

Ottawa gives flexibility on housing funds but no national strategy

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At the recent meeting of federal and provincial housing ministers, federal minister Diane Finley agreed to allow provinces to swap unused housing funds so all the money can be put to use before the stimulus program ends.

"The feds have said if you don't spend it, you lose it," said Jim Watson, Ontario's housing minister. "But we actually have the ability over the next couple of weeks, if one province isn't going to be able to use it, we can trade with them and bring the money into our province. "I think that kind of flexibility is welcome."

Ottawa has been adamant that no stimulus funds will be handed out after March 2011. Cities and some provinces have complained that they can't both match that funding and spend it effectively by then. So while Ottawa won't budge on the 2011 deadline, it has recently shown signs of giving provinces and cities as much leeway as they need in putting the money to work.

But the concession falls far short of the national strategy that social housing advocates and opposition politicians have argued for. They say funding has been sporadic and misdirected over the years, failing to dent the number of families in need of affordable housing. The short-term and unco-ordinated nature of most programs has seen too much money spent on red tape, fact-finding or emergency solutions such as shelters.

"It's little municipalities here and there, building little projects here and there," said MP Megan Leslie, the NDP housing critic. "It's not a strategy."

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