



**MEETING SD 33-20-24**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2024  
DET'ANCHOGH KÙÉ - EAGLE ROOM / ZOOM  
10:30 AM**

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**AGENDA**

1. Call to Order
2. Prayer
3. Review and Adoption of Agenda
4. Declarations of Conflict of Interest
5. Public Matters:
  - a. Public Briefing on Housing as a Human Right with YWCA NWT
6. New Business
  - a.
7. Date and Time of Next Meeting: Thursday, October 10, 2024 at 1:30PM
8. Adjournment

NORTHWEST TERRITORIES  
STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT  
**HOUSING AS A HUMAN RIGHT**

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Hawa-Dumbuya Sesay, Executive Director  
Kate Wilson, Director of Housing  
October 10, 2024

# ABOUT YWCA NWT

## *Vision:*

Equality for women and girls in a safe Northern society.

## *Mission:*

To build safe and equitable communities where women, girls and families can realize their full potential.

## *Our Housing Services*

- 21 transitional housing units for families in need of support
- 18 second-stage housing units for women and children who have left abusive households
- Numerous private units rented in Yellowknife for families unable to secure their own housing (our all-time high was 70 units in our name)
- A 6-bedroom emergency shelter for those fleeing violence within the home
- Two safe homes (one in the Dehcho, one in the Sahtu) so women and children fleeing violence have options in their own communities





# HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND HOUSING?

*Housing is a basic human need but it's also so much more than that.*

- Key to safety, stability, and sovereignty
- A place of refuge
- A place for families to stay together and grow
- A new start, new opportunities



*We are not just thinking of the housing  
we are thinking of the people inside the housing.*

# HIDDEN HOMELESSNESS

- Those who are provisionally accommodated, but do not necessarily have secure housing of their own.
- Includes anyone who is couch-surfing, sleeping in a car or other sort of vehicle, or living in a short-term shelter with nowhere to go next.
- Referred to as “hidden” because it’s not as visible as those sleeping rough or frequenting overnight shelters - but can be just as precarious, unsafe, and draining for those experiencing it.
- Often not properly enumerated or recognized.



# A GENDERED HOUSING CRISIS

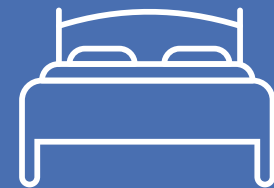
- Hidden homelessness is most commonly experienced by women and their families - they are more likely to stay in precarious accommodations to keep their children housed.
- Women-led households nationwide disproportionately live in core-housing need, meaning they fall below at least at least one of the accepted adequacy, affordability or suitability standards.
- Violence within the home is one of the primary causes of women's housing insecurity.
- Without anywhere to go once they leave an abuser, many women are forced to return to the unsafe household.



In 2019, the number of intimate partner violence incidents reported to police in the NWT was

**10x**

**The National Average**



**1,609**

**Safe Bed Nights**

were provided at YWCA NWT's family violence shelter last year



During the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, calls to YWCA NWT family violence crisis line increased by an estimated

**50%**



**27%**

**of Women -Led Households**

in Canada are in core housing need, compared to 16% of male-led family households

# RISING COSTS, RISING POVERTY



- The cost of living is on a sharp rise, and more and more families are struggling to keep their heads above water.
- Many people have two to three jobs just to make sure they can meet their basic needs, like housing, food, transportation, etc.
- Government funding for social welfare is simply not keeping up with the cost of inflation.
- This pressure is also felt on the service provider side, as the cost of running programs has greatly increased, but funding hasn't.



## SERIOUS INVESTMENTS IN LONG - TERM SOLUTIONS

# WHAT WILL IT TAKE?



**Bigger and better investments** in affordable and accessible social housing, as well as the supports that are needed to keep people housed.



**Meaningful acknowledgement** of the full-scope of what housing insecurity can look like, and a better understanding of how it impacts various communities.



Government responses and programs that are **compassionate, human-centered, and keep pace** with an ever-changing world .

### *What Else?*

- Legal framework review and system response
- Development of specific policy interventions to help reduce and prevent Indigenous homelessness
  - Affordability
  - Funding and resource allocation
- Community participation and gendered perspective



**THE TIME FOR ACTION IS  
NOW.**

# THANK YOU

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## **HOUSING AS A HUMAN RIGHT: YWCA NWT**

### ***Introduction:***

Good morning. My name is Hawa Dumbuya-Sesay, and I am the executive director of YWCA NWT. Thank you for this opportunity to share our thoughts on Housing as a Human Right this morning.

YWCA NWT presented on the Missing Persons Act several months ago, so members are likely familiar with us. Nonetheless, I'll provide a brief introduction to situate our organization on this topic.

### ***About the YWCA NWT:***

Our mission is to create safe and equitable Northern communities where women, girls and families can realize their full potential. We operate a variety of services to achieve this, from youth empowerment and after-school childcare, to independent legal advice/representation for survivors of sexual and family violence.

However, our biggest and most established program is housing. This has been a key part of our work since YWCA NWT's inception in 1966.

In Yellowknife alone, we have:

- 21 transitional housing units for families in need of support, with several of these specifically dedicated as emergency housing for families at immediate risk of homelessness at any given time;
- 18 second-stage housing units for women and children who have left abusive households; and
- A 6-bedroom emergency shelter for those fleeing violence within the home.

We also work closely with private landlords in Yellowknife to secure units for families who would otherwise be turned away due to bad credit or previous debts. We support by paying expenses like rental arrears and damage deposits to lessen any barriers, and eventually, leases are turned over to the families themselves.

Wraparound supports are built directly into our housing programs, and are indeed integral to their success. We have a team of support workers who gently walk with families as they navigate all aspects of the system. Other services we provide include wellness programming, employment readiness, and food assistance, to name a few.

Lastly, we have also opened two safe homes in regions without access to a full-service family violence shelter, offering women and children a place within their own community when violence escalates within the home.

## ***How Do We Understand Housing?***

Suffice to say, YWCA NWT has a lot of experience working in supportive housing.

Given this context of our work, we understand housing as more than just a roof over one's head - though this is, of course, a basic need that must be met for all.

We understand housing as key to safety, stability, and sovereignty (in both the personal and collective sense). Reliable and adequate housing provides refuge. It can offer a new start and facilitate new opportunities. It allows families to stay together, and to grow together.

When we look at housing as an issue, we are also looking beyond the physical structure, and we are considering what it takes to *keep* people housed. It's not enough to simply give someone housing and think the problem is solved - you have to actively support the people that are in there. This means enabling access to food, transit, healing services, community, etc.

So when we talk about housing as a human right, this is what we are thinking about. We are thinking about the people that are living inside the housing, and how they deserve the safety, stability, opportunity, and dignity that accessible, affordable, and reliable housing affords them.

Everyone has a right to housing, regardless of financial or material status, regardless of identity or background, regardless of where one lives or what one does. It's as simple as that!

### ***Hidden Homelessness:***

We'll now turn our attention to the primary challenges that YWCA NWT routinely witnesses with the territory's current housing system.

As providers of transitional and second-stage family housing, we most often encounter a form of acute housing insecurity known as "hidden homelessness." This is defined as those who are provisionally accommodated, but do not necessarily have secure housing of their own. It includes anyone who is couch-surfing, sleeping in a car or other sort of vehicle, or living in a short-term shelter with nowhere to go next, for example.

This type of homelessness is referred to as "hidden" because it's not as visible as those sleeping rough or frequenting overnight shelters - but that does not mean it doesn't exist! It is incredibly precarious, unsafe, and draining for those experiencing it.

Because hidden homelessness is harder to spot, it's not being properly enumerated or recognized. So, it's important to note that the true number of people experiencing homelessness is so much greater than what statistics - such as Point-In-Time counts or other shelter surveys - are telling us.



Speaking frankly, governments of all levels have blinders on when it comes to addressing or even acknowledging the scope of hidden homelessness in the Northwest Territories.

### ***A Gendered Housing Crisis:***

These blinders are concerning for a number of reasons, but one of them is that hidden homelessness is highly gendered. It is most commonly experienced by women and their families, as they are more likely to accept precarious accommodations simply to keep their children housed.

Furthermore, women-led households nationwide disproportionately live in core-housing need, meaning they fall below at least one of the accepted adequacy, affordability or suitability standards.

The North is certainly no exception to this. The problem is further exacerbated by our epidemic of intimate partner and family violence, which is occurring at a rate 10 times the national average. A 2019 report conducted by researchers at Aurora College revealed violence to be one of the primary causes of women's housing insecurity.

The same report described survivors of intimate partner violence leaving their abusers, only to return because there is nowhere to live. Women are actually choosing a life of abuse because they don't have anywhere else to go that is affordable and accessible to them.

On the other hand, women who are insecurely housed are more likely to experience violence. It's a self-perpetuating cycle.

At YWCA NWT, we routinely witness this dilemma. Women with or without children come into our family violence shelter, and often with limited financial means, struggle to find housing where they can begin a violence-free life.

Waitlists for public housing can be years long and difficult to get on. We work hard to fill that gap with our second-stage and transitional housing, but our programs are often vastly oversubscribed, and we can't always make up the shortfall.

### ***Rising Costs, Rising Poverty***

Now, add on to all of this the ever-rising cost of living. Everything has become so much more expensive, and families are sinking deeper and deeper into poverty. The smaller the community, the worse the problem.

We have more and more people coming to us for assistance just to try and keep their heads above water amidst this affordability crisis. We've met many people who are working two to three jobs just to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table.

Sadly, government funding for social welfare is simply not keeping up with the cost of inflation.

One stark example is the housing subsidies that the territorial government currently provides. Applicants are currently eligible for up to \$800 a month. However, with the aforementioned rising costs of living, that \$800 does not go nearly as far as it once did, especially for larger families with more people to accommodate and mouths to feed.

It's worth noting as well that the \$800 is calculated based on gross income, not net income - which means applicants are receiving even less.

This pressure is felt on the service provider side, as well. The funding we receive is relatively static, but the cost to keep the lights on, fix and repair units, staff to support the families living there, etc. have all gone up. We do everything in our power to keep that rise in costs from being passed on to tenants, but we are being left with fewer and fewer options.

We point this out because there have been several examples in recent years of the territorial government taking over programs (such as shelters) from nonprofits, only to greatly increase the budget allocated to it. If the GNWT needs that money to run the service, why are we expecting community organizations to do the same thing with half the money?

It's also deeply troubling when funds for programs and projects are cut mid-fiscal, or only funded one year at a time. This gives the impression that governments cannot be trusted to truly commit and that programs are at the whim of whoever is in power - when housing should be a fundamental right irregardless.

### ***What Will It Take?***

So, what will it take to address this crisis? We've painted a rather bleak picture, but of course, there are lots of approaches that can be taken.

Short-term shelters are currently necessary so we can ensure the community's most vulnerable aren't left behind or put in harm's way. But they are Band-Aids for a systemic issue. What the NWT - and indeed, the country - requires are sustained ideological, political and financial investments in long-term solutions.

We need more and better investments in affordable and accessible social housing, as well as the supports that are needed to *keep* people housed.

We need to meaningfully acknowledge the full-scope of what housing insecurity can look like, and have a better understanding of how it impacts various groups within our communities, particularly those that are marginalized.

We need social welfare programs that keep pace with the rising cost of living and

As a clear starting point, we suggest members here look back at the 18 recommendations the previous Standing Committee already made in March 2023 on ways to prevent homelessness in the NWT. We are particularly excited by the recommendations made with regards to Lifting Children and Youth Out of Care, Supporting Gender Equity, and Supporting Holistic Health (though all of the recommendations are excellent and needed).

Further recommendations include:

- Legal framework review and system response
- Development of specific policy interventions to help reduce and prevent Indigenous homelessness
- Affordability
- Funding and resource allocation
- Community participation and gendered perspective

***The Time for Action is Now:***

We want to end this presentation by reiterating that none of what we just said is at all new.

This is information that communities have shared time and time again, and that leaders have had for years, if not decades. Again, just look at the aforementioned report that came from this same committee a year and a half ago.

What counts is action. The NWT wants to see change, and there is plenty of available information on how to make that change. As always, YWCA NWT stands ready to work with the territorial government at any time to start making it happen.

***Thank you!***