Realizing the Right to Housing for Two-Spirit, Trans and Gender Diverse People

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About The 519 Church Street Community Centre

The 519 is a City of Toronto agency and registered charity built by Toronto's 2SLGBTQIA+ communities; a space where people come together to celebrate, organize, and create community. As an organization, we are committed to the health, happiness and full participation of the 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. We strive to make a real difference in people's lives, while working to advance equity, justice and community strength. In addition to a diverse suite of community and peer programs, we offer a legal clinic, housing supports, health services, and refugee and newcomer supports for 2SLGBTQIA+ communities across the city. In 2022, The 519 began collaborating with Homes First Society to develop the first 2SLGBTQIA+ adult shelter in Toronto, with an exclusive focus on refugee newcomers to Canada, and 50% of its 20 beds specifically dedicated to Trans or gender-diverse residents.

Background

It is well-evidenced that Two-Spirit, Trans and gender-diverse people have numerous barriers to realizing their right to safe, adequate and affordable housing. They are more likely to enter homelessness at younger ages; more likely to experience chronic homelessness; twice as likely to report conflict with or abuse from parents as a reason for housing loss; and almost 3 times as likely to experience health challenges (e.g. illness, mental health, substance use, suicidality), as compared to their cisgender counterparts[1].

Barriers faced by Two-Spirit, Trans and gender diverse people accessing safe housing are multi-fold. In emergency housing, the design of shelters is inherently gendered (e.g., women's / men's shelters; gendered washrooms etc.), making them structurally unsafe for Two-Spirit, Trans and nonbinary people from the outset. Additionally, transphobia (and anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism) across the housing continuum – in shelters, transitional housing, supportive housing, long-term care and amongst market rental housing etc. – is commonly experienced[2].

What's more, we know that statistical counts of Two-Spirit, Trans and gender diverse people experiencing homelessness are likely underestimates, as they may not feel comfortable disclosing this information and often avoid shelters altogether due to fear of violence and discrimination amidst a culture of normalized oppression. Shelter avoidance in turn results in risks to their safety,

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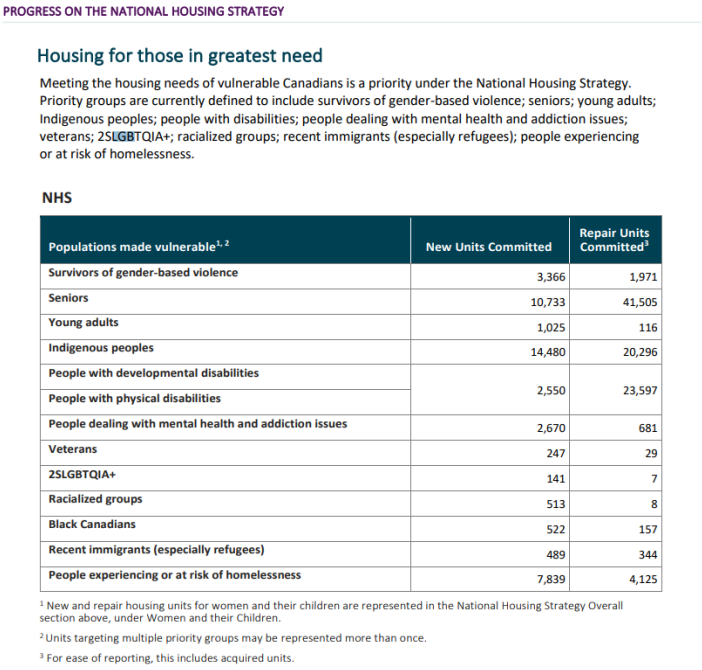
[1] Identifying 2SLGBTQ+ individuals experiencing homelessness using Point-in-Time counts: Evidence from the 2021 Toronto Street Needs Assessment survey | PLOS ONE
2SLGBTQ+ Peoples' Experiences of Homelessness in Toronto: Analysis of the 2021 Street Needs Assessment Survey: City of Toronto.
2SLGBTQ+ Youth, Violence, and Homelessness2SLGBTQ+ Youth, Violence, and Homelessness
Research-Brief-on-Housing-Need-Homelessness-amongst-Gender-Diverse-Persons.pdf
HEALTH AND WELL-BEING AMONG TRANS AND NON-BINARY YOUTH

[2] Research-Brief-on-Housing-Need-Homelessness-amongst-Gender-Diverse-Persons: Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network.pdf
Experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ Adults in Toronto's Homelessness and Housing Support System: MAP Centre for Urban Health Solutions.doc
Housing-Responsive-Report-for-CHRC
Aging Out, Moving towards queer and trans* competent care for seniors: Qmmunity
Developing Sustainable & Safe 2SLGBTQ+ Housing Models: The 519, 2022.

as they navigate the precarity of returning to abusive settings, couch surfing, or sleeping outdoors – contributing to an additional layer of 'hidden homelessness' that is not captured in our current data. [3]?.

Barrier Analysis - Federal Strategy

While *Housing and Homelessness* is named as a key pillar in the Federal 2SLGBTQIA+ Action Plan, little action has been initiated to date. Similarly, while the National Housing Strategy identifies 2SLGBTQIA+ as a priority population, **only 148 units** had been committed for 2SLGBTQIA+ people after seven years of the NHS's 10-year plan – the lowest of any priority group[4]. The disconnect between these two national strategies paints a stark picture of inaction on 2SLGBTQIA+ housing priorities. Since evidence suggests that housing discrimination and barriers are further exacerbated for 2SLGBTQIA+ members at the intersections[5], prioritizing Two-Spirit or Trans-specific Black, Indigenous and seniors housing (to name some examples) would support the right to housing for multiple NHS priority groups.



PROGRESS ON THE NATIONAL HOUSING STRATEGY

Housing for those in greatest need

Meeting the housing needs of vulnerable Canadians is a priority under the National Housing Strategy. Priority groups are currently defined to include survivors of gender-based violence; seniors; young adults; Indigenous peoples; people with disabilities; people dealing with mental health and addiction issues; veterans; 2SLGBTQIA+; racialized groups; recent immigrants (especially refugees); people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

NHS

Populations made vulnerable[1, 2]	New Units Committed	Repair Units Committed[3]
Survivors of gender-based violence	3,366	1,971
Seniors	10,733	41,505
Young adults	1,025	116
Indigenous peoples	14,480	20,296
People with developmental disabilities	2,550	23,597
People with physical disabilities		
People dealing with mental health and addiction issues	2,670	681
Veterans	247	29
2SLGBTQIA+	141	7
Racialized groups	513	8
Black Canadians	522	157
Recent immigrants (especially refugees)	489	344
People experiencing or at risk of homelessness	7,839	4,125

[1] New and repair housing units for women and their children are represented in the National Housing Strategy Overall section above, under Women and their Children.

[2] Units targeting multiple priority groups may be represented more than once.

[3] For ease of reporting, this includes acquired units.

Source: Progress Report on the National Housing Strategy, September 2024, page 32.

Another key barrier to the right to housing for these communities is the lack of disaggregation of Two-Spirit, Trans and gender diverse experiences within the broader 2SLGBTQIA+ umbrella – both in terms of housing data, and with regard to target outcomes for this priority group. While research is growing on general 2SLGBTQIA+ experiences of homelessness, more research is needed to understand the specific barriers to accessing safe and adequate housing for Trans and gender diverse people, and Two-Spirit people respectively, as these particular communities disproportionately face more barriers to housing than their cisgender counterparts. Likewise, when tracking outcomes for NHS-identified priority groups (as above), housing for Two-Spirit, Trans and gender diverse people in particular must be disaggregated from the generalized 2SLGBTQIA+ umbrella, given the urgent vulnerability of these communities.

Finally, while this NEHA review seeks to examine *the right to safe, adequate and affordable housing of women, Two Spirit, Trans, and gender-diverse people* as a collective group, we must respectfully make explicit that housing barriers faced by 2 Spirit, Trans women, Trans men and gender non-

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[3] Developing Sustainable & Safe 2SLGBTQ+ Housing Models: The 519, 2022, p.11.
Research-Brief-on-Housing-Need-Homelessness-amongst-Gender-Diverse-Persons.pdf, p.19-20.
2SLGBTQ+ Peoples' Experiences of Homelessness in Toronto: Analysis of the 2021 Street Needs Assessment Survey: City of Toronto.
Housing-Responsive-Report-for-CHRC
2SLGBTQ+ Youth, Violence, and Homelessness https://www.gbvlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/issuebased_newsletters/issue-24/Issue_24.pdf

[4] Progress on the National Housing Strategy, September 2024, page 32.

[5] 2SLGBTQ+ Peoples' Experiences of Homelessness in Toronto: Analysis of the 2021 Street Needs Assessment Survey: City of Toronto, p.12: 64% of 2SLGBTQ+ respondents in the Toronto 2021 Street Needs Assessment identified as racialized, with Black and Indigenous representing the highest demographic; 28% and 16% respectively.

conforming people **greatly differ** from housing barriers impacting cisgender women. To realize the right to housing for Two-Spirit, Trans and gender-diverse people, we must be responsive to the unique vulnerabilities of transphobic violence and discrimination; lack of inclusive and culturally responsive housing; and structurally gendered shelter spaces and processes.

Summary of Engagement

From January-February 2025, The 519 engaged 54 Two-Spirit, Trans and gender diverse community members, as well as LGBTQ-identified women on a vision and reflection of their right to housing. This series of engagements compliments our Housing Consultation from 2022 (see attached report), where over 120 individuals participated in a consultation on 2SLGBTQIA+ experiences in the Toronto shelter system. Across the groups engaged, several main themes emerged. Many of these insights align with previous consultation findings and reports, validating a direction for action.

Vision

Collectively, participants called for freedom from harassment, transphobia and discrimination (from landlords, shelter workers and other residents); space that provide autonomy, agency and dignity; buildings that are structurally sound with basic heat and amenities; proximity to transit and community; and affordability tied to income, that can enable stable, long-term housing.

Reason

Experiences of discrimination and the mental toll of feeling unsafe in housing across the continuum (e.g. shelters, supportive housing, private market housing etc.) was a common thread amongst all participants, as was the inability to find affordable housing that did not compromise meeting their other basic needs. Many described poor living conditions, including pests, holes in the walls and inadequate heat or water.

Two-Spirit and Trans BIPOC adult participants expressed many experiences of transphobic violence and harassment, resulting in a severe lack of safety in housing. Amongst youth and refugee shelter residents, numerous encounters with unscrupulous landlords and an inability to understand or enact their rights was commonly voiced. Many participants expressed being severely impacted by long housing waitlists and burdensome administration e.g. for shelters, supportive housing, RGI etc.

Knowledge

Participants named queer and Trans-specific networks and community services as particularly valuable in affirming their right to housing, for e.g. access to Trans-centred spaces and programming; support from peer Trans and BIPOC housing navigators and shelter workers; and a desire for a dedicated Trans representation amongst housing decision-makers etc. Conversely, participants spoke of multiple instances where they felt they were at the whim of individual gatekeepers for resources, describing experiences with social workers, shelter staff and landlords who lacked empathy or understanding of Trans experiences, and who directly or indirectly discriminated against them, with no accountability.

Recommendations for Action

Collectively, participants across all groups consistently named the following actions:

1. Create and increase dedicated housing for Two-Spirit, Trans and Gender Diverse communities across the housing continuum (e.g. shelters, supportive/transitional housing, long-term care, inclusive affordable housing etc.) with safe, supported and long-term pathways towards housing stabilization.

2. Appoint a housing advocate for Two-Spirit, and Trans and Gender Diverse housing rights.

3. Appoint 2SLGBTQIA+ organizations to lead the development of a de-institutionalized *for us by us* housing model, with access to Trans-specific community services and peer networks; warm and affirming housing advocates and navigators; and 2SLGBTQIA+ shelter staff and peer residents etc.

4. There is an urgent need for policy intervention to stop the financialization of housing – for Two-Spirit, Trans and Gender Diverse communities, and beyond. Key examples named by participants include: rent control; vacancy control; rent relief (akin to mortgage relief); strengthening landlord accountability (re: discrimination, unlawful requests or evictions etc.); and more funding for permanently and deeply affordable housing.

Attachments:

- Testimonials from Right to Housing workshops conducted by The 519, with engagement from 54 Two-Spirit, Trans and Gender Diverse community members and queer cisgender women.
- The 519: *Developing Sustainable & Safe 2SLGBTQ+ Housing Models: Community Consultation and Review, 2022* (29 pages).
- Taylor Newberry Consulting: *Partnerships in Action: Implementing a Shelter for Queer and Trans Newcomer Refugees, 2024* (70 pages).