

# GOVERNMENT ACTION GUIDE

## FOR IMPLEMENTING NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED, GENDER-SENSITIVE STANDARDS FOR EMERGENCY SHELTERS



### ABOUT

This resource is designed to help each level of government better understand what a rights-based and gender-sensitive approach to emergency shelters and Violence Against Women (VAW) shelters can look like.

### THIS TOOLKIT PROVIDES:

- An overview of the systemic challenges faced by women and gender-diverse people in housing and within the shelter system.
- A blueprint that effectively addresses the capacity gaps underlying some of the systemic issues in the shelter sector.
- Specific actions that each level of government can take to align funding and operating of emergency shelters with their human rights obligations.



Canadian  
Centre for  
Housing Rights



THE NATIONAL  
RIGHT TO HOUSING  
NETWORK



WOMEN'S NATIONAL  
HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS  
NETWORK

# THE PROBLEM

In Canada, women and gender-diverse people experience disproportionate levels of housing need and poverty.

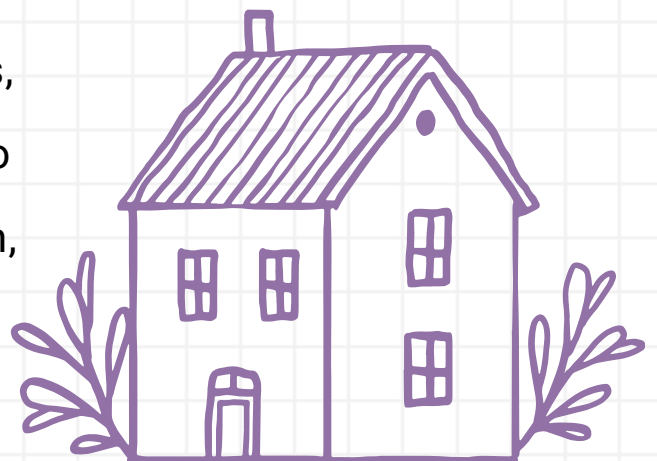
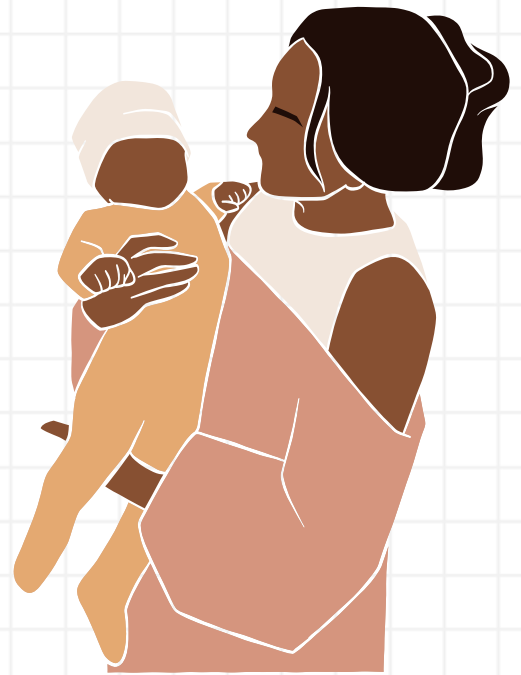
This issue is exacerbated by a severe shortage of affordable housing, forcing many to rely on emergency shelters that are often underfunded and overwhelmed.



Systemic barriers such as discrimination, violence, and lack of culturally appropriate services further compound these challenges, leaving marginalized populations particularly vulnerable within the shelter system.

Those who are racialized, disabled, newcomers or refugees, or who are gender-diverse, face specific and profound challenges in seeking shelter.

In addition, high barrier access to shelters, created through policies related to eligibility criteria, shelter rules, and duty to report, can result in denial of services, service restriction, child-parent separation, deepening of housing precarity, and increased exposure to violence or exploitation.

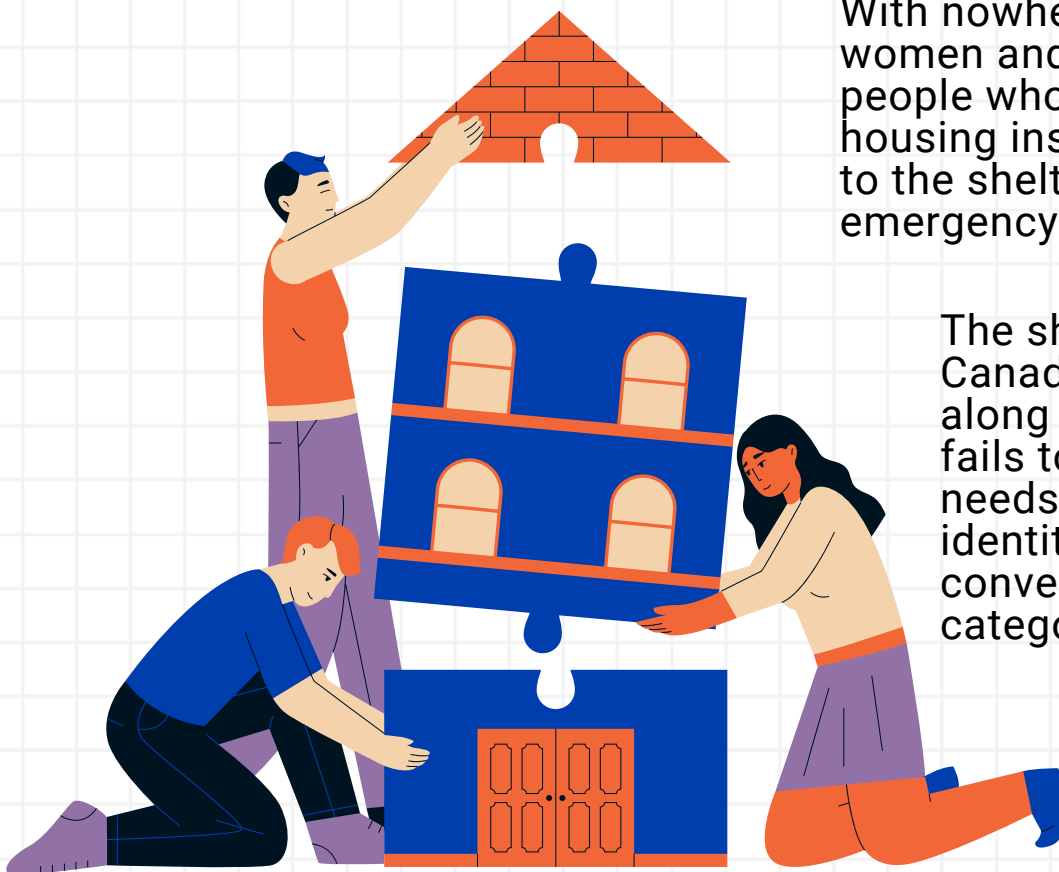


Gender-diverse individuals, including transgender and non-binary people, face significant barriers to stable housing due to transphobia and a lack of gender-affirming services.

Discrimination in housing markets and shelters often results in unsafe and hostile environments, making it difficult for gender-diverse people to find and maintain adequate housing.



With nowhere else to go, women and gender-diverse people who experience housing insecurity often turn to the shelter system for emergency housing.

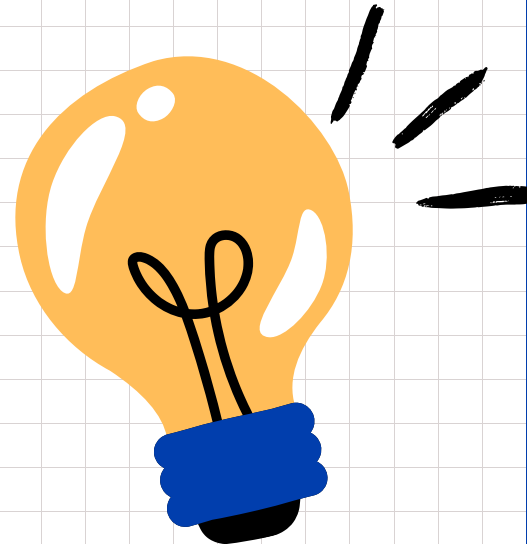


The shelter system in Canada is mainly aligned along a gender binary and fails to accommodate the needs of people whose identity falls outside of conventional gender categories.

For instance, there are very few women-specific emergency shelter beds across Canada, and approximately 1,000 women and children are turned away from VAW shelters each day.

There is also disparity in shelter access in regions across Canada, along urban and rural divides, and with some cities having greater access to gender-specific resources than others.

# THE SOLUTION



Under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and provincial/territorial human rights legislation, Canadian governments have an obligation to ensure that shelter provision is compliant with human rights standards. In 2019, Canada passed the historic *National Housing Strategy Act* (NHSA), which obligates the federal government to realize the right to housing. However, there is no dedicated legislation outlining what human rights-compliant shelter standards are.

The “**National Human Rights-Based, Gender-Sensitive Shelter Standards**” were developed in alignment with international human rights law standards to address the significant gaps in the provision of emergency shelter services for women and gender-diverse individuals. The development of these shelter standards has been a deeply collaborative effort. At each step of the development process, a diverse range of key actors, including people with lived experiences, service providers, human rights experts, and advocacy groups, were extensively engaged to ensure that the standards reflected a comprehensive understanding of the genuine needs and dynamic realities faced by those accessing emergency shelters across Canada.



# THE STANDARDS

Through robust engagement with over 50 organizations and community groups, including shelter providers that have already integrated human rights-based and gender-sensitive standards in their processes and operations, we found that there are four core principles that can support the successful implementation of seven standards to create safe, inclusive, accessible and dignified shelters.

## RIGHTS-BASED, GBA+ SHELTER STANDARDS

### EMPOWERED DECISION- MAKING

#### Standard 1

Shelter leadership and staff must engage meaningfully with residents to promote agency and co-ownership

#### Standard 7

Shelter leadership and staff must ensure processes for access to justice to claim the right to housing and other human rights

### INCLUSIVE DESIGN

#### Standard 2

Shelter leadership must ensure that all services offered at the shelter are accessible

### TRAUMA- INFORMED CARE

#### Standard 3

Shelter leadership and staff must respect, protect, and fulfill the rights of Indigenous women and Two-Spirit

#### Standard 4

Shelter leadership & staff must ensure residents of shelters have access to culturally adequate services and supports

### GENDER- CENTRED & CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE SERVICES

#### Standard 5

Shelter leadership and staff should prohibit forced evictions into unsheltered homelessness

#### Standard 6

Shelter leadership and staff should ensure shelter residents have access to basic needs

# IMPROVING SHELTER SERVICES IN CANADA

Canadian governments have an obligation to advance the right to housing for all. They also have an obligation to ensure the dignity and safety of unhoused people. The successful implementation of rights-based and gender-sensitive shelter standards requires adequate resourcing and support from all levels of government. Governments must ensure shelters are well-equipped to deliver services in alignment with human rights-based and gender-sensitive goals and outcomes. This includes setting aside operational funding for municipalities to offer training free of charge to all emergency shelters in their jurisdiction, establishing joint funding streams for shelters to upgrade infrastructure and services, and investing in staff well-being through mental health supports and equitable compensation.

In addition, Canadian governments and shelter providers should work together to improve the delivery of shelter services and uphold the rights of shelter residents. Below are specific actions that each level of government can take to achieve these goals.

# WHAT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT CAN DO



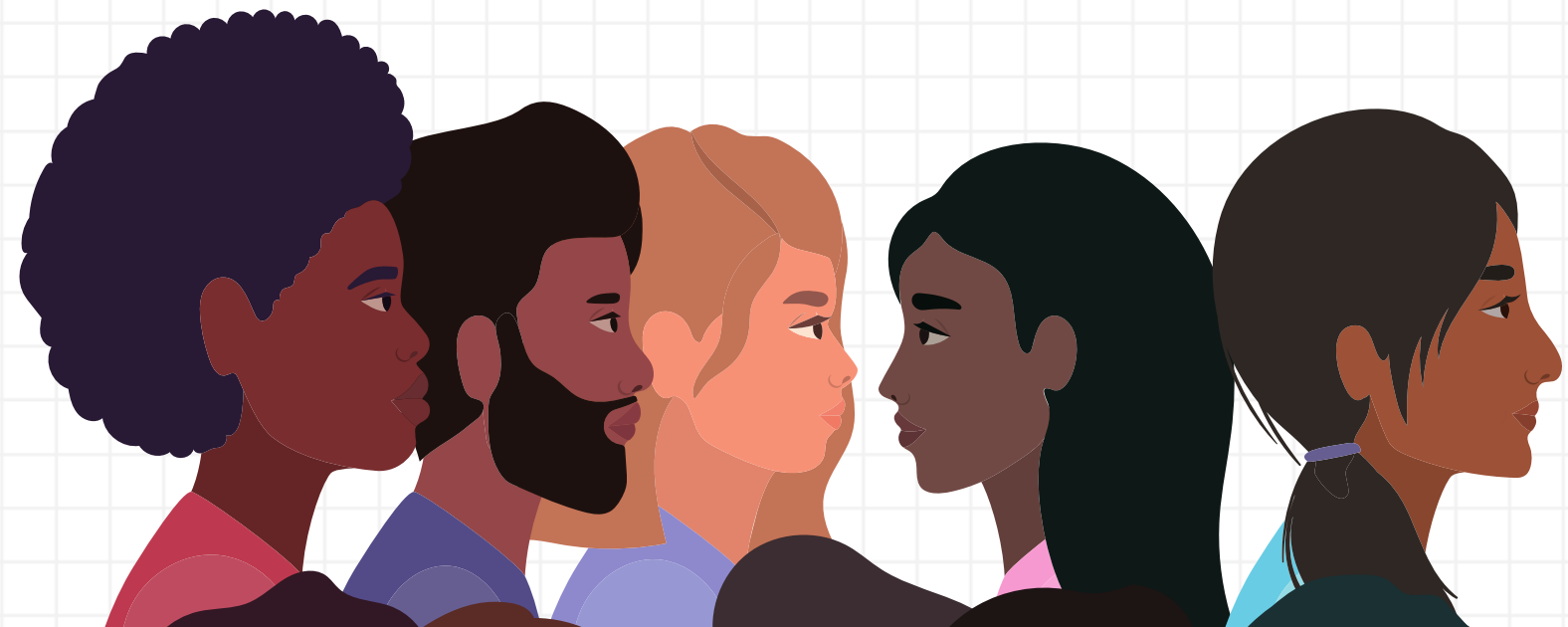
A national Community of Practice (CoP) is established to determine minimum shelter standards to integrate under the National Housing Strategy.



The Reaching Home program is enhanced using a human rights-based and gender-sensitive approach, and access to funding streams is prioritized for those who implement rights-based, gender-sensitive shelter standards.



The Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) and nationally-coordinated Point-in-Time (PiT) counts are updated to better reflect the experiences of women and gender-diverse people in situations of visible and hidden homelessness.



# WHAT PROVINCIAL / TERRITORIAL GOVERNMENTS CAN DO



Provincial and territorial Building Codes are amended to include a dedicated section on design and safety of emergency shelters.



Provincial and territorial accessibility legislation is amended to include minimum accessibility standards in emergency shelters.



Coordination systems, like a shelter navigation centre, are established for enhanced collaboration between shelters, hospitals, municipalities, and other service providers to improve communication and service access.



Cross-sector partnerships are established between emergency shelters and healthcare services, and P/T governments implement policies preventing the discharge of individuals from hospitals if they have nowhere to go.



P/T governments adequately resource legal aid services and provide expanded access to legal representation.



# WHAT MUNICIPAL / LOCAL GOVERNMENTS CAN DO



Municipalities create guidelines adapting the “National Human Rights-Based, Gender-Sensitive Shelter Standards” and outlining the minimum requirements for shelter provision in their jurisdiction. Access to funding streams is prioritized for those who implement rights-based, gender-sensitive shelter standards.



Human rights-based, gender-sensitive trainings and certifications are provided free of charge to local shelter providers to help them comply with municipal guidelines.



Funding is available to support shelter providers in providing their staff with training on gender-sensitivity, intersectionality, anti-oppression and cultural sensitivity in service delivery.



Cross-sector partnerships are established between municipalities, emergency shelters, local immigration centres, Indigenous-led organizations, 2SLGBTQIA+ rights organizations and lived experts.



Information is available in languages of the main cultural and Indigenous communities within a shelter’s jurisdiction.

**“Advancing the Right to Housing for Women & Gender-Diverse Persons: Developing National Rights-Based Shelter Standards using a GBA+ Framework” is a project that received funding from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) under the [NHS Solutions Labs](#), however, the views expressed are the personal views of the author and CMHC accepts no responsibility for them.**

