

## PUBLIC HOUSING: THE KEY TO ACHIEVING & MAINTAINING PERMANENT AFFORDABILITY

The B.C. General Employees' Union

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UsKRj0fcTuw>

### Summary

Publicly owned non-market housing is the best way to deliver homes that meet the level of affordability that people in British Columbia need. In this video, BC General Employees' Union (BCGEU) Executive Vic-President Kari Michaels reviews the history of public housing and how a robust build-out can—and should—happen again. To learn more about how to push for more public housing, go to our website: <https://www.affordablebc.ca/toolkit>

### Transcript

#### Introduction

00:00 -Housing costs have skyrocketed over the last few decades, putting working-class people into an increasingly impossible situation. Over half of British Columbians are either rent-burdened or carrying large mortgage debts just to keep a roof over their heads.

#### What is public housing?

1:14 - But not all types of housing are the same. If the goal is to make housing more affordable, a crucial factor is not just the number of houses or the built form, but rather who owns and controls our homes. Not all demand is the same when it comes to housing. The demand for investment properties that maximize income for the owner is very different from the demand of the average worker just looking for a place to live.

#### What happened to public housing?

2:19 - The private housing sector cannot provide housing at the levels of affordability that many people need because it relies on a for-profit model. What's missing, or rather have been chronically underfunded by governments for decades, is public housing.

### Disinvestment in public housing

3:44 - Like health care and education, housing was once understood to be a fundamental public good. Following the Second World War, countries around the world built millions of units of public housing. For example, between 1965 and 1970, the United Kingdom constructed an average of 164,000 units of public housing per year. Sweden built over a million public housing units in a decade between 1965 and 1974. And in Vienna, Austria, construction of public housing has been ongoing to a point where today over two-thirds of homes in that city are publicly owned.

### How it can work

5:30 - In cities with large swaths of publicly owned housing, living there becomes as normal as renting or owning privately. Comparatively, Canada in the United States built a lot less public housing. Governments in these countries instead directed massive amounts of public investment into building out the suburbs, which was... a choice.

### The need to scale up

6:23 - Still, at its peak, Canada built nearly 27,000 units of public housing in 1971, representing one out of every four rental apartments built that year. By today's standards, this is a lot. So, what happened? A trend of slow disinvestment in public housing began in the 1980s, alongside the election of right-wing governments and a broader ideological devaluation of public services.

### Complimentary policies

7:00 - While this is a start to reversing years of underfunding, it's nowhere near ambitious enough to get us out of this current crisis. The Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives suggests that a bold plan to address the shortfall and a rapidly growing population would look more like [25,000 new units annually, or 250,000 over ten years.](#)

### Conclusion

7:30 - It takes time and funding to build housing, and that's why complementary policies are needed too. In our previous video, we discussed vacancy control, a critical measure that would stabilize rents for tenants in the private market while more affordable housing gets built. In our next video, we'll be discussing land value capture, which is one way governments could raise revenue for building more public housing on an ongoing basis at a scale that reflects the level of urgency our situation demands.