

THE AGENCY FOR CO-OPERATIVE HOUSING

POLICY MANUAL

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SUBJECT:

Communications

1. Introduction

The Agency's commitment to openness and accountability makes effective communication with clients, stakeholders and the general public an organizational priority.

The Communications Policy is concerned with the way the Agency communicates with clients—both its legal client, CMHC, and the housing co-operatives whose agreements with CMHC the Agency oversees. The policy also deals with the way the Agency informs the general public about its work.

The Communications Policy complies with the terms of the Agency's service agreement with CMHC and complements Agency policies governing client-service and satisfaction standards, bilingual services, privacy, human resources, and confidentiality and access to information, all of which touch on matters associated with communication.

2. Standards

The Agency's communications will meet the following standards:

- The Agency provides its clients, stakeholders and the public with timely, accurate, clear and appropriate information about its policies, programs, services and initiatives.

- The Agency communicates promptly, openly and courteously with clients and other stakeholders.
- The Agency honours the values of transparency and accountability to its clients and the general public by practising assertive disclosure in its communications, while respecting the obligation to protect private and confidential information.
- The Agency ensures that its communications can be readily understood by making them available in English and French, as required by the Bilingual Services Policy, and by using various communication tools and formats, including plain language and alternative media, to meet different needs.
- The Agency's communications comply as necessary with the federal visibility requirements set out in the Agency's agreement with CMHC.

3. Electronic Communications

- 3.1. When not communicating in person through its staff, the Agency will normally communicate by e-mail and through postings on its public and client websites. Print communications will be infrequent.
- 3.2. The Agency makes extensive use of electronic media to
 - inform the public about the Agency and its operations;
 - bridge geographic distances between the Agency and its clients and stakeholders in different regions of Canada;
 - facilitate delivery of the Agency's services to clients; and
 - accomplish these objectives at reasonable cost.
- 3.3. The Agency's program of electronic communications comprises the following:
 - electronic transmission of correspondence;
 - a bilingual Agency presence on the Internet, serving clients, stakeholders and the general public;
 - a public website that includes Board and staff contact information, the Agency's policies and annual reports, and information on the Agency's operations and the co-operative housing programs we administer;
 - password-protected web pages, accessible to Agency clients and specific groups of external users;
 - an intranet that serves as a portal to the Agency's electronic records and facilitates the sharing of news and the exchange of views among Agency offices and between staff and management;

- electronic messaging that allows the Agency to alert co-ops and stakeholders to new developments and new materials on the website, while keeping each separate e-mail address private;
 - an occasional electronic bulletin providing news and information of interest to clients and other stakeholders and subscribers;
 - a web-published annual report that describes the Agency's activities and achievements throughout the year and summarizes its annual audited financial statements;
 - social-media accounts.
- 3.4. As required, the Agency issues other publications, posting them on its client and public websites and, as appropriate, distributing them by e-mail.
- 3.5. Agency staff decide which materials to place on the Agency's public website and which to reserve for the client web pages. In making these decisions, staff will weigh the Agency's commitment to public accountability against its wish to provide stakeholders and clients with special value through an enriched client website.

4. Communications with Co-operative Housing Clients and other Stakeholders

- 4.1. The Agency is committed to the prompt communication of all important information to its client housing co-operatives and such other stakeholders as regional federations of housing co-operatives, property-management companies and the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada.
- 4.2. The Agency will maintain a toll-free telephone line to ensure that co-operatives will be able to speak with the appropriate regional office of the Agency at no expense to clients.
- 4.3. In a timely manner, the Agency will make available to each client through the client web pages the client's Annual Information Returns, Risk Assessment Reports, Compliance Reports, Co-operative Data Reports, Property Inspection Reports, Plain-Language Financials, and, where applicable, the client's annual budget, rent supplement reports and monthly or quarterly monitoring reports.
- 4.4. The Agency will use its client web pages to supply clients and stakeholders with relevant news and resources drawn from internal and external sources.
- 4.5. The Agency will present its co-op clients and stakeholders with an annual report on the performance of its service to clients.

5. Communications with the Public

- 5.1. The public website serves as the Agency's primary communications tool with the general public.
- 5.2. Guided by its policies governing privacy, confidentiality and access to information, the Agency will respond promptly and courteously to enquiries from residents of housing co-operatives, people seeking residency and the general public. Requests for copies of special reports and commentary on aggregated data drawn from the portfolio, such as the Agency prepares annually for CMHC, will be referred to the Director, Operations or the Chief Executive Officer. Requests for information of other than a factual nature are referred to CMHC for response, as the Agency's service agreement with CMHC requires.

6. Federal Visibility

- 6.1. The service agreement between CMHC and the Agency has certain provisions intended to ensure that the federal government remains visible to the public and program clients, whatever the changes in roles and responsibilities for its co-operative housing programs. These provisions do not affect Agency correspondence with clients about its administrative services. However, publicity materials or information directed to the general public, co-operatives or members of co-operatives on any other matter must contain a CMHC-approved reference to the role and support for the programs provided by the federal government through CMHC.
- 6.2. The CMHC name, logo and other symbols may not be used without CMHC's written consent. When permission is given, their use must comply with CMHC's branding guidelines.
- 6.3. The Agency and its representatives are free to deliver speeches, post signs and distribute announcements, news releases and notices of public events, written and electronic, about factual, programmatic matters. However, CMHC must first approve public communications in any form about any other matter coming under the service agreement or relating to CMHC. The agreement with CMHC obliges the Agency to submit communications requiring its approval 15 days in advance.

7. Communications and the Board

- 7.1. The Agency will provide CMHC with access to approved minutes of meetings of the Board and its committees through the client website.
- 7.2. Highlights from Board meetings, other than confidential matters, will be posted on the Agency's public website.

- 7.3. When a confidential matter comes before the Board, the discussion and any decisions will be recorded in a confidential addendum to the minutes of the meeting. The addendum will be distributed only to directors, the Corporate Secretary, the CEO and any others specifically named by the Board. Confidential issues coming before Board committees will be treated in a similar way. Directors, Agency staff and committee members are expected to exercise discretion in discussing these matters beyond the Board.
- 7.4. Directors will conduct all communications in accordance with the expectations set out in the Role of the Individual Director Policy.

8. Issues Management

- 8.1. Before launching any major new initiative, the Agency will develop a communications plan to support it. This plan may involve the use of any or all of the Agency's regular communications tools, as well as new ones developed for that specific purpose. The plan may involve outreach directed to different audiences over varying periods of time and will normally include a scheduled evaluation of whether the plan was effective.
- 8.2. Agency staff will follow the Agency-CMHC protocol on communications when responding, or preparing to respond, to the news media or any elected official seeking information that concerns CMHC or services delivered under the Agency's agreement with CMHC.
- 8.3. In matters that do not concern CMHC, the CEO or a designate acts as the Agency's public spokesperson. When the Board's voice needs to be heard, the president of the Agency or a designate speaks on the Board's behalf.

9. Communications and the Agency's Workforce

- 9.1. The Agency's workforce consists of management, temporary and permanent employees, out-partners who, on contract, perform technical work for the Agency, and, occasionally, casual labour. Full and open communication among staff and between staff and management will increase the commitment and organizational loyalty of staff and demonstrate that the Agency is true to its professed values.
- 9.2. The Agency's management and temporary and permanent employees will have full access to information about co-op clients and the Agency's own operations, policies and resources.
- 9.3. The Agency will make available information about co-op clients and the Agency to out-partners and casual labour on a need-to-know basis only.

- 9.4. Subject to the Agency's policies governing privacy and confidentiality, Agency staff may communicate freely with clients, stakeholders and the general public on all factual, programmatic matters. Without specific permission, staff must not attempt to answer any questions from news media or elected officials at any level of government about CMHC or about services coming under the agreement with CMHC. Any such questions shall be referred to the relevant staff member listed in the protocol on Agency-CMHC communications.
- 9.5. All communication made through an individual staff member's social-media account, such as Facebook or Twitter, is subject to the limitations in section 9.4 above, the Ethical Conduct Policy and the board-approved Human Resources Policy, whether or not the posting indicates that the staff member works for the Agency.
- 9.6. Members of the Agency's workforce are expected to keep their supervisor at the Agency informed about any emerging issues that could attract media attention. Supervisory staff shall alert the Agency contact named in the previously mentioned protocol to any such emerging issue.

10. Communication of Financial Information about the Agency

- 10.1. CMHC and the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada will receive a copy of the Agency's full audited financial statements and auditor's report each year.
- 10.2. Staff will refer to the CEO any requests for financial information not contained in the Agency's annual report. The CEO may exercise discretion in determining what information to share, while being mindful of the Agency's preference for openness.