



YWCA
T O R O N T O

A TURNING POINT
FOR WOMEN



December 14, 2004

Ms. Elizabeth Harding
Director
Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Ministry of Public Infrastructure Renewal
Market Housing Branch
14th Floor
777 Bay St
Toronto ON M5G 2E5

Dear Ms. Harding:

On behalf of YWCA Toronto we would like to thank you for the opportunity to provide the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing with the YWCA's reflection at the consultation day on December 6th 2004 on the key issues in developing affordable housing. To underscore those points that we thought were most critical we are providing you with a brief written summary to assist you with your planning going forward.

YWCA Toronto has been involved in the development and management of a range of housing and shelter for homeless and marginalized women since its founding in 1873. YWCA housing has always provided more than just a roof. Throughout our history we have been both a service-provider and an advocate for women and girls.

We run supportive housing that is for short or long term stays. The adult and young women and children we house are not only low income but also face many other challenges that make it difficult for them to acquire and maintain appropriate housing.

Developing Housing for Victims of Domestic Violence

The consultation framed a discussion of how to ensure that the development of the affordable housing plan included responses that took account of the issues faced by women who have experienced violence in their homes. Given the high rates of violence experienced by women in Canada –as much as 1 in 2, or as “little” as 1 in 4--our response takes the issue a little further by suggesting a framework that accounts for gender differences in housing needs and homelessness. This moves the discussion from an after-the-fact response of housing to violence and homelessness to one of prevention and retention. We believe this fits with the stated priorities of the current government.

The case statement for women currently fleeing immediate abuse is clear.

Yet, despite a policy of recognizing abused women's “special priority” on the waiting list in Ontario, women are staying in shelters longer because they cannot find a place to live. Despite two sets of provincial Coroner's Inquest recommendations that access to housing for women fleeing violence be improved,

the opposite is in fact occurring, even within this commendable policy framework. The “special priority” status definition for access to social housing has recently been broadened to include all forms of violence committed within any person’s housing. In the absence of any increase in housing stock, this pits vulnerable groups against one another in a competition for basic needs and increases the likelihood of women returning to abuse, and quite possibly to their deaths (May/ Iles, 1998; Hadley, 2002). Indeed the regulatory framework adds to this dilemma by restricting the lapsed time between when a woman has lived with the abuser and when she can apply for Priority Status to three months.

Other regulatory changes, such as recording all tenants of units as lease holders have foreseeable and dangerous implications for loss of self-determination for women in abusive situations.

The Question of the Private Sector as Developers of Affordable Housing

The private sector has proven incapable of providing housing for low-income households. It makes sense to concentrate scarce public resources to assist those with low or fixed incomes. This must include those on social assistance and disability pensions. This can be achieved through significant construction or purchase of existing stock for non-profit rental and co-operative housing, together with rent supplements and an increase in the housing allowance of Ontario Works.

While the YWCA supports rent supplement programs, shelter workers report that women who have used the rent supplement programs in privately owned housing are vulnerable to unscrupulous landlords who are privy to personal and financial information. They are subject to threats and sexual harassment because they are reliant on the subsidy to afford the rent.

Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness for Women

For women, successfully seeking, sustaining and maintaining housing is tied to the ability to secure an income adequate to raising a family. In the absence of an affordable housing program that replaces stock and keeps pace with growing need, income security becomes a critical element in the determination of who will become homeless and who will not. Long-standing gender inequities and clear evidence of racial inequities in employment conditions compound the vulnerability of women-led households to periodic, cyclical and permanent homelessness. Rectifying these inequities requires co-ordinated responses and comprehensive plans that address inter-and intra governmental responsibilities. In direct and immediate terms the emergency level response to women’s income security as it relates to housing can be addressed in the following ways:

1. Raise the shelter allowance portion of Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program to average rent levels in each community.
2. Increase basic needs allowances and index social assistance benefits yearly to the cost of living.
3. Address anti-poverty and equity policy goals by rescinding the claw back of the National Child Benefit Supplement from social assistance recipients.

4. Facilitate the recognition of internationally trained professionals through leading a process of co-operation between all three levels of jurisdiction and community and professional stakeholders.
5. Stop “creaming” easier-to-serve clients from employment training lists through Federal Labour Market Adjustment Agreements, and gear more training programs to the most disadvantaged women.
6. Restore the requirement for provinces to recognize the former Designated Groups Policy that addresses the training needs of equity-seeking groups in the development of employment programs
7. Immediately restore regulated childcare funding to 1995 levels.

Innovative Design and Development Ideas

Barriers in Current Design and Development

Current barriers to development include a lack of coordination between the government funding bodies. In addition, the development approval process ties up scarce agency resources unnecessarily. For instance, despite a stated strategic direction of making housing a priority, funding flows at different times from each level of government, causing waiting periods that charitable organizations must cover from reserves. In addition, Service Managers have not streamlined their permanent approval processes to line up with any strategic housing initiative. At some point someone has to take the lead to require this coordination and improve the conditions for developing housing.

Gender Specific Barriers to Developing Housing

Women form the majority of occupants of lower income housing, and make up slightly more than 51% of the population in general, yet the planning and design of housing and communities remain largely unaware of gender differences in housing needs. As part of the consideration of proposals to design and develop new housing, the following criteria would increase the likelihood of successful tenancies for women who have, or might one day be experiencing violence.

- Women still bear the primary burden for unpaid care giving and all domestic tasks
- Women still earn less than men in the paid workforce with the result that women have less money for housing and less security of tenure.
- Women are also more likely to be dependent on public transit, and thus have less access to jobs and services outside the central areas of large cities.
- Women-led households are more likely to rent, and tenants are less likely to have control over the spaces in which they live.

Other barriers to women attaining appropriate, secure, and affordable housing arise specifically from the physical and social needs that distinguish them from men: as primary caregivers to all generations of family, women need housing that is within close proximity to social infrastructure (schools, hospitals, and community centres). High levels of violence against women occur both in public (strangers) and private (partner, acquaintance, landlord assault) yet the design of most city, neighbourhood, open public spaces and housing fails to address this issue. Studies of alternative housing have shown that some women have a clear preference for women-only housing with moderate design

alterations that address safety concerns. This has particular relevance to those more marginal populations of women who frequently wind up cyclically homeless due to exploitative conditions unwittingly built into the designs of mixed gender low income housing (Borderlands of Homelessness, 1996).

Designs that Work

Low rise, mixed income developments with design features that allow for maximum supervision of children from within units (such as those designed around green space and playgrounds) can prevent some of the problems associated with high density concentrations of low income families raising children. Low rise and multiple bedroom units are required for extended family use, and fully accessible disabled units are required to integrate those with disabilities into the mainstream of our communities. Close proximity to social infrastructure, as well as well-traveled, well-lit areas with public transit routes are all part of the design features that should be considered in addressing women's housing needs. In addition, we recommend consideration of the following:

- (as above) Some women-only buildings to increase safety and security for women and women-led households
- The internal design of houses should accommodate a range of households: disabled, single parent, elderly, three generation, several sharing adults, changes from one household into another.

This means:

1. Flexible designs (large kitchens that can accommodate several people cooking, removable dividers to make extra bedrooms);
2. More stacked housing and fewer narrow detached houses with lots of stairs;
3. Grants to make houses more accessible (grab bars in showers, wider doors);
4. Removing zoning (including parking requirement) and social housing regulations that restrict paid work within homes, and limit housing units to 'single families';
5. Allowing social housing units to have 'extra space' for women who do paid work in their homes.

Supportive Housing

For women, the need for supports to maintain housing is related primarily to the increased likelihood that they are survivors of violence and that they bear the primary or exclusive responsibility for raising children. To date, Provincial mental health reform has not integrated any consideration of community-based supportive housing, despite massive deinstitutionalization and clear research linking mental health issues with homelessness.

Mental illness and addictions are contributing factors in determining a person's vulnerability to homelessness. For women, these issues are most frequently linked to a history of psychological trauma, such as childhood sexual abuse, violence in their intimate relationships, experience of gender persecution and rape in the context of emigration or civil war. Data from homeless shelters, assaulted women's shelters, supportive housing programs, and drop-ins show that a high percentage of women experience on-going

living difficulties as a result of trauma, and that they require support to maintain their housing. Recent studies of homeless populations in both Canada and the United States are bearing this out statistically (North & Smith, 1992).

The high rate of trauma survivors in Toronto's alternative housing communities shows the need for women-only developments. This would create a sense of safety for a significant number of those who seek supportive housing and are prone to lose affordable housing due to the exploitation and harassment that can take place in mixed gender units (Borderlands of Homelessness, 1996).

Supports that are traditionally seen as the responsibilities of other ministries, such as hostels, drop-ins, women's counselling services, family support centers, parent relief programs, mental health services, as well as settlement services for new immigrants, all form a network of supports that assist people to maintain housing. More specifically, in the development of housing itself it is of crucial importance that:

- Non-profit housing that accommodates vulnerable clients such as the recently homeless, women fleeing violence and those with mental health challenges should have access to funds to provide supportive services.
- This means that the development of new housing and the administration of all joint housing programs must include a flexible range of supportive housing supports available on site **and/or** from an external source.

Housing proposals for this tenant population should:

- Provide opportunities for tenants to develop their skills in management-related activities if they wish
- Allow access to a co-coordinated eviction prevention program, that combines supports for conflict resolution and the prevention of rent arrears
- Recognize the potential need for attendant care for women with disabilities
- Develop culturally appropriate services, such as translation, interpreters
- Recognize the critical role of support services in the maintenance of housing that should be reflected in the allotment of funds to provide support services for social assistance recipients

This summary of the gender-specific concerns we bring to the affordable housing table can be elaborated or augmented at any time if it would be useful to your process. We urge to consider this as an aspect of over-all design and implementation and not as a matter of "specialized needs" within a gender neutral plan. We sincerely appreciate the chance to share our expertise, and to be back in conversation about the design, development and delivery of affordable housing in Ontario.

We look forward to continued participation with you as your ministry grapples with the challenging issue of a permanent, sustainable and affordable housing strategy.

Yours truly,

Joan White
Director of Housing

Amanda Dale
Director of Advocacy and Communications