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COMMENTARY

OPINION

National affordable housing plan urgently needed

By **Heather McGregor**

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It keeps me up at night that many women live their entire lives without a home that is safe and secure. I think of the women and children trapped in violent situations or turned away from emergency shelters because they are full. I think of the women forced to live in shelters for years at a time due to the lack of safe, affordable housing. Toronto's social housing waiting list is a staggering 97,000 households long — I think of the women on this list waiting years for a place to call home. I think of these women every day.

What is absolutely clear is that this country is facing an affordable housing crisis. The federal government must take a leadership role to address the glaring lack of social housing being built and put forward a co-ordinated plan to ensure effective support for tenants with complex needs. Women are counting on this government to act on housing. Housing is a human right.

Now that the federal government has launched consultations on a national housing strategy — dubbed Let's Talk Housing — we have cleared the first hurdle. Next, it is up to all of us to join the conversation and ensure that they get this strategy absolutely right. Put simply, a national housing strategy that is designed using a gender-neutral lens will not help women. I offer the following key points based on what I have learned after 21 years of building safe, affordable homes for women with YWCA Toronto.

First, safety is paramount. For women, violence is often the precursor to instability that plunges them into poverty and homelessness in order to seek safety. The fact that on a single night in Canada 73 per cent of women and children fleeing violence are turned away from emergency shelters because they are full should make every Canadian weep. Continued federal investment in shelters and transitional housing is needed to close existing gaps and to achieve the government's promise of "no one turned away."

Safety must also extend to the planning, design and operation of housing units. One girl at the YWCA Toronto's Girls' Centre told us she feels so unsafe in her neighbourhood, that from the second she steps off the bus from school, she runs as fast as she can — non-stop — until she reaches her front door and locks it behind her. It should not be this way. Our goal must reach beyond putting a roof over everyone's head. Safety is critically important — this includes secure entrances and exits, lighting, building and parking design, accessibility and child-friendly locations with access to services, green space and transit.

The housing crisis is a major driver of women and children's poverty. In Toronto and across Canada, the face of poverty is a woman's face. The consequence is that women and children are being forced to live in housing that is unsafe, unaffordable, overcrowded, below standard or a combination of all four. Women are also living in shelters for years at a time because they cannot afford the cost of rent — 20 years ago the length of stay would have been six to eight weeks. Safe, affordable housing is a critically important poverty reduction tool for women. It is right up there along with quality, affordable child care and securing employment with adequate incomes.

Women who are fleeing violence have distinct housing needs and require unique support. Violence is one of the most traumatizing things that can happen to us. That is why at YWCA Toronto, our housing support programs provide women with free, high-quality, trauma-informed programs, including mental health supports and guidance to help women overcome trauma and make healthy choices. This type of trauma-informed support must be recognized and funded as part of the national housing strategy.

Canada's commitment to reconciliation with indigenous peoples extends to housing. The ongoing inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women reminds us that indigenous women experience disproportionately higher levels of violence — and too many women have nowhere safe to go.

YWCA Toronto's Winona's Place provides a safe, affordable home for indigenous women and their children to live with traditional healing programs developed in collaboration with indigenous partners. This is a model that needs to be replicated across Canada. We desperately need more housing created by and for Indigenous women.

The affordable housing crisis that plagues this country should be of concern to every single Canadian. Together, we need to raise our voices because every woman has the right to a safe, affordable place to call home. Now is the time to act on housing.

***Heather McGregor** is the Chief Executive Officer at YWCA Toronto, one of the largest providers of safe, affordable housing for women and families in Canada.*

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