

REPORT

Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the Upcoming Federal Budget

Submitted by:

A Way Home Canada - a national coalition reimagining solutions to youth homelessness through transformations in policy, planning and practice.



Pre-Budget Submission - Federal Youth Homelessness Prevention Strategy

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RECOMMENDATION:

Development of a Youth Homelessness Prevention Strategy, with a dedicated funding stream under Reaching Home.

Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy has been critical in shaping capacity and opportunity for communities responding to the issue of homelessness and is committed to ending chronic homelessness. But we need to move further upstream. There are three things you can do to address homelessness:

- 1. Prevent it from happening in the first place.**
- 2. Recognize that even with prevention, some people will slip through the cracks and you will need emergency services.**
- 3. Move people out of homelessness with the necessary supports to ensure they don't become homeless again.**

Unfortunately, the bulk of our efforts and investment in Canada are in the middle - the crisis response. This includes for the most part emergency shelters and day programs, designed to address the immediate needs of young people for shelter and perhaps food. This imbalance in how we invest in, and respond to, homelessness is highly problematic, especially considering the well-being of young people. While emergency supports are necessary for providing crisis relief, they do little to meaningfully prevent, reduce, or end youth homelessness, nor address the most negative outcomes of this experience.

We can confidently say there has not been the same prioritization of services and supports for the youth population who are experiencing/at-risk/near-risk of homelessness in communities as there has been for other populations (chronic or veterans for example). This lack of prioritization continues to impact the federal government's overall goal of reducing chronic homelessness nationally by 50% by the fiscal year 2027/28. Relying on crisis responses, coupled with piecemeal youth-focused programs and practice, doesn't serve communities well, and further exposes young people to harm. Numerous studies have demonstrated the harmful consequences of allowing young people to remain in an extended state of homelessness, and yet few communities in Canada have youth-specific systems or strategies to help them transition quickly into housing. In this regard, we are not making sufficient progress and too many young people remain stuck in homelessness. Communities need to align with a larger vision, need to be given permission to innovate and are desperately looking for ways in which they can partner with larger systems to increase partnership and decrease inflow into homelessness.

The introduction of a youth strategy, under Reaching Home, presents a real opportunity to transform how we address youth homelessness in Canada, by moving from managing the crisis and putting young people at great risk, to an approach that focuses on the health and well-being of young people and assisting them to transition to adulthood in a safe and planned manner. The Government of Canada has shown great leadership in introducing prevention as a priority within the current Reaching Home Strategy. We need to take it to the next step. This means retaining current investments in Housing First and other community supports but also a dedicated investment in, and prioritization of, youth homelessness.

The 2016 pan-Canadian *Without a Home study* brought to light an ongoing crisis and revealed data that demonstrates that a focus on youth is central to achieving the federal government's goal of ending chronic homelessness. Among youth experiencing homelessness:

- **40.1%** were under the age of 16 when they first experienced homelessness;
- **76%** had multiple experiences of homelessness, with **37%** of these youth reporting more than five experiences of homelessness;
- **85.4%** were experiencing a mental health crisis, with **42%** reporting at least one suicide attempt; **38%** of young women reported a sexual assault in the previous 12 months;
- **57.8%** had involvement with child welfare involvement. Compared to national data (Statistics Canada, 2011), youth experiencing homelessness are 193 times more likely to have had involvement with child welfare (see also Nichols et al., 2017);
- **63.1%** had experienced childhood trauma and abuse;
- **51%** were not currently involved in either education, employment, or training; and Indigenous, racialized, newcomer, and LGBTQ2S+ youth are overrepresented in homeless youth populations across Canada.

The *Without a Home* study also highlights some important linkages that show overall resilience in young people with a commitment to their futures, despite their circumstances.

- **73.9%** indicated they would like to re-engage with their education
- **19.7%** were employed (the unemployment rate among youth in the general Canadian public was **13.3%** at the time of the survey)¹.

1. Stephen Gaetz, Bill O'Grady, Sean Kidd & Kaitlin Schwan. (2016). *Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey*. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

To further emphasize and bolster the Without a Home study data, UNICEF Canada released the [*Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being 2019 Baseline Report*](#) (the Index) in 2019. Staggeringly, the Index revealed data that suggests Canada is failing to meet the needs of children and youth across several focus areas that are predictors of homelessness:

- **23.3%** of 11–15-year-olds report going to school or to bed hungry because there is not enough food at home
- **20%** of children under 18 live in a household with an income lower than 60% of the median (LIM); and **3.5%** of children under 18 live in deep income poverty (below 75% of Canada's Official Poverty Line)
- **12.6%** of children under 18 have a core housing need; and **3%** of Canadian youth between the ages of 15 and 17 have been homeless and/or have experienced hidden homelessness.²

Lastly, the 2018 Federal (Homeless Partnering Strategy) Point-in-Time Count found that 50% of all people currently experiencing homelessness had their first experience before they were 25.

All of this points to key conclusions:

- For young people at risk of or who experience homelessness, we are waiting too long to intervene. In many jurisdictions, services for young people who experience homelessness are not available until they are 16 or even 18 years of age.
- For young people, the experience of homelessness for any length of time can have a devastating impact on health, safety, mental health, and well-being. We cannot expect this vulnerable population to “bootstrap” themselves out of homelessness.
- Those who do experience homelessness should be assisted in exiting this situation through the model of Housing First for Youth, an adaptation of Housing First that focuses on the needs of developing adolescents and young adults.
- By responding to youth homelessness in a more effective manner, we will decrease the likelihood that they will experience chronic homelessness as adults.

2. UNICEF Canada, *Child and Youth Well-being, 2019 Baseline Report*. September 3, 2019. <https://oneyouth.unicef.ca/en/child-and-youth-well-being-index>

This submission briefly outlines a vision for a distinct Youth Strategy, followed by a dedicated funding stream to be prioritized within the updated Reaching Home strategy. It focuses on four key pillars of activity:

- 1. Community planning and systems coordination**
- 2. Program and practice model adoption**
- 3. Training and technical assistance**
- 4. Equity, diversity and inclusion**

1. Community Planning and Systems Coordination

Reaching Home directives outline program requirements to assist federally-funded communities in preventing and reducing homelessness. There are some important new directions that are of specific interest to those focusing on youth homelessness prevention. Importantly, Reaching Home's mandatory community-level outcomes not only require Designated Communities to act and report on reductions in chronic homelessness. Communities are also required to report on reductions to new inflows into homelessness (note: this is primary and secondary prevention); and returns to homelessness (tertiary prevention). Both directives point to system reform. From fragmented services and supports at the community level to large-scale systems not converging when they need to, communities and the local organizations on the ground doing the work need better mechanisms and responses they can rely on. We witnessed within the Pandemic an acceleration of and clear alignment with prevention along with preparedness for change. Implementation of innovative programs and housing solutions tailored to the specific needs of young people, as well as structural changes within the operations of homeless-serving systems, need to be supported. The transformation of public systems, including child welfare, education, mental health, income supports and criminal justice, and their enhanced integration which can facilitate broad systems of care is essential. There are dynamics that are unique to each community that must be accounted for in local efforts and plans.

2. Program and Practice Model Adoption

Strategic and priority funding 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 must focus upstream to intervene well before a youth becomes homeless. The overrepresentation of particular demographics in the local homeless population, such as Indigenous youth, makes a difference in the design of these interventions so that must be taken into consideration. Addressing the issue in a rural or urban setting considerably impacts system planning approaches and resources needed. Practice and program model adoption need to be driven by evidence-based approaches and program models. The Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Demonstration Lab (MtS DEMS), funded by the Employment and Social Development Canada as part of the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy (YESS), has yielded important resources which can and will accelerate the on-the-ground application of Family and Natural Supports, Youth Reconnect and Housing First for Youth in communities.

3. Training and Technical Assistance

Building capacity for prevention across sectors through training, one-on-one coaching, program support, and facilitating dedicated Communities of Practice is at the root of how evidence-based program and practice models can be scaled and integrated within a system of care. Ensuring communities have the tools at their disposal, to ensure they are ready for program and practice model implementation and change is necessary. With that comes opportunities to introduce innovation and new collaborative efforts that can assist with streamlining systems, but also brings integrating services where possible. The work of adopting and transforming programs/practices, through training and technical assistance, cannot be done in isolation. Communities must be carefully supported through implementation and the building of these new systems.

4. Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

Concentrating our focus on enhancing where and how equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) can be placed within the ongoing strategic and practical work should underpin the three key pillars: community planning and systems coordination, program and practice model adoption and training and technical assistance, as detailed above. This work can capture the intersections between where a lack of EDI impacts program effectiveness and organizational capacity to recruit, retain and support a diverse workforce at all levels. Broad learning to enhance

culturally specific or diverse service orientations creates the kinds of intersectional approaches necessary for improving outcomes for youth and families.

5. Youth Strategy Directives

We are recommending that a dedicated Youth Strategy introduce youth-centred directives that align with how youth-serving organizations operate and reflect other funded areas of work where harmonization of efforts can be achieved. We believe these Directives can be supported and leveraged across Federal departments:

- Increased housing stability for youth;
- Sustained exits from homelessness;
- Prevention of youth homelessness;
- Enhanced educational participation and achievement; and
- Stronger employment and labour market participation outcomes.

The responsibility for preventing and ending youth homelessness is not on the federal government alone, however, their role in the process cannot be ignored or understated. As identified, preventing youth homelessness, and sustaining exits from youth homelessness is within reach. With a guiding strategy that leverages the strengths of community resources at the provincial/territorial and municipal levels as well as established knowledge and leadership to achieve these pillars, it is possible. A Way Home Canada, in partnership with our national and community partners, want to challenge the federal government to re-imagine the future for Canada's youth.

This government has the opportunity to completely shift the trajectory of ending chronic homelessness in Canada, but it cannot achieve that without a firm and lasting emphasis on youth homelessness prevention.

- **Communities can be ready to increase youth homelessness prevention with the right support.**
- **Evidence-based program models ready for scaling are at your disposal for promotion.**
- **Collaborative, prevention-based approaches that support upstream efforts and facilitate sustainable exits from youth homelessness, require multi-year/sustainable funding.**
- **A Way Home Canada is prepared to walk with you to ensure our shared outcomes are realized.**