



Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network Recommendations to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development, and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

June 12, 2020

Introduction

COVID-19 is a gendered crisis. While the virus itself does not discriminate, systemic inequities faced by women and gender diverse peoples, particularly Black, Indigenous, and women of colour, means that our experience of this pandemic is unique. Working with members across Canada, the Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network (WNHHN) is deeply aware of the intersecting marginalization caused by COVID-19 and experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity. Without taking experiences of gendered marginalization due to homelessness and COVID-19 into account, responses to the pandemic cannot lead to a path of equitable recovery and resilience for all.

Women's homelessness in Canada was already a crisis prior to the arrival of COVID-19. Making up approximately half of the homeless population in Canada, our experience of homelessness is uniquely gendered. Women are more likely to experience poverty and work minimum wage jobs, meaning that many of us face layoffs with limited savings. We disproportionately live in core housing need, head single-parent households, and bear the burden of childcare, putting us at risk of eviction when we face the impossible choice of paying the rent or feeding our kids.

For many women and gender diverse peoples, the directive to "stay at home" means we are trapped with partners or others who are abusive to us and our children. On the streets we fear not only exposure to COVID-19, but profound sexual, psychological, and physical violence. Many of these challenges are magnified for those who face multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization, including Indigenous women, transwomen, newcomer women, 2SLGBTQ2+ people, women of colour, and women with disabilities.

In the context of this pandemic, access to adequate and safe housing is the difference between life and death for many of us – whether we contract the virus or not. As we see increases in poverty, eviction, and domestic violence, we fear that our communities will face profound suffering and loss of life.

The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments to immediately procure safe housing for women, girls, children, and gender diverse people experiencing homelessness and/or fleeing violence, with a priority on Indigenous communities.

In alignment with the recommendations of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, the WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada to fund the provincial or municipal purchase of buildings or units that can then be re-purposed, over time, for long-term social housing. It is critical that after the pandemic ends, all people who received housing during this crisis are ensured

permanent housing, rather than transitioned back onto the streets. Living in particularly exacerbated conditions, First Nations, Inuit and Metis women require additional support. The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada offer financial support to increase staffing and expand the availability of safe housing for Indigenous women, including for those living in rural, remote, Northern, and urban communities. We applaud the Government of Canada's investment of \$157 million into Reaching Home, as well as the \$50 million specifically targeted to women's shelters and sexual assault centres; with that, additional funds need to be dedicated to acquiring permanent accommodations, given the circumstances of the pandemic.

The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada accelerate the allocation of funds to the Violence Against Women (VAW) and homeless sectors.

Where emergency homeless and domestic violence shelters continue to operate as an immediate measure during the pandemic, these spaces must be upgraded to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Many shelters have had their revenues greatly impacted by COVID-19 where individual donors are no longer present to support services. The WNHHN urges the accelerated allocation of relief funds to shelters, many of whom have still not received funding during the pandemic. Within communities that do not have adequate homeless or domestic violence shelters, it is critical that these services operate at full capacity, so women and gender diverse peoples are provided access to 24/7 safe spaces.

The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments to enact moratoriums on evictions and establish rent freezes across Canada during the pandemic and for a reasonable time thereafter.

Irrespective of jurisdictional disputes, the WNHHN urges the immediate adoption of a moratorium on evictions and a rent freeze in all provinces and territories. Given that women experience greater core housing need, higher rates of poverty, and face uniquely gendered forms of harassment from landlords, it is critical that strong policy measures are enacted to ensure women, children, and gender diverse peoples do not lose their housing during this crisis.

The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada ensures equitable access to financial relief for all women, girls, and gender diverse peoples experiencing homelessness or housing precarity, including for those who are sleeping rough and/or depend on the informal economy for their livelihood.

The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada remove bureaucratic barriers to accessing emergency financial aid for women and gender diverse peoples who are homeless or precariously housed. Lack of ID, a CRA account, a home address, citizenship, or other factors must not bar or significantly delay access to emergency financial relief.

The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments to increase social and disability assistance rates, ensuring rates are raised above poverty levels.

COVID-19 has brought on increased costs of basic necessities, loss of grey economies, and loss of access to social supports and childcare. The WHNNH recommends an increase in social and disability assistance

rates to lift women and their children out of poverty and account for the disproportionate economic hardships that many are facing as a result of the pandemic (e.g., loss of employment because of increased childcare responsibilities).

The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments ensure equitable and non-discriminatory access to COVID-19 testing and healthcare supports for women and gender diverse peoples experiencing homelessness, including through expanded outreach efforts (e.g., mobile testing units, mental health outreach).

The WNHHN urges the Government of Canada to ensure that housing status is not a barrier to accessing COVID-19 testing and healthcare services for women, girls, and gender diverse peoples during the pandemic, and that this population is a priority group for testing. The Government of Canada should support community-driven solutions to providing healthcare, social services, harm reduction, and mental health supports to people experiencing homelessness during this crisis. These efforts must be responsive to the unique healthcare needs and priorities of women and gender diverse peoples.

The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments to provide and/or expand free childcare services across the country for women with children living within various types of unstable housing, such as shelters and transitional housing, as well as for women who are deemed essential workers during the pandemic.

Childcare and supportive programs should be funded and amplified in shelters and transitional housing to support mothers, particularly given that certain daycares and schools remain closed. Shelters, transitional housing, and other emergency housing should be allocated additional support to ensure that families stay together wherever possible, and child authorities must be directed to prioritize providing support and resources over apprehensions. In alignment with YWCA Canada, the WNHHN recommends the expansion of free childcare services for women deemed essential workers during the pandemic. Childcare workers must receive additional financial compensation and relief support to provide these services.

The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments to provide food relief measures, ensuring that these efforts meet the needs of the most marginalized women, girls, children, and gender diverse peoples.

Food banks, meal programs, and other food relief programs are being exhausted of stock, scaling back, closing, or adapting in the wake of COVID-19. The WNHHN recommends funding the expansion of food relief measures to ensure access to adequate nutritious foods, including through expanded outreach efforts. Food banks and related measures must be included in the list of essential services, with providers given the necessary resources to safeguard safety and continuity (e.g., PPE). Action to ensure food security in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities is particularly critical given that food supply chains are threatened and these communities face already high food costs. Action to ensure food security for Northern communities in the long term is essential.

The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada establish national and regional ‘warm lines’ and online support networks to reduce the negative consequences of isolation for women, girls, and gender diverse peoples with lived experience of homelessness.

Online and phone support lines and networks are necessary for providing both peer and professional supports during the pandemic. Peer support phone lines and online communities for women and gender diverse peoples with lived experience of homelessness are particularly valuable and should be funded. These supports will help mitigate mental health challenges, substance use, and interpersonal conflicts that might otherwise result in hospitalizations and further burdens to the healthcare system.

The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada form a diverse national advisory body, spanning the women’s homelessness sector and the violence against women (VAW) sector, to guide and monitor policy responses to COVID-19, and to ensure that responses are gender-informed, intersectional, and shaped by lived expertise.

Without the formation of the National Housing Council, the WNHHN urges the Government of Canada to involve diverse women with lived expertise in policy decision-making and the monitoring of policy outcomes during the pandemic and post-pandemic. We recommend the formation of a diverse national advisory body to do so, ensuring that this expertise is drawn from across the women’s homelessness sector and the VAW sector. Such an advisory body must seek to represent the diversity of those experiencing homelessness and gender-based violence. Indigenous women’s organizations and lived experience experts must be substantively engaged.

Recommendations:

1. The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments to immediately procure safe housing for women, girls, children, and gender diverse people experiencing homelessness and/or fleeing violence, with a priority on Indigenous communities.
2. The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada accelerate the allocation of funds to the Violence Against Women (VAW), family shelters and homeless sectors in particular to provide expanded services and resources for women and their children.
3. The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments to enact moratoriums on evictions and establish rent freezes across Canada during the pandemic and for a reasonable time thereafter.
4. The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada ensures equitable access to financial relief for all women, girls, and gender diverse peoples experiencing homelessness or housing precarity, including for those who are sleeping rough and/or depend on the informal economy for their livelihood.
5. The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments to increase social and disability assistance rates.
6. The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments ensure equitable and non-discriminatory access to COVID-19 testing and healthcare supports for women and gender diverse peoples experiencing homelessness,

including through expanded outreach efforts (e.g., mobile testing units, mental health outreach).

7. The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments to provide and/or expand free childcare services across the country for women with children living within various types of unstable housing, such as shelters and transitional housing, as well as for women who are deemed essential workers during the pandemic.
8. The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments to provide food relief measures, ensuring that these efforts meet the needs of the most marginalized women, girls, children, and gender diverse peoples.
9. The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada establish national and regional 'warm lines' and online support networks to reduce the negative consequences of isolation for women, girls, and gender diverse peoples with lived experience of homelessness.
10. The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada form a diverse national advisory body, spanning the women's homelessness sector and the violence against women (VAW) sector, to guide and monitor policy responses to COVID-19, and to ensure that responses are gender-informed, intersectional, and shaped by lived expertise.