



# Housing, Homelessness, and Violence Against Women

A Discussion Paper

## **Women's Shelters Canada**

### **Hébergement femmes Canada**

Women's Shelters Canada is based in Ottawa. We represent a strong, unified voice on the issue of violence against women on the national stage. Through collaboration, knowledge exchange, and adoption of innovative practices, we advance the coordination and implementation of high quality services for women and children accessing shelters.

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The opinions and recommendations in this report, and any errors, are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders of this report.

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## List of acronyms

ACWS	Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters
CHRA	Canadian Housing and Renewal Association
CMHC	Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation
DV	Domestic Violence
HF	Housing First
HIFIS	Homeless Individuals and Families Information System
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NHS	National Housing Strategy
PTSD	Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
SDV-PHB	Special Domestic Violence Portable Housing Benefit
SPDAT	Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool
SPP	Special Priority Policy
VAW	Violence Against Women
WSC	Women’s Shelters Canada

## 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).<sup>i</sup> 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 Budget<sup>1</sup> 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".<sup>2</sup> We

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<sup>i</sup> 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 roundtable participants.

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 violence<sup>3</sup> must be integrated into the NHS and the NHF:

1. 7 in 10 people who experience family violence are women and girls;<sup>4</sup>
2. Research has shown that the majority of homeless families are led by sole support mothers;<sup>5</sup>
3. In 2012, sole support mothers were the fastest growing demographic accessing homeless shelters (not including VAW shelters).<sup>6</sup>

### Women's Invisible Homelessness

Research has shown that housing remains one of the leading barriers for women escaping violence<sup>7</sup> and that domestic violence is one of the main causes of homelessness among Canadian families.<sup>8</sup> 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).<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

The implications are that DV survivors are often not considered homeless. Consequently, rapid rehousing and homelessness reduction programs such as Housing First (HF)<sup>11</sup> 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;<sup>12</sup>
2. Women may not meet the criteria for 'chronic' or 'episodic' homelessness because their homelessness is invisible for safety reasons;<sup>13</sup>
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."<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> Indigenous women, low-income women on social assistance, homeless women, transgender women, and two-spirit persons are particularly impacted by housing discrimination.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

### 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 homelessness<sup>ii</sup> 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;

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<sup>ii</sup> 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](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FS21_rev_1_Housing_en.pdf)

### 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.

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this discussion paper is to highlight the links between domestic violence, housing instability, and women's homelessness. Additionally, this paper explores the various housing supports available to domestic violence (DV) survivors including social and affordable housing, Housing First, and other government housing supports. 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.

For this discussion paper, we are interested in identifying what housing programs or benefits exist for domestic violence survivors and to evaluate these programs or benefits – what is the eligibility criteria, how accessible are the programs, and are the benefits or programs coordinated with social assistance or other government supports? We hope this discussion paper illuminates the complex negotiation of housing, housing insecurity, and homelessness for domestic violence survivors while also providing clear recommendations on what work needs to be done at local, provincial, and national levels to ensure that all DV survivors can access safe and affordable housing.

### **Federal Government Budget 2017: Affordable Housing**

The Liberal government announced its federal budget on March 22, 2017. In line with developing a National Housing Strategy (NHS), the 2017 budget includes \$11.2 billion towards a variety of initiatives to renew Canada's affordable housing sector over the next 11 years.<sup>22</sup> Highlights include:

- \$3.2 billion to the provinces and territories to support key practices for affordable housing (e.g. constructing new housing units and rent subsidies).
- \$5 billion to establish a National Housing Fund for critical housing issues for vulnerable citizens (including seniors; Indigenous peoples; survivors fleeing situations of domestic violence; persons with disabilities; individuals dealing with mental health and addictions; and veterans).
- \$300 million towards Northern Housing (\$24 million to Yukon, \$36 million to the Northwest Territories, and \$240 million to Nunavut).
- \$225 million for housing support for Indigenous peoples not living on reserves (capital repairs, ensuring the continued affordability of units previously supported by the former Urban Native Housing Program, and encouraging the development of new housing).

### Gender-based analysis

“An effective National Housing Strategy must increase access to safe, affordable housing and reduce homelessness for women and girls. Development of the strategy requires gender-based analysis. Where housing and homelessness of women and girls is concerned, failure to include a gender-based analysis can be a **matter of life and death**” (YWCA Canada 2016: 5).

### Gender-based violence

“Approximately every six days, a woman in Canada is killed by her intimate partner. Out of the 83 police-reported intimate partner homicides in 2014, **67 of the victims – over 80% – were women**” (Canadian Women’s Foundation 2014; Statistics Canada 2014).

- \$2.1 billion Homelessness Partnering Strategy Programs to help prevent and reduce homelessness, including Housing First.

Budget 2017 intends to “establish a National Housing Fund to address critical housing issues and prioritize support for vulnerable citizens, including...survivors fleeing situations of domestic violence”.<sup>23</sup> We welcome the recognition of the links between domestic violence, housing, and homelessness. There are several key reasons why a gender-based analysis of family violence must be integrated into the National Housing Strategy and a National Housing Fund.<sup>24</sup> First, 7 in 10 people who experience family violence are women and girls.<sup>25</sup> Second, research has shown that the majority of homeless families are led by sole support mothers.<sup>26</sup> Third, in 2012, sole support mothers were considered the fastest growing demographic accessing homeless shelters (not including VAW shelters).<sup>27</sup>

It is our hope that through consultations and collaboration with advocates from VAW shelters and women’s housing and homelessness sectors, the National Housing Strategy will integrate an intersectional gender-based analysis. In order to truly address homelessness and the crisis in affordable housing, an intersectional analysis of class, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, immigration status, and disability is necessary to develop solutions that meet the needs of women living at different intersections.<sup>28</sup>

This paper begins with an overview of women’s homelessness, drawing attention to the ways that it is rendered invisible and exploring why and how homelessness programs often fail to support women fleeing violence. Next, we review social and affordable housing, Housing First, the Ontario pilot portable housing benefit for DV survivors, and VAW second stage or transitional housing. We conclude with a list of recommendations on the National Housing Strategy that emerged from a roundtable on Housing, Homelessness, and Violence Against Women organized by Women’s Shelters Canada in June 2017.

## HOUSING, HOMELESSNESS, AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The link between domestic violence and homelessness is well documented.<sup>29</sup> Several studies have noted that housing remains one of the leading barriers for women escaping violence<sup>30</sup> and that DV is one of the main causes of

homelessness among Canadian families.<sup>31</sup> Women escaping violence are at high risk for housing instability and homelessness. Housing instability differs from homelessness because women have a place to live; however, maintaining that residence may be

### Housing Insecurity

“...[W]omen defined housing (in)stability through the causes and consequences of violence – isolation, unemployment, economic strain, loss of control over one’s life, lack of safety, loss of identity, and psychological distress to name a few” (O’Campo et al. 2016: 4).

### Indicators of housing instability

“include difficulty paying rent, mortgage, or utility bills and being denied affordable housing because of past credit problems, eviction threats or notices, moving frequently, living in overcrowded conditions, or ‘doubling up’ in a residence with family or friends” (Rollins et al. 2012: 625).

difficult for a variety of reasons (from financial to mental health concerns).<sup>32</sup> Housing policies primarily focus on the material need – that is, the means necessary for housing someone (rent subsidies, social housing units, etc.). However, the psychological instability associated with Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) also needs to be considered, including “issues of safety, promoting feelings of home, [and] ensuring that new housing is a refuge...”.<sup>33</sup> IPV researchers have also documented that survivors’ mental health (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, depression, anxiety, etc.) is exacerbated by housing instability, which makes it difficult for survivors to maintain their housing and puts them at risk for homelessness.<sup>34</sup>

Women’s shelters offer a variety of services such as 24/7 counselling, children’s programs, parenting classes, mental health and addiction services, nutritional classes and community kitchens, legal and housing services, men’s programs, and assistance with applications to educational and apprenticeship programs. Women do not need to stay in the shelter to receive these services; in fact, for every two women receiving support while living in shelter, there are five accessing outreach services.<sup>35</sup> Many women’s shelters and transition houses operate from a feminist, trauma informed,<sup>iii</sup> and harm reduction<sup>iv</sup> approach. While VAW shelters<sup>v</sup> play a vital and important role in providing survivors of domestic violence a safe place to live

<sup>iii</sup> Trauma-informed care and practice recognizes how systems, organizations, and services, such as VAW shelters may re-traumatize survivors. As such, a trauma-informed approach provides services with the awareness of how trauma impacts people on multiple levels (psychological, neurobiological, biological, social, and spiritual) and that understanding trauma is key to the healing process. The key principles of trauma-informed practices are: acknowledging the trauma; safety; trust; choice and control; compassion; collaboration; and strengths-based. See: Clinic Community Health Centre Winnipeg. (2013). “A resource for service organizations and providers to deliver services that are trauma-informed.” Online at: [http://trauma-informed.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Trauma-informed\\_Toolkit.pdf](http://trauma-informed.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Trauma-informed_Toolkit.pdf).

<sup>iv</sup> Harm reduction approaches aim to reduce the negative health, social, and economic consequences that may arise from the use of drugs without necessarily reducing drug use. According to the Ontario Association of Interval & Transition Houses (OAITH), “the principles of harm reduction largely align with feminist anti-oppression principles and in fact many shelters and second stage houses in Ontario practice harm reduction to some extent; although some organizations don’t officially recognize the harm reduction work they do.” See: OAITH (2013: 4). “Harm reduction in VAW shelters: realities of services.” Online at: <http://opendoorsproject.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Harm-Reduction-Report-April-2013-final.pdf>.

<sup>v</sup> Across Canada, definitions for Emergency/ First Stage housing vary greatly. For instance, they are referred to as transition houses, safe homes, women’s shelters, family violence shelters, VAW emergency shelters, emergency domestic violence shelters, or first-stage shelters.

### Lack of Affordable Housing

“The lack of affordable housing is a key reason why many women do not leave abusive partners and why they return to them” (Mosher et al. 2004: 12).

### Need for women-centred housing

“[A]n overall lack of affordable and safe housing, chronic underfunding, and the dominant discourse that idealizes the need to foster women’s ‘independence’ limit the ability of service providers to tailor and provide such woman-centered housing” (Ponic et al. 2011: 1578).

while they transition from an abusive relationship, for a number of years there has been immense pressure on shelters to house women when resources are strained.<sup>36</sup> Far too often, women and children needing safety are denied access to VAW shelters for lack of capacity.<sup>37</sup> Shelter staff do all they can to ensure that women are not left on their own by temporarily sheltering women in hotel rooms, providing referrals to other shelters, and even searching for accommodations beyond their city, town, or village.<sup>38</sup> In our 2017 survey, 44% of shelters were full on snapshot day.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, in a study documenting the day-to-day realities of delivering shelter services, Burnett et al. (2016) found that several shelter directors they interviewed explained that they were “always full...functioning beyond their capacity and finding ways to create more space for women and children seeking shelter.”<sup>40</sup> Access to housing, including second stage/transitional housing, would allow emergency VAW shelters to accommodate a greater number of women escaping violence.<sup>vi</sup>

When women leave VAW shelters,<sup>vii</sup> they are confronted with limited choices because of an acute lack of affordable housing. Our 2016 annual survey of VAW shelters confirmed that affordable housing options such as subsidized and social housing are difficult to find; 30% of shelters reported that they have no social housing programs in their region.<sup>41</sup> For most women, the result is that they either return to their abuser, go into hidden or invisible homelessness via couch surfing with family or friends, or become homeless. Research has demonstrated that women often return to their abusers because of a shortage of affordable and safe housing.<sup>42</sup> It is difficult for women leaving violence to get their lives on track if they do not have a stable place to live. A lack of coordination of social supports, policies, and services

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<sup>vi</sup> The Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters (ACWS) defines second stage housing as “longer term (6 months to 2 years), apartment style residences that are part of a spectrum of domestic violence support and housing services that includes emergency and second-stage shelters, outreach services, and domestic violence housing first services. Second-stage shelters often bridge the transition between an emergency shelter and a woman living on her own” (ACWS 2015:13).

<sup>vii</sup> Provincial guidelines set length of stay limits on VAW shelters. These vary from province to province.

### Hidden Homelessness

"[I]f you're looking at individuals who [have] chronic or frequent episodes of homelessness, women don't always fall into the data.

**They purposely stay out of the data because if they have kids, they lose their kids"** (Louis Sorin, CEO, End Homelessness Winnipeg, cited in Drabble 2017: 12).

### Violence & Homelessness

"The risks of violence associated with homelessness even extend into the shelter system for many women, which may also explain their **avoidance of accessing these spaces** and contribute to the relative invisibility of their condition" (Kirkby and Mettler 2016:114).

delivered at the provincial level (income supports, social housing, justice system, child welfare authorities, etc.) further complicate the lives of women leaving violence.<sup>viii</sup>

### Women's Hidden Homelessness

We know that 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 women's shelters. These episodic experiences are obscured by data<sup>ix</sup> that only count street and shelter homelessness.<sup>43</sup> In 2017, the Homeless Partnering Strategy published their second national study on homelessness. Data was collected through the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) and did not count women staying in VAW shelters as part of the homeless population.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, national data regarding the gender demographics of the homeless do not capture homeless women if they are staying at a VAW shelter or are if they are in hidden homelessness. With VAW shelters across the country forced to turn women away on a daily basis due to overcapacity<sup>x</sup>, women survivors of DV, concerned with their safety, are reluctant to access mixed gender shelters.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, most homeless shelters are not equipped with domestic violence supports and staff, nor do they necessarily have safety measures in place to adequately protect domestic violence survivors. For these reasons, women usually do not access homeless shelters and therefore are not "counted" as homeless.

Because safety is such an issue for women leaving abuse, they are often not "visibly" homeless on the street. Instead, they stay with family, friends, or even a new partner.<sup>46</sup> For some women, they may exchange shelter for sex or

<sup>viii</sup> In a study documenting the day-to-day reality of delivering VAW shelter services, Burnett et al. found that "inadequate finances, lack of available affordable housing, challenges accessing legal services, and limited social supports further undermine women's efforts to live independently and violence free" (2016: 2).

<sup>ix</sup> The Coordinated Point in Time (PiT) national count of Canada's homeless counted women staying in VAW shelters and transitional houses, but recognized the limitations of the count in reaching everyone, particularly those in hidden homelessness. One quarter of all women surveyed reported domestic abuse as a factor leading to homelessness, which informed the need for targeted supports for vulnerable groups in the National Housing Fund. See Canada. (2016). "Homelessness Partnering Strategy: Highlights – 2016 Coordinated Point-in-Time Count of Homelessness in Canadian Communities." Online at: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/communities/homelessness/reports/highlights-2016-point-in-time-count.html>.

<sup>x</sup> Shelter staff make efforts to find accommodations for women by making referrals to other shelters and offering temporary stay at hotels.

### Immigrant Women

“Immigrant women may stay in abusive situations where their abusers control them by **exploiting their lack of awareness** of personal rights and the law, such as threatening the loss of child custody...The abusive partner or family member **may be in control of a woman’s immigration status** (e.g. by being her sponsor) and can use this as a way to exert control...” (Thurston et al. 2013: 2809).

### Canada’s Affordable Housing Crisis

“Today **over 1.5 million Canadian households** live in core housing need, with over half of those households living in extreme core housing need (living in poverty and spending over 50 per cent of their income on housing)”. (Richter and Meili 2016).

remain in violent situations to avoid street homelessness where there is a heightened risk for violence and exploitation.<sup>47</sup> Immigrant women face particular challenges if they have not yet developed support systems that could provide them with short-term accommodations. They may also face linguistic barriers and might not be able to find culturally appropriate services.<sup>48</sup> A significant barrier for single mothers is their fear to ask for assistance (from shelters, Housing First programs, and other social supports) because of concerns that child welfare authorities may apprehend their children.<sup>49</sup>

### SOCIAL AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING MODEL

Social housing is frequently used interchangeably with affordable housing; however, there are some distinctions.<sup>50</sup> Social housing refers to traditional public housing made affordable with government-subsidized rent, whereas affordable housing applies to recent programs that include more modest levels of subsidy that can be provided by private, public, nonprofit, and housing cooperatives.<sup>51</sup> The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) defines affordable housing when a household spends less than 30% of their pre-tax income on adequate shelter.<sup>52</sup> CMHC also designates households that spend more than 30% of their income on shelter to be in core housing need and those that spend 50% or more on shelter to be in severe housing need.<sup>53</sup> Recent immigrants are the most likely to spend more than 50% of their income on housing, placing them in severe housing need.<sup>xi</sup>

Social and affordable housing units are predominantly owned and operated by nonprofit, co-operative, and public (provincial or local government) housing agencies.<sup>54</sup> Since 1993, the federal and provincial governments have diminished their role in social and affordable housing by withdrawing investments in maintaining and repairing aging units and reducing overall spending on social housing including the building of new units.<sup>55</sup> The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness estimates that federal per capita spending on affordable housing has decreased to \$63 in 2013 from \$98 in 1993 (in 2013 dollars).<sup>56</sup> There is an acute need for the government to a) renew existing social housing assets<sup>57</sup> so that public, non-profit and co-operative housing providers can maintain affordable rents; b) create target

<sup>xi</sup> In 2011, 12.7% recent immigrant households were in severe housing need, the national average was 5.3%. See CMHC. (2016, Mar 3). “Recent Immigrants remain the most affected households among those in severe need.” Online at: [https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/hoficlincl/observer/observer\\_040.cfm](https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/hoficlincl/observer/observer_040.cfm)  
[https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/hoficlincl/observer/observer\\_040.cfm](https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/hoficlincl/observer/observer_040.cfm).

grants for capital repairs, retrofits and maintenance of social housing; and c) commit to long term sustainable funding.<sup>58</sup>

It is estimated that 4.5% or 600,000 households live in social and affordable housing units across Canada – 1 in 4 Canadians cannot afford safe and decent housing.<sup>59</sup> According to the Canadian Housing Renewal Association (CHRA), approximately 140,000 Canadians are on the affordable and social housing wait list.<sup>60</sup> Waiting list can be long – nationally the average is 4.5 years whereas in large urban centres like Toronto, the wait can be up to 8.4 years.<sup>61</sup> The long waiting lists and lack of available affordable units are a direct result of reduced public sector funding for social and affordable housing. Consequently, fewer low-income individuals and families (and increasingly middle-income families) are able to afford rent let alone home ownership. The housing gap between the wealthy and the poor is expanding while there are fewer supports and resources available to the most marginalized.<sup>62</sup>

### **Social and Affordable Housing Options for Survivors of Domestic Violence**

Long waiting lists for affordable housing could mean the difference between life and death for women fleeing domestic violence. For this reason, in most provinces and territories DV survivors are prioritized for social housing,<sup>63</sup> but with the affordable housing crisis, they still may not receive housing for several months.<sup>64</sup> Some VAW shelters are able to house women as they wait for a unit to open up, but this is not the case in all provinces and territories; some emergency shelters are only funded for up to three weeks.<sup>65</sup>

While DV survivors wait for an affordable unit to become available, they must find temporary accommodations, which varies depending on an individual's support network. For some, they may couch surf with family, friends, or a stranger. Some women may be unsheltered during this time and stay in a public space such as a park, bus shelter, tent, or a car, while others walk for hours during the night to stay safe.<sup>xii</sup> Several will return to an abuser to avoid homelessness.<sup>66</sup> Affordable housing is the key obstacle in women's ability to move on with their lives "and by far the biggest structural challenge in the delivery of shelter services."<sup>67</sup> 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.<sup>68</sup> Women fleeing violence face safety concerns

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<sup>xii</sup> Walking was a common strategy for women to stay safe while on the streets or if it was unsafe to sleep at night where they were staying. A women's centre worker in Winnipeg noted, "we often have women who say they are staying with a friend but it's so unsafe that they actually walk around all night long... they just walk all night because they are too scared to go to the shelter but they are too scared to sleep where they are at because it's not safe..." (Drabble 2017:28).

### Intersectionality

“Issues of intersectionality also need to be taken into account when one is looking at the association of homelessness and intimate partner abuse. ‘Intersectionality’, captures the complexities of not only these women’s lives but **the solutions needed to address their multiple and significant needs.** In Canada, abused Aboriginal women, abused women living in remote or rural areas, and abused immigrant women are populations that face additional issues and barriers with regard to potential homelessness” (Tutty et al. 2008: 17).

that need to be integrated into social and affordable housing options and supports. Research has demonstrated that threats to women’s safety and the potential for severe violence and femicide is heightened when they leave an abuser.<sup>69</sup> Stalking and sabotaging women’s attempts to secure safe housing and employment may continue for years after leaving the abuser.<sup>70</sup> For this reason, affordable community and social housing “that does not include appropriate safety measures (e.g. security systems, secure neighborhoods, restricted access) may not be appropriate...for those women who are at risk for severe physical violence.”<sup>71</sup>

Affordable housing also poses eligibility barriers due to the documentation and the “proof” that is required to process the benefit and achieve priority status.<sup>72</sup> For example, in Ontario, the Social Housing Reform Act 2000 requires documentation of cohabitation with an abuser and that applicants provide evidence that they will live permanently apart from their abuser.<sup>xiii</sup> To ensure priority listing, the application must be submitted within three months of ceasing to live together.<sup>73</sup> These stipulations may pose even greater challenges for immigrant women who are escaping an abusive sponsor, as they may not have access to or knowledge of the documents required for proof of cohabitation.<sup>74</sup> These application processes may prevent women from obtaining the special priority status for social housing and for some survivors, recounting their stories of abuse may re-victimize them.<sup>75</sup> VAW advocates assert that these administrative requirements are a violation of a DV survivor’s privacy.<sup>76</sup>

### Housing, Discrimination, and Violence Against Women

Systemic discrimination in social housing has been well documented.<sup>77</sup>

Indigenous women, low-income women on social assistance, homeless women, and transgender women and two-spirit persons are particularly impacted by discrimination from landlords who stereotype these women as “trouble makers.”<sup>78</sup> Discrimination intersects with poverty, homelessness, lone parent status, disability, race, gender, Indigeneity, sexuality, mental health, addictions, age, and the stigma attached to domestic violence.<sup>79</sup> A recent study on women’s homelessness in Winnipeg found that

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<sup>xiii</sup> Subsection 24(8) of O. Reg. 298/01 mandates that applicants requesting special priority status provide documentation to the service manager to verify the statement of abuse. See Ontario. Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. (2006). *Special Priority Policy Review within Domestic Violence Action Plan: Report to Stakeholders*. Online at: <http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Asset966.aspx>.

### Indigenous Women

“For Aboriginal women, who experience higher rates of violence compared to non-Aboriginal women, the situation is particularly bleak. The lack of adequate and affordable housing, financial assistance and social supports – coupled with other intersecting grounds – leaves many Aboriginal women with no choice but to return to their abusers” (Ontario Human Rights Commission 2008 section 5.1).

### Indigenous families

“Aboriginal families coming into contact with the child welfare system differ from non-Aboriginal families for historical and cultural reasons. For these reasons, it is essential that child welfare intervention policies and practices take into account the injustice and trauma that Canada has inflicted on Aboriginal peoples in the past” (Bennett 2009: 94).

transgender women and two-spirit persons are notably vulnerable to gender-based discrimination when they try to secure housing or access a shelter.<sup>xiv</sup> Immigrant women also experience discrimination when attempting to access affordable housing, which may be heightened by linguistic barriers and racism.<sup>80</sup> Women with disabilities face higher levels of poverty and unemployment, making it difficult for them to retain their housing. Women with intellectual disabilities and traumatic brain injuries without supports may struggle with finding housing, completing lengthy applications, and other requirements that are inaccessible to them. Additionally, the shortage of accessible units and discrimination from landlords is compounded by the lack of information available on their rights, including available supports (financial and accommodations) that could assist them.<sup>81</sup>

### Interaction of Systems: Child Welfare and Violence Against Women

Ensuring women are housed is crucial to their safety; however, the interaction of various systems (provincial policies from income support and social housing to child welfare) must also be acknowledged. 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 Criminal Justice System, and other legal entities and social services that not only puts custody of the children at risk but also undermines women’s sense of control, autonomy, and independence.<sup>82</sup> Indigenous mothers are more vulnerable to child welfare interventions and investigations and are at a higher risk for losing their children because of systemic racism and sexism reproduced through the *Indian Act* and the *Child and Family Services Act*.<sup>83</sup> Canada’s colonial history of Residential Schools<sup>84</sup> and the Sixties Scoop<sup>85</sup> mandated the State’s removal of Indigenous children from their families as part of an assimilation project. This history repeats itself today as Indigenous children are more susceptible to intervention from child welfare and are overrepresented in foster care.<sup>86</sup> Some estimate that “[t]he number of First Nations children in care outside their own homes today is three times the number of children in Residential Schools at the height of their operation.”<sup>87</sup> In 2011, Indigenous children represented 7% of all children in Canada yet they accounted for almost half (48%) of all foster children in the

<sup>xiv</sup> This ranges from physical violence in shelters that serve all genders and the private rental market where landlords outright refuse to rent to trans and two-spirit women (Drabble 2017: 22).

### Residential Tenancies Act Amended

Sue Tomney, CEO of YWCA Calgary commented on Alberta's amendment of the *Residential Tenancies Act*:  
 "Women tell us that **economic insecurity and stress of finding a new home** are among the top reasons they stay in unsafe, abusive relationships. This amendment to the Residential Tenancies Act addresses these stressors and enables women to escape abusive relationships with the supports they need" (Alberta 2016).

country.<sup>88</sup> For these reasons, Indigenous women fleeing abuse are even more fearful of child welfare and hold a deep mistrust for these agencies and workers.

Child welfare authorities can intervene and determine criteria around maintaining custody, criteria that may not be in the women's direct control (such as choosing a housing unit near the children's school or waiting times for income supports).<sup>89</sup> As such, social housing authorities must recognize the housing requirements mandated by child welfare regulations to ensure that mothers do not lose custody of their children by failing to provide housing matched to specifications outlined by child welfare authorities.<sup>90</sup> For example, social housing authorities should ensure that survivors of DV and their children are placed in a housing unit near their children's school and that the unit has the appropriate number of bedrooms in accordance with their children's age and gender.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, the apprehension of children by child welfare authorities may lead to a reduction or loss of housing allowance through social assistance, which puts women at risk for homelessness.<sup>xv</sup> These are examples of the inconsistencies across provincial government supports that low-income single mothers must navigate in order to avoid homelessness and maintain custody of their children.<sup>92</sup> We need a flexible approach to social housing that takes into account child welfare regulations so that mothers are able to maintain custody of their children and remain housed.

The reality is that for most women who are in shelters, affordable housing is not affordable. For women who were housed in social housing prior to fleeing

an abuser and entering a VAW shelter, they may have to pay arrears or damage deposits to social housing before they can qualify for social and affordable housing. As such, any damages or unpaid rent by their abusers may become the responsibility of DV survivors.<sup>93</sup> Matrimonial assets may also disqualify DV survivors for social housing even though in "many instances victims are not able to access those assets because they are in the abuser's control" and they may lack legal counsel to obtain access.<sup>94</sup> Other financial barriers include the slow process of applying for social assistance due to the excessive eligibility criteria required to prove financial need, including the disclosure of their experiences of DV to their caseworkers.<sup>95</sup> Social assistance may also be inaccessible to some immigrant women whose immigration status may prevent them

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<sup>xv</sup> For instance, in "Finding her home: a gender-based analysis of the homelessness crisis in Winnipeg" Drabble notes, "[o]ne of the main pathways into homelessness among women... is through specific gaps or barriers within or between systems they are involved with" such as employment income assistance, child welfare agencies and the criminal justice system (2017: 31).

from accessing or obtaining financial help, VAW shelters, and the police. For instance, if the abuser is also the sponsor, crucial information such as the sponsorship process, legal rights under Canadian law, and even knowledge of government social assistance and supports may be withheld.<sup>96</sup> These women may not know what supports are available to them to leave an abusive situation and may fear that asking for help could lead to deportation and/or the loss of their children.

Finding and maintaining housing also poses difficulties for women who have mental illness and trauma resulting from their abuse. PTSD, anxiety, panic attacks, and various other mental illnesses are the negative impacts of violence, which compromise women's ability to locate, secure, and maintain various housing supports necessary to lead independent and violence-free lives.<sup>97</sup> For some women, their mental illness may evolve into a disability if it significantly interferes with the performance of major life activities, such as learning, working, and communicating, including searching for housing. Survivors of domestic violence need support finding and maintaining housing as well as acquiring mental health and disability provisions as they begin their healing journey.

Most provinces have made some efforts to assist women fleeing domestic abuse without penalties from landlords. Quebec,<sup>98</sup> Saskatchewan,<sup>99</sup> Manitoba,<sup>100</sup> Ontario,<sup>101</sup> Alberta,<sup>102</sup> the Northwest Territories,<sup>103</sup> Nova Scotia,<sup>104</sup> and British Columbia<sup>105</sup> have amended their *Residential Tenancy Acts (RTA)* to shorten the notice period to end a rental tenancy agreement for victims of sexual or domestic violence from 60 days to under 30.<sup>106</sup> These changes help make it easier for survivors to flee abuse; however, coordinated system-wide changes at the national level are necessary to ensure consistent efforts to address VAW, housing, and homelessness.

**Table 1 Amendments to Residential Tenancies Act by Province**

Province	Domestic Violence amendments to RTA	
Alberta	Yes	2015
British Columbia	Yes	2015
Manitoba	Yes	2011
New Brunswick	No	-
Newfoundland and Labrador	No	-
North West Territories	Yes	2015
Nova Scotia	Yes	2013
Nunavut	No	-
Ontario	Yes	2016
Prince Edward Island	No	-
Quebec	Yes	2006
Saskatchewan	Yes	2017
Yukon	No	-

### Navigating Systems

Domestic violence survivors **must navigate** numerous agencies, government organizations, and policies while dealing with the emotional and physiological effects of abuse: “inadequate finances, lack of available affordable housing, challenges accessing legal services, and limited social supports further **undermine women’s efforts to live independently and violence free**” (Burnett et al. 2016:2).

### Summary: Affordable and Social Housing and Domestic Violence Survivors

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 and what some have called an affordable housing crisis.<sup>107</sup> DV survivors can access special priority status to obtain housing more quickly, but 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 – a form of financial abuse and controlling behavior.<sup>108</sup> Consequently, survivors fleeing violence may be unable to find the documentation necessary to prove cohabitation in order to access special priority status for social housing.<sup>xvi</sup> Furthermore, proving abuse can be demoralizing and re-victimizing for survivors.

Gender, disability, racial discrimination, and the stigmatization of domestic violence affects survivors as they navigate social and affordable housing bureaucracies. The Ontario Human Rights Commission has documented several types of discrimination in social housing on the basis of: sex (women, specifically lone mothers experience sexual harassment from landlords and property managers); transphobia and discrimination based on gender identity; family and marital status (lone mothers fleeing domestic violence

were the most impacted by this form of discrimination); criminal records; age; disability (including intellectual disabilities and mental illness); race (Indigenous peoples, specifically in the North, and recent immigrants were most impacted by this form of discrimination); sexual orientation; and discrimination against those who receive social assistance.<sup>109</sup>

Insufficient communication or contradictions between systems (social assistance, social housing, and child welfare) may prevent women from accessing and maintaining social housing and contribute to their housing insecurity and risk for homelessness. Social and affordable housing may not be affordable for women escaping violence as it may take time to secure financial assistance and save for first and last month’s rent. Eligibility

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<sup>xvi</sup> Immigrant women are particularly vulnerable to this form of abuse as their immigration status and other personal documents may be kept from them. Canada. Government of Canada Family Sponsorship. “Help for Spouses or Partners who are Victims of Abuse.” Online at <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/immigrate/sponsor/abuse.asp>.

criteria also poses problems as individuals with poor credit and/or rental history are screened and deemed ineligible. Furthermore, some survivors may not have rental references<sup>110</sup> and women who ended rental agreements early may face discrimination even though the early termination of leases for DV survivors is protected under the *Residential Tenancies Acts* in most provinces and territories. Given the limited period that women have to find housing while they 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 are left with no other choice but to return to their abuser or become homeless.<sup>111</sup>

## HOUSING FIRST MODEL

Since the 1990s, the Housing First (HF) model has emerged as a solution to housing the homeless as quickly as possible and was allotted funding in the 2017 Budget under the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS).<sup>xvii</sup> HF is a philosophy based on the understanding of housing as a basic human right that should be available to all. The underlying principle of HF is that people are better able to move forward with their lives if they are first housed.<sup>112</sup> According to the Homelessness Hub, the five core principles of HF include:

1. Immediate access to permanent housing with no housing readiness requirements;
2. Consumer choice and self-determination;
3. Recovery orientation;
4. Individualized and client-driven supports; and
5. Social and community integration<sup>i</sup>.

Generally, HF is administered through Community Advisory Boards and Community Entities to ensure that HF fits with the local situation of a given community.<sup>113</sup> There are several types of Housing First, including scattered sites (individual rental units in the private rental market); congregate models (many units in a single building with on-call support); and permanent supportive housing (for those with complex and recurring issues).<sup>114</sup> HF models believe individuals should have a say in where they live and create space and opportunities to build on their strengths and become self-sufficient.<sup>xviii</sup> It also

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<sup>xvii</sup> The 2017 budget designated \$2.1 billion towards Homelessness Partnering Strategy programs including Housing First initiatives.

<sup>xviii</sup> Reflecting on a Domestic Violence Housing First pilot project, housing directors at Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence found that the HF program was driven by more than just housing.

uses trauma-informed and harm reduction approaches. Research has shown that HF is more than just housing; it includes a wide range of voluntary supports provided in a client-centered way:

1. Housing supports (applying for rent subsidies, assistance finding housing, advocating with the landlord, etc.). At this level, HF case managers work with private and public landlords and access social, non-profit, and provincial rent supplements as well as other grants, such as low-income grants, to cover bills such as utilities;
2. Clinical supports (supports for mental health and social care of client); and
3. Complementary supports (help improve the quality of life, community integration, and working towards self-sufficiency including life skills, applying for supports, help with employment, education, and training).<sup>115</sup>

The Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT), a triage tool that assesses the health and social service needs of a homeless individual and is widely used in over 100 communities across Canada.<sup>116</sup> The SPDAT and the VI-SPDAT (a condensed version of SPDAT) are increasingly becoming the standard tool utilized to determine eligibility for a variety of homelessness programs, including Housing First.<sup>117</sup> It also prioritizes who should receive what types of housing and case management. The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS) reviewed the SPDAT- F for families and found two specific issues related to survivors of domestic violence. First, the tool does not take into account the importance of safety issues for women and children fleeing DV and instead focuses on demographic characteristics and previous experiences of homelessness.<sup>118</sup> Second, under the 20 components that are scored, there is no assessment that identifies the unique experiences of women fleeing violence, which are different from the chronically homeless, individuals, and families.<sup>119</sup> These critiques illuminate the challenges of developing HF programs for DV survivors as the tools used to assess and prioritize who should receive various types of housing and case management ignore the unique challenges DV survivors encounter when they leave an abuser and become homeless.

The program has been most successful in housing single homeless men and individuals with mental health and substance use issues.<sup>120</sup> However, Housing First relies on affordable housing stock and Canada's affordable housing is severely depleted; it is estimated that 100,000 new units of affordable and social housing are needed to reduce

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The program included the work of advocates, trauma informed and harm reduction approaches, non-judgement, meeting survivors where they were at, and voluntary services (counselling, life skills, etc.) which created opportunities for survivors to empower themselves (WSCADV 2015a).

## Domestic Violence Housing First

“DVHF agencies developed or enhanced strong partnerships with other services within their agencies, as well as with other domestic violence, sexual assault, and housing programs. Developing positive relationships with landlords, law enforcement, and other community programs enabled advocates to negotiate on survivors’ behalf, educate the community, and ultimately improve the community’s response to domestic violence. Stabilizing survivors fostered healthier communities” (WSCADV 2015:1).

core housing need and homelessness.<sup>121</sup> Rural areas, small towns, and northern communities do not have the same housing capacity to implement HF models as larger urban cities.<sup>122</sup>

The majority of Housing First programs do not meet the needs of women fleeing domestic violence for several reasons. First, eligibility requirements include being homeless for 30 days and if women are temporarily staying at a VAW shelter, they are not considered homeless.<sup>123</sup> Second, women may not meet the criteria for “chronic” or “episodic” homelessness because their homelessness is invisible for safety reasons.<sup>xix</sup> Third, 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). Fourth, families are often excluded – singles without dependents are the primary beneficiaries of HF supports. HF models must integrate a gendered lens when defining homelessness, as homelessness for women “is more likely to be hidden [and] there is a concern that many will be categorically excluded from eligibility for Housing First programs.”<sup>124</sup> Additionally, HF models have been criticized for not exploring the specific needs of Indigenous women who are at a much higher risk of violence than non-Indigenous women.<sup>125</sup>

In Canada, there have been some successful Housing First initiatives that are designed for women who are survivors of domestic violence and at risk of homelessness. The Vivian in Vancouver supports housing for at-risk, chronically homeless women and offers a minimal barrier, high tolerance environment under a harm reduction philosophy.<sup>126</sup> Discovery House Family Violence Prevention Society in Calgary is an integrated shelter that provides community services for abused women and children that includes a Housing First program.<sup>127</sup> The London Homes for Women utilizes gender-specific and violence/trauma-informed principles to ensuring that women get housed and avoid homelessness.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>xix</sup> “Chronic homelessness” refers to individuals, often with disabling conditions (e.g. chronic physical or mental illness, substance abuse problems), who are currently homeless and have been homeless for six months or more in the past year (e.g. have spent more than 180 nights in a shelter or place not fit for human habitation). “Episodically homeless” refers to individuals, often with disabling conditions, who are currently homeless and have experienced three or more episodes of homelessness in the past year. Episodes are defined as periods when a person would be in a shelter or place not fit for human habitation for a certain period, and after at least 30 days, would be back in the shelter or place. See <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/communities/homelessness/housing-first/supports.html#chronically>.

### Expand Special Priority Policy

According to Ontario's Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy, "based on the outcomes of the pilot project, the province will consider ways to enhance the Special Priority Policy and expand the use of this approach" (Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing 2016: 24).

There are also successful Housing First projects for survivors of domestic violence in the US that could be replicated in Canada. The Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WSCADV) developed a Domestic Violence Housing First (DVHF) pilot project to house survivors of domestic violence and enable them to establish a home with "the freedom to choose how to best rebuild their lives."<sup>129</sup> The DVHF project was survivor-driven – women could choose where they lived and what, if any, supports they wanted (from life skills to substance use counselling).<sup>130</sup> Beyond housing, the DVHF project provided survivors support in reconstructing their lives based on their own unique needs including transportation, career training, job-related expenses, childcare, supplies and services for children, lock changes, home security features, and temporary rental assistance. A harm reduction approach reduced the need for prerequisites; for instance, sobriety and employment are not requirements to access the program.<sup>xx</sup> DVHF project directors expressed that this approach gave more flexibility to meet the needs of survivors and that it ensured that all survivors, regardless of where they are at, could access the program and become housed.

WSCADV reported many positive outcomes of the DVHF pilot project including women and children feeling safer, stable, self-sufficient, "and empowered to create lives free from violence."<sup>131</sup> 96% of the pilot project participants remained stably housed after 18 months and 97% reported increased safety for themselves and their children.<sup>132</sup> Clearly, Canada's Housing First model could integrate programming that could effectively meet the needs of DV survivors and invest specific funding for DV survivors.

### Ontario Survivors of Domestic Violence Portable Housing Benefit Pilot Program

In September 2016, the Ontario government, in partnership with the federal government, launched the Portable Housing Benefit to help survivors of domestic violence and their families – the first of its kind in Canada. Ontario launched the pilot project in 22 communities, allotting \$17 million over 3 years with the aim to support up to 3,000 survivors (\$2.5 million in 2016/2017 to \$10 million in 2018/2019).<sup>133</sup> The Portable Housing benefit (referred to as the SDV-PHB Pilot) subsidizes rent geared to

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<sup>xx</sup> This is not to detract from the important work that emergency and second stage housing provides to DV survivors, but rather, a comment on the strengths in flexibility and mobility in how survivors are quickly housed under the HF program. Many VAW shelters have moved towards harm reduction policies in an effort to be more inclusive and create more honest and meaningful relationships between counsellors and survivors. Some shelters may use harm reduction approaches but not necessarily identify them as harm reduction (OAITH 2013).

income social housing within the private sector housing market. The primary goal of the SDV-PHB Pilot is to reduce the amount of time it takes for DV survivors to find safe, affordable housing, as well as to learn which services and supports most effectively enable housing stability.

To receive the Benefit, applicants must meet the criteria for social housing and special priority status (also known as Special Priority Policy, or SPP).<sup>134</sup> The new pilot program helps abused women immediately find housing in their community and allows them to choose where they would like to live, be it closer to family, social support networks, schools, etc. The Benefit is linked to individuals or families rather than a specific housing unit, thereby promoting greater flexibility, mobility, and choice.

However, some VAW advocates and front line workers have identified overarching problems with the special priority status for domestic violence survivors. In an open letter to the Ontario Ministry of Housing, VAW workers noted: “Many women and dependents residing in Violence Against Women’s shelters are not eligible for the SPP mainly due to their inability to prove cohabitation with the persons they are fleeing, or as it is the case as of late, they can’t prove dependency on the familial relationship.”<sup>135</sup> In order for such benefits to be successful, they must be universal and work with VAW shelters.<sup>136</sup> VAW advocates promote the broadening of eligibility criteria to include more women and the reduction of bureaucratic barriers, including limiting the criteria required to prove abuse as this may re-victimize DV survivors.<sup>137</sup> VAW advocates have also noted the program is only short term (up to two years) and that the SPP eligibility requires women to remove themselves from the social housing list, putting them at a disadvantage for social housing once they complete the program.

A key concern is that the pilot project is temporary and there are no guarantees that this benefit will be available upon completion of the project. However, based on the widespread support of the Portable Housing Benefit by the VAW sector and the positive impacts for DV survivors, it is likely that the Ontario Liberal government will continue to fund this benefit. Other advantages include less stress on the growing affordable housing wait list, which in 2016 had increased to over 171,360 Ontario households.<sup>138</sup>

In June 2016, the Ontario Ministry of Housing established a Special Priority Policy Working Group comprised of experts from the VAW sector, Indigenous organizations, service managers, and housing providers to monitor and evaluate the pilot project. To date, they have met five times and have reflected on how the SDV-PHB Pilot has been implemented in various communities as well as recommended ways that the SPP could be improved to better serve domestic violence survivors (a report was submitted to the Ministry in November 2017). Continued collaboration with experts in the VAW sector is

crucial to ensure that the program is meeting the needs of survivors and that a gender-based approach to homelessness and housing is incorporated.<sup>139</sup>

### **VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN SECOND STAGE/TRANSITIONAL HOUSING**

Ensuring that women fleeing domestic violence can access emergency shelters and become housed as soon as possible is essential in ensuring that DV survivors have resources to leave an abusive situation. Equally important are programs designed for long-term support that are women-centered and trauma-informed. VAW second stage housing (also known as transitional housing) is a form of longer-term housing provided to domestic violence survivors who are transitioning from emergency shelter to long-term housing. This includes facility-based housing in apartments with 24-hour staffing who can provide intensive case management.<sup>140</sup> Residents pay rent and receive housing as well as a variety of services from help with job searches to counselling.<sup>xxi</sup> Generally, second stage housing requires residents to follow basic rules and policies such as a curfew, mandatory participation in services, and the exclusion of alcohol and/or drug use on shelter premises.<sup>141</sup> Length of stay can range from three months to two years. The objective of second stage housing is to break the cycle of violence and provide supports for women to rebuild their lives. The primary services offered to women and children within second stage housing are:

- Individual counselling for women and children;
- Group counselling for women and children;
- Court accompaniment;
- Systems navigation (social assistance, social housing, legal aid, child welfare, etc.); and
- Education and sensitization.<sup>142</sup>

Evidently, VAW second stage housing provides numerous services and supports for women and children who have experienced domestic violence. However, nationally second stage shelters tend to receive significantly less funding than first stage/emergency shelters. This is notably the case when it comes to funding for services and supports; second stage/transitional housing may receive funding to build a new shelter or do repairs but the servicing is not funded. Increasing second stage housing would make a significant difference in addressing the housing needs of survivors of domestic violence. The National Housing Strategy should expand funding for second stage housing in order to respond to the needs of DV survivors, a group that the NHS has identified as a priority.

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<sup>xxi</sup> Domestic violence survivors who use substances may not qualify for some second-stage housing that have zero tolerance policies on substance use (ACWS 2015:13). This is not necessarily the case for all second-stage shelters, particularly those who have adopted harm reduction policies (OATH 2013:4).

## MOVING FORWARD AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Social and affordable housing, Housing First, and the Portable Housing Benefit are important housing supports that ensure that domestic violence survivors have access to safe and affordable housing, a vital step for them as they rebuild their lives.

Our review of social and affordable housing found the following to be barriers in DV survivors finding safe and affordable housing: discrimination based on race, disability, and gender; stigmatization associated with domestic violence; excessive and contradictory bureaucratic requirements to access programs and benefits; and the lack of coordinated systems (inconsistency across provinces and territories). The flexibility and choices afforded by the HF model make it a welcomed initiative to end homelessness and ensure that the most vulnerable are housed. However, the gender-neutral approach neglects to take into account women's experiences of gender-based violence and housing insecurity. Moreover, an intersectional focus is also needed to ensure that the unique needs *and* solutions for Indigenous, immigrant, rural, and disabled women are integrated into HF programs. Finally, the Portable Housing Pilot project in Ontario, in consultation with VAW experts, has found a flexible approach to quickly house DV survivors that gives them more freedom to choose where they live. In order to ensure that women fleeing violence in all regions of the country have access to comparable levels of services and supports, we need a coordinated response across Canada to ensure that programs like the Ontario pilot project are available in each province and territory.

With the 2017 Budget reinvestment in social and affordable housing alongside the development of the National Housing Strategy, we have an opportunity to address some of the major limitations of the current affordable housing model including building new units to reduce the waiting list for social housing and providing financial and other supports to public, non-profit, and co-operative housing to maintain and repair housing stock.<sup>143</sup> Moreover, the development of specific funding streams for organizations and shelters, including second stage and transitional housing, serving DV survivors is needed. We have a unique opportunity to bring about meaningful change. To do so, it is essential that the National Housing Strategy, the Poverty Reduction Strategy,<sup>144</sup> and the Gender-Based Violence Strategy<sup>145</sup> build on one another and develop coordinated policies and programs.

### 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 homelessness<sup>22</sup> 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;

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### 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.

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