

Housing, Homelessness, and Violence Against Women



Executive Summary



In June 2017, WSC brought together a diverse group of leaders and experts including representatives from the VAW sector, the homelessness sector, the anti-poverty sector, academics, and policy makers. From the roundtable and discussion paper, we developed 11 recommendations on the National Housing Strategy (to be released in the fall of 2017).

The discussion paper was researched and written by Krystle Maki, Research and Policy Coordinator at WSC. Feedback on earlier drafts of the discussion paper were provided by WSC's Advisory Council and Roundtable participants.

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Executive summary

While there is a general recognition of the link between violence against women (VAW), housing, and homelessness, the VAW shelter sector has had limited involvement with the housing and homelessness sectors. The purpose of this discussion paper is to outline and review the social and affordable housing options and supports available to domestic violence (DV) survivors and to illuminate the complex and sometimes contradictory systems that survivors must navigate to avoid homelessness and gain access safe and affordable housing.

In June 2017, Women’s Shelters Canada (WSC) organized a cross-sectoral roundtable on housing, homelessness, and VAW. The roundtable brought together a diverse group of leaders and experts including representatives from the VAW sector, the social and affordable housing sector, the homelessness sector, the anti-poverty sector, and academics and policy makers. Our roundtable discussions informed aspects of this discussion paper and our recommendations on the National Housing Strategy (NHS).¹ It is our hope that through consultations and collaboration with advocates from VAW shelters and women’s housing and homelessness sectors, the NHS will integrate an intersectional gender-based analysis to develop housing solutions that meet the needs of all women.

At WSC, our long-term objective is to bring about systemic change that will improve housing options and outcomes for women fleeing violence. The roundtable and the discussion paper are our commitment to building a strong foundation across sectors to facilitate a comprehensive approach to housing, homelessness, and VAW. The following highlights key themes that emerged from our research and the roundtable. Our research drew upon a wide range of sources including: provincial policies and legislation; government reports; policy papers; NGO reports; data generated through our annual survey on the VAW shelter sector; and academic research.

National Housing Strategy

Over the past year, the federal government has been working to develop a National Housing Strategy, which is expected to be announced in the fall of 2017. The 2017 Budget² included \$11.2 billion towards a variety of initiatives to renew Canada’s affordable housing sector over the next 11 years including \$5 billion towards a National Housing Fund (NHF) “to address critical housing issues and prioritize support for vulnerable citizens, including...survivors fleeing situations of domestic violence”.³ We welcome the government’s acknowledgement of the link between domestic violence, housing, and homelessness and the recognition that DV survivors have unique housing needs as well as challenges in accessing social housing programs.

Aside from the categorization of domestic violence survivors as a “priority group”, there is little evidence that the NHS will reflect a gender-based analysis. There are several key reasons why a gender-based analysis of family violence⁴ must be integrated into the NHS and the NHF:

1. 7 in 10 people who experience family violence are women and girls;⁵
2. Research has shown that the majority of homeless families are led by sole support mothers;⁶
3. In 2012, sole support mothers were the fastest growing demographic accessing homeless shelters (not including VAW shelters).⁷

Women`s Invisible Homelessness

Research has shown that housing remains one of the leading barriers for women escaping violence⁸ and that domestic violence is one of the main causes of homelessness among Canadian families.⁹ Women`s homelessness is vastly underestimated and often hidden. Women may experience `episodic homelessness` as they move in and out of abusive situations and stay at VAW shelters. These episodic experiences are obscured by data that only count street and shelter homelessness (women couch surfing or staying at VAW shelter are not recognized as homeless).¹⁰ Other reasons why women do not show up in the data is because DV survivors are reluctant to access mixed gender shelters for safety reasons; most homeless shelters are not equipped with domestic violence supports and staff; and some homeless shelters will not accommodate women fleeing violence.¹¹

The implications are that DV survivors are often not considered homeless. Consequently, rapid rehousing and homelessness reduction programs such as Housing First (HF)¹² may exclude DV survivors for a variety of reasons:

1. Eligibility requirements include being homeless for 30 days and women temporarily staying at a VAW shelters are not considered homeless;¹³
2. Women may not meet the criteria for `chronic` or `episodic` homelessness because their homelessness is invisible for safety reasons;¹⁴
3. A majority of potential HF clients are recruited at homeless shelters, which DV survivors often avoid for safety reasons (or because the shelter will not accept them);
4. Families are often excluded – singles without dependents are the primary beneficiaries of HF supports.

Social and Affordable Housing Options for DV Survivors

Affordable housing is a significant obstacle in women`s ability to move on with their lives “and by far the biggest structural challenge in the delivery of shelter services.”¹⁵ Canada`s affordable and low-income housing deficit is felt most acutely by women leaving violent partners or emergency shelters, and especially by women who are poor, Indigenous, living with a disability, and/or living in rural and remote areas.¹⁶ For this discussion paper, various social housing supports were evaluated on the following criteria: what are the eligibility requirements; how

accessible are the programs; and are the benefits or programs coordinated with social assistance or other provincial government supports?

Overall, current social and affordable housing models and service delivery make it difficult for survivors of domestic violence to find, secure, and maintain safe and affordable housing. Primarily, the lack of social and affordable housing units results in long wait times.¹⁷ DV survivors can access special priority status to obtain housing more quickly, however the eligibility process can be cumbersome and may prevent some women from attaining housing. For instance, the requirement of proof of cohabitation may be inaccessible to women whose abusers kept this information hidden from them.¹⁸ Furthermore, proving one's experience of abuse can be demoralizing and re-victimizing for survivors.

Social and affordable housing supports require improvements starting with widening eligibility criteria and reducing bureaucratic barriers to priority status to ensure that all DV survivors can access social and affordable housing.

Systemic discrimination & Navigation of Systems

Our review of social and affordable housing supports revealed that women escaping violence face multiple challenges as they navigate systems such as social housing, child welfare, social assistance/income supports, family court, and the criminal justice system (CJS). Additionally, DV survivors face systemic discrimination in social housing, which has been well documented.¹⁹ Indigenous women, low-income women on social assistance, homeless women, transgender women, and two-spirit persons are particularly impacted by housing discrimination.²⁰

For women who have fled domestic violence, custody of their child(ren) may be precarious because they come into contact with child welfare through domestic violence referrals. Mandatory reporting prompts a series of system responses from Family Court, Child Welfare Agencies, the CJS, and other legal entities and social services that puts custody of the children at risk.²¹ Furthermore, insufficient communication or contradictions between systems (social assistance, social housing, and child welfare etc.) may prevent women from accessing and maintaining social housing. Given the limited period that women have to find housing during their stay at VAW shelters, the bureaucratic loopholes associated with applying for social housing, and the long wait times for units and social assistance, women may be unsuccessful in securing housing and may be left with no other choice but to return to their abuser or become homeless.²²

Recommendations to the National Housing Strategy

In light of these findings and our discussions at the roundtable, we recommend that the National Housing Strategy:

- 1) Incorporate an intersectional human rights gender approach that recognizes the links between the lack of housing, homelessness, poverty, economic insecurity, colonization, racism, ableism, child intervention, and violence against women (VAW). An intersectional analysis of race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, age, immigration status, and disability is necessary to develop solutions that meet the needs of women living at different intersections;
- 2) Require current funding definitions of homelessness²³ to be more inclusive of women, recognizing that their homelessness is invisible and that:
 - Women who experience violence in their own homes are homeless
 - Women who flee violence are homeless
 - Women who stay in women’s shelters are homeless
 - Women who couch surf with family, friends, and strangers are homeless;
- 3) Create an Indigenous Housing Strategy that responds to the specific needs of Indigenous women and their families both on- and off-reserve, including co-operative housing and a provision that services are integrated at the beginning (e.g. child care, space for ceremony, collective kitchens, trauma-informed design);
- 4) Significantly increase the supply of social housing units and require that a minimum of 25% of units in all projects funded by the National Housing Strategy be fully accessible for women with disabilities and their families using the principles of universal design;
- 5) Incorporate flexibility to make it easier to provide a continuum of housing services specific to meet regional needs. This is especially important in northern, rural, and isolated communities where housing services are more limited;

National Housing Fund

- 6) Re-establish the shelter enhancement fund and dedicate 10% (\$50 million per year) in the National Housing Fund for shelters and additional funds for a continuum of housing for gender-based violence survivors;
- 7) Ensure that the shelter enhancement fund reflects the specific needs of VAW shelters, is distributed equitably, and accounts for regional differences including the costs associated with repairs, renovations, and builds to bring access to shelters to a national standard;
- 8) Include women survivors who are fleeing violence from non-partner family members, landlords, caregivers, and support workers on whom they depend for resources and housing.

Investment in Affordable Housing

- 9) Ensure there are dedicated funds in the agreements negotiated with the provinces and territories for shelters and a continuum of housing, including second stage/transitional and permanent supportive housing, for gender-based violence survivors;

Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS)

- 10) Address the limitations and inconsistencies across the provinces, territories, and regions of the current community entity funding model and set parameters for operating funding so that women's shelters and organizations can apply directly to the federal government for HPS funding;
- 11) Support a continuum of housing beyond Housing First, including dedicated funding for permanent, temporary, and supportive housing provided by VAW services (including second stage/transitional housing) that serve survivors of violence and women coping with mental health and addictions. Additionally, there is a pressing need to support housing that is trauma-informed, low-barrier, and based on practices of harm reduction.

Notes

- ¹ We appreciate the input we received on an early draft of the discussion paper from VAW experts including members of WSC's Advisory Council and participants from the roundtable.
- ² Canada. (2017, Mar 22). *Building a Strong Middle Class: Budget 2017*. Online at: <http://www.budget.gc.ca/2017/docs/plan/budget-2017-en.pdf>
- ³ Canada (2017: 134).
- ⁴ Statistics Canada. (2016, Jan 26). *Infographic: Family Violence in Canada*. Online at: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2016001-eng.htm>
- ⁵ Statistics Canada. (2014). *Homicide in Canada Table 6*. Online at: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2015001/article/14244/tbl/tbl06-eng.htm>
- ⁶ YWCA Canada. (2012). "When There's No Place Like Home: A Snapshot of Women's Homelessness In Canada." Online at: <http://ywcacanada.ca/data/publications/00000058.pdf>
- ⁷ Mosher, J. and Homes for Women (2013). "Housing First, Women Second? Gendering Housing First. A Brief from the Homes for Women Campaign." Online at: <http://ywcacanada.ca/data/documents/00000382.pdf>
- ⁸ Baker, C., Billhardt, K., Warren, J., Rollins, C., and Glass, N. (2010). "Domestic Violence, Housing Instability, and Homelessness: A Review of Housing Policies and Program Practices for Meeting The Needs of Survivors. *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, 15: 430-439; Burnett, C., Ford-Gilboe, M., Berman, H., Wathen, N., and Ward-Griffin, C. (2016). "The Day-to-Day Reality of Delivering Shelter Services to Women Exposed to Intimate Partner Violence in the Context of System and Policy Demands." *Journal of Social Service Research*, 0(0): 1-17; Jategaonkar, N., and Ponic, P. (2011). "Unsafe and Unacceptable Housing: Health and Policy Implications for Women Leaving Violent Relationships. *Women's Health and Urban Life* 10(1): 32-58; Ponic, P., Varcoe, C., Davies, L., Ford -Gilboe, M., Wuest and, J., & Hammerton, J. (2011). "Leaving ≠ Moving: Housing Patterns of Women Who Have Left an Abusive Partner." *Violence Against Women*, 17(12), 1576-1600; Tutty, L., Ogden, C., Giurgiu, and B., & Weaver-Dunlop, G. (2013). "I Built My House of Hope: Abused Women and Pathways into Homelessness". *Violence Against Women*, 19(12), 1498-1517. Burnett, Ford-Gilboe, Berman, Wathen and Ward-Griffin (2016); Burnett, C., Ford-Gilboe, M., Berman, H., Ward-Griffin and, C., & Wathen, N. (2015). "A Critical Discourse Analysis of Provincial Policies Impacting Shelter Service Delivery to Women Exposed to Violence." *Policy, Politics, & Nursing Practice*, 16(1-2), 5-16; Mosher and Homes for Women (2013); Noble, A. Raising the Roof. (2015). "Beyond Housing First: A Holistic Response to Family Homelessness in Canada." Online at: http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/2015_HousingFirstReport_EN-WEB.pdf; Ponic et al. (2011).
- ⁹ Canadian Network Women's Shelters and Transition Houses (CNWSTH). (2014, Oct 23). "Second State Shelters for Women Fleeing Violence: Briefing Document"; Jategonkar and Ponic (2011); Noble (2015).
- ¹⁰ Kirkby, C., Mettler, K. (2016). "Women First: An Analysis of a Trauma-Informed, Women -Centred, Harm Reduction Housing Model for Women with Complex Substance Use and Mental Health Issues." Pp. 114- 133 in *Exploring Effective Systems Responses to Homelessness*. Edited by N. Nichols and C. Doberstein. Toronto: The Homeless Hub Press. Online at: <http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/2.1%20Kirkby.pdf>; Mosher and Homes for Women (2013).
- ¹¹ Tutty, L. (2015). "Addressing the safety and trauma issues of abused women: A cross-Canada study of YWCA shelters." *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 16(3), 101-116; Drabble, J and McInnes, S. (2017). "Finding Her Home: A Gender-Based Analysis of the Homelessness Crisis in Winnipeg." *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*. Manitoba Office. Online at https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/Manitoba%20Office/2017/03/Finding_Her_Home_%20low-res.pdf. Kirkby and Mettler (2016); YWCA Canada. (2016, Oct 19).

“Counting Women and Girls into the National Housing Strategy.” Online at:

<http://ywcacanada.ca/data/documents/00000532.pdf>

¹² Gaetz, S., Scott, F., and Gulliver, T., (Eds). (2013). *Housing First in Canada: Supporting Communities to End Homelessness*. E book online at: <http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/HFCanada-Framework.pdf>

¹³ Mosher and Homes for Women (2013).

¹⁴ Canada. “Housing First.” Online at: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/communities/homelessness/housing-first/supports.html#chronically>

¹⁵ Burnett et al. (2015:11).

¹⁶ CNWSTH (2015). “A Blueprint for Canada’s National Action Plan on Violence Against Women and Girls.” Online at: <http://endvaw.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Blueprint-for-Canadas-NAP-on-VAW.pdf>

¹⁷ Gaetz, S., Gulliver0Garcia, T., Richter, T. (2014). “The State of Homelessness in Canada.” Canadian Observatory on Homelessness; Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness. Online at: <http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/SOHC2014.pdf>; Richter, T., Meili, R. (2016 Sept 25). “Canada’s Housing Crisis is a Public Health Emergency.” *CBC News*. Online at: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/homelessness-public-health-commentary-1.3777019>

¹⁸ Canada. Department of Justice. (2017, Jan 11). “About Family Violence.” Online at: <http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/cj-jp/fv-vf/about-afv.html#types>.

¹⁹ Barata, P. C., & Stewart, D. E. (2006). “Housing Discrimination Against Victims of Domestic Violence”. Ottawa, Ontario: *Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation*; Gotthilf, R., and D. Stavem. (2015).

“Navigating Rental (Power) Relations: The ‘Tenant Landlord Cooperation’ Program.” In Josh Brandon and Jim Silver (eds.), *Poor Housing: A Silent Crisis*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, and Winnipeg: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives; Hulchanski 2004; Ponik, P., & Jategaonkar, N. (2010). “Shedding Light on the Barriers to Housing for Women Fleeing Violence: An Advocacy Report.” Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada: BC Non-Profit Housing Association.

²⁰ Drabble (2017: 21).

²¹ Little (2015).

²² O’Campo et al. (2016: 9).

²³ As reflected in the United Nation’s definition of Homelessness. See United Nations. (2015). “The Right to Adequate Housing: Fact Sheet 21.” Online at:

http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FS21_rev_1_Housing_en.pdf