

Presentation to the Toronto Board of Health

Speaking Notes for Heather McGregor

October 31, 2016

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to talk to you about the connections between housing and health for women and girls in our city.

My name is Heather McGregor and I am the Chief Executive Officer of YWCA Toronto, the largest multi-service women's organization in Canada. We help women escape and recover from violence, move out of poverty and gain economic security, and access housing that is safe and affordable. We also work with young girls – building their leadership and critical thinking skills. Our Association serves over 12,000 women and families annually in 32 programs across the City of Toronto.

We are also one of the largest providers of housing for women and their families. Our housing portfolio includes nine shelter and housing programs, including two violence against women shelters, a shelter for homeless women, a transitional housing project and 550 units of permanent housing. We shelter and house almost 1,700 women and children annually.

My comments today will focus on the need for a gender analysis of women's homelessness and housing insecurity.

Just two weeks ago, Canada's Chief Public Health Officer released a report which identified violence against women as a public health issue of global importance.

It is a tragedy that every four days a woman is killed by a family member. It is a tragedy that Indigenous women experience disproportionately higher levels of violence. There is a strong need and moral imperative for action

For women, violence is often the precursor to instability that plunges them into poverty and homelessness to seek safety. Only by using a gender lens can governments effectively recognize and respond to the unique systemic challenges facing women, particularly the connection between violence, trauma, mental health and substance abuse.

YWCA Toronto has been involved in housing consultations at the provincial and federal levels. The following are some of the key recommendations we have made:

- Include safety and support as key dimensions important to housing in Canada.
- Invest in a continuum of housing options for women based on housing readiness and specific needs – including women-only emergency shelters, transitional housing and permanent housing options.
- Expand access to housing options by and for Indigenous women with traditional healing programs.
- Develop a coordinated plan to ensure effective support for tenants with complex needs – including strengthening supportive housing and funding trauma-informed mental health programs.

Looking at Toronto's housing context, we cannot ignore the impact of poverty on women's homelessness, housing insecurity and health.

In every category – Indigenous women, immigrant and refugee women, senior women – women's poverty rates are higher than those of men. We also cannot ignore Toronto's stark divisions along neighbourhood, racial and ethnic lines in terms of economic conditions and opportunities. We must close these gaps. Poverty destroys lives, limits opportunity and harms families and communities.

YWCA Toronto appeared before the Toronto Budget Committee earlier this year – and we will do so again in 2017 – to urge Councillors to adequately fund the City's poverty reduction strategy.

We also join with other civic leaders in calling on Councilors to look at new revenue generating tools to fund important poverty reduction initiatives. As we all know, inaction is detrimental to the health and safety of Torontonians – especially women.

Thank you.