



Nina Gorka of the YWCA at the new Davenport Women's Shelter  
Photo: CJ BAEK

## New women's shelter opens in the Annex

Helping our most vulnerable means looking beyond the number of beds

by Jessica Wei

On the last week of January, a new women's shelter opened up at 348 Davenport Rd., adding 56 beds to a system that desperately needs them.

On the day of the shelter open house, the temperature had dropped to a piercing -21 degrees.

The previous week, two homeless women had been found dead: One was discovered in a donation bin at Bloor Street and Dovercourt Road. The other was run over by a garbage truck while she was sleeping on a grate in an alleyway downtown. In a city where homelessness has become an unignorable issue, women's shelters in particular are in a unique position of need – for beds and also for gender-specific community programs.

"Women experience homelessness in a very different way. They experience violence in different ways," said Nina Gorka, the director of shelters, girls and family programs at the YWCA, which manages the shelter. "Women are often less comfortable accessing co-ed shelters, so they're looking for spaces where they feel safe, and often those are dedicated women-only spaces."

At press time, the City of Toronto's Daily Shelter Census showed an overnight occupancy rate of 99 per cent for women's shelters and 100 per cent for family shelters.

### "Women experience homelessness in a very different way."

Women represented 42 per cent of respondents to the city's 2018 Street Needs Census, but occupy only 29 per cent of single adult drop-in centres (men made up 67 per cent). Transgender, gender nonconforming and two-spirit identifying respondents each represented one per cent of total census respondents.

Dr. Barbara Landau, a lawyer and family mediator who attended the shelter's open house, was one of the people who lobbied for it to open. Based on first impressions, she was pleased with the new shelter, which was previously a hastily pulled together emergency respite centre. She was particularly impressed by the staff and the programming.

"You're going to need connections for health care, for mental health care, for retraining, helping people to get into the employment market," said Landau. "You're going to need to think beyond the six months."

Gorka's team is currently looking into running workshops around topics like housing searches, self-esteem and harm reduction.

The pet-friendly shelter welcomes women and people who identify as transgender and gender non-binary of over 16 years of age. They expect to be at capacity by the end of February.

**Update:** Davenport shelter opened Jan 23 and was at capacity by mid-February

Access to safe, affordable housing is a human right.

## YWCA Toronto Shelter and Housing programs

As one of the largest providers of housing targeted to women and their families in Canada, YWCA Toronto shelters and houses nearly 1,700 women and children annually through:

- 2 violence against women shelters
- 2 shelters for homeless women
- 547 units of permanent housing

### EMERGENCY SHELTER FROM VIOLENCE

YWCA Toronto provides immediate safety and free shelter for women and their children fleeing abuse. Through two sites, we provide on-site trauma and mental health support, addictions counselling, parent support, and employment counselling. We also provide necessities upon arrival and throughout their stay.