

Community Matters

House(less)



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Fall Edition

Edmonton Social Planning Council





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Community Matters

Welcome to the third issue of our new quarterly publication, Community Matters.

Community Matters aims to inform the community about social issues that impact citizens and connect the dots between social issues, evidence, and policy. We aim to use this space to give a voice to local agencies, ESPC volunteer writers, and staff members alike.

Each edition will spotlight a specific social issue and demonstrate the intersectional nature and impact on equality. Our goal is to use evidence as we continue to inform on the issues affecting individuals and families.

For our Fall 2022 issue, we are focusing on housing, shelters, and the state of houselessness in Edmonton.

Housing is recognized as an international human right. Nevertheless, we have fallen quite short in fulfilling these rights when it comes to providing adequate, affordable, and suitable housing. Houselessness has been greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, many important gains that have been achieved in reducing the number of people who are unhoused prior to 2020 were erased within the span of two years. While pandemic supports such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) prevented many people from losing their housing, the ending of these supports places those living in financial uncertainty at risk.

Those who live without housing or are facing some level of housing insecurity are disproportionately members of marginalized groups. This issue strives to capture some of the housing challenges faced by these marginalized peoples as well as some of the agencies striving to support them. We were pleased to have a number of social agencies that incorporate housing and shelter needs as part of their services, join this edition including Old Strathcona Youth Society, Bissell Centre, Terra Centre, and the Edmonton Pride Senior Group Society.

Addressing housing needs is crucial towards building a just and inclusive society. We hope this issue will help build more awareness around the diverse and intersectional housing needs of marginalized populations and work towards solutions that provide housing for all.

- Susan Morrissey, Executive Director





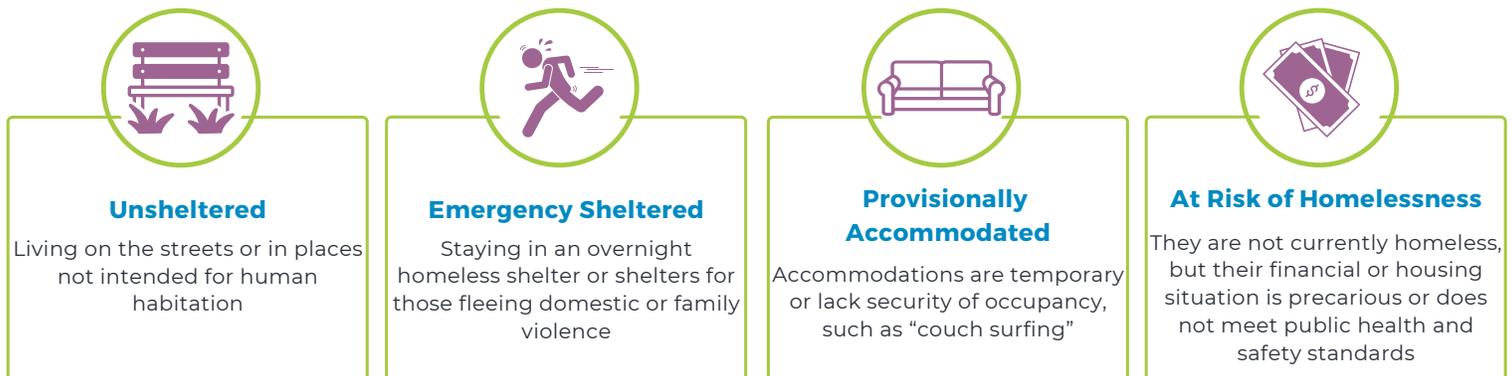
Housing and Homelessness: Terminology and Word Choices

The realm of housing, shelters, and homelessness is complex and varied. Someone unfamiliar to the housing sector may understandably be confused by some of the terminology and the meaning behind it. We have created this glossary list to help readers better understand the issues that are discussed in more detail within this issue of *Community Matters*.

Homelessness Defined

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness defines homelessness as “the situation of an individual, family, or community without stable, safe, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect means and ability of acquiring it.” (1)

Homelessness can span a spectrum of experiences and circumstances. It can describe someone who is:



For those experiencing homelessness, their situation tends to be fluid where their shelter arrangements can change and shift quite dramatically.

Precarious and inadequate housing not only relates to household income and the structure of the dwelling, but also a lack of access to necessary supports and opportunities, including employment, health care, clean water and sanitation, schools, childcare, and others.

Indigenous Peoples and Homelessness

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness'

Indigenous definition of homelessness, developed by Jesse Thistle, considers the traumas Indigenous Peoples have experienced linked to colonialism. While homelessness experienced among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples is a condition where they lack stable, permanent, and appropriate housing, it goes beyond lacking a physical structure of habitation. It also acknowledges Indigenous worldviews, since being in a state of homelessness deprives an Indigenous person from culturally, spiritually, emotionally, or physically reconnecting with their Indigenous identity or lost relationships. (2)

Indigenous Peoples are overrepresented amongst Canadians experiencing homelessness. As of July 2022, within Edmonton, and according to Homeward Trust's [Edmonton Homelessness Dashboard](#), among the 2,745 people currently experiencing homelessness, 58% of them identify as Indigenous. (3)

Homelessness for Indigenous Peoples is intrinsically linked to historical and ongoing settler colonization and racism that have displaced First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples from traditional lands as well as social and cultural systems. This has created and prolonged Indigenous homelessness.

The Power of Language

Homeless vs. Houseless terminology and word usage

For years, homeless or homelessness has been the standard term used by governments to describe people living without stable or permanent shelter. However, in recent years there has been a shift to move away from this term in favour of houselessness or unhoused.



58%

Of Edmonton's current houseless population identify as Indigenous

The [reason for this shift](#) is partly because of the meanings linked to the words “house” and “home.” A house refers to a physical structure meant for human habitation while a home can encompass more than a structure built on a physical location as it is tied to a community with social connections. Using “unhoused” or “houseless” acknowledges that while someone may lack a socially accepted physical structure to live in, they still have a social connection with the wider community. (4)

[In addition](#), the term “homeless” can be linked to stigma and can be framed in such a way as to demonize those without housing as dangerous to society. (5) Fundamentally, this shift in terminology seeks to be more respectful when describing people who live without a fixed address.

While there may not yet be widespread agreement regarding the terms, as the updated [Associated Press Stylebook](#) does describe homeless as “generally acceptable” to use as an adjective, (6) the respect and dignity of those experiencing housing insecurity is a top priority.

For this issue, we will prioritize using “unhoused” or “houseless” terminology.

Person First Language

When referring to people who are without shelter, person-first language is important. For this issue, they will be described as a “person experiencing homelessness” instead of a “homeless person.” This is done as a reminder that their condition does not define them and that they are first and foremost a human being.

It is important to emphasize that there is a broad range of experiences when it comes to people who are unhoused or without shelter. While the general public might think of homelessness primarily as people sleeping rough on the streets or within an encampment, there are also hidden components of houselessness. This includes those who “couch surf” temporarily with friends or family or the working houseless who live in their vehicles. Living without shelter generally is not a choice, and the experience is incredibly challenging.

Housing Definitions

Core Housing Need

According to criteria set out by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), a household is considered to be in [core housing need](#) if at least one of the following conditions is not met: (7)

Adequate: the dwelling is not requiring any major repairs, such as excessive mold, inadequate heating or water supply, or significant structural damage.

Affordable: shelter costs (e.g. rent and utilities) are below 30% of total before-tax household income.

Suitable: there are enough bedrooms for the size and composition of the household members.

Types of Affordable Housing and Shelters

There are many housing and shelter options that exist within the public, private, or not-for-profit sector. Below are some of the most common types of housing geared to low-income households:

Supportive housing provides a permanent home and on-site supports (e.g. medical assistance, counselling) for people who need assistance to live independently. This could include people exiting homelessness, people who are elderly, have disabilities, struggle with addiction, or have mental illness. Investing in permanent supportive housing has been a priority for the City of Edmonton in their strategy to end chronic homelessness. New permanent supportive housing units were approved by [City Council in 2020](#) in King Edward Park, Inglewood, Terrace Heights, and McArthur/Wellington neighbourhoods and are expected to be completed this year. (8)

Emergency housing provides temporary shelter and accommodations for certain vulnerable groups. These can include those experiencing homelessness and those fleeing domestic violence or abuse. Some examples of emergency housing within Edmonton include women’s shelters such as [WIN House](#), [Wings of Providence](#), and [Women’s Emergency Accommodation Centre \(WEAC\)](#). Shelters that serve the unhoused are operated by a number of organizations, such as [The Mustard Seed](#) and [Hope Mission](#).



Non-profit housing provides rental housing to low- and moderate-income individuals. They are typically built by the province, a municipality, or a community group. Tenants pay rent that is geared to their income and other tenants pay rent that is at the lower level of the private market rent. **Civida** (formerly Capital Region Housing) is the largest provider of social housing and near market and market homes within the Edmonton Metropolitan Region. Another affordable housing organization is the **Right at Home Housing Society**, where most units are rented for 40% less of market value.

Market housing, is privately owned housing with prices set by the private market.

Co-operative housing provides housing for people with low and moderate incomes, representing a middle ground between renting and owning a home. Members of a co-operative collectively own the development with shelter payments going towards the upkeep of the building. Members contribute to the governance of the co-op. The cost of housing is geared to a percentage of income for some residents while the rest pay market rates. According to the **Northern Alberta Co-operative Housing Association**, there are 41 co-operative developments in Edmonton and the surrounding areas. (9)

Bridge housing is a continuum of housing that's between emergency and permanent housing. These short-term accommodations bridge the gap between homelessness and permanent housing. On-site supports are offered to individuals as they work with outreach workers to secure permanent housing. Residents typically stay in bridge housing for an average of 30 to 90 days. During the COVID-19 pandemic, **Homeward Trust Edmonton** has set up bridge housing in five locations in partnership with Boyle Street Community Services, Niginan Housing Ventures, and Jasper Place Wellness Centre. Some of these locations have since stopped taking intakes. (10)

Housing First

Housing first refers to providing people experiencing homelessness with independent and permanent housing as a first step. There are no preconditions or compliance requirements to being admitted into housing first programs. Once the person is provided housing, other supports such as mental health or addictions can be addressed once the housing situation is resolved. (11)

Spectrum of Homelessness Experiences

Precariously housed, hidden homelessness or housing insecurity refers to people who are at risk of losing their housing. They are facing severe affordability problems when it comes to maintaining their housing. They may risk losing housing in the immediate or near future. Those who manage to maintain their housing often do so at the expense of meeting their nutritional needs, heating their homes, and other expenses that contribute to their health and well-being. (1)

Temporarily homeless refers to people who are without accommodation for a relatively short time period. This could happen due to the result of a natural disaster like a fire or a flood or through changes to a person's living situation like a separation or divorce. They tend to be rehoused within a short period of time. (12)

Cyclically homeless refers to people who have lost their housing due to a change in their situation, such as a job loss, a hospital stay, or a prison term. Those who use safehouses such as women fleeing family violence or runaway youths are also part of this group. (12)

Chronically homeless (13) refers to people who have been homeless for at least a year, or repeatedly over the course of several months or years and often have complex and long-term health conditions such as addictions or mental illness. (13)

Adequate housing re-envision “housing” beyond a physical space that has four walls and a roof, and this concept is recognized in international human rights law. Instead, it “should be seen as the right to live somewhere in security, peace, and dignity.” There are 7 criteria that must be met (at a minimum) for housing to be deemed adequate, which are as follows: Security of ownership/tenancy; availability of services, materials, facilities, and infrastructure; affordability; habitability; accessibility; location; and cultural adequacy. (14)

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YOUTH

Old Strathcona Youth Society: A Place Where Youth Matter

Written by Amanda Labonte

[Old Strathcona Youth Society \(OSYS\)](#), located at 10325 83 Ave is a street-level, safe drop-in space for vulnerable youth who are between the ages of 14 – 24. Youth are provided with support, resources, harm reduction materials, and fun activities.

We sat down with Shona Hickmore, a registered social worker and current program coordinator for OSYS, and Dill Prusko, the outreach worker with OSYS, to learn more about the youth houselessness experience.

What are some of the impacts that OSYS has on youth? What does OSYS mean to youth?

Shona

We see about 160 unique youth in a month and sometimes up to 40 in a day. If it's hard to hear about all their stories or to support them imagine how hard it must be to live their lives. When they come to OSYS they're aware that the person who helps them pick out the outfit for the first day of school, the person that holds their hand while they do a pregnancy test, or the person who checks in on them, cares. They leave knowing that they can come back, and we want to hear how the rest of the story turns out.

Here in the building youth feel important and know they matter to somebody. Ultimately, I think that will be the legacy of OSYS. We opened in 1998 and youth still stop in to see Karen, our executive director, from those first few years because OSYS was important in their lives because they felt supported. I think that that speaks to the value of it, speaks to the value of connection of community, of basic human dignity, and treating people like people.

Dill

They like the staff here and it's because we treat them with respect, and they feel safe here to let those walls down. They don't have to be, for the most part, anything but themselves here. OSYS is so important because we can help youth with further steps in their life, but we also are happy for them right now, that they're here with us.



How is serving youth experiencing houselessness or housing insecurity different from serving adult populations?

Dill

Their brain is still developing, as well as everything they're going through, so you really have to scaffold life with them. They have very limited life experience, but they also have so much life experience in other ways. They have less exposure to the different kinds of resources that are available to them. There are so many things you have to know in order to access a resource. For example, how to get there, what is going to be asked if and when you get there, do you have to bring documents?

Shona

Legally there are a lot of adult resources youth can't access until they're 18. All of our best housing teams outside of [YESS](#) [Youth Empowerment and Support Services] are all adult focused. Another thing is if a youth is under 18 there is the barrier of a need for parental permission.

At 16 you can help a youth apply to become an independent minor which is helpful. I'm thinking of a particular youth we have now who's not 16 until October and really needs to be able to control their own situation. You do your best to navigate to resources that may not require [documentation]. We know YESS is not going to require youth to have ID to access the Armory Resource Centre or to access Nexus Overnight Shelter, but it really does limit what you can do especially with youth coming out of situations with huge trauma.

In Alberta it is not illegal to leave home before the age of 18, however, if the youth is apprehended by the police someone will be contacted to take responsibility for the youth. This could be a parent, family member, guardian, or potentially children's services. Should an agreement with [Alberta Children Services](#) be made, the government is then responsible for the 'parental role.'

Youth may receive help from the [Office of the Child and Youth Advocate Alberta](#) if they are provided services under the [Protection of Sexually Exploited Children Act](#) (PSECA) or [Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act](#). (1) Caseworkers like those at OSYS can help youth navigate these resources.

We are referring to youth as "being unhoused" why is that important and how does language have meaning?

Shona

I like [unhoused](#) because a lot of our youth have, what I like to think of as, conditional homes. Some of them will say "no I'm homeless" but some of them will say "well, no, I have a home I just can't deal with that person." A lot of it is for youth who use substances, their parents want them to be clean if they're going to be back with their parents. The youth do still recognize oftentimes those places as home or as important places to them and we never want to diminish the importance of those places.





Dill

The youth describe different places as home. They might say OSYS is my home, it does not necessarily mean home is where they are sleeping and living, but home is the community that they are in and the people that they surround themselves with. They have their community, they just do not have a house right now.

We've talked a little bit about some of the barriers particularly around ID. What are some of the other barriers you see that youth experience when they're trying to obtain housing?

Dill

It can be hard to even get that process started because it's difficult to do those basic life skills. Something that I've noticed working here is that youth are asked to make appointments on time, have their paperwork filled out, and have it all together in order to get housed. Sometimes time does not exist for youth. In order to get housing, they must first go through an entire process when they are really just focusing on being alive right now.

Shona

Another really big barrier for youth is for a lot of resources, you need stable contact information. For [Alberta Works](#), you need a phone number or an e-mail address. How are you supposed to set up viewings with [Housing First](#) if you do not have a phone or a way for your Housing First worker to contact you? If you're a youth and you have to be back at the shelter to get a bed somewhere between four and five o'clock and you have all these appointments, how are you going to manage that? Especially when you have to take all your stuff with you.

Dill

Wait times just to get in the system. For example, trying to get somebody in with coordinated access and housing first, it's sometimes one to three months or longer. It's really difficult to conceptualize three months when you're trying to decide where am I going to sleep tonight. I'm not thinking three months in advance, I'm thinking about tonight.

There's a lot of stigma around youth experiencing houselessness. How would you respond to those stigmas or what would you like to see the shift in that conversation be?

Shona

I don't know if it's around youth specifically, but I think I'd like to see a shift in conversation that brings the idea of dignity more to the forefront. We [society] have this conversation with stigma like "oh, they must be unwell" or "they must be on something" or that these youth, these people are lacking in something.

Dill

I don't think many people realize how close they are to being unhoused. If I missed two paychecks, for example, I would not have my place. I do have support but having support is not a choice. We are all for the most part a few degrees away from being where they are. When it comes to stigma, you're othering, but we are not others from them, we are all, for the most part, pretty close to being where they are.

What would you like to see the broader community do to help support youth?

Dill

People need to start advocating for people who are not themselves. For example, writing your MLA, becoming more active politically but also doing small things, like donating to nonprofits or grassroots organizations or donating your time. Educating themselves, if you are living in a community know what's in your community and know who is in your community.

Shona

If you see a homeless or unhoused person on the street, you do not need to walk across the street. You do not need to send all those implied messages of worth or value. Do not treat them like they are lesser.

If you volunteer with an organization that supports the [houseless](#) population, do not assume that you suddenly understand what's going on for those people, you don't. If you go into those spaces, know that you are a visitor, know that you are privileged, and be respectful.

Also, knowing your privilege and using it. I can't give my privilege back, I can't give that to others, but I can use it for them. You can use your voice for other people. There are important conversations to have in important moments, quiet moments, and small moments. To be somebody who advocates even when no one is looking at you, when you get nothing from it, and maybe even when you pay the price for doing it.

What is one message that you would like people to take away from the work being done?

Shona

Our youth are human. They deserve safety, they deserve to be able to live in a place of their choosing where they feel safe. They deserve people around them in their community that are willing to work to help get them there. OSYS does some of that work, that's great but we're five people, they deserve 500 people around them.

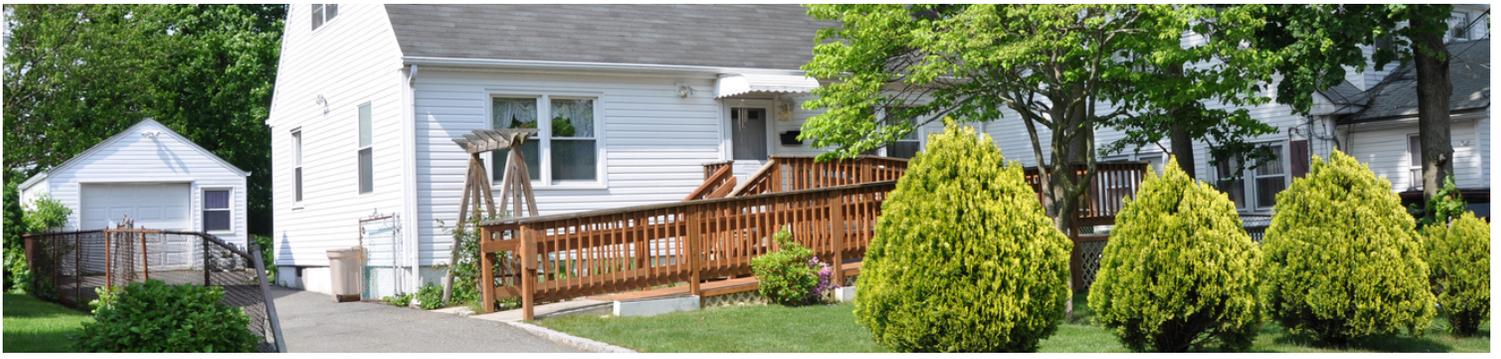
Dill

I love my job so much it's one of the best jobs in the world, but I also hope one day I never have to do it. I hope people know that these are not *poor little kids*, these are some of the coolest people I've ever met in my entire life.

[Volunteer with OSYS](#)

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Barriers to Affordable Housing for Persons with Disabilities

Written by Brett Lambert

Everyone deserves to live in housing that is safe, affordable, and [adequate](#). This is especially true for those who live with a disability who face multiple barriers to participating and integrating into society. Whether it is finding employment, public transportation that is accessible, or a lack of assistive technology, our society has a long way to go towards accommodating persons with disabilities in a meaningful and robust way that provides dignity and upholds their human rights.

When it comes to housing, barriers to accessing housing for persons with disabilities are intrinsically tied to financial insecurity. This includes barriers to employment as well as social assistance programs that keep recipients below the poverty line. Housing units lacking [accessibility designs](#) that were built primarily for able-bodied persons (people who do not have a disability) make it difficult to live independently within their own communities. (1)

The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (CRPD), which Canada ratified in 2010, affirms the right to housing for persons with disabilities, which includes an adequate standard of living, the right to accessible and adequate housing, and the continuous improvement of living conditions. (2) Despite this

commitment, Canada has fallen short of living up to this pledge. Statistics Canada's [2017 Canadian Survey on Disability](#) outlines the various inequalities that persist among persons with disabilities and access to housing, which are summarized below. (3)

Accessibility Challenges

The ability to live independently within their community and access to the necessary support is crucial for the rights of persons with disabilities. This includes the accessibility of the place they live in. Among those who have a physical disability, 44.9% require at least one type of aid, assistive device, or accessibility feature within their homes such as access ramps, walk-in baths, or elevators. However, 13% of those with physical disabilities lacked these aids or assistive devices that they need. (3)

Affordability Challenges

Access to affordable housing is a particularly pressing challenge for persons with disabilities. Nationally, 25% of persons with disabilities spent more than 30% of their household income, the threshold for housing affordability set by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) on shelter costs. This is higher than the

national average of 19.7% among the general population.

The affordability gap is even greater among persons with disabilities who live in rental housing, with 44.4% of them living in unaffordable housing compared to 34.6% of the general population. (3)

Quality of Housing

Compared to the general population, persons with disabilities are more likely to live in housing that needs major repairs, which can include defective plumbing or electrical wiring, housing in need of structural repairs to walls, floors, or ceilings. (3)

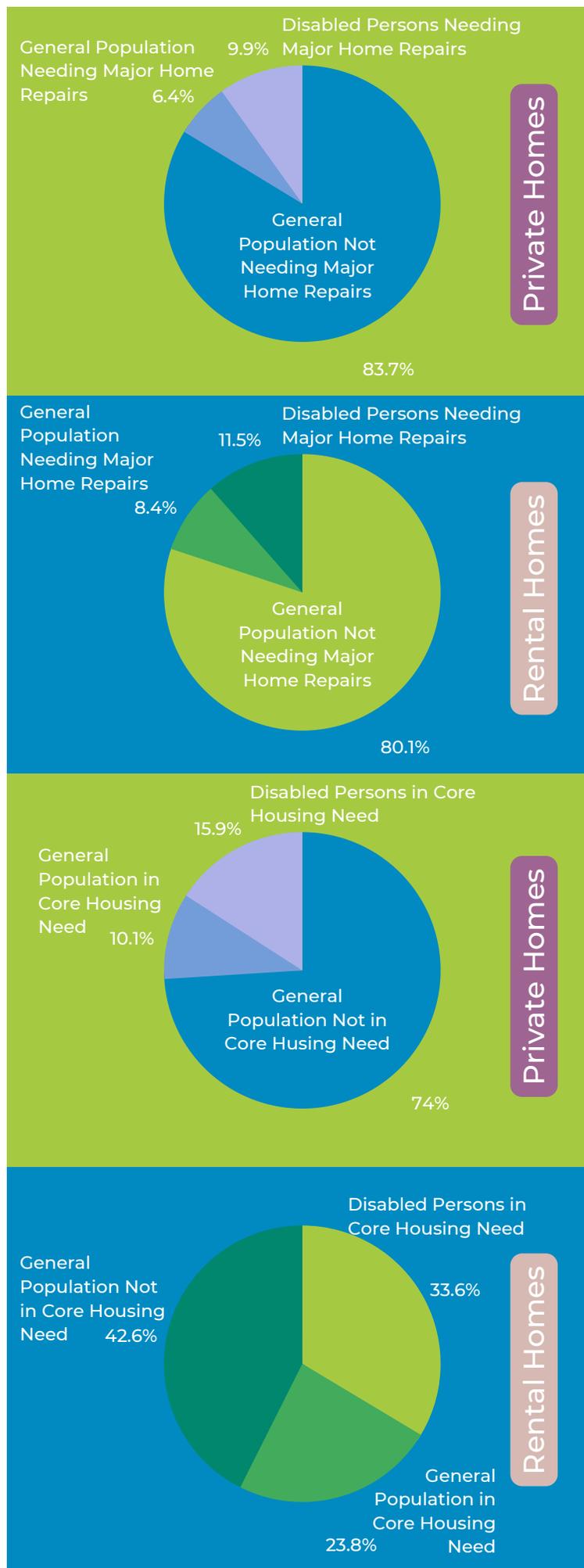
Nationally, 9.9% of all persons with disabilities lived in private homes that needed major repairs compared to 6.4% of the general population. Among those who live in rental housing, 11.5% of persons with disabilities live in a home in need of major repairs compared to 8.4% of the general population. (3)

In Canada, 15.9% of persons with disabilities are in [core housing need](#), compared to 10.1% of the general population. Among those living in rental housing, 33.6% of persons with disabilities were in core housing need, compared to 23.8% of the general population. (3)

Improve Access to Housing for Persons with Disabilities and Upholding their Human Rights

Knowing that there are large gaps between housing access for persons with disabilities and the general population, the need for action to meaningfully address this is pressing and critical.

Radical Inclusion, an initiative facilitated by the John Humphrey Centre for Peace and Human Rights comprising a group of 13 people with lived experience in disability, released the [Report on the Status of People living with Disability in Alberta](#) in 2021 as a critical review of human rights in Alberta as it relates to the United Nations CRPD. (5)



The report looks at several areas where our society is falling short of upholding the principles of the CRPD for people who live with a disability. It focuses on financial barriers, employment and careers, health care, justice and law enforcement, as well as housing.

The report summarizes years-long wait lists for affordable housing that accommodates physical disabilities. Due to the long wait times and shortage in availability, people end up being forced into housing not designed to meet their accessibility needs, which makes them isolated and hidden in their own homes. Discrimination in housing is not unusual, there are landlords who refuse to rent out their property because the tenant has a disability or receives disability income supports like Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH).

Modifications to homes that accommodate accessibility needs in bathrooms and kitchens, such as walk-in baths, lowered counters, and automatic doors, are expensive. If a person lacks the funds, these modifications are out of reach for many people. The difficulty in navigating an inaccessible home creates barriers to obtaining employment, taking care of the home, and can create a dependency relationship on caregivers and family members.

Radical Inclusion's report has a number of calls to action to make housing align with the CRPD for persons with disabilities. This includes governments consulting with persons with disabilities to build more accessible and affordable housing. For existing homes not designed to accommodate persons with disabilities, providing subsidies for builders to make additions or improvements to older buildings. Providing more flexible and accessible subsidy programs to allow persons with disabilities to modify their homes without carrying a financial burden is another factor. To empower persons with disabilities, providing funding for educational programs on tenants' rights with a focus on disability was also identified.

Maintaining family and community connections is another priority. To address that, calls for integrating an accessibility and visitability index, which would comprise key accessibility features on the entrance and main areas of a single-family home in the design of homes, making it easier for a non-disabled person to accommodate a visit from friends and relatives with a disability.

Final Reflections

Despite Canada's commitment to implement the CRPD, the reality is that support for persons with disabilities within Alberta and across Canada is a fragmented patchwork, making it difficult to navigate. The area of housing is no exception. A shift in mindset, better coordination among orders of government, and meaningful consultation with persons living with a disability are necessary for achieving this.

The necessary legislation, regulations, and social policies need to include a disability lens in order to make the housing landscape more inclusive for persons with disabilities.



Housing issues overlap a great deal with financial insecurity be it barriers to finding gainful employment or income support programs that fail to meet a person's basic needs. Income support programs for persons with disabilities, which pay below the poverty line perpetuate these housing inequities and increase the likelihood of them living in unaffordable and [inadequate housing](#). Overhauling our social safety net so that persons with disabilities can thrive, not just survive, would also go a long way towards reducing these barriers.

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Rent-to-Own

During the printing of this month's edition, the Federal Government of Canada [announced](#) that the third phase of the [Rapid Housing Initiative](#), has launched. The initiative is intended to provide quick build affordable housing to vulnerable peoples, where the Federal Government provides funding to municipalities to provide affordable housing through creative solutions. (1)

Part of the third phase of the Rapid Housing Initiative is a Rent to Own Pilot where the Federal Government of Canada will work with housing providers to implement this opportunity. (1) Applications for the pilot opened August 30, 2022.

Rent to Own generally involves a lease agreement where a deposit is paid and at the end of the lease, the tenant has the option to purchase the home. In some cases, a portion of the rent paid goes towards the equity in the home. (2)

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“I shouldn’t have to worry about going back in the closet”: Edmonton’s LGBTQ2S+ Friendly Retirement home

Written by Sydney Sheloff

The Edmonton Pride Seniors Group Society’s mission is to ensure that seniors’ services, activity centers, and housing are safe for LGBTQ2S+ seniors living in Edmonton. The society is currently working on a project to develop a safe retirement home for LGBTQ2S+ seniors.

We sat down with Blair MacKinnon from the Edmonton Pride Seniors Group Society to learn the impact this housing would have on LGBTQ2S+ seniors living in Edmonton.

Can you give a brief overview the LGBTQ2S + friendly retirement home?

Around 2017 the [Edmonton Pride Seniors Group Society](#) (EPSGS) formed the housing development committee to get more focused on the housing project and what we could achieve for our community. In 2015 we had consultants do a survey of our seniors in the LGBTQ2S+ community and found that they had fears about moving into any sort of seniors housing. Many people have been out for many years and never really thought about “OK what happens when I get older, and I can no longer live in my own house” which is what most people want to do. The survey pointed out that people had fears about moving into

general seniors housing and that they might face discrimination. We’ve seen research from different jurisdictions that LGBTQ2S+ seniors did face discrimination when they went into seniors’ housing. To have to go back into the closet again after they have been out for 20, 30 years, was pretty terrifying to people.

We did a survey back in 2020 where we contacted about 212 members of our community to find out what’s important to them in housing. The key thing is having safe housing for our community, where they can feel comfortable and that it’s their home. It was important that they be together with members of their community and can be who they are.



Throughout your research what needs did you find that LGBTQ2S+ seniors have that differ from other seniors?

A lot of people, when they get a certain age, they have a question “but where would I live” and then they pick someplace that's appropriate for them. We have that same concern but also, a number of other worries: If I have a partner, I should be able to live with my partner in this housing. Would the residents and staff accept me? Would I be able to live free from discrimination? Would my sexual orientation be assumed? Would they assume that I'm straight? If there was healthcare like home care, how would I be treated by healthcare professionals? Some of them mentioned they are afraid of violence or harassment from residents. One of them said for example,

“
“I shouldn't have to be inauthentic to survive,”
”

I should be able to be who I want to be, I shouldn't have to struggle to get the care I want, I shouldn't have to worry about going back into the closet. We've heard from people who were out, had a partner and all of a sudden had to hide that relationship when they're in seniors' housing. It was like going backward, and so they said, “I want to feel respected and comfortable and safe just like any other person.”

The housing that we would provide would be somewhat different in that we wanted it to be a Community Center too. They would provide programs and services and social events in the building, not just for the residents, but for other members of our community, so it would be the go-to place. In the design of our housing, our consultant made sure that we had space not just for the apartments, but for a community kitchen and a large open area where you can hold events. There would be a cafe for people in the building and residents' friends and relatives. It would be more than just an apartment building, it would be unique and as far as we know, it would be the first in Edmonton. Social events are very important for the LGBTQ2S+ community because as seniors age they often get more isolated from the rest of the world and in our community even more isolated.

Why is it important to form community between LGBTQ2S+ seniors and other seniors?

In the survey over 90% of people said they didn't want it to be just LGBTQ2S+ seniors, that they wanted their friends and allies to be there also. They didn't want it to be what we call a gay or lesbian ghetto, that was very critical, they wanted it to be just like they are in their own life. Members of our community may have been married previously and have children, and so they interact with members of their family, and lots of us have straight friends. They wanted the home to be a community for everyone, that was very important.



What is the importance of aging in place in the context of this project?

Once people move from their home into this housing, they want to stay in their home. It was very critical, we heard from them that they shouldn't have to move up and go to another higher level of care just because they need more services. That's the whole concept of aging in place, the care that you need when you need it continues with you so you can stay in the same place.

What sets this home apart from other existing affirming facilities such as the [Ashbourne](#)?

While the Ashbourne is an affirming facility, anyone who is LGBTQ2S+ there is accepted, that doesn't mean it was built expressly for the LGBTQ2S+ community. Whereas in our housing the majority would be LGBTQ2S+. Our members of the community would feel very safe, and I think that's very important for them. It is important to feel connected to community. It's almost funny in a way that our community never thought we

would ever get old, and now we're at this point in our life, we have fought for our rights for many many years and now we're seniors and then we have to fight for those rights too. That's what sets this apart from other general seniors housing.

What is one message you would like people to take away from this project you're working on?

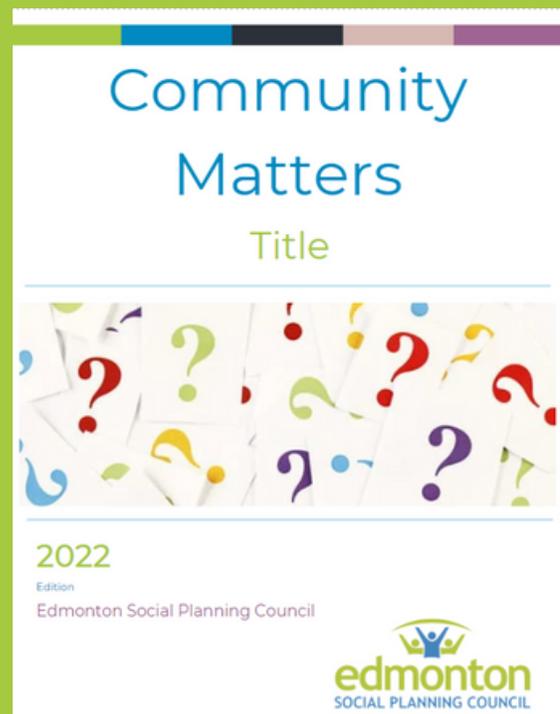
We want to have the same rights and feel safe and part of the community just like everybody else. It's very important for our community, just like every senior, to feel welcomed, safe and comfortable. I'd say these are just basic rights, it's not anything unusual, it's something that members of our community deserve, and we just want to be who we are.

You can learn more about this project by reading the Edmonton Pride Seniors Group Society's [LGBTQ2S+ Friendly Seniors Housing Prospectus](#), and by signing up for their [newsletter](#) to receive updates on the project.

Would you or your agency like to get involved in Community Matters?

There are multiple ways that you or your organization can contribute to our upcoming publication in December. Our planning for the December edition will be starting soon!

For more information or to express your interest please contact:
Amanda Labonte
amandal@edmontonsocialplanning.ca





Where Do You Go When ‘Home’ isn’t Safe?: Domestic Violence Shelter Options in Alberta

Written by Jenna Robinson

Introduction

When critically engaging with [houselessness](#) in Edmonton, it is essential to include its intersection with experiences of family and intimate partner violence. Domestic violence is often cited as a leading cause of houselessness among women in Canada (Homeless Hub, 2016). There are many factors that cause this to occur, including structural barriers to accessing housing, financial constraints, and the overall nature of family and intimate partner violence.

Prevalence of Family and Intimate Partner Violence in Canada

Family violence and intimate partner violence are often used synonymously to define experiences of domestic violence, however, there are important distinctions between the two; family violence includes violence within a household and can occur between parents, children, and siblings (Moorer, 2021). Intimate partner violence includes violence in a romantic relationship who may or may not reside in the same household. Both family violence and intimate partner violence [can take form in many ways](#), such as emotional/psychological, financial, sexual, and

physical abuse. In 2019, 67% of the victims of family violence in Canada were women and girls and this population also comprised 79% of all victims of intimate partner violence (Statistics Canada, 2021). In previous years, Alberta has had the third highest reported rate of intimate partner violence among all provinces in Canada (Mertz, 2017); Saskatchewan had the highest, followed by Manitoba.

It is critical to note that these rates only include police-reported experiences of violence which fail to depict the severity of violence; “It’s impossible to calculate the number of women and girls experiencing violence at the hands of an intimate partner, spouse or relative. The majority – *more than 80%*, according to one StatsCan estimate – go unreported” (Kingston, 2019). Many of those who experience family and intimate partner violence do not report their experiences to the police due to fear, lack of trust in authorities, and denial. Some folks do not know that they are experiencing violence, nor do they want their partner to get in trouble. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a dramatic increase in calls to Albertan women’s shelters,

leaving [Sagesse Domestic Violence Prevention Society](#) with an increase of over 100% from 2019-2021 (Fikowski, 2021). Support and housing options are required now more than ever to provide immediate safety for women and children fleeing violence.

Shelter Options for Women Fleeing Family Violence in Alberta

Folks leaving family violence have three options of shelters in Alberta: emergency, first stage, and second stage shelters. All shelters have strict surveillance and security measures to ensure residents are as safe as possible and no unwanted visitors are able to enter. One study found that “going to a domestic violence shelter could allow a survivor to access additional services, support, and a sense of community” (Rizo et al., 2022). In addition, Rizo et al, (2022) found that shelters ‘help a survivor get out of survival mode,’ provide safety, and potentially enhance well-being.” Housing is important because it provides folks with a safe and secure space where they can process their experiences and plan for the future. However, there are significant barriers for women leaving violence and attempting to secure safe, affordable housing. For example, financial abuse affects a woman's ability to afford housing because her partner may not have allowed her to work or freely access the family finances (National Network to End Domestic Violence, 2017). Racism, sexism, and discrimination also influence a woman's ability to find housing, for her and her children. For those who have nowhere else to go, there are some options:



Emergency Shelters

[Emergency shelters](#) are short-term housing spaces where folks can temporarily live to physically leave the violence they (and/or their children) are experiencing. Shelter workers connect folks to counsellors who can help them find the support they need. An example of an emergency shelter for women fleeing violence in Edmonton is [Lurana Shelter](#). Lurana Shelter provides “safe, secure refuge and emergency services such as meals, clothing, personal care items, transportation, and child support, as well as services related to advocacy, and staffing 24/7 for support and security. One-on-one counselling is provided in partnership with a community agency” (Catholic Social Services, 2022). If needed, an emergency shelter can refer a woman (and their children) to other shelter options that provide longer-term support, such as [Wings of Providence](#).

First Stage Shelters

First stage shelters allow folks to focus on recovery and healing from their experiences. Residents typically do not work or go to school and instead attend group and individual counselling sessions. Free childcare is typically offered while the mother attends one-on-one and peer counselling, group counselling, healing circles, and/or other important appointments. An example of a first-stage shelter for women in Edmonton is WINGS of Providence; their first-stage shelter is an apartment building with 49 units consisting of 2- and 3-bedroom living spaces that are fully furnished (Wings of Providence, 2022). WINGS also offers social support and life skills education. This includes safety planning, court accompaniment, food pantry, grocery gift cards, and many other services. Along with their first stage shelter, WINGS supports some women through their second stage shelter, “Home Next Door”.

Second Stage Shelters

Second-stage shelters are “safe, long term, affordable housing [options] to promote continued healing and independence.” (Wings of Providence, 2022). These shelters differ from emergency and first stages shelters because they require women to return to work or school to aid in their integration into society, yet still provide programming options for women and their children. At the Home Next Door, families still have access to the WINGS donation programming and an Outreach Program that provides counseling support, education, and resources for those overcoming family violence.

Limitations of Domestic Violence Shelters – Are They the Best Solution?

Although domestic violence shelters as a temporary refuge is a response to the growing rates of family and intimate partner violence in Canada, there are limitations and concerns associated with them. For example, the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters [ACSW] (2019) reported that between 2018-2019, Alberta shelters had to turn away 23,247 women, children, and seniors who were seeking housing due to capacity limitations. This finding is not only potentially life-threatening but likely is an under-estimate of the current severity of those being turned away. Although experiences of domestic violence itself influence the rate of [hidden homelessness](#) within populations (which cannot be calculated), the lack of available shelter beds increases the severity of this problem because it forces this population to couch surf, return to unsafe relationships, engage in survival sex work, or live in their vehicle (Thielman, 2021). COVID-19 has sparked an influx in reporting of family and intimate partner violence but has also likely influenced the invisibility of family and intimate partner violence. Accessing

support services and shelters became more difficult due to mandatory quarantines and lockdowns because partners and family members were forced to stay home. As a result, individuals experiencing violence have less opportunity to be alone and access domestic violence support.

When responding to the growing rates of family and intimate partner violence, we must address and consider the unique experiences of specific populations in our communities, such as [visible minority groups](#), members of the [2SLGBTQIA+ community](#), as well as youth and [older adults](#).

Edmonton has taken a step in the right direction by providing a one-time investment of \$880,000 in 2022 to women’s shelters across Edmonton, but they must not stop there (Komadina, 2022). It is critical that Edmonton expands its support and services to better support all genders, sexual orientations, and racial, ethnic, and cultural identities who endure family and intimate partner violence.

If you are worried about yourself or someone you know, you can learn about warning signs of an abusive relationship [here](#). For a list of other domestic violence shelters supporting women leaving violence in Alberta, please visit the [Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters website](#). For domestic violence support catered for refugee and immigrant populations, visit the [Islamic Family and Social Services Association](#). The [Aboriginal Counselling Services of Alberta](#) offers programming for Indigenous Peoples impacted by domestic violence, such as the Circles of Safety program for men, women, children, and youth. [The Today Centre](#) provides services for those impacted by family violence and is 2SLGBTQ+ friendly.

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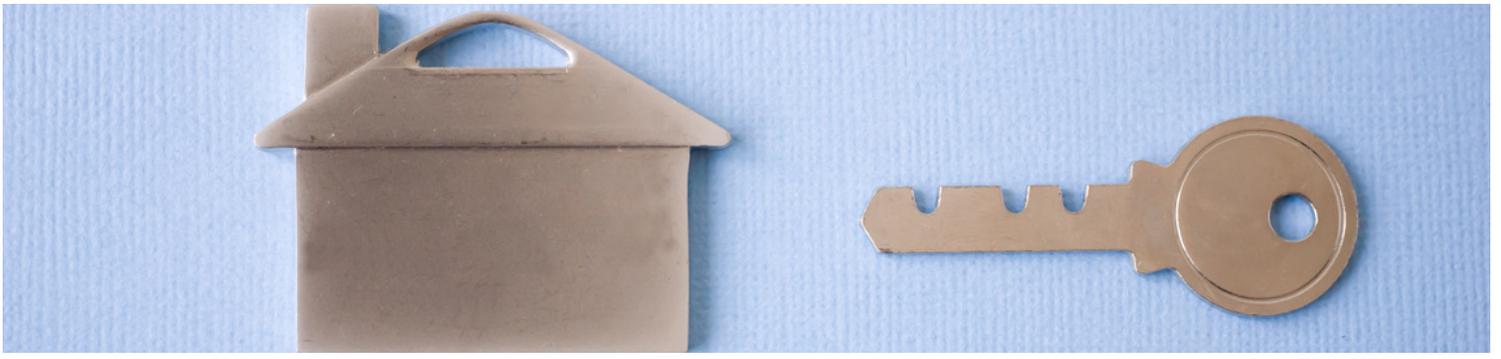


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Bissell Centre: Housing is a Right and a Collective Responsibility

Written by Amanda Labonte

In order to put an end to homelessness, those who are [unhoused](#) need the necessary support to transition away from being unsheltered to finding a safe and stable place to call home. The Bissell Centre has a spectrum of services that aim to provide housing and the necessary wraparound support to those who are in need. The Housing Outreach Team at Bissell Centre is one form of housing support offered by Bissell Centre. Other housing programs offered include [Homeless to Homes](#) and [Community Bridge](#). Candace Noble, Director of Housing and Outreach with Bissell Centre, shared more about the work being done.

How does your organization as well as the people you serve define homelessness or houselessness?

In terms of the definition of [houselessness](#), it can vary by program but because we're deeply rooted in the [Housing First](#) Program, we have started using the word houseless, so that's the preferred term at Bissell Centre right now. It's probably most widely accepted at Bissell Centre that a person that's houseless would not have their name on a legal document entitling them to a place, such as not having their name on a lease agreement.

I think it's really individualized in terms of how people see their situations so I think we would categorize somebody that's couch surfing as being houseless, but they might not in their specific circumstance. It's very individualized how folks would define their own situation.

Could you give a brief overview of what the Housing Outreach Team does?

Our [Outreach Housing Team](#) in its current form has six housing outreach workers. The outreach workers provide housing first services so they're interacting with community members that have been [chronically](#) or episodically experiencing homelessness.

They are housing folks that often have co-morbidities, in the form of untreated mental health diagnoses or substance use disorder. They would help them find independent [market housing](#) and set them up with furniture and utilities. The team helps with startup groceries [ie: pantry staples and first month's groceries] and then they refer folks out to a housing first case management team that would provide them with wraparound support for a year at least.



There is an addition to the Outreach Housing Team called Diversion. At Bissell Centre, we refer to that as a diversion from chronic homelessness. It means diverting folks from requiring that intensive support of the housing first program.

Their goal is to meet anyone in the community that has a housing need and support them with whatever that need is. It's a really individualized program and started initially filling gaps in the community as it existed in terms of housing services. We continue to do housing workshops, our staff will go to places like [WIN House](#) and provide housing services to individuals staying there, helping them to move out. [Edmonton Public Library](#) is a big partner for us in terms of providing our diversion services. There's lots of diversity in the need that comes to those workshops, for example, we'll get folks that are coming with landlord issues for mediation or conflict resolution, or we'll get people that are facing eviction due to arrears or utility debt.

What are some barriers people experience when they're trying to obtain housing?

Because we work with folks across the entire spectrum of needing housing it's varied. We're working with folks that are sleeping outside and trying to move those folks inside to shelter or temporary housing and the reality of it is that our shelter system is not exhaustive. A barrier for folks sleeping outside is consistent contact and their daily fight for survival. Trying to maintain their lives, and their basic needs on a daily basis. *It's hard to think forward when you're so caught up in having to survive that day.*

Documentation is a huge piece. Barriers to identification, landlord references, income, those things are huge. Our team tries to help with all of those things. For example, in order to get Alberta Supports right now, you really need to have a phone in order to have an application be approved.

Our community has really struggled to implement enough permanent [supportive housing](#). We've committed to obtaining a certain number of 500 units I believe, but we've encountered lots of barriers whether that's funding from different levels of government or land use. There's a large portion of people in our community that are needing permanent support and we don't have the facilities right now to be able to provide them with that level of care.

How might having an untreated mental health diagnosis or substance use disorder become a barrier to accessing housing?

There's a lot of intersectionality between mental health and substance use and I don't think that there's a lot of resources available in our community to serve where those overlap. So, I don't think it's as huge a barrier in terms of programs getting folks into housing, but it makes housing retention a challenge. There are really big challenges in terms of finding appropriate services and levels of care for people. As there is with any social issue. It's hard determining whose responsibility it is. Is this a healthcare, social disorder, or community agency issue? Whose responsibility is it to serve this demographic and what resources do you have to make it happen? We really struggle with that in terms of housing retention.



Housing First is an incredible program and it has the ability to meet people where they're at and move them into housing without requiring any levels of compliance, really having a person-centered delivery model. But that person still has to exist in a community and has to live in a market housing setting. Often, we don't have the resources to provide them with the support they need for that to go well.

How can we shift the conversation to create more inclusive spaces both for folks who are moved into housing but also for those that are still experiencing being unhoused?

Part of the stigma comes from concentration. If you have 100 people that are experiencing the same barriers and you put them all into a small area together that is going to exacerbate issues. The affordable apartments and the services are downtown, so we concentrate folks downtown. The big thing that we need to do to create inclusion in our broader communities is just to let people know that folks experiencing challenges are already existing in their community. The reason that you don't see them is because they're not hanging out together.

We [society] don't create a lot of relationships. I think the biggest piece to inclusion is looking at ways that folks that are integrating into communities can experience reciprocity. I don't think belonging really happens until you feel like you've had the chance to contribute something or feel needed in some way in that relationship.

Are there things that the broader community can do to help support folks that are either experiencing homelessness or that are recently housed?

There's lots that every individual can do in their everyday life towards reconciliation. That's a huge part of this work, specifically given the disproportionate number of folks that are Indigenous and experience issues related to poverty and homelessness. My biggest recommendation to anybody: be a better neighbour or a better community member in general. Know that history, read those recommendations, and figure out how you can implement even one of them in your daily life, your daily interactions.

Everybody actually does have something to offer. It doesn't have to be monetary or anything that seems outrageous, but if you're open to it everybody does have something to offer in terms of reciprocity. Being open and recognizing the humanness of everybody is so important.

What is one thing you really want people to take away from the work that's being done?

Housing is a right. Having a right doesn't mean that everybody is given the same thing, equality is not equity, and some people need a little bit more resources and support to get to the same place as somebody else.

Folks can't begin to be on a journey toward self-actualization where they can reach their full potential and contribute their full selves to their family and their community without having their basic needs met. A [living wage](#) and a safe and adequate place to live for example. It's pretty tragic that we still haven't gotten there where we can provide that level of equity in our communities. We often look at people that 'don't have' as being at fault for that in some way, but it's a collective responsibility. We have a responsibility in order to provide those basic levels of care for folks.

If you would like to learn more about Bissell Centre check out their [website](#).





Terra Centre: The Potential and Promise of Young Parents

Written by Amanda Labonte and Jenna Robinson

Karen Mottershead is the Executive Director of the [Terra Centre](#), a non-profit organization that helps pregnant and parenting teens with a broad range of supports to be successful parents. She discussed some of the work that Terra Centre does and emphasized the importance of housing with us. The Terra Centre can impact the lives of both the parent and child – sometimes in large ways, sometimes in small ways. Mottershead shared how some

“
Alumni talk about “coming home” – seeing Terra Centre as a place of safety and security,
”

even after they leave. There is a lot of pride and a sense of accomplishment for many of the young adults who graduate, in some cases they are the first members of their family to graduate high school.

Historically the focus for Terra Centre has been educational attainment by helping moms primarily with completing their high school

education. (1) Today, Terra Centre has grown and offers far more resources and support, providing evidence that they understand how various challenges can and do intersect. Mottershead explained how the benefit and value of finishing school are immense but require a lot of support and resources and that becomes especially challenging when a person does not have housing and even more challenging when a young person becomes a parent. The immediacy of housing intersects with educational attainment for youth.

When working with young adults, it is important to remember that developmentally, they live in the present and often do not plan long term. This can lead to school not being deemed a high priority. She explained that it is important for youth to have immediate housing access because when they are ready to return to school, they can register immediately and not have to worry about where they are going to live. Terra Centre has a very deep understanding of the stage of development that young parents are at, and can offer a meaningful level of support to meet the unique needs, and understand what kinds of approaches work best to support young families.



Terra Centre uses [wrap-around supports](#), when a young adult receives housing, they also get a support worker. When a student enters the [Braemar school](#), a school just for parenting teens, Terra Centre has ensured that there are multiple services at the school to meet their needs. This includes an onsite daycare, immunization nurses that come in, support workers and more.

There are complicated challenges for youth trying to obtain housing, particularly if a young adult is under the age of 18. Barriers for youth include legal aspects of signing off on lease agreements, getting utilities hooked up, and negative perceptions of young people by landlords. There continues to be a community stigma around young people being irresponsible, having wild parties or that they are 'going to trash the place.' Mottershead stated *this has not been the experience of Terra Centre staff working with young people, and instead is quite the opposite; these parents care deeply and want stability for their children, much like the rest of the population.* Terra Centre staff spend a substantial amount of time around advocacy working to acquire housing that is safe, stable and in a positive community.

Many young parents have experienced a lot of trauma in their lives. They see personal and emotional safety as a primary need that is very difficult to acquire. Many of the young people grew up living in subsidized housing, communities that exist in poverty, low-income housing, and experienced unsafe living environments. When young parents become pregnant, they want a different experience for their child.

One partnership in particular is crucial to what Terra Centre does. [The Brentwood Partnership Housing Program](#) "helps families build skills, resiliency and complete their education in a safe, stable and affordable environment. As the families move through the phases of our program they transition from needing help to a place of self-sufficiency. It's our goal to see them model those skills to the children they are raising helping us to break the poverty cycle for 2 generations in one program." (2) There are about 27 families currently living at the housing complex, with many staying there for over two years, and this can be their forever home because they do not have to leave at any given time.

As we discussed the stigma and community perceptions of young people who have children and how this creates challenges and barriers, Mottershead stated that the stigma for young dads is often deeper than young moms. There are societal perceptions that young dads are 'dead beat dads, don't want to be involved, or walked away from their child(ren).' Young dads are an important part of the story, and they have an important role to play in the life of their children. The role of Terra Centre is to help support parental relationships for the benefit of the child, even if the parents are no longer in a partnered relationship. Terra Centre has a unique approach in that they have outreach workers who work specifically with young dads. (1)



Karen Mottershead shared a photovoice research project undertaken by Terra Centre through the Successful Families Housing Program. During the project, every week families had a different theme, they would take pictures and explain how that picture related to the theme. Karen shared a story of how one week the theme was safety and one of the participants submitted a picture of a door.

The comment from the parent was that this is the first time they could shut a door and feel safe. It was fundamental to have a door.

As a community sensitivity is needed to reduce the negative perceptions young parents experience because parenting at any age is hard. Unhelpful and hurtful comments and gestures by the public to young parents are painful and negatively impacts their sense of self in terms of their capacity, who they are, and how they'll move forward in life. Parents are doing the best they can and a gentle word would be nice and acknowledge the youth is a parent, and everyone is trying to do their best job. Young people want to feel validated in their roles and these small gestures of support could make such a difference.

Mottershead expressed her hope that members in the community would start seeing the potential and promise of young parents as opposed to seeing a negative or deficit. That can be done through kind words, supporting Terra Centre, or different organizations.

To learn more:

<https://TerraCentre.ca/blog/photovoice/>

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Energy Poverty and the Dignity of Edmontonians

Written by Sydney Sheloff

What is energy poverty?

Energy poverty is the experience of households struggling to meet their energy needs, including heating and cooling their homes, and powering lights and appliances (Empower Me, 2018; CUSP, n.d.). The average Canadian spends less than 3% of their after-tax income on home heating and electricity. According to Canadian Urban Sustainability Practitioners (CUSP) households that spend double this (6%) are considered to be living in energy poverty (n.d.).

50,765 Edmonton households – that’s 16% - live in energy poverty. This varies across the city, 36% of residents in the Alberta Avenue neighbourhood experience energy poverty, whereas only 8.3% in Ellerslie do (CUSP, n.d.). A variety of factors influence this. Households in Alberta Avenue have lower incomes than those in Ellerslie (\$60K vs. \$104K). In addition, houses in Alberta Avenue are older (86% were built before 1991) and more likely to need major repairs (17% vs. 0%).

People who own homes are more likely to live in energy poverty (20-30%) than those who rent (14%). This is likely because a) those who rent often have energy costs included in their rent, and b) renters tend to live in smaller apartments and row housing that requires less energy to heat. However, renters whose utilities are not included in their rent are most likely to experience energy poverty. People that live in single detached housing also have a much higher likelihood of experiencing energy poverty (Empower Me, 2018).

Energy poverty is not isolated to people living with low income. In fact, two-thirds of those living in energy poverty are not considered to be living in low income. People with higher incomes are more likely to be living in larger homes that cost more to heat (Empower Me, 2018). At the same time, lower-income families are more likely to be in homes that, while smaller, have poor insulation and are therefore hard to heat, as well often live in homes in major need of repairs (ODPHP, 2020). While low-income families may be less likely to experience energy poverty, they feel its effects much more harshly.

What are the effects of energy poverty?

Living in energy poverty has many negative consequences on the lives of families. Families may choose to keep their homes at lower temperatures, which is uncomfortable. Living in cold homes also has negative health consequences, such as higher rates of respiratory problems and high susceptibility to illness for children (EmPower Me, 2018). Families may have to sacrifice other important needs, such as groceries and medication, to pay for energy (CUSP, n.d.).

One of the most extreme consequences of energy poverty is having one's power shut off. This has incredibly negative impacts on people's health and quality of life. Losing refrigeration means food and medications can go bad and makes it so that families cannot cook food. A lack of hot water makes hygiene difficult (Cummings, 2022; CUSP, n.d.). As essential services, work, and school move online, not being able to power electronics or Wi-Fi routers makes these things inaccessible. Children can fall behind in school, and adults risk losing their jobs.

Living in energy poverty is incredibly stressful. Families need to make tough choices about what they power and when, and live under the fear that they could lose all power if they make a wrong choice. Above all, it greatly impacts a family's sense of dignity.

What is happening in Edmonton?

The Government of Alberta has rules in place to ensure households do not lose heat in the cold winter months. Between October 15 and April 15, limiters are installed instead of a full disconnection (Cummings, 2022). These limiters allow families to have enough energy to power their necessities – such as their furnace, fridge, a few lights, and one

small appliance. Anecdotes show that families are forced to stop using their ovens, stoves, washers, and dryers as these appliances use too much power. If people go over the 'limit' their power will suddenly go off, and they have to either [manually restart their meter](#), or if they have a meter with remote capabilities, wait 15-30 minutes for it to automatically restart (Edwardson, 2022).

Once summer hits, if these families have not caught up on bills, they risk losing power altogether. This has been the reality for 200 Edmontonians in 2022 (Cummings, 2022). As described above, losing power greatly affects these families' ability to meet their basic needs – storing and cooking food, washing clothes, taking care of personal hygiene – and sacrifices their dignity.



EPCOR claims that disconnection is always a "last resort" after they have exhausted all other attempts at resolving balances (Cummings, 2022). From a human rights approach, is it ever okay to take away someone's power? The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 7 calls for universal access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy. Energy is essential for people's physical and mental well-being, and as such, can be considered a fundamental human need (Shyu, 2021). Energy is currently unaffordable for many Edmontonians, this is a breach of their rights.

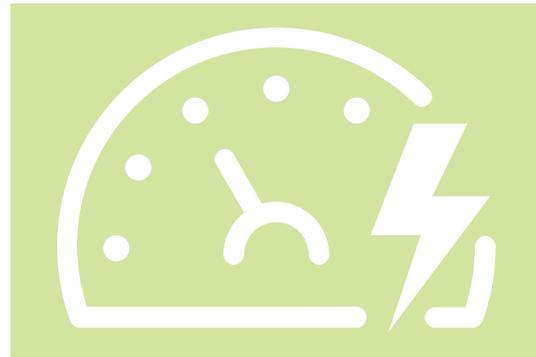
What can be done?

There are programs in place to address energy poverty, but these are not sufficient. The province of Alberta promised automatic \$50 electricity rebates, but in the face of a rising cost of living, this barely makes a dent in families' monthly budgets, let alone allows them to pay off debts (Cummings, 2022). Upgrades to make homes more energy efficient are a great way to reduce energy costs. However, if families cannot afford their monthly bills, it is unlikely they can afford home upgrades. Programs such as [Empower Me](#) offer home upgrades to help lower energy costs, but these are geared to people who own their homes and are out of reach for many renters and low-income families.

We need to instate policies to ensure all people living in Canada have access to their basic energy needs. In South Africa, vulnerable households have access to 50kWh per month as [Free Basic Electrification](#) (Shyu, 2021). Governments in Canada could instate a similar system to ensure all families can power their essential needs. Investing in renewable energy sources would make energy more affordable. Overall, governments in Canada, and Edmonton specifically, need to reconceptualize energy as a fundamental human need and put policies in place to ensure everyone has access.

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How Do We Fix the Housing Market?

Written by Lexia Simmons

Home prices have risen 20.6% from 2018 to 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2022a), with reduced access to affordable housing. Countries, provinces, states, and municipalities have been researching, innovating, and implementing different programs to make housing more affordable. As stated by the Department of Finance Canada (2022), *“Everyone should have a safe and affordable place to call home.”* This article will begin with a municipality that has chosen to view the housing crisis through an innovative lens and then will focus on the strategies different municipalities have taken in solving the problems a lack of supply in the housing market has caused.

The City of Kitchener (2020) in Ontario developed a housing affordability program called [Housing for All](#). The program includes seven main priorities; however, the City of Kitchener has identified some priorities that are new and not addressed in other municipal housing programs. Those priorities include a concentration on education around affordable housing. The idea is to shift the community mindset to housing as a human right and reduce the mentality of the NIBMY (not in my backyard) that has gripped and slowed down affordable housing programs in neighborhoods that need it. The City of Kitchener is also committed to lived experience collaboration, allowing those most impacted by the lack of housing to be a part of the solution. Finally, the last innovative priority is the commitment to

developing more community housing and facilitating partnerships between the non-profit sector and developers to create innovative solutions to help make the housing market more affordable. Although these are not core activities, they are a framework in which Kitchener is planning on moving forward with housing affordability. A theme identified in Kitchener, as well as other municipalities, is the lack of housing supply. A lack of basic supply and increased demand means a reduced housing supply which will inevitably drive the cost of housing up. The following will outline solutions across North America on increasing the housing supply.

The first factor was increasing housing construction. One of the most significant barriers to housing construction is the rising cost. According to Statistics Canada, residential building construction increased 5.6% in the first quarter of 2022, with Calgary having the highest increase at 6.9%, followed by Edmonton and Toronto, up to 6.8% (Statistics Canada, 2022b). Many municipalities have embraced modular housing to drive down the increasing cost of construction. Modular Homes are homes built indoors in a home construction factory (Quality Homes, 2020). The parts of these homes (modules) are transported to their new location and assembled by tradespeople on an already poured and treated foundation. The City of

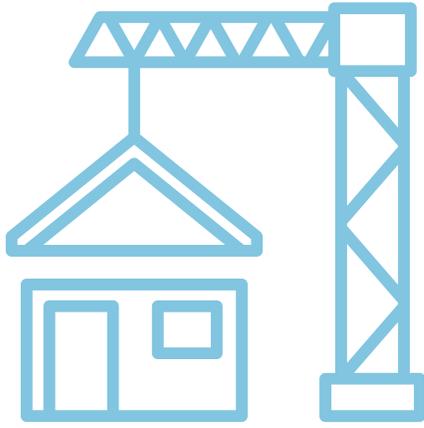
Toronto (2019), as part of its [HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan](#), has also committed to creating 1,000 modular homes in Toronto.

The City of Vancouver (n.d.) has also identified modular homes as a type of housing that can be constructed more quickly and provide immediate relief to people without homes. Vancouver built around 663 units in modular housing buildings, which not only supplies housing, but also provides individuals with two meals a day, and opportunities to connect with community groups, volunteer opportunities, and social events. Vancouver identified that modular housing could be constructed in about three months on vacant, underused sites across the city and can be relocated and reconfigured to fit different locations. It can also provide immediate relief, and the right supports until permanent social housing is available. Modular housing can create a sense of community, amenity space, and connections with the neighborhood.

Another barrier to housing construction is the single-family zoning that limits the ability to increase housing units. In Toronto, 62.3% of residential land is exclusively zoned for detached houses; 80.5% in Vancouver, 67.2% in Calgary, 69.3% in Edmonton, and 45.8% in Montreal (Sun, n.d.). The City of Minneapolis identified that single-family zoning resulted in a lower supply of homes and perpetuated systematic disparities between racialized and non-racialized communities. As a result, they eliminated single-family zoning and allowed at least three residential units in each parcel of land, previously reserved for only single-family homes (Minneapolis City of Lakes, n.d.). The decrease in single-family housing enables the building of more multiunit and multi-use buildings that can allow for a greater supply of housing, resulting in greater accessibility and, in turn, greater affordability. With a change in zoning, developers can build more multi-unit homes; however, it also allows homeowners to create multi-unit homes themselves.

Percentage of Residential Land Exclusively Zoned for Detached Houses





The City of Edmonton (n.d.a) did change some zoning areas across the city to allow for the creation of Garden Suites which are single, or two-story structures built in the back yards of single detached homes, semi-detached homes, and row houses that have their own living room, bathroom and kitchen. The City of Edmonton (n.d.b) first introduced the concept of Garden Suites in 2017 and has continued to update the bylaw as recently as 2020 to allow it to become more accessible; however, it still does not go as far as Minneapolis does in making Garden Suites an option for all houses across the city. The City of Vancouver (2021) has also created secondary dwellings; they are one of the first cities to allow two secondary dwellings on the property, one attached to the main house and the other laneway housing, which is helping to increase the supply of housing in the city.

Changing the zoning to increase housing is one step in the right direction to allow for a greater supply of housing in the market; with the rising cost of inflation and everyday financial and time commitments families are facing, finding the capital and time to develop these homes may not be feasible. The City of Pasadena in California is addressing this issue by creating an affordable housing initiative that helps homeowners with assistance in the financing, designing, permission, and constructing new Additional Dwelling Units (ADUS) (Pasadena, Department of Housing, n.d.). Another initiative that helps to combat this barrier

is in Atlanta. [Backyard ATL](#) is a project undertaken by Eightvillage where they invest in additional Dwelling Units in partnership with homeowners to make ADUS more accessible to the general population (Backyard ATL, n.d.). Additional Dwelling Units increase the supply of livable homes in the market which should push down the price and make homes more affordable.

There is no one solution to the housing crisis in Canada, and this article has only addressed innovation around the lack of housing supply. There needs to be a continued conversation around other factors that impact housing affordability. Moreover, there may be lessons learned further than those found in North America. Housing is one of the most significant crises of our generation. Governments, non-profits, and private companies are doing great things to help with the housing crisis; however, it will take a lot of varied solutions and trial and error to get it right.

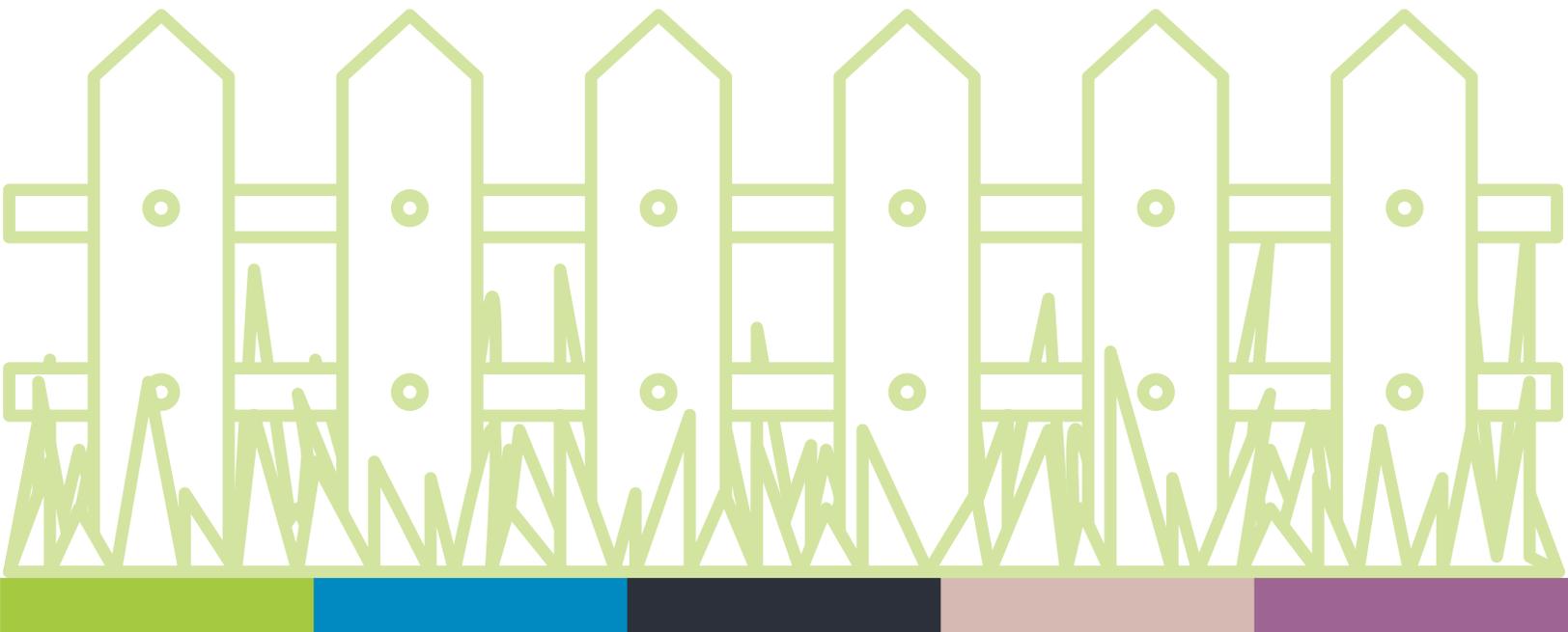
About Lexia Simmons

Lexia Simmons is a certified educator with a passion for social issues. She has completed a Bachelor of Arts and Education degree and worked for non-profit, government offices, schools, and EdTech companies. Lexia aspires to use her educational background to help break down complicated policy issues into easy-to-understand parts.



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About the Edmonton Social Planning Council

The Edmonton Social Planning Council is an independent, non-profit, non-partisan social research organization, with registered charitable status. Our focus is social research, particularly in the areas of low-income and poverty. ESPC is a source of knowledge and expertise on social issues within our community.

We are dedicated to encouraging the adoption of equitable social policy, supporting the work of other organizations who are striving to improve the lives of Edmontonians, and educating the public regarding the social issues that impact them on a daily basis.

Our Vision: A community in which all people are full and valued participants.

Our Mission: Through rigorous research, detailed analysis, and community engagement, we deepen community understanding of social planning issues, influence policy, and spark collaborative actions that lead to positive social change.

We thank you for your continued support.

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