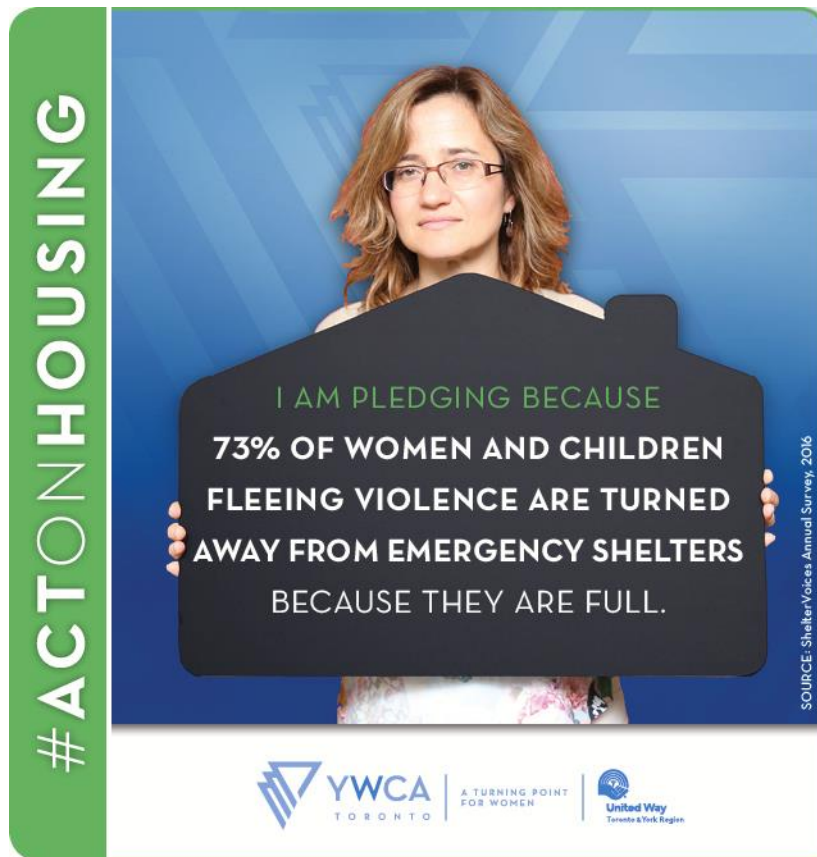


Working Together to Create Safe, Affordable, Supportive Homes for Women

*YWCA Toronto Submission for the
National Housing Strategy Consultations
October, 2016*



*Photo | Meme from YWCA Toronto's #ActOnHousing advocacy campaign

Working Together to Create Safe, Affordable, Supportive Homes for Women

YWCA Toronto is the largest multi-service women's organization in the country. We have a long and proud history of providing direct services and tackling systemic issues to help women escape violence, move out of poverty, and access safe affordable housing. We also work with young girls - building their leadership and critical thinking skills. Our Association serves over 12,000 women and families annually in 32 programs in 12 locations across the City of Toronto.

We are also one of the largest providers of housing for women and their families. Our housing portfolio includes nine shelter and housing programs, including two violence against women shelters, a shelter for homeless women, a transitional housing project and 550 units of permanent housing. We shelter and house almost 1,700 women and children annually. All of our permanent housing sites provide rent-geared to income, housing subsidies, or rent supplements.

Our largest housing site, the YWCA Toronto Elm Centre, provides 165 market rent units, 85 supportive housing units for women with mental health and addictions issues and 50 units for families of Aboriginal descent. As Toronto Mayor John Tory made clear during a Big City Mayor's press conference we hosted in 2015, "The YWCA Elm Centre is an example of what can happen when all levels of government work together... and make a real substantive commitment to help tackle Canada's affordable housing crisis."

This submission is informed by the life experiences of the thousands of women and girls who use our programs and services every day. It also incorporates feedback and comments from YWCA Toronto staff members who took the time to provide input. Many of our staff are front-line workers, many are advocates and activists, and all are dedicated to helping women and children find safety, support and justice.

A Vision of Housing for Canada

YWCA Toronto firmly believes that every woman has the right to a safe, affordable, supportive place to call home. Women tell us that a safe and secure home at YWCA Toronto has transformed their lives and the lives of their children — they want this opportunity for all women. They want to ensure that women are never forced to stay in violent relationships because they cannot afford to leave or made to choose whether to feed their children or pay their rent. These are too frequently the real lived experiences of many women in Toronto. As one staff person wrote: "We have an affordable housing crisis in Canada and it is time for action. Housing is a basic human right and essential for all Canadians – especially women."

We echo the calls from the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association for the national housing strategy to prioritize the housing needs of marginalized populations and low-income Canadians – especially women who are homeless due to violence and Indigenous women. One staff person wrote: "Women and children fleeing violence and/or abuse are urgently in need of safe, secure permanent housing. Healing from traumatic experiences and rebuilding lives requires the stability of a safe home to build from."

In addition, we urge the federal government actively to include women directly affected by homelessness and insecure housing in the development and implementation of this strategy. As one resident in YWCA Toronto's transitional housing program wrote: "The biggest problem is that women like me go unheard. We feel undervalued. It feels like our lived experiences of homelessness and escaping violence holds no weight. Our stories should be used to mobilize change." Women with lived experience can provide invaluable information about the actual impacts of policies and programs. Women with lived experience

should be included in all expert panels and adequately consulted on the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the national housing strategy.

Priorities for a National Housing Strategy

Women's homelessness is a significant, yet often hidden, crisis facing this country. Research shows that for every person who is absolutely homeless, there are at least three more who fall into the hidden homelessness category. This includes women who remain in violent relationships to maintain their housing, those that are in hiding for their own safety, those who are living in crowded conditions with family or friends, and those who may be hidden because of their precarious immigration status. These women and their children are often the hardest to reach and support.

There is a strong need and moral imperative for a coordinated national housing strategy that creates safe, affordable housing and a co-ordinated plan to ensure effective support for tenants with complex needs. Women are counting on this government to act on housing.

An effective national housing strategy must:

- Utilize a gender-based analysis that recognizes and responds to the unique systemic challenges that women face who are homeless and fleeing violence as well as the inter-connectedness of violence, trauma, mental health and substance abuse.
- Recognize that one size does not fit all – access to housing and experiences of homelessness differ on the basis of gender as well as a range of intersecting factors including poverty, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, immigrant and refugee status, age and disability.
- Commit the federal government to maintaining a long-term lead role in actively addressing housing affordability, including adequate, stable and consistent funding to support the implementation of the strategy.
- Set gender-disaggregated national targets, benchmarks and timetables, developed in consultation with provincial and municipal governments. In addition, the national housing strategy must support reliable research and data collection on women and girls' homelessness.
- Leverage the expertise of social housing providers, including those providing social housing specifically to women.

Strengthening Systems for Victims and Survivors of Violence

Prioritize safety: Safety must be included amongst the federal government's key themes for housing in Canada. One girl at the YWCA Toronto's Girls' Centre told us she feels so unsafe in her neighbourhood, that from the second she steps off the bus from school, she runs as fast as she can — non-stop — until she reaches her front door and locks it behind her. It should not be this way. Safety must extend to the planning, design and operation of housing units – this includes child-friendly locations with access to services, green space and transit. We recommend that the national housing strategy incorporate gender-based safety audits in the development and renovation of all affordable housing funded through this strategy. The federal government – including the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development – can play a leadership role in promoting the adoption of safe design and safe planning by municipalities.

Expand Access to Violence Against Women Shelters/Transition Houses: We are encouraged by the federal government's recent announcement to commit \$89.9 million over the next two years for shelter construction and renovation. This capital investment will help to expand shelters and increase accessibility. Federal investment in shelters and transitional housing is critical to moving towards the

government's promise of "no one turned away." We encourage the federal government to consult with our sector to ensure that these funds have the most impact and strongest outcomes.

In addition, we urge the federal government to prioritize closing the gaps in access to shelter that exist for women with disabilities, for Indigenous women, for transgender women, for women from Canada's wide range of cultural communities, for women in Northern territories and rural areas and for women facing addictions and mental health challenges. Leadership at the federal level is required to ensure that shelters receive adequate operational funding to close these gaps.

Expand Access to Housing Options by and for Indigenous Women: We applaud the government for moving forward with an inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women. Toronto has one of the largest Indigenous populations in Canada and Indigenous women experience disproportionately higher levels of violence than any other group. There is a need for more housing created by and for Indigenous women. As one staff person wrote, the federal government must "take a look at [existing] Indigenous housing strategies in larger cities and work collaboratively with communities to help develop healthy and sustainable communities."

We encourage the federal government to look at replicating successful housing programs for Indigenous women – like YWCA Toronto's Winona's Place, which provides a safe, affordable home for Indigenous women and their children to live with traditional healing programs developed in collaboration with Indigenous partners. We also echo calls from Homes for Women/YWCA Canada for the federal government to include a self-determined Indigenous housing strategy with a gender lens and leadership from the Native Women's Association of Canada, Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Association and other Indigenous women's organizations.

Housing for Girls and Young Women: The rising homelessness of girls and young women is a serious cause for concern. Neglect, high levels of family violence, sexual abuse, homophobia and transphobia have all been documented as major contributing factors to girls' homelessness. We urge the federal government to invest in affordable and supportive housing options that are specific to young women, girls and transgender youth.

Free Trauma Counselling: YWCA Toronto has been a strong voice at the provincial and federal levels advocating for free, high-quality trauma informed counselling for victims/survivors of violence and for their children. Women tell us that they cannot access the supports they desperately need because they simply cannot afford counselling fees. There are long waiting lists. Some counsellors are inadequately trained. Many programs are short-term or not available at all, such as addiction detox beds. And most importantly, the types of alternative supports survivors find most helpful – like art therapy – are often not funded. Leadership at the federal level is required to increase accessibility across Canada for all women.

There is also a need for the federal government to fund more programming geared specifically to newcomer women where conversations about trauma, violence or mental health can be discussed. There are specific trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) programs for refugees that come from war-torn countries but the focus is on generalized violence and the trauma of war, which can exclude newcomer and refugee women who have experienced gender-based violence, particularly repeated incidents of sexual violence.

Growing and Maintaining Toronto's Affordable Housing Stock

Toronto's Affordable Housing Crisis: Toronto is challenged with over 97,000 households on the waiting list for affordable housing. The consequence is that women and children are being forced to live in

housing that is unsafe, unaffordable, over-crowded, below standard or a combination of all four. One staff person wrote: “The women we work with cannot afford market rental units in Toronto.” Another wrote “Too many women and families are being forced to make decisions about not paying hydro, or not having food for the entire month in order to ensure they pay their rent.” Safe, affordable housing is a critically important poverty reduction tool for women. It is right up there along with quality, affordable child care and securing employment with adequate incomes.

Toronto’s Special Priority Program waiting list is far too long. Like the women themselves, we are concerned that women are living in shelter and transitional housing for far too long and many could readily move to permanent or supportive housing if it was available. Creating more safe, affordable housing options in Toronto helps to give women options and it also helps to free up spaces in shelters for other women and children in need. As one staff person wrote: “Shelters are there for women (when there is space available) and do very good work, but shelters are very difficult places to stay and housing options for women and children are nearly impossible to obtain.” Women and children deserve better and require safe affordable housing so they can rebuild their lives.

Increasing Housing Options for Women: Women benefit from a continuum of housing options based on housing readiness and their specific needs. Many women seek housing that is gender-specific and trauma informed. They want to create communities, peer support networks and gain access to child care and employment. One staff person wrote: “There have to be a variety of housing options available to meet the changing needs of women.” Another staff person wrote: “Women tell us that they choose to live at the YWCA Toronto Elm Centre because they like that it is a woman-only space. This is especially important for women in our community who have experienced violence.” The national housing strategy must include adequate funding to expand women-only shelters, transitional housing and permanent housing facilities.

The national housing strategy must include funding to address the massive backlog in repairs and renovations for existing housing stock in Toronto. Again, we urge the federal government to mandate gender-based safety audits in renovation projects. We also encourage the federal government to introduce measures to make housing more affordable, including new rent subsidies and portable housing benefits, in particular for women fleeing domestic violence. The development of these measures should be informed by the portable housing benefit pilot program already underway in Ontario.

Support Affordable Housing at the Municipal Level: There is an urgent need for provinces to push forward legislative changes that support affordable housing at the municipal level. Toronto’s Chief Planner Jennifer Keesmaat has said that with inclusionary zoning powers Toronto could have secured 12,000 affordable housing units in the last five years. Instead, fewer than 3,700 affordable rental and ownership units have been added since 2010. We encourage the federal government to take a leadership role in promoting inclusionary zoning power when meeting with provincial and territorial counterparts.

Strengthening Supportive Housing

Prioritize support: Support must be included amongst the federal government’s key themes for housing in Canada. One staff person wrote: “Healing from traumatic experiences and rebuilding lives after violence requires a safe, supportive home to build from.” Another staff person wrote: “Stable affordable housing within a supportive and safe community helps give stability to women dealing with mental health challenges, Indigenous women and those rebuilding after violence.” Staff across our Association are reporting increases in women experiencing mental health challenges and addictions issues. The national

housing strategy must invest in supportive housing and include a coordinated long-term plan and appropriate resources to ensure effective support is available for women with complex needs.

Investing in Supportive Housing: YWCA Toronto's housing support programs provide women with free, high-quality, trauma-informed programs, including mental health supports and guidance to help women overcome trauma and make healthy choices. We work with community partners such as the Jean Tweed Centre, Anishnawbe Health Services and Women's College Hospital to deliver case management and health promotion programs at our Elm Centre site. This type of trauma-informed support must be recognized and funded as part of the national housing strategy.

We echo the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association's recommendation for the federal government to introduce dedicated funding for social services that will support the ability of provinces, territories and municipalities to provide additional front-line health, mental health and social supports to tenants in supportive housing and other social housing. This funding should also be available to housing providers that directly provide social services.

Supporting Senior Women: On average, women have longer life spans than men and poverty rates for single senior women have risen dramatically. The national housing strategy must include a plan to take care of our aging population of women who require a high level of support that is often not available outside of long-term care facilities. We echo the call from YWCA Canada/Homes for Women for the federal government to include innovative affordable housing program initiatives for housing dedicated to senior women.

In closing, YWCA Toronto offers our assistance as civil society partners as the federal government moves forward with its national housing strategy. We are deeply committed to strengthening the social safety net and creating change in areas where women and girls have been left behind.

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