



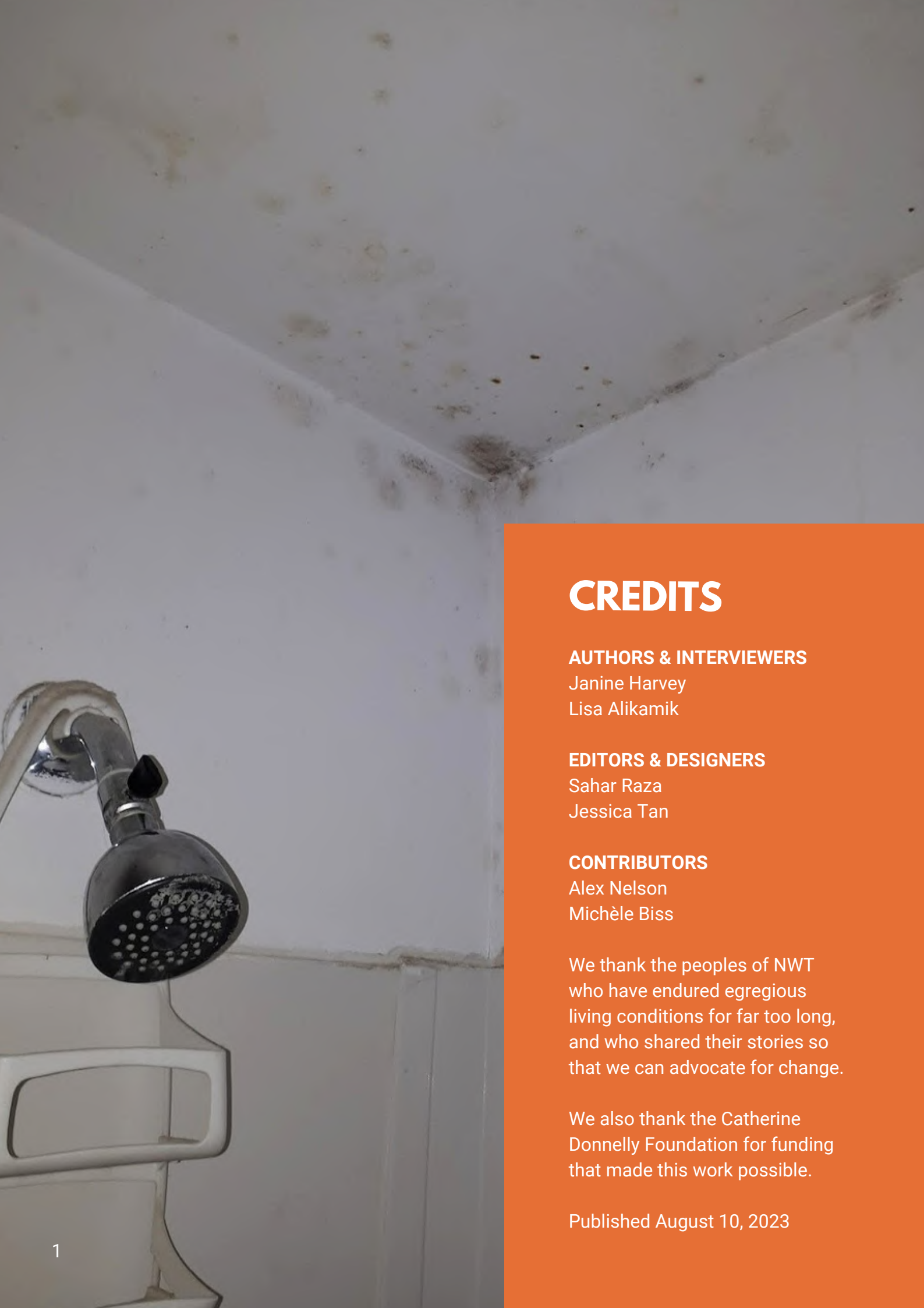
THE NATIONAL  
**RIGHT TO HOUSING**  
NETWORK

2023

# Stark Truths

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INDIGENOUS  
HOUSING REALITIES  
& SOLUTIONS IN  
NORTHERN, REMOTE  
COMMUNITIES



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We thank the peoples of NWT who have endured egregious living conditions for far too long, and who shared their stories so that we can advocate for change.

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# BACKGROUND

Issues of housing inadequacy, unaffordability, and inaccessibility are exacerbated for Indigenous peoples living in rural, remote, and northern communities across Canada. Legacies of colonial displacement, dislocation, and inadequate investment have led to small Inuit communities in the northern territories becoming spaces of inopportunity, poverty, insufficient infrastructure, and deeply inadequate housing. These conditions are among the worst in Canada, yet studies on these housing issues have been predominantly informed by southern, settler researchers and methods—if any research is conducted at all. More often, these issues are ignored in mainstream discussions on housing and homelessness, with Inuit and northern Indigenous peoples so often absent from these conversations.

This project—proposed, envisioned, and led by Inuit right to housing advocates in the Northwest Territories—disrupts these gaps and highlights the state of housing-related human rights violations taking place in remote and northern Indigenous communities. In partnership with local Indigenous leaders and community members, and with the aim of documenting and amplifying their housing conditions, concerns, and solutions, the National Right to Housing Network received funding from the Catherine Donnelly Foundation to facilitate and enable this important research. It will also serve as a submission to the Federal Housing Advocate.

In late 2022 and early 2023, Janine Harvey and Lisa Alikamik of Ulukhaktok, Northwest Territories (NWT) conducted culturally appropriate interviews and surveys within their Indigenous communities to hear from local residents about their stories and experiences with housing in the NWT. What follows are their findings and proposed solutions.

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# THE INTERVIEWERS

## JANINE HARVEY

My name is Janine Harvey.

I was adopted to a very wonderful Inuit family. I grew up in Ulukhaktok, NWT. I moved to Yellowknife to go to school in 1999. I lived there for 21 years, I just recently moved back to Ulukhaktok.

I have 5 of my own and 4 stepchildren. I'm married to my husband Thomas Harvey. I'm a grandmother of 9 grandchildren.

I started working at a very young age to help my family. I worked for the YWCA (support worker) and the Women's Society (Housing First program) during my time in Yellowknife. I received a Scholarship from CAEH for the work I did with Housing First.

I was a founder of Tahiuqtiit Women's Society, and I'm also the Executive Director. I sit on the board for PCVWH, Campaign 2000, and the NWT Victim Assistance Fund. I have also served as a hamlet councillor and deputy mayor in my community of Ulukhaktok.

I'm fluent in my language. I enjoy sewing traditional clothing, hunting, camping, fishing and teaching my culture to others.

I am a mother, wife, daughter and a supporter for Inuit culture, an advocate, a survivor, and I now dedicate my time to helping other indigenous people fleeing family violence.



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# THE INTERVIEWERS



## LISA ALIKAMIK

Lisa Alikamik is an Inuk artist and leader from Ulukhaktok, Northwest Territories. Her art represents Inuit culture, and she teaches art classes in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region. Lisa is also a mother of three wonderful children.

Lisa was a founder of the Tahiuqtiit Women's Society and served as its President before she took on the role of Project Manager for its shelter operations. The goal of the Tahiuqtiit Women's Society is to establish a shelter for Inuit women and children experiencing violence and to develop and support culturally appropriate programs that benefit Inuit.

Prior to that, Lisa worked with the Hamlet of Ulukhaktok, co-ordinating the Food Bank operations and sat on the board of directors for several non-profit organizations in the community.

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# INTRODUCTION

*The following report is written from the perspective of the interviewers, Janine Harvey and Lisa Alikamik. Participants' personal accounts and experiences with housing in the NWT are also weaved throughout the report.*

We were very interested in leading this project and doing these interviews because we see homelessness in our community (and surrounding communities) on a daily basis. Homelessness is a real issue.

It is a heavy weight to bear, seeing our people struggling and hurting. We see our people being mistreated by corporations. We strongly believe everyone deserves to have a home. With effort and collaboration between networks with the same goal, and by creating programs that are culturally appropriate in the North, we can help our people to be sheltered and have a place to call home.



## Human Rights Context

This research took place after Canada passed the [National Housing Strategy Act](#) in 2019, which commits the federal government to progressively realizing the right to adequate housing for all people across Canada—including throughout its policies and budgetary decisions. The Act recognizes that the right to adequate housing is “a fundamental human right affirmed in international law.” It also states that “housing is essential to the inherent dignity and well-being of the person and to building sustainable and inclusive communities.”

The Canadian government, in consultation with the government of the Northwest Territories, has also signed onto international human rights treaties like the United Nations (UN) [International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights](#), the [UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women](#), and the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#).

The stories in this research report highlight that despite these human rights commitments, many barriers to adequate housing still exist and are not being addressed in NWT, particularly within Indigenous communities.

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# METHODOLOGY

We conducted approximately 60 surveys and interviews about people's housing experiences in three communities across NWT: Yellowknife, Inuvik, and Ulukhaktok. The surveys were written in plain English text with the aim of providing respondents with a clear understanding of the questions they were being asked and why. People were given the option to complete surveys and interviews over the phone, over Facebook Messenger, or in-person.

We also held in-person community meetings and town halls in all three communities, which included culturally appropriate elements like sewing spaces. Including activities that are a significant part of the community's everyday life and cultural practice made the spaces more comforting. These activities created an environment that felt less like an "official space" and more like a familiar community setting where people could gather, connect, and share. This informal and safe environment eased tensions and encouraged community members to open up and engage in deeper, more meaningful conversations.

Years of trust, relationship-building, shared understanding, and connection were at the foundation of what made community members receptive to our efforts and made the work meaningful. It was also important to approach these housing conversations with sensitivity, confidentiality, patience, sincerity, and respect.

Confidentiality was a priority. In all three NWT communities, there was a very high rate of interest to participate in this work, though we noticed that many participants were timid and scared of being penalized by their landlords for sharing their housing experiences in their communities. There was evident fear that the

information collected would be used against them to disrupt or harm their living situation. Keeping participant identities anonymous went a long way in helping community members feel comfortable to take part in surveys and interviews. We clarified that remaining anonymous would ensure that their identifiable information would not be shared with their housing providers.

We as interviewers also have experience with living in government housing in NWT. Knowing that we have been in similar situations or have similar experiences made community members feel more comfortable in sharing their sensitive data and experiences with us.



## ON CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICES

Before beginning interviews, we would first offer tea and coffee to people sitting down for interviews with us. This made people feel more comfortable, but it also helped us to build trust and understanding in how we were connected to one another within the community, as human beings. This trust-building was needed to have an open conversation about a challenging topic.

Although it was important for us to know more about each other to build this connection, we didn't formally collect any identifying information from people we interviewed. Everyone was able to stay anonymous, which was greatly appreciated. During interviews, people used words like "relief," "truth,"

"compassion," and "understanding" to describe the space. They also knew that, with our shared experiences, they wouldn't be judged for expressing wishes to live in ways that reflected traditional Inuit cultural practices.

Part of the community meetings and town halls we hosted in Yellowknife and Ulukhaktok involved making space for sewing and art. We also sat down to share a meal with everyone before group discussions, as a gesture to thank everyone who participated for sharing their time, knowledge, and experiences. Though the gift cards and door prizes were important offerings, we also showed our appreciation through these other gestures.





## CHALLENGES

If we did this project again in the future, we would plan our budget to account for inflation. The cost of travel, fuel, and food rose significantly since preparing our project budget, which is an even bigger problem in northern communities where the cost of living is so much higher. There was also much greater interest in participating in the research than we had budgeted for initially. Local organizations were able to share funding to provide further gift cards, and door prizes at community meetings and town hall sessions. This showed us how much of an impact our work was able to have on the community.



# The Stark Truths



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# HOMELESSNESS

We see firsthand that our people and neighbouring friends in surrounding communities experience dire predicaments due to having no safe place to call home. We see the rippling effects of homelessness and how it contributes to distress in everyday life. There are many incidents of tenants living with hostility just to keep a roof over their head.

We also know that addressing homelessness is supposed to be an urgent priority under international human rights law—and the federal government’s own National Housing Strategy Act. **But we see no action.**

In our interviews, it was mentioned that when shelters are at full capacity, the people dependent on those shelters often have no choice but to sleep outside. Their families often have no room in their already overcrowded homes.

One individual who is struggling with homelessness and substance use has little support from family and friends. They shared that **it is hard for them to look for work because they are so cold at night and are using their energy to stay alive.**

For another person, they explained that substance use has taken over their life:

“

*I used to have a home and a job and now I have nothing. I would give anything to have that back, but my addiction is strong. My worry now is: where am I going to sleep tonight... and where am I going to get food from?*

”

This survival-oriented lifestyle and worry is very common among people in the North. At the end of the conversation, the participant was grateful to have talked with us and shared his story. He stated that he is grateful when he does get a bed, and he feels sorry for some of his friends that may not have gotten a warm bed tonight. **He hopes that they are alive in the morning. It is not easy living on the streets in the cold winter months.**



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# SHELTERS

A lot of people expressed having no help or support, or no more options for housing.

Some stated that they've seen many of their friends die this year and since the pandemic. They believe that overcrowding in shelters contributed to their losses of life because we don't have places to live.

One individual also shared concerns that there is no treatment centre, and expressed little hope for recovering from his substance use and situation. **When residing in shelters, lack of sleep is inevitable, and this sleep deprivation and anxiety can lead to depression. People question how they will make it through another day. This worry often leads people to cope with their homelessness through substance use. People seek to avoid feeling the emotional pain they are enduring.**

One interviewee told us:



“

*My kids were taken away. I was forced to go to treatment. I was evicted from my house. I was controlled. I had no other choice but to go to treatment to get my kids back.*

*I was promised housing but again after treatment, I had to wait many months for a home, where I fell back into addiction because there was no safe place for me to be after treatment.*

*Eventually I got my kids back, but I was watched closely with every move I made. Anyone who visited my house I had to report. I am grateful to have my family back and have a roof over my head. I hope no one ever has to go through this. I never gave up. I lost hope at times, but I picked myself back up—I was not going to let them win. To be forced to do something because I made one mistake... **No one should be penalized and ripped of their dignity.***

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# TRANSITIONAL HOUSING

When people did get into transitional housing, they expressed evident gratitude for a place to reside. Several individuals specified that they are grateful for the Housing First programs, shelters and transitional housing—but most of all, grateful just to have a warm place to stay and call home.

**Despite this, it was said that people felt controlled.** In transitional housing, it was indicated by residents that they are not allowed to have family visit them. Landlords have the power to decide who is allowed to visit the tenants.

Tenants also felt forced to do programming to obtain their accommodation. A lot of people appreciated the security in their building, but some said they felt scrutinized. One individual we spoke with who is in the Housing First program stated that he wished he could have a

stove to cook their own food. He wished that he was the only one with the key to his room so that he could have some privacy.

Because of this, the summer season is often anticipated by those living in transitional housing. They wait for warmer temperatures to pitch a tent outdoors so that they can enjoy their privacy and freedom for those short months.

## What is transitional housing?

Transitional housing is a type of supportive accommodation that is temporary, and meant to bridge the gap from homelessness to more permanent housing.

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# DISCRIMINATION

When it came to signing documents and lease agreements, there was no legal or advocacy support, or clarification of what tenants were signing.

It was also mentioned that housing providers in NWT exerted control over the lifestyles that tenants chose to live. A participant stated that when he entered the office of a housing provider to submit his application for housing, he was questioned about his completion of an addictions program. He was directed to show proof that he had completed the treatment program and attach it with his application or it

would not be considered. **This is both an inappropriate violation rooted in discrimination and is a breach of confidentiality for applicants.**

One individual stated that asking for help takes a lot of their dignity away because they feel they are looked at as someone who can't afford their own rent. They feel labelled as someone who has no job and face the unfair assumption that they may trash or cause damage to their housing unit. This participant said she felt intimidated and did not feel confident in asking for help. She believes this

is why she is stuck in the shelter today—the feeling of fear and acceptance of being let down from supports that are supposed to be there to assist people. She would just like to walk into an office and not be judged or looked at like she is a problem. In our interview, she exclaimed:

“

*I don't want to feel ashamed of myself! I don't want to be looked at like I am nothing! This makes me never want to ask anyone for help again. It is degrading!*

”

We know that some community members cannot pay rent because of reasons directly tied to Canada's long and ongoing history of colonialism. A lot of housing and programs provided are also not culturally appropriate—they do not support the lifestyle of our Inuit and Arctic communities, which greatly differ from other communities across Canada.

At our community conversations, many people expressed their concern for Elders and parents that are often taken advantage of by their grown children or grandchildren who reside with them due to the shortage of housing in northern communities. Often this leads to overcrowding in housing which contributes to different intersections of abuse, poor hygiene, and poverty. These barriers lead to troubling conditions and patterns that can deteriorate community health. Tensions grow between families because of overcrowding.



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# ARREARS, EVICTIONS, & LANDLORDS

A high number of participants stated that it is very stressful to have rent payment amounts overdue or outstanding (i.e., arrears). It was identified that people feel fear on a day-to-day basis. This frame of mind often led to a pervasive fear of being evicted with short notice. This worry also led to the fear of their children being apprehended by social services because of not being able to obtain a secure home.

As one person stated:

“  
*What's the use of working?! All I'm going to do is work to pay my rent. I'll never get ahead in life. Right now it will cost me about \$3000 to get my own apartment and we know income support will never give me that because I have arrears. I have no hope. I tried, and nothing happened. I'm just let down again and again and again. I just wish someone can help me find my own home to live in. If I can get a home, I will get my granddaughter back from social services.*

Our people in the Arctic are left with little to no support when it comes to funding opportunities to help alleviate arrears, even through external rental programs offered by housing providers in NWT.

One individual said they felt that NWT housing providers are not helping the people, and that they are creating more homelessness with their ways of working.

The government and housing programs offered in the NWT are not helping the people because tenants can't access funding for rent. Current programs are aimed at homeowners. For instance, we have tried to help someone who is going to be evicted, but because he was residing in government-provided unit, he did not qualify for the NWT funding programs. Today, there are people still being evicted because they had not paid their power bill on time. This is an example of the lack of support to prevent eviction.

## What are arrears?

"Arrears" refers to rent money that is owed, overdue, or outstanding, and is a common reason for eviction.

An individual stated that she's not going to pay her rent until the renovations are done in her unit. She indicated that there is mould in her unit, and it is in poor condition. She pays a high cost for rent every month. She states that she is scared that she is going to be

evicted because of arrears, but she's tired of living and paying for a unit that is in very poor condition. She specified that she cannot even sleep in some of the rooms because they are in such bad condition. **She fears her kids will become ill from the mould and conditions of her home.**

**A lot of tenants feel that they have been done wrong. People in our communities have expressed that they feel like they are mainly working to meet rent.** The struggle is constant and some can't make ends meet to put food on the table or obtain basic necessities to maintain their home.

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# SAFETY

One individual stated that she was abused for years by her common-law partner, and her home was damaged due to the abuse she endured. When she called RCMP, her partner was arrested and charged—but her kids were taken away by the authorities, and she was also evicted from her unit. **While in tears, she shared:**

“*This should never happen to anyone. I was a victim.*”

People do not want to talk about housing in the North, but they do want to feel safe. They want merely to feel treated fairly, and to feel comfortable in the place they call home. The stories that we heard were heartbreaking and we found many similarities among the people we spoke with.

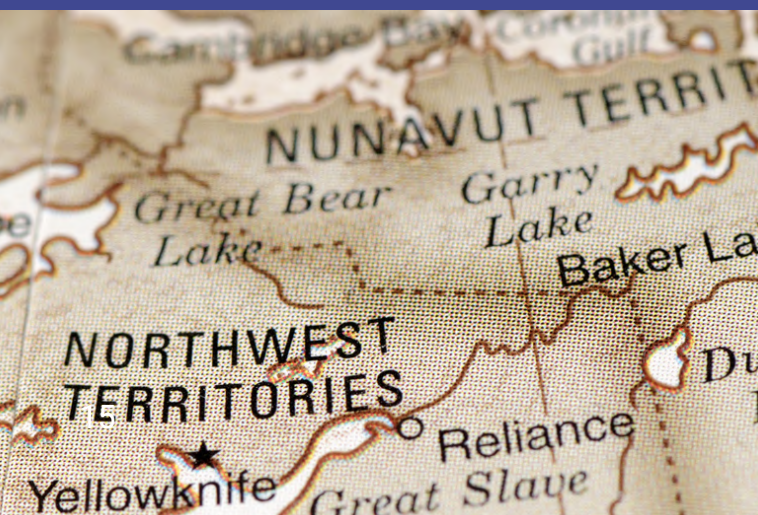
One individual says “safe housing” to her means not feeling watched. It means being able to feel comfortable in your own home, where your kids can play in the yard and not having to see drug dealers or bootleggers. Where you are not harassed by people who are intoxicated or people who are knocking at your door at all hours of the night. This individual would like to see more security around her block.

We had another individual who had no choice but to leave her home in Nunavut; due to medical reasons, she had to be close to the hospital. She said:

“*If you are going to relocate people for something medical, at least make sure we have safe housing.*”

Over the past years she has not had safe housing, where her kids can play outside safely or she can feel at peace in her home.

Culturally appropriate housing to her also means being able to cook her traditional food, which she is not able to do.





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# BASIC INFRASTRUCTURE, SERVICES, & FACILITIES

In small communities with no road access, living is very complex. We live in a very cold climate. Some communities do not have trees for firewood and live in cabins at -45 degrees Celsius with no other housing options. Often, people resort to living in cabins that are built with plywood. If you don't have firewood, you must use heating fuel which is very costly.

People have no access to basic necessities like laundry. They have no electricity. Often there are health effects to these conditions, like breathing in stove fumes. Many people have no standard oven to cook and no washer and dryer for clean clothes. **This makes life very challenging and leaves people with little or no hope for the future.**

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## HEALTH & HABITABILITY

People and their health are also affected by living in poor housing conditions. It is not rare to hear about or see mould, broken windows and doors, and holes in walls. These kinds of living conditions can be dangerous. Exposed electrical wires, sharp areas exposed, and mould negatively affects people's health.

### Human Rights Context

Under international human rights law, dignity, equality, non-discrimination, and access to justice are at the core of the right to adequate housing—as well as seven components including:

1. Legal security of tenure (i.e., legal protection from tenant evictions)
2. Availability of services, materials, facilities, and infrastructure
3. Affordability
4. Habitability
5. Accessibility
6. Location
7. Cultural adequacy



Out of the 60 interviews we conducted, the majority of participants stated that they live in poor housing and needed major renovations in their unit. There were statements made that new tenants had moved into an allocated housing unit that still needs renovations or had mould upon moving in. They were told by their housing provider that there was nothing maintenance could do, and they would be forced to move into this rundown unit to avoid being homeless.

Many people stated they're tired of getting run down apartments. One participant stated:



*The rugs are old, the walls are not cleaned and painted. It is already run down before you move in! The windows might be boarded up. We are put in the ghetto. I try to live a healthy life but all around you it does not look safe, it does not look clean... I'm here fighting all hours of the night. It is hard to stay sober when I am put in this cluster of addiction to drug dealing and bootlegging. I am put to the test again. I failed many times and that's why I'm back in the shelter and no one wants to help me.*



In small, isolated communities, there aren't many housing options, so applicants accept the unit and move in to have a place to call their own. **This is an example of power and**

**control exerted by governments, major housing providers, and other landlords.** It is also a careless act of landlords and is a prime example of an establishment's lack of professionalism or desire to provide a safe and adequate living space for the tenants and people of the North.

It was also brought to our attention by participants from the survey that they felt like administration or local housing boards often demonstrated favouritism with applicants.

One individual stated that she had made several work orders for a leak under her sink that needed repairs, but it was not attended to and left mould under her sink as a result. She wondered if that mould had affected her family's health. **A lot of people stated that they would like to see work orders happen in a timely manner.** People are tired and frustrated with being held accountable for wear and tear of housing units. Tenants are being penalized for routine wear and tear and feel that landlords are not keeping up with the demand of renovations.

### Human Rights Context

Under international human rights law and the National Housing Strategy Act, governments are required to commit a "maximum of available resources" to work towards the progressive realization of the human right to housing. For a wealthy country like Canada, the standard is such that it's difficult for governments to say that they simply don't have funding to meet human rights obligations. When government agents claim to not have adequate resources to complete repairs to make units habitable, this begs the question—why not?

There is often a limited supply of materials for repairs in housing units. With no road access, isolated communities get an annual sea lift once a year or have materials delivered on scheduled flights, so the cost of materials to be flown in can be very high. There needs to be a solution to this so that people can have adequate and safe housing.

**People in the North deserve to live in housing that is comfortable. It is unreasonable for renters to pay maximum rent for a run-down unit.** Tenants often have to move into units that require repairs. We see this time and time again. Social media is a place where people vent and express their frustrations because they have no other way to access justice.

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# EDUCATION

**Housing is one of the biggest barriers to education.** As one individual stated:

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*I would like to go to school but I will lose my unit if I choose to leave my community for education. They do say you do not... But there are many individuals who left the community to go to school and come back to no home. You lose your house and if you go back home, you're put back on the waiting list which can take many years to get a unit.*

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On the other hand, many people do not want to leave their communities but have no other choice because there is no housing or higher education option locally.





# A Culturally Appropriate Housing Wish List

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

Below are recommendations brought forward from participants and community members who have lived experience within housing in the North, or who have stayed in shelters or experienced unsheltered homelessness.

Throughout our interviews and meetings, participants in interviews identified a “wish list” of policy changes in regards to housing in the North. At the centre of this wish list is the need for governments to ensure that adequate housing is available for everyone.

When we asked what culturally appropriate housing looked like, some expressed that it was:

- “
- *Having a place of my own,*
  - *Employees in the housing office being able to speak cultural languages,*
  - *Having a fireplace to able to cook our traditional foods,*
  - *Having a place to do our traditional arts and crafts,*
  - *Having culturally appropriate programs, and*
  - *Living with no racism—accepting each other’s cultures.*
- ”

1. **Alternative housing:** Adequate housing cannot just mean any building with four walls and a roof. Alternatives must be available for people that meet their needs—including cultural adequacy.
2. **Safe housing:** Available housing must be safe.
3. **Affordable housing:** Housing must be genuinely affordable.
4. **Shorter waitlists for housing:** With severe winter weather, the consequences of being on a waitlist for housing can be devastating.
5. **Renovations:** Many are living in housing with unsafe conditions. Renovations should be completed in a timely manner.
6. **Appointment of advocacy workers (such as a Northwest Territories Housing Advocate):** this would mean someone who would help tenants and people experiencing homelessness file paperwork, help with applications, and help look for funding to go to hearings.
7. **Culturally appropriate applications:** We need people who can speak our language accepting housing applications and assisting through the process.
8. **Culturally appropriate policies and procedures that are client-friendly:** Housing providers should review all policies and procedures to ensure that they are culturally appropriate and client-friendly.

9. **Readable documents:** Documents provided by NWT Housing, landlords, and housing providers are often inaccessible. These documents need to be translated before signing.
10. **Temporary shelters:** There is a lack of temporary shelters throughout the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. Funding must be made available to build and resource shelters.
11. **Safe Elders homes:** Our Elders must have access to a safe home.
12. **More of our own people working in housing:** This requires resources for the government to build trust and relationships in our communities, and to create opportunities for our own people to work in housing.
13. **Indigenous-led housing:** We need housing options funded by government that are Indigenous-led.
14. **No evictions until alternative housing is found for individuals:** This is especially important when weather conditions mean the consequence of homelessness may be death. This is also a principle of human rights law and was even recommended to the Canada in their 2022 UN review by the Committee on the Rights of the Child. It needs to be honoured.
15. **Homeownership programs:** Programs must be accessible to ensure people have a way to build to homeownership. This can start with more client-friendly readable documents that are translated.
16. **Stable homes for people with disabilities.**
17. **Better partnerships between government housing and income support programs.**

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# A COLLABORATIVE PATH FORWARD

During these interviews, it often became emotional. Participants expressed gratitude throughout the surveys that we were conducting. We were informed that people felt hopeful that the surveys would genuinely surface the realities of living in the North. They felt heard. And they were very grateful to share their experience and concerns.

Participants and community members are hopeful that our governments will come through to end homelessness and prioritize

the importance of homes for our people in the North.

**There is a housing crisis in the Northwest Territories and in Nunavut. We know the challenges Northerners face. There must be effort to work together and create solutions. It is time to collaborate and work as partners to end homelessness in the North.** With the right supports and the right amount of funding, this can happen. There are people with lived and living experiences of homelessness and deeply inadequate housing who say:



## *Enough talking.*

*It is time to see some action on what our government has been promising us for years. We are ready to create partnerships.*

*We are ready to sit at the table for negotiations and we are ready to help our own people.*

*Leaders and individuals are exhausted from the broken promises.*

*Working together is crucial in creating adequate, culturally appropriate, and safe housing in the North.*

*Safe and adequate housing is a human right and everyone deserves housing.*





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