that a common theme among CBHO support efforts is holistic, wrap-around support that goes beyond providing shelter. In-house social workers, child care support, credit building initiatives, transitional housing coordinators, and community events are but some of the holistic ways that community-based housing organizations work to support newcomers. Cities have also played a leading role in coordinating volunteer efforts (Leverkusen), hiring in-house settlement support workers (Bogota), and in providing alternative accommodation to nationally operated reception centres (Utrecht). Other innovative approaches have

included the repurposing of vacant properties for the temporary accommodation of precarious migrants, where organizations developed a rapid plan of action to turn vacant properties facing demolition into housing solutions. Ultimately, these community-based housing organizations serve as formidable examples of how to support the housing needs of newcomer populations in Toronto and beyond. This research has demonstrated that there is not one umbrella solution to migrant housing. Instead, coordinated efforts between all community and policy actors can work to bridge the gaps of settlement service provision and foreground creative, place-based models of housing support that are essential newcomer wellbeing.

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