



YWCA Toronto

YWCA Toronto promotes equality, economic security and lives free from violence.

THE BLOG

Housing Plan Can Help End Hidden Crisis Of Women's Homelessness

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.

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The YWCA Toronto Elm Centre located in the heart of downtown Toronto.

I have an unshakable belief in the resiliency and strength of women. With 20 years under my belt working in the social services sector, this belief keeps me going.

From Vancouver's Downtown Eastside to Toronto's core -- I have worked with women of all races, ages, identities and faiths. I have worked with women coping with trauma and rebuilding after violence; women tackling addictions and mental health challenges; women working to climb out of deep poverty and street-entrenched lives. My efforts always centre on supporting those most in need.

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 are trapped in violent situations and women living in precarious, sub-standard housing. These women and their children are often the hardest to reach and support.

The promised national housing strategy is a chance for governments to act on housing. My experience has taught me that women benefit from a continuum of housing options -- there must be new funding for women-only shelters, transitional housing and permanent housing facilities.

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We need a coordinated plan and appropriate resources to ensure effective support is available for women with complex needs. We need more housing by and for Indigenous women with traditional healing programs. And we must take care of our aging population who require a high level of support that is often not available outside of long-term care facilities.

The government also has an opportunity to learn from existing supportive housing models across Canada. The YWCA Toronto Elm Centre, where I work, is one such model. We have 300 units of permanent housing for women and women-led families in the heart of downtown Toronto. Our model combines affordable housing, rent-geared-to-income housing, supportive housing and 50 units designated for Indigenous women. It is the largest affordable housing facility to be built in Toronto in the last decade.

The Elm Centre is unique. From the moment our tenants walk in the front door, they are welcomed home by our invaluable concierge team. The building is fully accessible and clean, with play areas for children, wonderful green spaces, roof-top gardens and a traditional herbal garden. Our dedicated staff help build community through organizing community kitchens, expressive arts programs, yoga sessions and teaching circles. And the location is central -- close to transit, core services and schools.

Women tell us that they choose to live at the Elm Centre because they like that it is a woman-only space. This is especially important for women in our Elm Centre community who have experienced violence. For many women, the ability to lock their apartment door means safety and peace of mind; to be the sole leaseholder means independence; and to have a fixed address means stability and belonging. What many take for granted means everything to a woman moving into her first true home.

Women also come to the Elm Centre for support. Through a partnership with the Jean Tweed Centre, we provide on-site, individualized, trauma and harm reduction-informed services to women in our supportive housing program. Jean Tweed also provides a sessional nurse practitioner on-site. Through a partnership with Women's College Hospital, we have a primary care physician regularly on-site as well.

Also unique is the Elm Advisory Council, which is made up of social services partners that advise our leadership team. We always strive to grow and learn from expertise in the sector and from the women we work with.

Housing is about so much more than bricks and mortar. It is a social determinant of health. It improves well-being and is key to building better futures. I have seen how safe, affordable, supportive housing helps to transform lives. I work with YWCA Toronto because the entire team understands this. It is critically important that the federal government does as well. Now is the time to act on housing.

Danielle Nakouz is the Manager of YWCA Toronto's Elm Centre Supportive Housing program.

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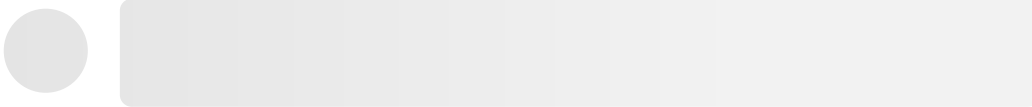
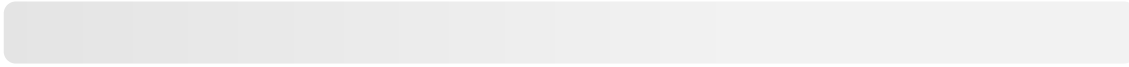
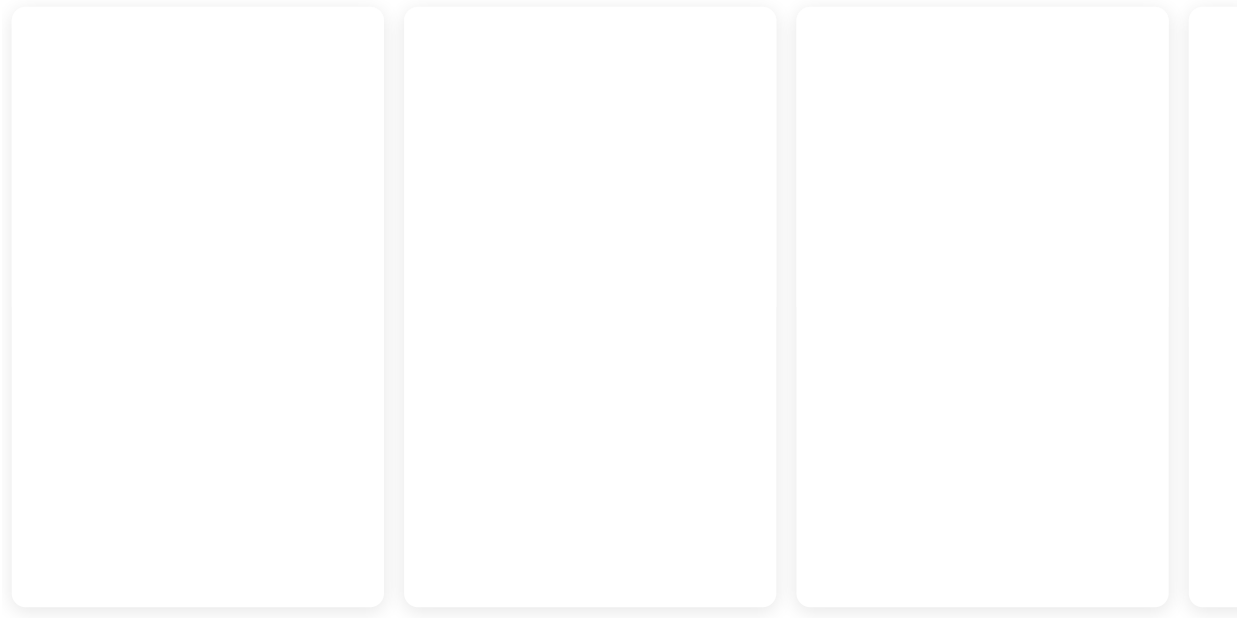
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