

# Recommendations for the Canada National Housing Strategy: supporting women and children experiencing violence.

*October 2016*

*Document prepared in collaboration with the  
Children's Aid Societies / Violence against Women  
(CAS/VAW) Advisory Committee, Transitional and  
Housing Support Program (THSP) Network, Violence  
against Women Network (VAWN) and the Woman  
Abuse Council of Toronto (WomanACT)*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Woman Abuse Council of Toronto (WomanACT), is a policy development and planning body that coordinates an efficient and effective approach to providing services for women and their children impacted by gender violence.

Firstly, we would like to congratulate the Government of Canada on pursuing this much-needed strategy. Like you, we too envision a Canada where people have access to housing that meets their needs, and they can afford. We would also suggest that such housing should be safe. In the course of the work we do, we support women and children fleeing unsafe homes and communities due to domestic and gender-based violence.

In this context, the WomanACT convened and coordinated a joint planning session with members of the Toronto Region Children's Aid Societies / Violence Against Women (CAS/VAW) Advisory Committee, the Transitional and Housing Support Program (THSP) Network and the Toronto Region Violence Against Women Shelter Network (VAWN). The goal was to enhance collaboration within the Violence against women (VAW) Sector and align our work and efforts to address the impact of domestic violence on the lives of women and their children and gender-based violence. Part of the session included a consultation process to develop a coordinated sector response to inform government's Housing Policies and Strategies.

The networks and committees represented at the session have closely aligned missions and mandates. They all work to end violence against woman and children through collaboration on the provision of services and by working to address systemic issues and discrimination that perpetuate the conditions that put women and their children, indigenous, Lesbians, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer and Two-Spirited (LGBTQ2S) women at risk and vulnerability to violence. These conditions include poverty, lack of safe and affordable housing, economic exploitation, failures of the justice system, and a popular and institutional culture that allows and often condones the abuse of women and children.

While the networks and committees are closely aligned, opportunities now exist to take the collaboration and alignment to new levels to further develop intentional and effective structures and coordinated responses that will leverage the work of each network or committee to deliver maximum impact on the issues that all member organizations are seeking to address. The creation of a common point of contact with other related networks would serve to strengthen the collective efforts of all. Recognizing we live in a world of increasing complexity and decreasing resources; organizations must work strategically and efficiently to make the best use of available resources.

This process initiated by WomanACT identified ways to optimize the great wealth of expertise and experience represented by the organizations that make up the networks and committees of the VAW sector and its allies in Toronto and ultimately fulfill its' mission as a coordinating body in the city of Toronto. To that extent, we would like to express our commitment to collaborating with the government in the development of a strategy that addresses the housing needs of women and children impacted by violence.

## PARTICIPANTS

The planning process involved representatives of four collaborative groups in Toronto that have been established to address the needs of women and their children experiencing abuse. The groups are made up of representatives from agencies working directly in the VAW sector or agencies who work in partnership with VAW agencies.

These groups are:

- Toronto Region Children's Aid Societies (CAS/VAW) Collaboration Advisory Committee
- Transitional Housing and Support Program (THSP) Network
- Toronto Region Violence Against Women Shelter Network (VAWN)
- Woman Abuse Council of Toronto (WomanACT)

**The Toronto Region CAS/VAW Collaboration Advisory Committee** is a community-based Advisory group that flows important information and recommendations to its' funders the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) and works across the CAS/VAW sector to increase collaboration and enhance service delivery for women and children. Membership in this Committee is organizational and includes representatives from organizations signatory of the CAS/VAW Collaborative Agreement or funders, namely MCSS and MCYS. Staff coordination and support to the Committee's work is provided by WomanACT.

**The THSP Network** is a dynamic Network dedicated to promoting effective, consistent and high-quality responses to domestic and gender-based violence and address women's and children's need for safe and affordable housing and transitional support to ensure their safety and self-sufficiency. The Network is made up of representatives of organizations working for improved access to housing and transitional support services and responses for women and children experiencing violence in Toronto. Membership is organizational, not individual. The Network is made up of two standing committees

(Workers and Managers) and three Task Teams (Housing, Economic Development, and Justice). Staff coordination and support to the Network is provided by WomanACT.

**The Toronto Region Violence Against Women Shelter Network (VAWN)** meets to discuss and act on emerging issues, policy, strategic directions and research as it affects women and their children who use their shelters, and the people who work in them. It is comprised of Executive Directors, Directors and Managers of 14 VAW Shelters from across the GTA.

VAWN is committed to supporting its' members in the demanding work of managing shelters while also working towards systemic change to end violence against women and their children. Staff coordination and is provided by a part-time position hired directly by the Network and funded by MCSS.

The **Woman Abuse Council of Toronto (WomanACT)** is a policy development and planning body that coordinates an efficient and effective approach to providing services for abused ed women and their families. The general council is made up of senior level representatives of each of the key sectors in the community response to woman abuse. WomanACT is unique among the four groups in that its mandate is to develop a coordinated community response to woman abuse to promote systemic change and be more effective in promoting women's safety. WomanACT acts as the coordinating body for agencies and services working in the VAW sector in Toronto.

The individuals participating in the joint planning session are co-chairs, chairs, council members, task team leads, and coordinators supporting the groups represented. All four of the above groups have clear mandates and comprehensive Terms of Reference that set out each group's agreed-upon ways of working, as well as strategic plans.

## CURRENT CONTEXT

There are a number of current realities that inform the need for coordinated action. The fact that woman abuse remains prevalent means more needs to be done to eradicate this devastating social problem. In this context, it is important to recognize the source of women and children's homelessness, is the violence they experience in their homes and communities. Furthermore, it is crucial to see and address women's housing needs using a lens that considers the interconnectedness of systems that further marginalizes them.

Woman abuse cannot be seen in isolation from the social factors that increase women's risk of violence. These factors include poverty, childhood sexual abuse, mental health

challenges, and addictions, discrimination and racism, lack of safe and affordable housing, poor access to education and meaningful employment. Women continue to be financially disadvantaged making them dangerously dependent on their intimate partners or vulnerable to exploitation. Immigrant women sponsored by their partners and temporary foreign workers are at increased risk of being controlled and exploited. Human trafficking<sup>1</sup> is a growing problem and includes Canadian women being forcibly removed from one part of the country to another, as well as women and girls being smuggled into Canada from outside the country for sexual and other types of exploitation. The lack of safe and affordable housing in our communities has led women and children to stay over longer periods of time. In fact, shelters have seen an increased number of children who have never had stable housing and have lived most of their short lives in shelters. Consequently, women shelters have had to turn away women and children seeking refuge, thus increasing their risk and vulnerability to further violence and lethality.

Also, women who have not accessed VAW shelters, are living in precarious housing because of the high cost of private market housing and women living in extreme poverty. Often our clients are unable to purchase food, clothing, pay for transportation and meet any other needs.

Aboriginal women continue to be at greater risks of violence. Unique historical and social factors contribute to this situation as referenced in the recently released report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Some new and troubling trends are being observed by workers in the VAW sector and allied organizations; for example, more women are solely charged in the context of domestic violence, and more men are being awarded custody when women are residing in shelters. The health sector is not responding adequately to the issue of violence against women. And while Statistics Canada has reported on violence against women over the years, the reduction in Status of Women offices nationally means there is no coordinated gender-based voice speaking to the issues. On the contrary, both from a public policy perspective and in the public mind, it appears there is a campaign to suggest that women no longer need “special treatment” because equality has been achieved. Statistics on women’s participation in postsecondary education or boards of directors are trotted out as proof of this. Indeed, some men’s groups are emerging to suggest that women are being favoured and that it is now men who are being treated unequally.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It was noted that human trafficking can also affect men and boys.

<sup>2</sup> In March 2015, coinciding with International Women’s Day and Premier Kathleen Wynne’s announcement of the Province’s three year sexual violence and harassment prevention strategy, Canadian Association For Equality (CAFE) launched a billboard campaign proclaiming “Half of domestic violence victims are men. No domestic violence shelters are dedicated to us”; and a twitter campaign #Let’sTalkMen.

Funding for prevention work which helps to address these broader social inequality factors has been reduced and this could explain in part why the connection is being lost and why the voices opposing “special treatment” for women are gaining ground. There is a sense that the VAW sector is losing traction in the struggle to end woman abuse and that the sector is having to spend valuable resources to fight to keep or recoup gains already won.

At the same time, there seems to be more tolerance for violence against women in popular culture (some call it a “rape culture”<sup>3</sup>) as evidence of the work of some popular artists. In Toronto, successful public campaigns have been mounted to sanction performing artists who promote rape culture.

Some young women do not always recognize gender-based violence. This lack of awareness could be explained, in part, because young women from a very young age are inundated with messages that sexualize and objectify them; and also because there is no countervailing and coordinated publicly-supported campaign to raise their awareness of the issue. We need to see this situation as an invitation to bring new people into the movement for women’s equality and, where necessary, to re-invent feminism so that it is relevant to young women. We also have to recognize that young women themselves are speaking of feminism in new ways and we need to enter into a conversation with them about that.<sup>4</sup>

With the many challenges, the group also identified some opportunities in the current context to move the VAW agenda forward. While recent reports of female sexual assault and sexual harassment perpetrated by high-profile celebrities and within highly respected public institutions represent a tragedy for the women involved, the heightened media attention these cases have focussed the public mind on the issue as perhaps never before. As well, recent publications documenting rape and rape culture on university campuses in Canada and the United States, have put the issue on the front burner for many who may not have given it a second thought before. There have also been more public education campaigns regarding violence against women in recent years presenting an opportunity to build on this momentum. All of this may have prompted Premier Kathleen

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<sup>3</sup> “A complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm... In a rape culture both men and women assume sexual violence as a fact of life, inevitable...However... much of what we accept as inevitable is in fact the expression of values and attitudes that can change.” Emilie Buchwald *Transforming A Rape Culture*, 1993

<sup>4</sup> Sometimes referred to as Third Wave feminism.

Wynne to launch an action plan to stop sexual violence and harassment in the Province of Ontario. The campaign is called, “It’s Never Okay.”<sup>5</sup>

The convergence of these developments has opened up a public discussion about violence against women. This creates an opportunity for the VAW sector and its allies, as experts on the topic, to contribute meaningfully to the National Housing Strategy discussion. In particular, it is an opportunity to make the connection between violence against women and the social, economic, cultural and historical factors that promote it. Therefore, we are optimistic this strategy will seek ideas that look at how we can best address the housing needs of women and children in a holistic and integrated way where government and not-for-profit (social profit) organizations work collaboratively.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE NATIONAL HOUSING STRATEGY CONSULTATION

The Violence against Women sector is very hopeful with the Government of Canada’s initiative to institute a National Housing Strategy. It is critical this initiative includes and considers the additional barriers and layers of vulnerability experienced by women and children facing violence. In that sense, the strategy should ensure women’s housing needs across their lifespan on principles of equality. Likewise, the strategy should be in line with the National Strategy to End Violence against Violence, as well as bring to the table all important stakeholders from the different levels of government and across ministries who directly or indirectly impact the lives of women and children.

### Need to be Gender-Responsive

The most important message from the Violence against Women sector and its allies in Toronto are the need for a gender lens to be applied to all aspects of the strategy. Women’s housing needs are different from men’s, and women experience homelessness differently from men. The solutions for women need to take these differences into account.

Violence Against Women and Gender-Based Violence is a major cause of women’s homelessness. In light of this, key considerations that underpin the sector’s response are: the importance of understanding the intersectionality of factors for women in need of housing; the need to take a holistic approach when providing housing for women experiencing violence; and the need for the Housing sector to increase its

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<sup>5</sup> [Province of Ontario, “It’s Never Okay”](#)

understanding of and capacity to respond to the dynamics of violence against women. This is necessary to ensure women receive fair and equitable access to the affordable housing programs.

#### A sustainable supply of affordable housing

To support Women and children who have experienced violence, the solution is not only to provide affordable housing but to have supports and response systems available (i.e. health, justice, income, education and training, employment, etc.) Currently, there is not an adequate supply of housing. The province of Ontario is known as the highest rate of poverty among new immigrants.

“The 260 units of affordable rental housing opened in 2013 represented a drop of 77% from 2012 (and 66% from 2011). Only seven units built for affordable ownership were made available in 2013, 98% fewer than the previous year.<sup>288</sup>” (Toronto Community Foundation Vital Signs Report 2014)

We recommend that rent supplement programs be expanded and provided to women and children who have experienced violence as a priority. There should be incentives for private market landlords to participate in these programs and that the private units involved be put on a list and made public to service providers.

We further recommend that in new condominiums being built, 5- 10% of building units should be designated to social housing.

Also, we recommend the need for increase transitional housing.

- Legislate dedicated low-rent units/units for women who experience violence in all new developments: public housing, the private sector, and hybrid. Look at existing models that combine sustainability and housing e.g. Interval House (BESS and Her Home); Habitat for Humanity.
- Fund VAW workers to negotiate with private landlords; some are already doing this with some success but with no funding or formal mandate.
- Address zoning to allow inclusionary housing—more mixed, with an increase in Rent Geared to Income (RGI) units.
- Examine critically other strategies for addressing the need for sustainable supply, such as City Homes, Tiny House models, and Lane Way projects. There has been both concerns and recommendations expressed about some of these models, for example, the Tiny House models seemed to have occurred on the reserve, and it failed due to no maintenance, concerns were expressed about how the model did not meet a standard of dignity, and it’s not a sustainable model.
- Create a spectrum of housing-not ‘one size fits all.’

- If safe and appropriate, provide supports to women who would prefer to stay in their homes, there should be a collaboration with social assistance to provide a subsidy to maintain her unit. This could result in a reduction of pressure on the housing supply. This is an example where justice system partners would be critical to ensure women and children are safe while they are staying in their homes.
- The **national housing strategy** should include a dedicated budget for municipalities to maintain their social housing stock in good repair.

### A fair and coordinated system of Housing Assistance

- A legal and policy framework that protects women and children impacted by violence and does not further marginalize them by demanding proof of their abuse (i.e. proof of cohabitation, proof of dependency, proof of status, etc.)
- The word “fair” is recommended to be used instead of using “equitable housing” for example.
- Build housing that is clean, safe, well-maintained, accessible and takes into account the importance of location in the realities of a woman’s life.
- Keep a VAW lens on the issue: lack of housing impacts women in particular ways. “Fairness” needs to be understood in light of this.
- In Toronto, the Special Priority (SP) Program waiting list is too long. As a result, women experiencing violence may be put at greater risk. The introduction of interviews for Special Priority status lengthens the time required and suggests a lack of trust between housing providers and VAW sector. Interviews must be discontinued as they further trigger and traumatize women.
- More transparency and accountability around the access process is needed among housing providers.
- Increase resources to speed up the applications process.
- Improve access to education.
- Build Community and Community Engagement; strengthen tenant and resident organizations.
- To be effective, Ministries must work in partnership i.e. Ministry of Community and Social Services (Social Assistance), Ministry of Housing, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Child and Youth Services, Ministry of the Attorney General, Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development, etc.
- Need an assets/strengths-based approach to policy development as well as gender lens on policy development.

- We recommend that new housing process be accessible and provided in various formats due to the fact all women do not have access to technology and language barriers might be present
- We recommend all changes to housing process and legislation be made accessible and public

#### Coordinated, accessible Support Services

- A systematic effort is needed to address and dismantle barriers to access safe and affordable housing and VAW support services to prevent eviction.
- Centralized Intake managed by the VAW sector to handle VAW calls and coordinate the services needed would speed up the process for services and access, with an understanding of the intersectionality of other factors:
  - Poverty
  - Immigration
  - Child care
- Need to design a comprehensive/holistic model of service taking into consideration services already provided such as Transitional Housing and Support Program, Counselling, Mental Health, Employment Skills, etc.
- Social priority includes women who experience violence aboard (In different countries)
- We recommend emphasizing integrated community support system model with women and children at the centre.
- A public education plan that:
  - Challenges existing patriarchal messages and practices
  - Promotes healthy and vibrant housing communities where women and girls are safe and respected.
  - Integrate anti-oppression and anti-racist frameworks

## Homelessness to Housing Continuum



Based on input from Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing

### Safe and Secure Housing

The strategy must include the issues of safety and security. The City of Toronto Housing Charter provides a clear vision, and the group would like to see something similar included in the National Housing Strategy's vision.

There should be a provision that outlines clear definition of 'affordable,' 'suitability and 'adequate.' As well, clarify the level of standard which these terms are defined and applied. A statement should include the principal of 'dignity' in relations to the standard of affordable and adequate housing.

## CONCLUSION

Those whose views are reflected in this submission, wish to convey their thanks to the Government of Canada for seeking input on the National Housing Strategy. This issue impacts the women we serve profoundly, and it continues to present a significant obstacle to women and their children living lives free from violence and abuse. We hope that by providing the perspective of the VAW sector and its allies on this critical issue for women and their children, we will have helped our country to move closer to its vision for housing in Canada.

We would like to express our commitment to continue to work with the government during the development stage as well as the implementation stage of this strategy.

If you have any questions or wish clarification of anything in this submission, please contact Harmy Mendoza Executive Director, WomanACT using the contact information below.

Woman Abuse Council of Toronto

Tel: 416-944-9242 Ext 225

Mobile: 647-501-0984

Fax: 416-944-9753

[ed@womanabuse.ca](mailto:ed@womanabuse.ca)

## APPENDICES

Appendix A City of Toronto Housing Charter

Appendix B Contributors to the Submission

# Appendix A: City of Toronto Housing Charter



## Toronto Housing Charter Opportunity for All

### Policy Statement:

It is the policy of the City of Toronto that fair access to a full range of housing is fundamental to strengthening Toronto's economy, its environmental efforts, and the health and social well-being of its residents and communities.

In that regard:

All residents should have a safe, secure, affordable and well-maintained home from which to realize their full potential.

All residents should be able to live in their neighbourhood of choice without discrimination.

All residents, regardless of whether they rent or own a home, or are homeless, have an equal stake and voice in Toronto's future.

All residents have the right to equal treatment in housing without discrimination as provided by the Ontario Human Rights Code, and to be protected from discriminatory practices which limit their housing opportunities.

All housing in Toronto should be maintained and operated in a good and safe state of repair.

### Implementation:

*The Toronto Housing Charter – Opportunity for All* is designed to guide City Council and the City's public service in the provision of services and programs to residents.

The City of Toronto will consult and work with the Ontario Human Rights Commission to support the housing rights of residents and to advance the policies contained in the *Toronto Housing Charter*.

The City of Toronto will from time to time review the Toronto Housing Charter to reflect any amendments to complementary policies including Toronto's Official Plan, the Human Rights and Anti-Harassment Policy, and the Vision Statement on Access, Equity and Diversity.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Miller".

David Miller  
Mayor

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Giorgio Mammoliti".

Councillor Giorgio Mammoliti  
Chair, Affordable Housing Committee

August 5, 2009

## Appendix B: Contributors to the Submission

<b>NAME</b>	<b>NETWORK ROLE</b>	<b>HOME AGENCY</b>
Irene Gabinet	THSP Network Coordinator	WomanACT (Woman Abuse Council of Toronto)
Dia Mamatis	WomanACT Council member	Public Health-Toronto
Arlene McCalla	VAWN Co-Chair	Interval House
Harmy Mendoza	Executive Director	WomanACT (Woman Abuse Council of Toronto)
Carla Neto	WomanACT Co-Chair VAWN Housing Work Group	WomanACT (Woman Abuse Council of Toronto)
Gila Raposo	VAWN Coordinator	Toronto Region VAW Shelter Network (VAWN)
Leila Sarangi	THSP Network Co-Chair	Women's Habitat of Etobicoke
Silvia Samsa	VAWN Co-Chair	Women's Habitat of Etobicoke
Lisa Tomlinson	CAS/VAW Co-Chair	Children's Aid Society of Toronto
Fatima Valentim	CAS/VAW Co-Chair	Yorktown Shelter for Women
Francisco Vidal	THSP Network Housing Task Team	Center For Spanish Speaking Peoples
Paula Wells	CAS/VAW Coordinator	WomanACT (Woman Abuse Council of Toronto)