



OCTOBER 2021

WHAT WE HEARD

SAFE AT HOME
COMMUNITY CONVERSATION



WOMANACT'S SAFE AT HOME PROJECT

WomanACT has been conducting research to better understand the policies, programs, and practices that support women to remain in their own home when leaving a violent relationship. At the centre of this research is the Safe at Home housing model, which has been conceptualized in this project as a housing approach for women living with an abusive partner to either remain in the shared home with their partner removed or move directly to independent housing when leaving the relationship. Components of this project include: a literature review on the design, outcomes, and promising practices of Safe at Home programs in other jurisdictions; community-based research with survivors of intimate partner violence on their housing experiences and preferences; and knowledge mobilization activities to engage stakeholders and survivors in moving findings to action.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

On October 5, 2021, WomanACT brought together 13 senior leaders from across sectors to start a dialogue on Safe at Home housing models. With representation from community agencies, municipal and provincial governments, the criminal justice system, and housing and gender-based violence research organizations, participants were invited to share their expertise on opportunities to advance Safe at Home programs in Ontario. We heard valuable insights on how Safe at Home addressed current program and policy goals, the considerations for implementation in each sector, and existing levers and strategies that could play a role in future work on Safe at Home.

HOW DOES SAFE AT HOME ADDRESS YOUR PROGRAM AND POLICY GOALS?

- WomanACT’s research on Safe at Home and survivors’ housing experiences can add to the evidence on women’s hidden homelessness and offer an approach to address it.
- Safe at Home can help resolve the issues that survivors face in accessing their belongings when leaving an abusive relationship. Survivors staying in their home can be a tactic to retain ownership over their space and belongings.
- Safe at Home can be framed as an eviction prevention tool. Survivors remaining in their homes can offer a pathway to resolving tenancy conflicts and preserve housing affordability because moving to a new home typically reflects an increase in rent.
- Safe at Home can benefit the justice system by improving sentencing rates for perpetrators. When survivors have housing stability, they are more willing to participate in a trial that typically occurs 12-18 months after a charge has been laid. In contrast, housing instability can lead women to return to the abusive situation and drop existing charges, which creates a cycle of violence that resets the clock on sentencing.



WHAT CONCERNS AND CONSIDERATIONS DO YOU HAVE AROUND THE SAFE AT HOME HOUSING MODEL?

Program Design Considerations

- Survivors cannot afford to be living in independent housing without financial support in the interim. There is a mismatch between what women need to be economically stable and what is currently available for them.
- There is a knowledge gap on how to adapt Safe at Home programs for racialized communities and whether they are already implementing informal versions of this model.
- It is unclear what level of risk is appropriate for Safe at Home participants.
- The housing model may need to be renamed to reflect the option to move to independent housing. The ‘Safe at Home’ name is often used for programs that exclusively support women to remain in the shared home.
- There are structural barriers for racialized women to engage with the criminal justice system, so using police as an entry way into the program may cause hesitancy.
- A Safe at Home program would need to consider the child’s perspective with regard to support services, school, and childcare.

Housing & Service System Considerations

- There is a lack of housing stock in Toronto and a lack of housing options for survivors.
- Many survivors still see shelters as the only housing option for women experiencing violence, and many housing programs and policies are designed to only support people who go through the shelter system.
- There is a lack of trauma-informed approaches across the housing system.
- Toronto has a limited integrated service system and limited perpetrator support options.
- There is a lack of connection between the justice system and community partners. All partners involved in Safe at Home would need a better understanding of the justice rules and tools that could be used in the program (e.g., when a partner can be removed from the home, when and how survivors can get protection orders).
- Police and other agencies need to know the housing options available and this may require training and education.
- A massive culture shift among sectors is needed to have a women-centered approach that thinks about the trauma many women experience.
- There is a need for spaces where community agencies come together with government and justice partners to build trust and prevent working in silos.
- There is a need to build stronger relationships with wider community organizations to raise awareness of Safe at Home. Neighbourhood-based organizations could be an important point of first contact to connect with this type of program.

Policy Considerations

- The needs and wants of women are not always reflected by funding and policy priorities related to housing. Advocates should be calling for housing policy and funding that delivers what survivors want.
- Canada is lacking the tenancy policies to facilitate Safe at Home. The model would require policies to add women's name to leases, evict abusive partners, and facilitate lease transfers.
- It would be challenging to implement this model in cases where violence is not reported to police or charges are not pursued. There are likely a large number of women who would benefit from this model, but leave home without criminal justice system contact.
- Housing status is not usually factored into bail terms. Since the abuse itself is the primary consideration, there is only limited protection available with regard to perpetrator exclusion from the home.





WHAT LEVERS OR STRATEGIES (E.G., PARTNERSHIPS, POLICIES, FUNDING POTS, LEGISLATION) CAN WE USE TO ADVANCE SAFE AT HOME?

- The City of Toronto’s proposed Gender-Based Violence Strategy under SafeTO is currently working with Shelter, Support and Housing Administration and the Housing Secretariat on housing options that move away from crisis and temporary housing models. SafeTO has placed items under its Gender-Based Violence Strategy as implementation priorities and will be looking to increase collaboration with the anti-VAW sector.
- COVID-19 has created rapid housing funding opportunities through both the City of Toronto and the federal government.
- Existing network and service system planning tables are an opportunity to get input and feedback from Toronto’s anti-VAW sector.
- Some of Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation’s funding streams could be used for Safe at Home, such as the Rapid Housing Initiative, the National Housing Co-Investment Fund, and Reaching Home. Safe at Home could help support Reaching Home’s current aim of becoming more gender responsive and addressing women’s hidden homelessness.
- The City of Toronto’s eviction prevention program has a focus on shelter diversion. There is also an opportunity to position Safe at Home programs alongside other eviction prevention services and strategies.
- Safe at Home could leverage rent subsidies through the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit and the City of Toronto Rent Bank.
- There are existing housing allowances for survivors being used by shelters in Toronto and existing wraparound services for survivors that could both be part of Safe at Home programs.
- The City of Toronto has existing partnerships and tables with private landlords. This could be a forum to share the program model and engage landlords in the work.
- Toronto Community Housing used to offer a housing swap program that was effective for survivors. This type of program could be reconsidered.
- Strategies used by existing programs that provide housing for perpetrators could offer lessons for Safe at Home design and implementation.

WHAT NORMS AND ATTITUDES WOULD NEED TO BE SHIFTED TO ADVANCE SAFE AT HOME?



Where money for women's housing goes

The expectation that people experiencing violence should have to leave or move

That shelters aren't the only option

Norms that support intimate partner violence in general

We need to look to more communities on how they have implemented [Safe at Home], especially racialized communities who may have more informal schemes

That violence has to be physical to necessitate this kind of intervention

Focus on what women want

When we speak with survivors for the first time, we tend to ask them if they want to leave. We could offer more options.

The separation between the anti-VAW and the housing and homelessness sectors

Safety interventions aimed at "new beginnings" for survivors

Collaborative service system model

Wraparound supports available outside of shelters

