

Policy Brief: Bold action on supportive housing

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Wellesley Institute advances population health and reduces health inequities by driving change on the social determinants of health through applied research, effective policy solutions, knowledge mobilization and innovation.

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Acknowledgment of Traditional Land

We wish to acknowledge this land on which Wellesley Institute operates. For thousands of years, it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

Policy Brief

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Introduction

Ontario faces three crises in housing – attainability, affordability and homelessness. These crises were and are exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The economic chaos created as our American allies become difficult neighbours threatens to pile on top of the COVID-19 damage before our society, systems and people have recovered, and make homelessness even worse, when it has already devastated health for generations. Ontarians experiencing homelessness get sick, stay sick and die young. Street-involved men in Toronto die 24 years younger, and women in Toronto die 42 years younger, than the general population.

We cannot solve the homelessness crisis without supportive housing.

Supportive housing combines housing assistance (e.g., rent-geared-to-income and rent supplements) and wrap-around support services (e.g. counselling, addiction supports, life skills training, medication management, and more) to serve diverse client populations. It is critical to meet the needs of those at risk of homelessness or currently experiencing homelessness, individuals with physical or developmental disabilities, and individuals with mental health and/or substance use challenges.

The demand for supportive housing has continued to rise across Ontario. In 2017, an expert panel indicated the need to build an additional 30,000 new supportive housing units in the province over the following 10 years. It is clear this outdated estimate is very low. The wait list for mental health and addictions supportive housing in the City of Toronto alone was more than 28,000 in 2024. The supply of new supportive housing spaces has not met that 2017 target. Additionally, the cost of housing has dramatically increased, along with many other goods essential to a thriving, healthy life. It is reasonable to expect prevalence may have increased in the last eight years. Finally, that estimate was for mental health and addictions units specifically and did not address needs in other areas.

Supportive housing residents report positive mental health and substance use outcomes, enhanced community integration, and overall well-being. A national evaluation of supportive housing by the Mental Health Commission of Canada found every \$10 investment into supportive housing yields \$21.72 in public cost savings.

Despite the importance of ending homelessness, and the benefits of supportive housing, for providers currently working to create and continue supportive housing, red tape is far too challenging. There are three levels of government and multiple provincial ministries involved in providing housing to people who need it, making the system difficult to navigate. This is time that has costs that should be spent on housing care.

We cannot afford not to end homelessness and provide supportive housing for everyone who needs it. Beyond the moral imperative, supportive housing addresses issues that are challenging Ontarians across the province. It gives those in homelessness a chance to enter the job market. It reduces crime and recidivism. It saves our healthcare system money in emergency rooms, hospital beds, human resources and ambulances, and addresses our mental health and addictions challenges.

Our organizations have joined with a number of others from across the province to urge the provincial government to take action on supportive housing. This briefing note provides additional recommendations to address the two areas proposed by the Supportive Housing for Ontario Coalition:

1. Set up the system for success in ending homelessness by addressing red tape and structural barriers to supportive housing. Improve inter-Ministerial policy and funding coordination within the Government of Ontario and among the three levels of government. Centralize resources, decision-makers and staff, and streamline efforts around supportive housing.
2. Deliver the help Ontario needs by investing significantly in the supportive housing sector by adding at least 40,000 units, preferably non-profit owned and operated, to the provincial stock. Ensure equitable delivery of services to structurally disadvantaged groups. Establish goals, objectives and targets for supportive housing that measure client and organization-wide outcomes related to health, well-being, and recidivism, and publicly demonstrate to the people of Ontario how this problem will be solved within 10 years.

Recommendations

1. Create the conditions for success

There are significant system and jurisdictional challenges and red tape making it difficult to deliver supportive housing with the funding that is already available.

Supportive housing includes multiple levels of government, many different ministries, many different agencies, many different systems, and many different organizations engaged in funding and delivery of this essential service. This creates significant challenges for providers – the dedicated, hard-working individuals on the ground who strive every day to deliver the homes and care that people need.

Recommendation 1.1

Ontario is the jurisdiction best positioned to lead on addressing the supportive housing crisis. It should take a leadership role in bringing federal, municipal and Indigenous leaders to the table to develop an all-level plan to end homelessness within 10 years.

Recommendation 1.2

The Premier of Ontario should direct the appropriate Ministers to collaborate with federal and municipal partners to pilot “one window” offices, in which relevant federal, provincial and municipal planners and approvers are co-located to give supportive housing providers a straightforward approach to supporting current units, saving current units from being lost, and creating new ones.

Recommendation 1.3

The Premier of Ontario should direct the Minister of Finance to work with cabinet colleagues, the federal government, and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario to streamline access to all funding for supportive housing, including changing fiscal years for all funding to line up on the same date.

Recommendation 1.4

The Premier of Ontario should direct the Cabinet Office to prepare, within 30 days, a plan to unite all services that house Ontarians under one roof.

One Minister, and one Ministry, should be given a mandate to end homelessness within 10 years. That Ministry should bring together supportive housing capital and operating funding for individuals who have developmental disabilities, are justice-involved, have mental health and substance use challenges, are older adults, and/or have physical disabilities.

This would have the added benefit of allowing the Minister and Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing to focus on facilitating the construction of attainable housing across the province.

A secretariat with an Associate Deputy-level executive lead should be established in Cabinet Office to oversee supportive housing coordination between all Ministries with an interest in ensuring Ontarians are housed, including Municipal Affairs and Housing, Health, Attorney General, Solicitor General, Children, Community and Social Services, Mental Health and Addictions, Seniors and Accessibility, and Finance.

2. Deliver the help Ontario needs

Significant resources, meaningful and trackable public and internal targets, and equitable delivery are all needed to solve the supportive housing crisis and end homelessness.

Recommendation 2.1

The next provincial budget should commit to ensuring at least 40,000 units are added to Ontario's supportive housing stock over the next 10 years as a start to solving this problem.

Recommendation 2.2

The new, streamlined, centralized and accessible Ministry and Cabinet Office leaders responsible for delivering supportive housing should immediately undertake to create, within six months, definitions for supportive housing that span the spectrum of need. This should include supports ranging from life skill and program access up to significant mental or physical supports, including in long-term care. This should be completed in consultation with communities affected, experts and other levels of government.

Recommendation 2.3

In advance of the second budget of their mandate, the provincial government should create a public report outlining:

1. How many supportive housing units currently exist across Ontario, based on the definition from the previous recommendation.
2. How many units are actually needed by 2035 to ensure everyone in Ontario who needs supports to be housed receives them.
3. How the government intends to lead all levels of government and the non-profit sector to ensure that those supportive housing units will be constructed and funded.
4. What targets all three levels of government will meet for delivering additional supportive housing, including to sub-groups of the population most in need.
5. Other steps the government will lead on to ensure that chronic homelessness is eliminated by 2035.

Conclusion

Homelessness and housing unaffordability are not new, but they are worse every day. Homelessness is morally unacceptable in a free and democratic society. It places unsustainable burdens on our health, justice and social support systems. It does societal damage we can no longer afford. It weakens our economy in way that, with the current global uncertainty, we cannot continue to bear.

It is time for bold action on supportive housing to humanely and effectively eliminate the scourge of homelessness. Our government can show everyone in Ontario what we can achieve together, and the stronger future we can build.

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