

Findings from the 2018 National Tribal Housing and Homeownership Survey

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In late April 2018, the National American Indian Housing Council released a survey to its members to learn more about the general state of housing programs across Indian Country¹. The [Center for Indian Country Development](#) at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, through its [National Native Homeownership Coalition](#), contributed questions relating to the state of homeownership in tribal communities.

The survey highlighted some important issues, providing a stage for additional follow-up and action. Foremost, NAIHC recognizes the importance of making it easier for members to respond to surveys like this one. The response rate was less than 20%, with only 46 TDHE respondents. Data drives policy decisions and NAIHC's advocacy efforts. NAIHC relies on its members to share information about the state of housing in their tribal communities.

This survey is a useful starting point to implement better data-gathering practices, so we would like to share the high-level results to begin an ongoing process of collection and evaluation of the state of housing and homeownership in our communities.

Housing highlights from the survey:

1. Tribal housing programs appear to be largely dependent on the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as the primary source of development funding. This is concerning, because it prevents tribes from moving to a more sustainable model of self-governance for housing development. First, there is always funding insecurity when reauthorization of programs like [NAHASDA](#) continue to fail or are not fully-funded, even with widespread support. This limits a tribe's responsiveness to the housing demand and needs in its community. Across Indian Country, there is a housing shortage of nearly 70,000 units (and this number is conservative)². This demonstrates a need to explore other options, which could include private sector models that are demand-driven and do not constrain a tribe's flexibility like federal guidelines.

¹ Information on NAIHC regions can be accessed [here](#).

² HUD's Housing Needs of American Indians and Alaska Natives in Tribal Areas (January 2017) <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/publications/HNAIHousingNeeds.html>

For those responding to this survey, only two new developing projects were not HUD-funded. Two TDHEs (tribally-designated housing entities) used Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC) to develop new housing, but a number of other respondents indicated interest in using LIHTC funds in the future. In fact, seven members reported LIHTC projects in various stages of development. For an example of LIHTC-funded housing on the Pine Ridge Reservation, please visit the [Center's webpage](#).

Other tribal housing entities are looking to grow their housing with other federal resources, such as the [U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Housing Services](#) programs. Federal programs like the [Veterans Affairs Direct Loan](#) also make it possible to individual tribal borrowers to build their own homes.

2. [TDHEs continue to create new housing developments](#). Though survey responses cannot be extrapolated to describe Indian Country in its entirety, over 80% of respondents (or 37 respondents) indicated that they have placed new units into service in their communities within the past 3 years. The developments were a mix of single-family rental, multi-family rental, and homeownership units. This provides further evidence to the 2017 HUD study—the need to supply new housing units in tribal areas across the nation.
3. [Tribal housing rehabilitation continues to be an issue](#). All 46 TDHE respondents are maintaining and rehabilitating existing units. In the past three years, half of respondents rehabilitated or modernized over 10 units. The survey does not provide enough information to explain the nature of the maintenance and repairs, but HUD's national study does demonstrate that housing conditions for American Indians and Alaska Natives are worse than the rest of the U.S. population.

The survey suggests that homeownership is a priority for TDHEs (tribally-designated housing entities)

Traditional public housing authorities in the U.S. usually limit their activities to rental housing. The NAIHC survey provides some evidence that tribes are more invested than their counterparts in creating housing choice by offering homeownership programs and homeownership counseling services. 32 of 46 TDHE respondents indicated that they offer homeownership programs and/or counseling services. This includes access to mortgage products, like the [HUD 184 Loan Program](#), [USDA 502 Direct Loan](#), [Veterans Affairs Direct Native American Direct Loan](#). This includes homebuyer readiness programs like [NAIHC's Pathways Home](#), recently relaunched with new training opportunities across Indian Country.

While the potential for homeownership expansion is apparent, the survey identified a number of potential challenges for home loans in tribal communities, especially those located on trust land. Unsurprisingly, TDHEs reported that the credit readiness of individual tribal borrowers was the primary challenge, followed by the lack of homebuyer education. If this holds true across Indian Country, TDHEs and partners could have a potentially profound impact just by offering homebuyer education and credit counseling services.

Other challenges to homeownership cited in the survey:

- Housing affordability
- High cost of construction
- Lack of infrastructure
- Processing time for Title Status Reports by the Bureau of Indian Affairs

Surprisingly, less than ten of our responses indicated a lack of lenders as a primary challenge to homeownership in their community.

Consistently, respondents indicated the need for more information on homeownership programs, from the products themselves, to residential leasing under the HEARTH Act and exercising right of first refusal in cases of foreclosure.

Next steps

So what are the next steps for NAIHC and NNHC after delivering this survey?

1. Use the survey responses on training and technical assistance needs to evaluate whether NAIHC has appropriate trainers and providers to address the most pressing issues.
2. Share non-HUD funding sources for housing development with tribes in our future conferences and communications.
3. Collaborate with the [NNHC](#) as they continue to streamline the mortgage lending process, and help bring the message to our partners at federal agencies and private lenders.
Share the [Tribal Leaders Handbook on Homeownership](#), which lays out strategies to address many of the challenges noted from this survey.
4. Conduct the survey on an annual basis with an aim to achieve broader participation of our members.

The first survey is a good start, and NAIHC hopes to create a meaningful dataset that both highlights its members' successes and identifies areas of unmet need. Beginning in 2019, NAIHC anticipates running these surveys by region with better engagement with our members and with the goal of gaining more input from across all of Indian Country.

We welcome your ideas on how to improve housing and homeownership in Indian Country as we go into 2019!