



# Ending the housing crisis: Strategic advocacy stories



THE NATIONAL  
RIGHT TO HOUSING  
NETWORK

Summary of strategic advocacy stories from the July 2022 Strategic Advocacy Summit.



“The responsibility we bear to sustain each other is massive. Through this report, we want to hold space for the labour that advocates are putting in to keep people housed. The stories shared can serve as advice that can be potentially translated to other contexts — or even as a reminder, that we are not alone in this struggle.”

~Alex Nelson, National Right to Housing Network.

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“[The National Housing Strategy Act is] owned by the people at this Summit, by people who were turned away at shelters last night, by kids who are leaving child welfare with all of their possessions in a garbage bag — all of the folks that we are working in solidarity with across the country, those are the people who own this legislation.”

~Khulud Baig, Women’s National Housing and Homelessness Network.

## **A note on voices:**

In order to keep people’s voices clear and authentic, under the “What Advocacy Looks Like – In their words...” headings, we have kept stories as first person, so as to not change the tone and dilute the message. Housing is a very personal aspect of life – sometimes all-consuming – and fighting for the right to housing is exhausting.

This report was edited to ensure plain language and accessibility, but we decided not to censor or otherwise clean up the text more than necessary, in order to respect and give a solid space to those expressing themselves over their personal fights for the right to fair, adequate, and safe places to exist and call home.



## About the July 2022 Strategic Advocacy Summit

In July 2022, the National Right to Housing Network hosted a Strategic Advocacy Summit — a virtual, two-day event that brought together over 100 advocates from across the country with the goal of connecting leaders in the right to housing movement to network, plan, strategize, and share the stories of their advocacy learnings.

Our strength in the right to housing movement comes from our connections and ties with one another. The Summit was envisioned to provide a venue for conversations among people who might not be able to talk to one other because of where they are, who they are, and what they do — but they all have the same goal: to make the right to housing real for all.

The Strategic Advocacy Summit was a stepping-stone for our collective advocacy when it comes to housing and tenants' rights. This event highlighted the deep effects the housing crisis has had on communities across Canada.

It also exemplifies the passion, drive, dedication and commitment of grassroots advocates and people with lived experience, who continue to advance housing equality for all.

### Thank You & Building the Event

This event was made possible with funding from the [Community Housing Transformation Centre](#), through the Community-Based Tenant Initiative. This funding allowed us to bring Alex Nelson, our Community Engagement and Research Specialist; and Misha Khan, our Strategic Development Manager; on to our team to plan and host this event. Alex moderated the event and panel discussions.

In order to guide the creation of the event, a committee of dedicated advocates came together to help think through equity, safety, and accessibility.

Their insight, patience and care have been critical to building a space where advocates — especially those with lived experience — could meaningfully participate. We discussed the importance of building an event that, at every stage of planning and execution, was able to address and respond to the



challenges and systemic inequality people face, and the very same dynamics that create housing inequity in the first place.

The process of building this space thoughtfully took months of hard work and required us to be flexible and nimble. When we talk about creating a new approach to housing from a human rights perspective, this type of thoughtful and equity-focused work is key.

Our rights-based approach to this Summit, allows us to test and think through ways of building equity and fairness into collaboration, and into systems in general, which are often overlooked.

We offer this Respectful Space Agreement here as a template for others working to hold space for lived experience advocates and marginalized communities. As we learn, this agreement will serve as a living document, and the most up-to-date version can be found on our [Respectful Space Agreement web page](#).

## **Respectful Space Agreement**

The National Right to Housing Network wants its online meetings and events to welcome all people in a safe space. It is important to us that the voices of those that are usually ignored are actively included and listened to.

This usually includes:

- People with lived experience of homelessness.
- Indigenous Peoples.
- People of colour.
- Those of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.
- People with disabilities, impairments, and limitations.
- Otherwise marginalized groups and individuals.

We also understand that people can be in more than one of these categories and that will affect their experiences in a different way than some others.



In particular, we acknowledge that historically, Indigenous Peoples have and continue to experience dispossession, dislocation, and displacement from their lands, languages, and cultures.

Because of this, we use these tools to inform our work:

- [The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,](#)
- [The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action,](#)
- [The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' Calls to Justice,](#)
- Principles of Indigenous self-determination.

To achieve our goal of being a safe space, the National Right to Housing Network has a zero-tolerance for any form of discrimination, violence, bullying, or abusive behaviour. We are committed to ensuring that our events remain safe and respectful spaces for all participants. All of us are responsible for making sure our events continue to be safe spaces, and we call this "our shared responsibility".

### **Our Shared Responsibility**

Registering for a National Right to Housing Network event means you will treat your fellow participants respectfully and help ensure Network events are a safe space for everyone. It also means that any form of discrimination, violence, bullying or abusive behaviour may result in your removal from the event.

Part of building a shared space also involves being mindful of speaking times. As a courtesy to other participants, please keep your speaking time brief to let others share their thoughts.

If any discrimination is witnessed or experienced during a National Right to Housing Network event or if you feel unsafe, please notify an event organizer or any member of our staff. If you have suggestions on how we can improve event experiences for all or make our events more inclusive spaces, please [message us on our contact page](#) to let us know.



# The Right to Housing: Canada's National Housing Strategy Act

## What is the right to housing?

The right to housing is the concept that all people have the “right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity”, according to the first United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing ([Housing Rights Watch, 2023](#)).

This requires the government to implement policies and programs to make sure everyone has this opportunity in the shortest possible timeframes. It also means giving priority to vulnerable groups, and those with greatest need.

On June 21, 2019, Canada passed Bill C-97, which included the [National Housing Strategy Act](#). This Act contains official policy outlining how federal money is spent on housing, and finally recognizes the right to housing that advocates have been working on, for decades.

This report discusses some of their work in the context of the Strategic Advocacy Summit.

Note: in this report, when we mention the National Housing Strategy – either when it was just a strategy or when it became law and called the “National Housing Strategy **Act**” – we link to the Government of Canada information page about it. If you want to access the official legislation, it is linked here:

[Department of Justice Canada – National Housing Strategy Act.](#)





## **How did we get here? – Advocacy Timeline:**

### **1. Tireless advocacy for a cause we never stop believing in:**

For more than three decades, advocates came together and worked to achieve something that had never been done before in Canada: they were working to breathe legislative life into the right to housing. The advocates at the forefront of this work faced frustrations, hurdles, and a lack of political will to match their dogged determination.

“I am here today because, like all of you, I am passionate about social justice, which quite frankly means that we are all slightly irrationally optimistic — because despite overwhelming signs pointing to the contrary, we really do believe that we can build a better world, and we are willing to work for it and fight for it.”

~ Sahar Raza, Policy and Communications Director at the National Right to Housing Network.

### **2. Anticipated release of Canada’s National Housing Strategy:**

In fall 2017, right to housing advocates across Canada waited for the federal government to release its housing strategy. One question stood out in particular: would the [National Housing Strategy](#) recognize



housing as a human right? Would the federal government make real the legislation that was so desperately needed?

### **3. Housing strategy introduced:**

[Canada's National Housing Strategy](#) was introduced in 2017!

### **4. Open letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau & Model legislation developed:**

In August 2018, housing advocates urged Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to enshrine the right to housing in the strategy.

- On August 14, 2018, advocates released [an open letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau](#), totaling 1,100 signatories.
- The letter, urging the Prime Minister to enshrine the right to housing in the strategy, also provided a draft piece of model legislation for the government to work from. Right to housing advocates and legal experts from across the country – notably including Bruce Porter and Elizabeth McIsaac – worked on this. [Read a Literary Review of Canada \(2019\) article on their advocacy work.](#)

### **5. Advocacy and change-makers advocate for a legislation with teeth:**

What followed was a massive government relations and advocacy effort by housing rights advocacy leaders. Change-makers pushed the government to ensure that Canada's first right to housing legislation genuinely worked to disrupt the housing crisis.

### **6. Legislation received Royal Assent – but it wasn't perfect:**

On April 8, 2019, the [National Housing Strategy Act](#) was introduced in the 2019 Budget Implementation Act (Bill C-97). The legislation confirmed the government's commitment to the idea that housing should be recognized as a human right under international law. However, when the Act was introduced, it had major flaws – for example it did not include any meaningful accountability, and it didn't provide for hearings.

### **7. More advocacy for a better legislation:**

A new wave of housing rights advocacy began — building off over 30 years of:

- Grassroots advocacy.
- Engagement with UN human rights bodies.



- Court challenges.

This met unprecedented success and the draft legislation was changed, resulting in the current version of the [National Housing Strategy Act](#).

## **Current status of Canada’s National Housing Strategy Act:**

The [National Housing Strategy Act](#) requires that governments:

- Adopt and maintain a national housing strategy.
- Establish oversight mechanisms — including a National Housing Council and a Federal Housing Advocate — through which systemic housing inequities can be investigated and addressed.
- Provide rights-based accountability mechanisms, including access to hearings through Review Panels, on important systemic issues. [Read more on review panels](#).

The [National Housing Strategy Act](#) is the blueprint for legal pathways to address housing rights violations, and is based in international human rights law.

“When we talk about housing as a human right, we are not just talking about four walls and a roof—we’re talking about adequate housing. That means we’re talking about housing that is:

- Habitable;
- Stable;
- Affordable and spacious enough for your household and family;
- Accessible;
- Culturally adequate for diverse and differently abled people;
- Has necessary infrastructure and facilities like water, sanitation, heating and cooling, and I would even say, internet in this day and age; and,
- Is Located within reach of employment, healthcare, and community.

This right to adequate housing is not a privilege — it’s a fundamental human right, inherent to the dignity and well-being of a person. A critical piece of the social justice puzzle and journey is ensuring that everyone has access to safe and secure housing that meets their needs.”



~ Sahar Raza, Policy and Communications Director at the National Right to Housing Network.”

## **Stories of change:**

We have to listen to success stories, and stories of hardship. We have to acknowledge the great and unprecedented efforts taking place, in advocating for housing to be understood as a human right. We have to hear the stories of those working on the ground, and making this happen.

There are folks building the right to housing framework with the federal government, and folks making incredible local change right now in our communities.

Stories not only make the right to housing feel tangible, but they also allow advocates to witness the very real successes communities are having in defending rights.

**The right to housing means something, and during the Summit, we were able to hear from advocates who are engaging with the process and making real, tangible change happen in their communities.**

**People are claiming the right to housing — let’s talk about how they are doing it.**



## **Advocacy Story #1 – The National Right to Housing Network: A Story of National-Level Coordination to Breathe Life into Canada’s First Right to Housing Legislation**



### **Context:**

National Right to Housing Network staff Sahar Raza (Policy and Communications Director), as well as Alex Nelson (Community Engagement and Research Specialist), spoke on the coordination work done behind the scenes to bring Canada’s first right to housing legislation to light.

“The newly legislated right to housing in Canada, under the 2019 [National Housing Strategy Act](#), is so significant [because] it finally gives us domestic commitments, tools, and mechanisms which we can use to hold every level of our colonial government accountable to the right to housing as it is understood in international law.

“And it signals to our governments, policy-makers, and housing sector the need for a shift away from our current picture of housing, which is very much an extension of the capitalist and colonial project, and treats housing as a commodity or vehicle for certain people in society — who already have wealth and



power — to increase their power and wealth at the expense of everyone else.”

~ Sahar Raza, the National Right to Housing Network’s Policy and Communications Director, as well as Alex Nelson – Community Engagement and Research Specialist

## **What Advocacy Looks Like – In their words...**

No advocacy success happens overnight, it builds on the momentum of years of prior organizing and advocacy, and often takes advantage of policy windows.

The legislated right to housing was built on decades of people from the housing, poverty, and human rights sectors, all pushing the federal government to re-enter the housing space after decades of not being involved.

We often won’t see successes on a day-to-day basis or even a year-to-year basis, and it can be really disheartening.

We started seeing some progress in 2017 when the federal government finally passed its [National Housing Strategy](#) (explained above – see our [“How did we get here? – Advocacy Timeline”](#) section). In that housing strategy, the federal government mentioned that housing is a human right. From there, we were able to further advocate to have this actually legislated as a human right. This demonstrates how slow it can be, but every effort is contributing.





### **How we contribute to change:**

The National Right to Housing Network:

- Creates spaces and opportunities where housing advocates can strategize and collaborate.
- Vocalize our community's calls to action with government.

Progress is slow but increasing. For example: in recent years we've seen the [federal budget revamped housing programs become more affordable \(Government of Canada, 2022\)](#), and the [first co-op housing investment in decades \(Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada, 2022\)](#).

Together, we are a powerful force for change and justice.

### **A slow but steady drive forward:**

The National Housing Strategy, released in 2017, is the vehicle for advancing the country's commitment to the right to housing. The 2019 [National Housing Strategy Act](#) lays down a roadmap for this vehicle, and provides the fuel to put it into motion — but the vehicle still needs a driver.

Housing rights advocates still need to push forward to make sure the government stays accountable for implementing the legislation — and driving it forward.



### **Important advocacy lessons learned:**

1. We need allies in government to see change implemented:

The success we've seen in the right to housing movement has been contingent on a few key government allies who really championed it.

[Adam Vaughan](#) was the Parliamentary Secretary for the housing Minister from 2017 to 2019. Adam really championed the right to housing movement. Right to housing advocates were able to develop a collaborative and trusting relationship with him, and then he was able to drive that forward.

2. Public support needs to be there.

There needs to be demonstrable public support for the cause. For example, the [Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario](#), [The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness](#), [Campaign 2000](#), [Maytree](#), and many other organizations were running letter-writing campaigns to support our collective advocacy. They were able to collect over 10,000 names of supporters who were behind the right to housing.

We also had advocates from many organizations – including [UN Special Rapporteur for the Right to Adequate Housing, Leilani Farha](#) – demonstrating public support for the cause.

This was all very significant and got the government's attention.





### 3. Offer practical solutions to problems.

This is critical, because many of us are in the sector because we are so passionate — we want to end poverty and injustice — but often this can end with just a critique.

We, as passionate experts who are connected with the community, must come up with practical solutions to support the government in making the change we need.

### 4. Pushing for change requires continual upkeep.

We need networks and spaces for collaboration, to continue working with the government. Advocates need to continue the monitoring, accountability, public education and community efforts that got us here in the first place.

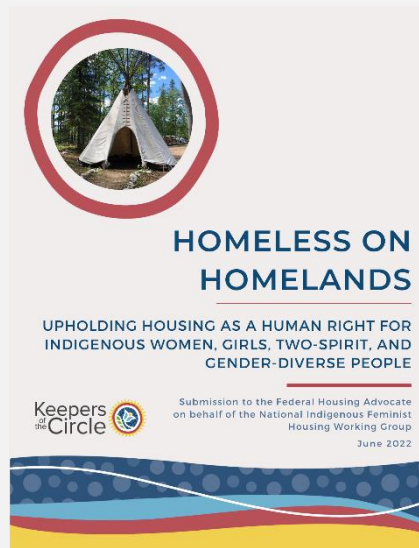
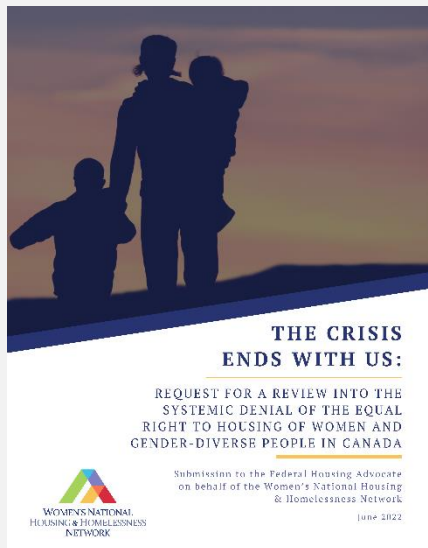
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Our strategy was effective: not only did we build on decades of advocacy, but we also demonstrated society's support, built government allies to champion our efforts, and then we literally gave them the legislation (explained above – see our [“How did we get here? – Advocacy Timeline” section](#)).

## **Advocacy Story #2 – Keepers of the Circle and the Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network: A Story of Advocates Exercising their Human Right to Housing Under the National Housing Strategy Act**

### **Context:**

In the summer of 2022, two grassroots advocacy networks [led two systemic claims on gendered violations of the right to housing](#). These claims were submitted to the [Federal Housing Advocate](#).



One claim was led by the [Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network](#) and one from the [National Indigenous Women's Housing Network](#) (formerly the National Indigenous Feminist Housing Working Group), and are both supported by [Keepers of the Circle](#). The claims complement each other.

For months leading up to the launch, advocates discussed:

- What gendered violations of the right to housing looked like.
- What factors need to be considered in addressing the rights violations faced by this community.
- What the stakes are for engaging in human rights processes.

The fight brought people claiming their housing rights and larger-scale housing advocates, together to make sure community voices are being heard.

Update: as of May 2023, the Federal Housing Advocate has asked the Government of Canada to [establish a human rights Review Panel](#) stemming from this work..

[Access the 2 Claims submitted.](#)

## **What Advocacy Looks Like – In their words...**

### **Explaining Claim #1: Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network:**



“I work to support spaces for Indigenous women to take control of their own solutions and agency when it comes to housing and homelessness solutions.”

~Khulud Baig, Women’s National Housing and Homelessness Network.

The Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network has been working for quite a long time on the gendered nature of housing problems and homelessness, as well as discrimination and inequity related to gender and other intersecting identities.

The real question is: how do we use the [National Housing Strategy Act](#) to advance equity for women and gender diverse folks?

Claim #1 premise: the housing system we're living in has a discriminatory impact on marginalized women and gender diverse folks. We are making policy choices that are resulting in systemic inequity.

This is resulting in:

- A deep core housing need.
- Separation of children from families.
- Chronic poverty.
- Exploitation.
- Abuse.



Gender matters when it comes to housing and homelessness and we have not built a housing system that is responsive to the unique needs and realities of women and gender-diverse folks.

In Claim #1, we were largely focused on 3 right to housing violations:

- Failure to provide adequate, accessible, and affordable housing.
- Failure to prevent and eliminate homelessness amongst women and gender-diverse people.
- Failure to regulate the financialization of housing (the way that profit from housing is prioritized over human rights) in alignment with the right to housing.

The below quote, from Claim #1, really positions the human right to housing as central to agency and control over our own lives, and speaks to our insistence on reclaiming that control:

“We see no future for ourselves in the current housing regime. While our present circumstances have been determined for us, the future is not

yet decided. We offer this claim as part of our efforts to author a future for ourselves, our communities, and our planet through which housing as a tool for inclusion, equity, dignity, and interdependence.”

~ Women’s National Housing and Homelessness Network Human Rights Claim Taskforce.



## **How we developed our Claim:**

We formed a Human Rights Task Force of roughly 30 women and gender-diverse folks from across the country, with a major focus on lived expertise, a diversity of skill sets, and representation from across the country.

We met every 2 to 3 weeks, and would talk about:

- What are the key human rights issues we are seeing?
- What do those look like?
- How do we want to articulate them?
- What is the evidence?

We were guided by lived experts within the group, in terms of how to think about the Claim, what we needed to prioritize, and how to frame it. We also had international experts come in and support us in thinking this through.

As we moved along, we came to a place where we were agreeing on the key priorities. We painstakingly defined, with 30 people in a Zoom room, the central issue we were identifying, and then did a lot of collaborative writing to develop the Claim.

We:

- Analyzed international human rights law.
- Looked through policy and reviewed research.
- Articulated what we saw as key human rights violations.
- Asserted that the Government of Canada is responsible for immediately addressing these urgent human rights issues.

## **Launching our Claim:**

We [held a press conference at Parliament Hill \(YouTube\)](#) to launch our Claim.

“I see myself in this Claim” / “I want to build a Claim” / “How do I get engaged, and how can I help support documenting what human rights violations are happening in my community?”.

~ Anonymous.

“We have this really specific problem in our municipality, and I can use this as a tool to be building power and movement, to be doing advocacy on this issue.”

~ Anonymous.





## Want to submit your own Claim?

If you're an individual, group or organization, you can [submit a Claim to the Federal Housing Advocate](#).

## What happens to a submitted Claim?



### Step 1:

The Federal Housing Advocate receives the Claim, and makes a decision about whether they will review it, or whether they'll send it to the National Housing Council.

### Step 2:

The Federal Housing Advocate or a National Housing Council appointed Review Panel will submit recommendations to the Minister of Housing and Diversity and Inclusion.

### Step 3:

The Government of Canada must issue a response within 120 days to the House of Commons and the Senate.

## Explaining Claim #2: National Indigenous Women's Housing Network (formerly National Indigenous Feminist Housing Working Group):

"The National Indigenous Women's Housing Network is a movement of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples who are dedicated to improving the living situations of Indigenous women and girls, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse persons across Turtle Island and ending incidents of becoming unsheltered. All members have the lived experience of needing adequate shelter and a place to call home."

~National Indigenous Women's Housing Network.



Claim #2 premise: Indigenous Peoples (specifically women, girls and gender-diverse people) disproportionately experience housing rights violations, due to lack of housing opportunities that support the unique safety, historical, cultural, and systems support needs of Indigenous Peoples (specifically women, girls, and gender-diverse people) living with a colonialist government.

The National Indigenous Women's Housing Network (formerly the National Indigenous Feminist Housing Working Group) articulated that it is important to not engage in the human rights fight for adequate housing, just as a way of demanding rights from the Federal Housing Advocate.

Rather, people involved with the Claim articulated that the process of engaging in housing as a human rights process is a way for Indigenous women to:

- Assert their right to self-determination.
- Call out and change colonial policies.
- Define what housing, and the right to housing means to them.
- Enable communities to create and build their own solutions rooted in Indigeneity, and culturally appropriate practices that respect Indigenous livelihoods.

This realization allowed us to regard fighting for housing rights/human rights as a means through which Indigenous women can:

- Assert their own rights, and inherent rights.
- Connect the right to housing to other elements, like right to land, right to practice culture, right to health, right to security – all of these critical, intrinsic rights that you cannot separate from the right to housing for Indigenous women.

### **Manufactured housing crisis for Indigenous communities**

One of the biggest reasons why we see disproportionate housing rights violations in Indigenous communities, is because this is manufactured by the imposition of colonial policies and the kind of housing options made available to Indigenous communities. These housing options are based in Indigenous Peoples not being able to practice their culture, and not having rights to their lands, or cultural ways.

In Claim #2, we were largely focused on 4 right to housing violations:



- Violation 1: Lack of action on the calls to justice from the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Report, and the Truth and Reconciliation Committee calls to action.

If the federal government was really invested in building solutions, the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls report would have all the information they need on how they could build solutions. People on the ground have known this for a long time, but there is a clear lack of will when it comes to the federal, provincial and municipal governments being invested in creating safety and housing rights for Indigenous women.

- Violation 2: Failure to provide safe, adequate, and culturally appropriate housing on our own terms:

We highlighted the violation around providing safe, adequate, culturally appropriate housing, that is on communities' own terms and allows them to practice their culture. We articulated our right to this level of housing in the way that Indigenous women feel it makes sense.

For example:

Just putting 20 standard apartment units in a northern community is not realizing the right to housing, because that housing does not meet the range of cultural, community, and family needs of Indigenous women.

The right to housing is more than providing four walls and roof, and providing housing that is not built with Indigenous Peoples at the centre will be more likely to fall short across other cultural, social and geographical needs.





- Violation 3: Neglect across systems, multiple systems failure, and institutional betrayal:

We highlighted the violations created by multiple public systems, and how they impact the right to housing for Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse people.

For example:

The child welfare system determines what kind of housing we have, and it kicks children out of care at the age of majority. All of those critical connections that would link someone to home, or a community, are stripped away.

Another example is: healthcare.

Many people have to leave their home communities to access something as basic as healthcare, and this determines housing outcomes for people.

- Violation 4: Security of Indigenous land and security of housing on that land, as part of the [National Housing Strategy](#).

Finally, we made a deep connection between land rights and housing rights, because colonial removal of Indigenous Peoples from their land is at the core of housing insecurity and homelessness being experienced by Indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse people. Indigenous Peoples are not interested in any right to housing that does not come with that core connection to right to secure land.

“We would want to build housing, but where do we build housing? We build housing on land.”



~ Indigenous Knowledge Keeper and member of National Indigenous Women's Housing Network.

### **Core recommendations to Federal Housing Advocate:**

- Appoint a panel of knowledge keepers, Elders, and advocates to look at Indigenous housing rights claims submitted to the Federal Housing Advocate.
- Review the Action Plan for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women report.
- Develop an Indigenous Human Rights Tribunal.

### **Housing advocacy in the North:**

We're using the housing rights Claims to create space for advocacy in the Northwest Territories through working together with advocates like Lisa and the co-chair of the National Indigenous Women's Housing Network, Katlia Lafferty, who is also an advocate from Yellowknife. Housing in the North specifically, has some very unique challenges due to geography of the North and the resources that are made available there, but also because of the extreme lack of political will of northern colonial governments to provide real solutions to people living there.

Above and below are some of the pictures that Katlia has taken in people's homes – homes where people are paying upwards of \$2,000 in rent. This is housing provided by the Government of Northwest Territories, as the main housing provider in the territory:



### **Call-out for other Northern housing advocates:**

If you're a housing advocate in the Yukon, Nunavut, or the Northwest Territories and want to co-organize with us, [reach out \(Keepers of the Circle\)](#).

We are really interested in lifting up voices from the North and creating capacity for folks to do advocacy within their own contexts. Keepers of the Circle, which is also situated in Northern Ontario, is deeply interested in looking at creating capacity for northern-owned solutions and Indigenous, women-led solutions in the North.

I hope that we can connect with more advocates doing similar work, to build power and organize. Two advocates (in the next Advocacy Story) are both doing a lot of on-the-ground organizing in Yellowknife, and are building evidence toward submitting a Northwest Territories-focused human rights claim.

### **Important advocacy lessons learned:**

1. Diversify the ways that you engage people, and bringing tons of folks in.  
One of the things that is really clear is that people's voices often get missed for all kinds of reasons. Maybe because they don't have a Google Calendar alert, or because their internet is not as robust as other folks'. You should be building a process that attempts to



diversify the ways you engage, and building in time to ensure that happens. It's critical for making sure that there is space for diverse voices.

We had different ways people could get involved, including:

- Meetings.
- Internal surveys.
- Phone calls.
- Emails.
- Shared documents.
- Slack, WhatsApp, and more.

The intersection of those ways of communication really increased the participation accessibility for folks. This can be labour intensive, but it is **critical**.

2. Bring in experts.

The National Right to Housing Network is amazing in this regard, and there are lots of folks who can provide support.

3. Build trust.

In part, what worked for us is that we've been a group that has been working together for many years. We are trying to build trust, as we grow a social movement around this issue.

4. Think outside the box.

Part of our concern with our organizing, is that people won't consider other avenues than the Federal Housing Advocate, for pushing change. There are other ways. For example, at the community level we're doing regional sharing circles, and People's Tribunals where we're hearing directly from folks with lived expertise about the human rights violations they're experiencing.



## **Advocacy Story #3 – Janine Harvey and Lisa Thurber: An Indigenous-Led Process to Document Violations of the Right to Housing in the Northwest Territories to Claim the Human Right to Housing with the Federal Housing Advocate**



### **Context**

Northwest Territories advocates [Janine Harvey](#) and [Lisa Thurber](#) have been hard at work trying to build understanding around the scope and scale of a situation that has garnered little national attention: housing rights violations experienced by communities in Northern Canada.

“I’m in my community of Ulukhaktok, Northwest Territories. Our population is mostly Inuit people, of about 450 people. I sit on the Steering Committee of the National Right to Housing Network, and I also sit on their First Voice Advocacy working group and sit on Campaign 2000: End Child and Family Poverty.”

~ Janine Harvey, Executive Director, Tahiuqtiit Women's Society, Steering Committee & First Voice Advocacy working group, National Right to Housing Network; and Campaign 2000: End Child and Family Poverty.



“I am currently in High Prairie Alberta, four hours north of Edmonton. I'm originally from the Northwest Territories, born and raised in Hay River. My mother was a residential school survivor from the Hay River reserve, and I've been living in housing in the Northwest Territories all my life, so the stories are pretty much the same across Canada.”

~ Lisa Thurber, Right to housing advocate with lived experience.

### **What Advocacy Looks Like – In their words...**

Our work highlights the fact that research must be identified and led by the community, and should be approached with a different community-based ethic.

Research participants in smaller communities across northern Canada face a greater risk of negative consequences, as opposed to research participants in bigger communities. In many places, there is one main housing provider, and there is very little chance of anonymity in being part of research studies — the problems of which may not be visible to an outside researcher. The risk of being identified and facing consequences is extreme, so people are afraid to speak out about their housing situation.

Only someone from the community has the right level of trust, and assurance that people's stories and information are treated with dignity and understanding. Northern Canadian populations are over-researched, but in an extractive and exploitative way. Methods that work in southern Canada are applied haphazardly. This approach does harm.

Our work undertakes a thoughtful and important project to make change in a community-guided way.

### **Janine Harvey, Steering Committee & First Voice Advocacy working group, National Right to Housing Network; and Campaign 2000: End Child and Family Poverty:**

I want to talk about a project I recently concluded — a 10-month pilot project in the Northwest Territories.





With the help of the National Right to Housing Network, we were able to secure some funding from the [Catherine Donnelly Foundation](#),

### **What is the project?**

With this funding, I travelled across the Northwest Territories and Nunavut to conduct culturally appropriate interviews with Indigenous community members. I gathered their stories and first-hand experiences of what it's like trying to find affordable, safe, and secure housing in the North.

In my community, we just have one main housing provider, and they really work to exert control over the tenants. This is similar across the North.

### **About my experience:**

I had worked for Housing First prior to moving back to my community. I left my community in 1996 to go to school, and then I lived in Yellowknife, where I started working for [right to housing advocate Arlene Hache](#), and the [YWCA](#). I've been involved in housing and shelter work for the last 21 years prior to moving to my community of Ulukhaktok.

I always thought what we were going through with housing and poverty was normal, until I got educated and realized the power and control that the government has over our people, and the control and power housing has over our people too.

I saw this happening with no resources no support, no advocacy, no mental health, no health. We live in a very unique place.

I decided to sit on several steering committees throughout Canada to help people understand what we're facing up here in the Northwest Territories, because it's very unique.

### **Our housing struggles in the Northwest Territories:**

I secured funding for the [Tahiuqtiit Women's Society](#) to build a shelter in Ulukhaktok. — a safe place for women and children, because right now we don't have anything. We absolutely have nothing — we don't have counsellors, we don't have social workers. We only have nurses that come in on a monthly basis. There is a lot of advocacy that needs to be done in the



Northwest Territories. In the North, in the Arctic, we have a high rate of suicide.

People in my community are living with no windows, no doors, no bathroom doors. A lot of mold in people's houses. A lot of overcrowding and abuse, and addiction due to overcrowding.

We still have people in my community living in cabins, because of the shortage of housing, in minus 50-degree weather.

### **Process – making sure people’s stories are told safely:**

In this project, with people’s permission, I recorded these experiences and stories

Because of the context, confidentiality is so important, and people had the choice to be anonymous when they're sharing their story. I really wanted to make sure that it was culturally appropriate and safe for tenants to be speaking in regard to their housing. I came up with a process for how to keep our people safe, and still get their stories out.

### **My advocacy next steps:**

Since the Summit, we launched the report summarizing and sharing the stories we heard. This report is called [Stark Truths: Indigenous Housing Realities & Solutions in Northern, Remote Communities](#). I want the government to use this powerful report to see and hear stories from our people who are living in these states, and the conditions they're living in.

Bringing this information back to the government is important so we can plan how to make things better for housing. That information is also for the rest of Canada to see how it really is in the Northwest Territories.

For many years, my people haven't been heard.

### **Without safe housing...**

Without safe housing, we are going to keep having murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls. We do not have safe housing in Canada. That's the reality. And that's the truth. Without advocacy, we have no voices in the North, because our people are scared to speak up about housing.





So advocacy in communities is really important, so that people know they have support, and they do have somewhere to go to talk about housing issues. I'd really like to create a position, or for the government to create a position, for advocacy in small communities so that people could have a voice and prevent eviction.

Without funding and money from the government, we will never be able to create safe housing because in the North, it's really expensive to build houses and to make sure they're sustainable for the cold climate. So, we have to make sure that this work happens in the right way.

Update: In December, 2022, Janine and her community were [awarded federal funding](#) to open the Tahiuqtiit Women's Society. The Tahiuqtiit Women's Society aims to create a family shelter in Ulukhaktok.

Lisa Thurber, Right to housing advocate, with lived experience: We need tenants' rights in the Northwest Territories, because there are absolutely none right now. Once you're evicted from public housing, you are officially homeless. There is no market rent. There's nowhere to go.

When I started this advocacy journey, it was just to help an elder get her toilet unclogged, which became a huge journey. She ended up leaving the community, and after two years of fighting to get her bathroom fixed, we couldn't, and she left and went to Northern BC.

Advocacy has to start with **that** person — who needs a hot water tank. We had a family of five in Tuktoyaktuk with a child with autism, with no warm water heater for two months. According to [Goally \(2023\)](#) this can be challenging for autistic children. We finally threatened them with bad press. Next week, they got a hot water tank.

Often, the Northwest Territories is totally and utterly forgotten about. So, trying to get our housing stories and our unique situation out there is key. Like with all publicly-funded housing, we don't know whether we're going to be evicted next year based on changing factors in our lives, like an extra child, income going up or down, or some other life event.

Every year, our landlord is going to reassess whether or not we have a right to be in that public housing unit.

And if your lease isn't renewed, where do you go?



### **By the numbers:**

I can't understand how we have **any** homelessness in the Northwest Territories:

We only have slightly more than 40,000 people ([NWT Bureau of Statistics 2021 Census Population and Dwelling Counts](#); [Statistics Canada, Quarterly population estimates](#)), and only approximately 15,205 households ([NWT Bureau of Statistics Housing 2021 Census](#)). That's like a small city — less than Grande Prairie, Alberta.

However, in 2021, 36% of the 15,205 houses in the province had either an affordability, adequacy or suitability problem ([NWT Bureau of Statistics Housing 2021 Census](#)).

According to the [Government of Northwest Territories \(2022, p. 14\)](#), based on cost estimates for 2022-2023, maximum construction costs were estimated at about \$643 per square foot to \$832 per square foot, across the Northwest Territories.

However, in general, the Northwest Territories' housing budget appears to be more than sufficient for supporting the number of people we have needing adequate, proper housing.

### **Next steps:**



- Setting up a Tenants' Association in the Northwest Territories.
- Get the word out about the housing as a human right Claims work, to let people know they have rights.

## **Advocacy Story #4 – Victoria Levack and the Disability Rights Coalition of Nova Scotia: A Story of Exercising Human Rights through the Courts**



### **Context:**

In Nova Scotia, hundreds of people are involved in a massive human rights case against the provincial government. The case concerns people with disabilities being able to access housing in communities versus being institutionalized against their will.

Victoria Levack is a fierce advocate for disability rights and is at the centre of this case. Victoria is also the current spokesperson for the [Disability Rights Coalition of Nova Scotia](#). During the Strategic Advocacy Summit, Victoria



spoke to the ways she shows up in solidarity with others experiencing housing rights violations in her community.

“It’s about dignity...I don’t think my government looks at me as a human being. I think they look at me as a problem. As something to be fixed. And that’s not the case... I just want my humanity please. And I want a home.”

~ Victoria Levack, Disability Rights Coalition of Nova Scotia.

## **What Advocacy Looks Like – In their words...**

### **An Interview:**

**Alex Nelson, National Right to Housing Network:** As a person fighting for their rights at the centre of a major human rights case, and as an influential advocate in your community, what are some of the biggest areas of growth and learning from your work in the housing and homelessness sector, and what would you do differently if you could?

**Victoria Levack:** I’ve actually learned quite a bit. I used to be very naïve, because Nova Scotia in particular is known to be like “love thy neighbor,” “we help each other,” “solidarity of community,” and stuff. And so I thought, yes, we still have homelessness, but everybody’s basic needs are taken care of, they have access to food all the time, they have access to water, they have access to supports if they want them, and that’s just not the case at all.

I started getting into this housing work when I was forced to live in an institution against my will, because there were no supports in the community for me. So, I moved into a nursing home when I was 21 — I am now 31.

I did finally get into a pilot program, to get me moved out of the facility, but that’s just me and there are thousands behind me. Then I realized, it’s not just people with disabilities being screwed, and not getting what they need — it’s **everyone**, regardless of ability or race, although people of colour are, of course, generally more affected.

Basically, I learned that you have to be militant.





And that doesn't mean violent. That means, instead of going. "Please, sir, may I have my rights," I reason with them and make them see that I am in fact a human being. Asking nice got me nowhere — nowhere! Now I demand: these are my rights as a human being, and therefore you will give them to me, and the rest of us.

That's when things started to change because being nice got me nowhere.

**Alex Nelson, National Right to Housing Network:** That's such an important position to learn from — it takes a different kind of advocacy and persistence when your human rights are being violated. A lot of advocates at the grassroots level are learning that this is what it takes. The status quo is not working, so

people are experimenting and unapologetically trying new and different ways of organizing and speaking back to power.

**Victoria Levack:** And what I would change if I could:

I would just make people understand, we're human beings. Many people who are not in the situation, says things like "people choose this. They want this, or this is their own fault because they did drugs, or they engage in sex work" — nobody **chooses** to have their rights denied.

And one thing I would change about government — other than "hey stop doing this" — is, actually let them be honest about the fact that they do not care. Do not go around spreading your crap about "we believe in human rights" and then do nothing to follow through on it. Be honest, at the very least. Don't lie to me and gaslight me.

**Alex Nelson, National Right to Housing Network:** And start talking about structural oppression and inequity as the route of these issues.



## **Advocacy Story #5 – Aditya Rao and The New Brunswick Coalition for Tenants Rights: Mobilizing a Tenant Movement to assert the Right to Housing by Fighting Speculative, Predatory, and Exploitative Landlords**



### **Context:**

Tenants face steep challenges in the New Brunswick housing market: there are few tenant protections in the province, with no meaningful rent control.

Aditya Rao lived in New Brunswick from 2020 to 2022 and was involved in creating [The New Brunswick Coalition for Tenants Rights](#).

“In New Brunswick, the fact that the debate shifted from one where our landlords were considered the authority on housing, to one where our tenants have a voice in the public narrative – the fact that legislative change happened despite the best efforts of government; the fact that tenants are getting organized – is itself a success story.”



~ Aditya Rao, The New Brunswick Coalition for Tenants Rights.



## **What Advocacy Looks Like – In their words...**

### **An Interview:**

### **Term to know: Financialization of housing.**

Financialization is when something that has not previously been seen as a tool for making profit, becomes part of making money – and when these systems are unchecked, exploitation of tenants (particularly those part of marginalized groups) runs out of control.

**Alex Nelson, National Right to Housing Network:** The financialization of housing is a growing concern in Canada, as housing costs continue to rise, putting more and more people at risk of losing their homes.

Landlords in New Brunswick have a virtually unlimited landscape for increasing the cost of rent. The result is increasing financialization of housing.

**Adi Rao, The New Brunswick Coalition for Tenants Rights:** We organized the New Brunswick Coalition for Tenants Rights in an environment where landlords were used to having all the power.

- In 2020, landlords could raise rents by any amount in New Brunswick, except in very limited circumstances.
- In 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, [a landlord in New Brunswick increased the rent by 50% on a senior citizen in Fredericton \(CBC, 2020\)](#) – this amounted to an increase of \$400 per month. There was immediate outrage. Because of pressure and advocacy, that landlord ended up backing off.
- The only options for tenants against rental increases at the time, included: trying to negotiate with a landlord, or treating it as an eviction notice.



- Landlords were able to evict tenants at the end of the tenancy agreement, with no rationale.

“...This is a business and operating a property is a business. And we have to look out for what’s best for our owners and our owners really rely on us to give them the best advice possible. No different than, you know, people investing in stocks and talking to the stockbroker, you know, what is the best stocks to buy that’s going to increase their profits, you know, they really rely on us to give them that information. [...] And, you know, doesn’t matter if you’re renting apartments or if you’re selling apples.”

~ Jeff Murray, representing the landlord Canada Homes for Rent  
– CBC interview in December 2020.

### **Advocating for change:**

Once the individuals facing the \$2,000 a month rental increase, advocated for change, the landlord backed off. Unfortunately, this doesn’t always happen, but it is a step in the right direction toward landlords getting the message that housing rights are human rights.

### **Change happened:**

Over the last few years, the New Brunswick Coalition for Tenants Rights was relentless. In partnership with groups like the [Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now \(ACORN\)](#), we were continuously in the media pushing for change, and in two years the government was forced to change the law. Now:

- Tenants can bring their landlord’s rent increases to the Residential Tenancies Tribunal for review. The notice period for a rent increase was doubled to six months.
- Rents can only increase once a year.
- New legislation created a temporary rent cap.
- There are new rules against arbitrary evictions.

([Government of New Brunswick, 2022.](#))

Note: Landlords in an area or neighbourhood can still increase rent within the law in a way that harms tenants if they collaborate and all agree to a





consistent price point ([Government of New Brunswick, 2022](#)). The setup of the tribunal system fuels unaffordability. If two neighbours challenge a rent increase, and one wins and the other loses, the loss will set a new price point of what is “reasonable” for the neighbourhood.



## Looking to future advocacy

There's still more to do:

We've got to:

- Fight to take profit out of housing.
- Fight to take down Real Estate Investment Trusts.
- Address financialization of housing.
- Legislate national standards so tenants are protected across Canada.
- Build cooperative and non-profit housing, and housing that is affordable and accessible.

There's a long way to go. But we must claim our victories, and we must celebrate them.



## **Advocacy Story #6 – Laura Murphy and the Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness: Building Spaces for Rights Claimants to Exercise their Human Rights through Co-Creation and Equity**



### **Context:**

In Edmonton, Alberta, housing advocates are working within a tense provincial political climate. Hard work is being done to take the [National Housing Strategy Act](#) and make it work on the ground in Albertan communities.

Laura Murphy is an advocate who has gained experience in acknowledging the place for anger and frustration in this work, but also in how to build a space that makes people feel seen and heard.



Laura works with the [Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness](#), and the [Affordable Housing Solutions Lab](#). These learnings are incredibly important for those who want safe spaces to advocate for housing rights and create systems change..

## **What Advocacy Looks Like – In their words...**

At the Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness:

- I am part of a diverse group of folks from all walks of life, with a wide range of housing expertise.
- We work as a team: whether there is an important housing issue to address, a call from government to respond to a policy, or an opportunity to advocate and educate the public, we decide collectively on a plan of action.

At the Affordable Housing Solutions Lab:

- I am the lab's research coordinator.
- Our role is to bring the right people together, and re-think our Canadian housing model. We do this through the lens of the human right to housing.

My goal is to bring human rights holders with lived housing inequality experience to the centre of the conversation about housing – to bring people together in the right way.

### **An Interview:**

**Alex Nelson, National Right to Housing Network:** What financial, social, political, environmental, or cultural factors would make the biggest difference in terms of housing for you and your community?

**Laura Murphy:** We really need to do things in a different way, and to really rethink who the people are at the centre of this decision-making and where that expertise lies.

This means:

- Being creative.
- Committing to doing things differently.
- Really thinking about power and capacity, along with challenging what is called "expertise".



- Those in power need to be okay with being humbled and listening – giving power to – those with lived experience.
- Considering what approach to this advocacy works best for folks who are dealing with unmet housing needs, and figuring out that way of moving forward. This is important because the creativity and outside-the-box thinking that is often necessary in advocacy work, is quite tough if you're living in stress and crisis.

None of us have enough time or resources, or capacity to deal with the things that are happening, especially when in housing crisis or dealing with challenges. It's a revolutionary act when we come together – like at this Summit – to start to bridge those relationships, to learn from one another to get that information, and combine our limited capacity.

### **The Access to Housing Choice Series:**

We co-created the [Access to Housing Choice series](#).

The Access to Housing Choice Series is a series of recorded virtual sessions, facilitated over Summer 2021, by folks with lived experience of accessible housing needs. The sessions showcase the challenges of finding accessible housing that meets people's needs, and the socialized support system that does not adequately address people's unique needs.

Check out the [Access to Housing Choice series](#).



## **Advocacy Story #7 – Ambalika Roy and The Right to Housing Toronto: Building the Infrastructure to Claim the Right to Housing at a Municipal Level**



Context:

[Right to Housing Toronto](#) is a grassroots group of engaged citizens and community advocates who combat housing inequity, and fight for the right to safe and accessible housing. Local chapters operate around the Greater Toronto Area, and tackle local challenges and bylaws that increase exclusion and housing insecurity.

### **What Advocacy Looks Like – In their words...**

**Our Advocacy:**





Some examples of the work we've done, include:

- [Affordable Housing Pledge](#): We developed a right-to-housing pledge for candidates in a recent municipal election. 53 candidates in 22 out of 25 wards across Toronto signed the pledge.
- Championing inclusionary zoning.
- Getting Toronto City Council to designate housing as a human right.
- Advocating for appointing a Toronto Housing Commissioner.

(Check out the following media on this:

1. [Right to Housing Toronto – Toronto Housing Commissioner Briefing Note July 2020.](#)
2. [City of Toronto Housing Commissioner \(Toronto.CA\).](#)
3. [National Right to Housing Network - The Housing Tell: How municipal leaders can advance housing rights in Toronto's upcoming election.](#))

Right to Housing Toronto steering committee members:

Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now.

Advocacy Centre for Windsor, Ontario.

Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario.

Canadian Centre for Housing Rights.

Centre for Independent Living.

Color of Poverty.

Federation of Metro Tenants Association.

the Jane and Finch Housing Coalition.

Maytree.

West Scarborough Community Legal Services.

Women Act.

We have long-standing housing advocates Joy Connelly and Ingrid Palmer.

To ensure that we bring our unique expertise to the table, we have three subcommittees:

- Policy monitoring.
- Government relations.
- Outreach and community engagement.

Our work:

- Developing submissions and speaking points for city meetings.



- Speaking with city staff and councillors to increase their knowledge on the right to housing.
- Policy recommendations: analyzing the city's housing solutions, and providing rights-based recommendations to help decision-makers identify what/how they can do better.
- Education recommendations: developing educational materials, explaining what the right to housing is, and answering common questions to make it more tangible.
- Community engagement: engaging with communities across the city to raise awareness about the right to housing, as well as supporting communities' grassroots advocacy efforts.

Right to Housing Toronto is doing incredible work to advance the right to housing, on a federal level and on the ground at a municipal level.

### **How advocacy changed our world:**



In January 2019, Toronto City Council voted whether to recognize housing as a human right. It lost.

Groups and experts working on this issue came together to talk about what to do next, as we wanted the city to adopt housing as a human right.

We found out that the city was about to start work on a 10-year housing plan for Toronto. We focused all our efforts on influencing that process in a few ways. We started:

- Working with city staff to help them understand and develop rights-based housing policy.
- Pushing for support among the city councillors for a rights-based housing approach.

Our ultimate goal was ensuring a successful vote, and demonstrating broad public support.

The city finalized the 10-year rights based plan in December 2019, **recognizing housing as a human right!**

The advocacy work of the group has been successful, but we still have a long way to go. This is just the beginning.





### **Next steps:**

Right to Housing Toronto continues our advocacy to ensure the proper implementation of this 10-year plan, and we are currently pushing for a mechanism to hold the government accountable in the form of a Housing Commissioner.

### **Important advocacy lessons learned:**

1. Find the political widow: for example, a news story, an election, working with city councillors committed to the cause.

For us, it was the timing related to the [National Housing Strategy Act](#), and a visit from UN Special Rapporteur, to put the issue on Toronto City Council's agenda.

Also, knowing which councillors are on board with particular housing policies, and reaching out to them to build that political support, was important.

2. Position yourself as a resource:

We have positioned ourselves as a trusted partner and resource – a space where decision-makers can ask right to housing questions when they need to.

At the same time, we work to build public support. We constantly communicate with our supporters and the broader public,

about key events and relevant housing policy updates through our [Right to Housing Toronto website and newsletter](#).



This image features a row of townhouses. The view from the street shows the roofs and upper floors of the houses, against a blue sky. There is a tree and many power lines in the foreground.

## **Conclusion**

The strength in the space of the Summit was that we had powerful advocates from coast to coast to coast coming and sharing what they see happening in their communities, and identifying points of strategic opportunity for moving forward the right to housing. We are so regionally and jurisdictionally divided, that it is sometimes hard to find ways to learn from other human rights defenders.

We're left with an important piece for perspective and reflection: what action are we taking?

Part of our hope in bringing everyone together in this space was to see what is working — what actions people are taking that are making the most change and, ultimately, keeping people housed. This Summit was the



starting point for a bigger conversation about what advocates are doing related to housing justice in their communities.

Practically, we also need to reflect on what resources are needed to make those changes, and sustain current right to housing movements. The points that speakers made — talking about being rebellious, being militant — were deeply eye-opening and motivating. In a lot of ways, the right to housing movement in Canada is a new opportunity for us to be rebellious against a system that is deeply broken and is harming our communities.

During the Summit, we saw how there are practical ways in which the right to housing is being made real. Right to housing work can only be what we, as the people fighting against the system, make it. The things we're fighting for are all so fundamental and basic, and it is tragic that we don't all have our right to housing realized, but we're working on it. That is the power of this space, and this conversation.

Housing is not a privilege, it's a right, and the feeling of safety and security for yourself, your loved ones, and/or your community, is so important for us as human beings to survive in this world. It's not just about having a structure to live in. It's about what that means — having a safe place makes it possible to live your life to the fullest, and truly embrace your entire existence as a human being.

The responsibility we bear to sustain each other is massive. Through this report, we want to hold space for the labour that advocates are putting in to keeping people housed. The stories shared can serve as advice that can be potentially translated to other contexts — or even as a reminder, that we are not alone in this struggle.