

A WAY HOME: NATIONAL HOUSING STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS



THE ISSUE

How can the federal government, through the National Housing Strategy, strategically align its efforts with work being done at the provincial, territorial, and local levels to prevent and end youth homelessness?

A WAY HOME CANADA - BACKGROUND

A Way Home Canada is a national coalition of organizations and individuals from across the country that are collaborating and aligning their strategies and resources to prevent and end youth homelessness. Our members include all of the national organizations that work on homelessness in Canada, such as the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, Raising the Roof, the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness, Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, and the Canadian Housing Renewal Association. Our recommendations for the National Housing Strategy are drawn from our collaboration with these groups.

An end to youth homelessness will not come from the youth-serving sector alone. Using a Collective Impact framework, A Way Home Canada works to bring key players to the table from all levels of government, nonprofit and private sectors, and research that have the ability to affect change on the systems that drive young people into homelessness.

We understand that to truly end youth homelessness, we must stop the flow of youth into homelessness in the first place, and we acknowledge that the experience and risk of homelessness is a violation of youths' human rights. A Way Home is committed to shifting the focus and policy discourse from crisis response, to prevention, and establishing appropriate housing supports to move youth out of homelessness as quickly as possible. The National Housing Strategy will be an important component of making this shift toward prevention. The recommendations presented in this document draw on the work of our member organizations, local experts working directly with youth, and most importantly, the youth themselves.

ISSUE CONTEXT

In Canada we are seeing many troubling trends among youth. The 2011 Census of Population data revealed that 59.3% of the young adults aged 20 to 24 live in the parental home, either never having left, or returning home after living somewhere else (Statistics Canada, 2011). Indeed, the Vancouver Foundation Transitions Survey found that a “vast majority of parents who have children under 19 fully expect that they will be supporting their children after they reach 19 [and] 83% of these parents anticipate helping their children pay for post-secondary education” (2013). If these are the prospects for Canada’s youth in general, the barriers to financial security and independence are significantly greater for vulnerable and marginalized youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

The causes and conditions of homelessness are different for young people (Canada Without Poverty & A Way Home Canada, 2016: 4). While some youth leave home because of domestic disputes, others become homeless because of systems failures that turn them out to the streets (eg. child welfare, corrections), and for many this will be their first time leaving behind socially dependent relationships (2016). Solutions to address youth homelessness must therefore be tailored to meet the specific needs of youth.

Preventing homelessness and ensuring young people have stable housing are essential to getting and keeping youth out of poverty. A lack of housing stability can make educational attainment and labour market participation and attachment suffer, because when youth become homeless, they disengage from education and training. This sets in motion a chain of setbacks that can prevent youth from reaching their full potential as adults. With education becoming more and more essential to finding good employment and securing one’s future in a changing labour market, Canada cannot afford to allow precarious housing to be a barrier to youth achievement.



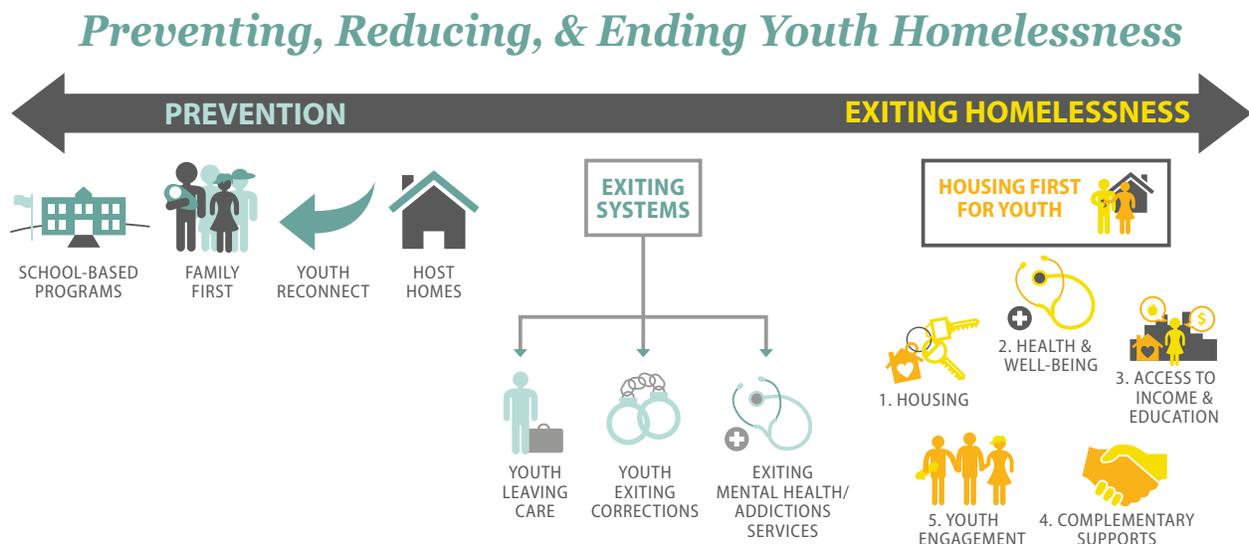
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RECOMMENDATIONS

Expand and enhance the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) with a core component of the strategy supporting youth homelessness prevention and housing supports through community systems planning.

Youth under the age of 25 require programs and services that address their unique needs and issues. Additionally, the resources provided at the federal level need to be flexible, meaningful, and timely in order to be client-driven and meet each young person’s needs within their local context. Without proper exit planning, youth leaving corrections, physical/ mental health, and child welfare systems may also find themselves without a home. Priority must be given to prevention programs that divert and keep young people out of shelters and provide them with appropriate and adequate supports.

Youth-specific prevention programs focus upstream to intervene well before a youth becomes homeless. Evidence-based examples of prevention programs include school-based programs, Family First, Youth Reconnect, and Host Homes. The diagram below illustrates the continuum of prevention programs, systems exit planning, and housing and supports required to address youth homelessness:



Much of the progress around youth homelessness happens at the local level through community planning based in the philosophy of Housing First for Youth. There are communities across Canada at various stages in the planning process, including Lethbridge, Calgary, and Edmonton, AB; Kingston, Ottawa, Toronto, and Wellington County, ON; Winnipeg and Brandon, MB; St. John’s, NFLD; Yellowknife, NWT; Saint John, NB; and Kamloops, BC.

With the Homelessness Partnering Strategy set to expire in 2019, we now have an opportunity to refocus and enhance the program to better align with and expand local progress on youth homelessness. The ever-growing body of knowledge on what policies, programs and services do or do not work to prevent and end youth homelessness could be effectively shared and tested utilizing the existing network of Canada's 61 HPS designated communities.

The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness has received funding through HPS to provide the designated communities with comprehensive training, and similar training sessions could be provided on best practices, strategies, and programs for youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness, including Housing First for Youth. This training partnered with an increase in HPS dollars that invest in communities' efforts to prevent and end youth homelessness would make use of and enhance the existing community assets allowing more communities across Canada to make real advancements toward ending youth homelessness.

In order to reform local systems, communities need to work within the context of the mainstream provincial and territorial systems that address, or at times, feed into youth homelessness. To further innovation around youth homelessness and offer more opportunities for knowledge-sharing between provinces, territories and communities, the government should convene a Federal-Provincial-Territorial Planning Table.

The Planning Table would be cost-neutral, offering an opportunity for all levels of government to evaluate how their systems (physical/mental health, corrections, child welfare, etc.) help or hinder efforts to prevent and end youth homelessness. Policies, programs and systems at the federal, provincial, and territorial levels can then begin to strategically align in order to support community systems planning efforts. Specific attention must be given to the nuanced needs of homeless or at-risk youth in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities throughout.



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Comprehensive planning to increase the supply of and access to affordable housing that is appropriate for youth in their local context.

As mentioned earlier, addressing housing affordability and stability is a crucial component to help youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness reach their potential. Affordability must be addressed from both a supply and demand approach. We therefore recommend that the federal government in collaboration with provincial and territorial governments, create an Affordable Housing Framework Agreement. This agreement would set out specific roles, targets, priorities, and expectations for investment in affordable housing, within the local context of the housing needs of youth. This means allowing for funding to be used by municipalities to meet their community's needs.

A federal-provincial-territorial agreement should include provisions that allocate set numbers of units targeted for young people at the local level which reflect the housing needs of youth in that area. This will prevent youth from having to leave their communities to seek affordable housing, particularly in rural and remote communities. These provisions, along with creative solutions such as landlord-tenant agreements, will help prevent discrimination of youth by landlords of both subsidized and market rental units whom may be especially reluctant to rent to youth, perceiving them to be higher risk tenants.

It is especially imperative that youth exiting public systems between the ages of 16 and 18 receive adequate support to access housing. We recommend a portable housing benefit for youth between 16 and 18 years old, which can be accessed either while residing at home to offset costs to the family, or once they leave home and are either a) legally emancipated from care or the custody of their parents, or b) have their status as being homeless approved by a legal representative or housing worker. In the latter case, the representative or worker would vouch for the youth's inability to return home. This would address any concerns that youth under 18 would leave home prematurely.

This benefit would not be counted as extra income so as not to offset other benefits received by youth or their families. It should also be indexed to reflect local housing prices, which differ greatly from region to region.

The Housing Benefit is a particularly appealing option for communities with limited affordable housing supply, high rent, and/or low vacancy rates, as it makes market-priced rental units accessible and relieves pressure on affordable housing stock. Additionally, a Housing Benefit gives people agency over where they choose to live, rather than being confined to low-income neighbourhoods, helping reduce the concentration of poverty and creating more mixed-income neighbourhoods.

One final key component of an affordable housing strategy is to offer housing and support that meet the unique needs of Indigenous youth. With 28% of the Indigenous population under the age of 14, and their overrepresentation in youth homelessness, it will become increasingly important to provide appropriate prevention programs for these young people, both on- and off-reserve as a part of community planning processes. These actions must meaningfully engage and seek Indigenous leadership in order to empower Indigenous communities to have ownership of the programs and interventions available for their young people.

An example of Indigenous youth homelessness prevention is the award-winning Niwasa Aboriginal Education Program in Hamilton Ontario; a school-based education program that provides culture-based educational services to Indigenous children, youth and families. The number of Indigenous students graduating from high school each year has jumped from 4 in the year before the program was launched, to 38 graduates 12 years later in 2014.

CONCLUSION

Canada is at a crossroads with the development of a National Housing Strategy. Given that this is the first time in many years since the country has seen concerted federal action to address housing and homelessness, it would be easy to create a bare-bones strategy that deviates little from the status quo. We at A Way Home Canada want to challenge the federal government to re-imagine the future for Canada's youth and think differently about how we address social issues in general, and youth homelessness in particular.

This government has the opportunity to leave a lasting legacy of helping to bring an end to youth homelessness in Canada - a worthy and just cause, befitting of a government whose party's rallying cry has been "Real Change". The onus for preventing and ending youth homelessness is not on the federal government alone, however their role in the process cannot be ignored or understated. Ending youth homelessness is possible when we have all of the key players at the table, willing to collaborate and strategically align their efforts and resources. We know how to end youth homelessness, and with your support we hope the National Housing Strategy will be a means to that end.