

Position Statement – Homelessness and Housing

Housing is a human right, and Casey House believes that stable housing and safe living conditions are essential to health and well-being. We believe that people without housing deserve to be cared for with dignity, compassion, and respect amidst the challenges they face, both within and beyond our hospital. Casey House believes that all levels of government have a role to play in upholding and fulfilling the right to housing, to ensure that everyone has equitable access to a safe, adequate, and affordable place to live.

“Adequate housing is a fundamental human right that is recognized in international law, including the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Canada is a party. All orders of government, including municipalities, have a role to play in furthering the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing that is affirmed in international law.”ⁱ

– Toronto Housing Charter – Opportunity for All, HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan

In Canada, adequate housing is a fundamental human right that is “essential to the inherent dignity and well-being of the person and to building sustainable and inclusive communities...”ⁱⁱ – to which all levels of government are bound. Governments must ensure the progressive realization of this right, with the maximum available resources. However, currently this right is far from realized due to factors that include: lack of affordable housing options; high and rising cost of housing relative to income levels; and insufficient health and social supports that prevent homelessness and reduce poverty. For decades, government investment in affordable housing declinedⁱⁱⁱ, and the housing market has not produced viable housing options for all income levels^{iv}. Today, in addition to the tens of thousands of people experiencing homelessness on any given night^v, more than 10% of households in Canada are in “core housing need”^{vi}: they live somewhere unsuitable, inadequate, or unaffordable and cannot afford alternative housing in their local community. This is particularly common among low-income renters who are disproportionately Indigenous, racialized, elderly, and/or living with disabilities^{vii}.

Toronto context

- In 2021, 40% of tenant households spent more than 30% of income on shelter^{viii}
- In 2022, year-over-year rent increased by 21% for a one-bedroom unit^{ix}
- In 2021, 18,000 people were experiencing homelessness^x
- In 2021, there were 221 reported deaths among people experiencing homelessness, more than half due to drug toxicity^{xi}
- Since June 2022, a daily average of more than 100 callers have been turned away from the shelter system^{xii}

- As of September 2022, there were 24,085 people on the waitlist for supportive housing^{xiii}
- As of September 2022, the waitlist for rent-geared-to-income (RGI) housing totalled more than 81,000 households^{xiv}

In addition to inadequate housing options in Toronto, there is a constant lack of emergency shelter spaces to accommodate the volume of people experiencing homelessness – a population in which Black, Indigenous, and other racialized groups continue to be over-represented^{xv}. Even when shelter spaces are available, barriers to equitable access, lack of suitable options, and unsafe conditions persist. Given this reality, many people are sleeping outdoors, including on sidewalks, between buildings, and in parks; this includes encampments – settings where people without housing live together in tents or other temporary structures. Even for those who have a roof over their heads, the situation can be precarious: whether couch-surfing, living in unsanctioned dwellings, or barely affording the skyrocketing cost of rent – which increases the likelihood of evictions^{xvi} – many people live at risk of becoming homeless.

Lack of decent, permanent housing significantly impacts health and well-being, and people experiencing homelessness use the acute health system at higher rates than the general population^{xvii}. The absence of a safe, stable place to sleep and access to the necessities of life make it difficult to attain stability and adhere to a daily routine. As a result, complex physical and mental health challenges are exacerbated and have a cumulative impact: chronic physical pain can intensify, emotions may become less regulated, and medication routines are easily disrupted – all of which can also make it difficult for people to have the wherewithal to access available care and services. In addition, not having a place to safely store personal belongings can lead medications and critical documentation, including health cards, to be misplaced or stolen. This can negatively impact people’s adherence to treatment plans, which subsequently exacerbates chronic illnesses, and hinder their ability to attend to follow-up support – all of which disrupts the continuum of care.

For people living rough, the negative health impacts are worsened by inclement weather and exacerbated by local government responses to homeless encampments, such as forced clearings and evictions that fail to uphold the basic dignity and human rights of its residents^{xviii}. In Toronto, such actions have been found to infringe on the right to housing according to the Federal Housing Advocate^{xix}, and to be disruptive and traumatizing to those affected according to Ombudsman Toronto^{xx}.

While efforts are underway to address the housing and homelessness crisis, there is much more work to do, especially to support people with complex health and psycho-social needs.

Calls to action

A role for all levels of government

1. We call on all levels of government to exercise their respective power and responsibility to **uphold and fulfill the human right to housing** by:
 - Allocating the maximum of available resources, and using all appropriate means, to provide equitable, low-barrier access to adequate housing
 - Allocating resources specifically to address housing challenges experienced by Indigenous peoples, and Indigenous-specific housing needs
 - Adopting a human rights-based approach to people experiencing homelessness, including outdoor homelessness, that ensures a fair, consistent, transparent, and accountable response
 - Preventing unwarranted evictions
 - Prioritizing and responding to the unique needs of equity seeking groups and people with complex health and psychosocial needs
 - Engaging people with lived and living experience of homelessness, inadequate housing, and housing discrimination when developing homelessness and housing policies

2. We call on all levels of government to leverage resources (as applicable) to **support, improve and/or increase the availability, accessibility, and quality of a diverse range of housing options and supports**, including:
 - Emergency shelter spaces and homelessness services that respond to all weather conditions, and that don't require abstinence from substance use
 - Transitional and/or supportive housing for people coping with mental health or substance use challenges that is responsive as they age, and for people aging with HIV
 - Social housing, including rent-geared-to-income (RGI) housing, that integrates harm reduction strategies and supports
 - Permanent and deeply affordable rental housing, including government-subsidized housing, that is accessible for all income levels
 - Health and social services human resources to enable the provision of safe, supportive, transitional, and social housing

3. We call on all levels of government to leverage resources (as applicable) to **support, improve and/or invest in homelessness prevention and poverty reduction** measures, including:
 - Income support policies and programs that respond to the cost of living
 - Housing benefits and supplements that help people afford the cost of rent
 - Eviction prevention programs in local communities

A role for shelter and housing providers

4. We call on providers of emergency shelter and/or supportive/transitional housing to improve equitable access and safe conditions by:
 - Embracing a trauma-informed approach as it relates to the intersection of health and housing
 - Adopting harm reduction and overdose prevention principles and practices to remove barriers for people who use substances
 - Ensuring accountability and transparency in the intake-to-offer process

For more information about Casey House’s public policy and advocacy work, and a glossary of key terms, visit caseyhouse.ca/our-insights/advocacy.

Contact

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ⁱ Toronto Housing Charter – Opportunity for All: <https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/948f-Toronto-Housing-Charter-2020.pdf>

ⁱⁱ National Housing Strategy Act, S.C. 2019, c. 29, s. 313, Assented to 2019-06-21

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://housingrightscanada.com/fifty-years-in-the-making-of-ontarios-housing-crisis-a-timeline/>

^{iv} Falvo, N. (2022). Chapter 1: What causes homelessness? In Falvo, N. (Ed.), Introduction to homelessness in high-income countries: An open access e-textbook. Retrieved from <https://nickfalvo.ca/>

^v How many people are homeless in Canada? <https://www.homelesshub.ca/about-homelessness/homelessness-101/how-many-people-are-homeless-canada>

^{vi} Statistics Canada. (2023). “To buy or to rent: The housing market continues to be reshaped by several factors as Canadians search for an affordable place to call home” Accessed at: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220921/mc-b005-eng.htm>

^{vii} Macrae, Emily. “Housing is a human right. Let’s start treating it like one” First Policy Response (September 30, 2021): <https://policyresponse.ca/housing-is-a-human-right-lets-start-treating-it-like-one/>

^{viii} Toronto Public Health. Toronto’s Population Health Profile. February 2023.

^{ix} Campbell, Shantaé. “Average rent increased by 10.9% in 2022, report shows”. Financial Post (January 18, 2023): <https://financialpost.com/real-estate/average-rent-increased-10-9-percent-2022>

^x Community Profiles – Toronto: <https://www.homelesshub.ca/community-profile/toronto>

^{xi} Toronto Public Health. Toronto’s Population Health Profile. February 2023.

^{xii} City of Toronto – Shelter System Flow Data: <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/data-research-maps/research-reports/housing-and-homelessness-research-and-reports/shelter-system-flow-data/>

^{xiii} Gibson, Victoria. “A 37-year wait for a subsidized one-bedroom, 3,808 applicants for 200 lower-cost rentals. The hunt for affordable housing in Toronto today.” Toronto Star (November

29, 2022): <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2022/11/29/a-37-year-wait-for-a-subsidized-one-bedroom-3808-applicants-for-200-lower-cost-rentals-the-hunt-for-affordable-housing-in-toronto-today.html>

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} City of Toronto – Street Needs Assessment 2021:

<https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2021/ec/bgrd/backgroundfile-171729.pdf>

^{xvi} Leon, Scott; Iveniuk, James. “Forced Out: Evictions, Race, and Poverty in Toronto.” Wellesley Institute (August 2020): <https://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Forced-Out-Evictions-Race-and-Poverty-in-Toronto-.pdf>

^{xvii} Jesse I.R. Jenkinson, Stephen W. Hwang, Carol Strike, Erica Di Ruggiero, “We don’t have a good system for people who don’t have a home and don’t need a hospital”: Contextualizing the hospital discharge process for people experiencing homelessness in Toronto, Canada, *SSM - Qualitative Research in Health*, Volume 2, 2022, 100056, ISSN 2667-3215, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmqr.2022.100056>.

^{xviii} Farha, Leilani; Schwan, Kaitlin. “A National Protocol for Homeless Encampments in Canada” UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing (April 30, 2020): <https://www.make-the-shift.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/A-National-Protocol-for-Homeless-Encampments-in-Canada.pdf>

^{xix} Schwan, K., Lutoto, P., Freeman, S., van Wagner, E., Flynn, A., McCartan, D. & Graham, L. 2022. Case study: Toronto—A human rights analysis of encampments in Canada. The Office of the Federal Housing Advocate.

^{xx} “An Investigation into the City’s Process for Clearing Encampments in 2021: Interim Report” Ombudsman Toronto (July 14, 2022): <https://www.ombudsmantoronto.ca/Investigative-Work/Early-Recommendations-to-Improve-City-Response-to.aspx>