

A glass sphere resting on a dark, textured rock. The sphere reflects a city skyline at sunset, with a prominent tower and other buildings. The background is a blurred cityscape across a body of water, with a blue sky and a sunset glow. A blue diagonal shape is in the top left corner.

# YWCA TORONTO SUBMISSION TO **ONTARIO'S NEW POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY**

March 30, 2020

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# INTRODUCTION

YWCA Toronto transforms lives. As the city's largest multi-service women's organization, we help families escape violence, move out of poverty and access safe, affordable housing. We work tenaciously to break down barriers that prevent women and girls from achieving equality. Annually, our Association serves over 13,000 people, including trans and non-binary community members.

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We are deeply concerned about the effects of growing poverty and inequality on women and girls in our province. In response to the government's request for input on the 2020-2025 Poverty Reduction Strategy, we conducted six consultations. This submission highlights the stories and concerns of residents in our shelter and housing sites, clients accessing our settlement and employment programs, as well as frontline staff. Given that our mandate is to serve women and girls who face marginalization and other forms of systemic inequities, our submission provides a representative snapshot of urban poverty in our province and the realities facing so many communities struggling for safety, security and stability.

Poverty destroys lives, limits opportunities and harms families. It fractures communities and leaves many women in unsafe situations. Entrenched and deep poverty is particularly harmful because it creates a sense of hopelessness and negatively impacts both physical and mental health. Any effective approach to the alleviation of poverty must

be centered in the diverse voices of women and girls.

While structuring the Poverty Reduction Strategy, we encourage the province to work closely with community partners. As direct service providers, we have a great wealth of knowledge to share. YWCA Toronto in particular has served women for over 100 years; we have amassed information, statistical data, and other resources which we can offer in creating sustainable, evidenced-based solutions.

As always, YWCA Toronto works with the province and community partners to ensure the best level of care to individuals impacted by poverty and other forms of marginalization. We know women and girls can achieve many great things if given the right opportunities – it is time for the province to ensure that every Ontario resident is afforded the opportunity to live a dignified life in safety and with the proper supports in place.

*“Politicians should try to spend a month in a shelter.”*

## POVERTY IN ONTARIO TODAY

Poverty is inherently stigmatizing. It limits the ability of women to take care of their children and build a better future for themselves and their families.

13.7% of Ontarians live in poverty, a rate that has grown in contrast to many other provinces. Women are overrepresented in poverty statistics, a reality that is compounded for women who are racialized, Indigenous, newcomers, seniors, trans, living with disabilities or gender-diverse. In Ontario approximately 410,000 children live in poverty — many impacted children are from single-women-led families.<sup>1</sup> It is the poverty of women that is behind the poverty of so many children in our province.<sup>2</sup>

As more Ontarians fall into poverty, demand for social assistance has steadily grown. By the province’s own account, demand for social assistance has grown 55 per cent over the past 15 years.<sup>3</sup>

*“We feel dehumanized.”*

Experiences of poverty differ on the basis of gender. Women are more likely to live on low incomes, live to old age, live with children, and seek shelter due to violence. Women also face unique systemic challenges as they flee violence and attempt to secure housing. Many women are reluctant to turn to co-ed

and overpopulated shelters because they are unsafe spaces. They will try to couch surf with friends, stay with family members, or may – unfortunately – return to abusive homes. Poverty leaves women in difficult situations.

A Poverty Reduction Strategy that fails to address the specific concerns of women will not succeed — gender-responsive investments are urgently needed. The lack of an intersectional gender lens on poverty reduction efforts has compromised the province’s ability to deliver on its targets.

Ultimately, poverty deepens gender, racial, and geographic inequalities.<sup>4</sup> Poverty is also bad for our economy as it is estimated to cost Ontario between \$10.4 billion and \$13.1 billion per year.<sup>5</sup> There is a strong moral, social and economic incentive to address this challenge. However, we must do so in a manner that prioritizes the needs of communities directly impacted by poverty and is inclusive of the concerns of diverse women.

*“Access to affordable housing is paramount.”*

## HOUSING

The foremost sign of poverty is housing need. In our consultations, access to affordable and adequate housing was flagged as the number one concern. The communities we serve have repeatedly expressed a strong demand for affordable housing that is both safe and available when needed. An increase in the affordable housing stock is vital in reducing poverty and homelessness.

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The waitlist for social housing in Toronto has doubled over the past ten years, while the waitlist for supportive housing has almost quadrupled.<sup>6</sup> Waitlist times can be up to seven years in Toronto. The women we spoke to noted how difficult it is to obtain social housing and how long they have to wait for a unit. While they are waiting, women are often in the shelter system, at friends, or in between housing arrangements.

Once a unit is offered, many are found to be in disrepair and in buildings that are unsafe for women and unfit for their children. Some women are forced to seek shelter or alternative housing arrangements because their units are unhygienic, dilapidated, or in buildings known for violence and crime. Such buildings do not advance the safety or stability of women and their families. Whereas Housing Connections used to offer three options when offering a home, now it only offers one. This take-it-or-leave-it approach more often than not leaves women forced to make suboptimal decisions that

may lead to greater risk to their personal safety and wellbeing.

When no affordable or safe housing options are available, women do not leave the shelter system. Within the shelter system, women and non-binary people cannot easily access co-ed shelters and this presents significant challenges in terms of capacity for women’s shelters and Violence Against Women shelters in our city. Frontline staff have noted that the duration of shelter stay has increased over the last five years. Whereas before it may have taken six months for a woman to secure adequate housing, today it can take years, regardless of the fact that shelter residents have high housing priority. Many women stay longer than is permitted in the shelter system due to a lack of adequate affordable housing options causing crowding and overcapacity issues.

Not having the available services to accommodate women when transitioning out of shelters, many report ending up on

the streets and/or staying at another shelter. Providing women with opportunities to secure safe, affordable and adequate housing enables them to have the stability needed to find employment, assume caregiving responsibilities, and so forth. Women are able to navigate a path to success with safe, affordable housing.

Additionally, participants shared that the current housing system discriminates against their social status and racial identity. They report systemic discrimination against recipients of Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), which is compounded for Indigenous, Black, trans, racialized, non-status and newcomer women. Participants report landlords discriminate against them, going so far as to refuse sharing a rental form when they find out a prospective tenant receives income assistance. Systemic discrimination faced by marginalized women has left many in unsafe situations. Particularly for women fleeing violence, this dynamic is deeply problematic and concerning.

From the women and staff we have consulted, it is clear that the housing stock must be diversified and innovated. Some solutions offered during our consultations: incentivize homeowners to rent empty rooms; invest in laneway and modular homes; create inclusionary zoning measures to promote mixed-income neighbourhoods and housing; properly fund and increase the supportive housing stock for women who require clinical and social supports; and invest in rent-g geared-to-income units and other subsidized housing units.

*“[There are] standards expected from a person [tenant] but not of the building.”*

Others proposed that landlords, particularly larger property management companies, should not be allowed to discriminate against social assistance recipients and that there should be a feedback/enforcement mechanism, such as a hotline to report when a company does engage in such discriminatory practices. It was also suggested that rent-control measures need to be in place and properly enforced given the rise of “renovictions.” All the women reported the rising cost of rent and the inability to find adequate, affordable housing is a primary reason for experiencing the harmful effects of poverty.

Frontline staff offered several additional poverty reduction measures including a vacant homes tax, regulating developers to ensure at least 25% of every new condominium development is slated for deeply affordable housing units, and an increased investment in the existing public housing stock to ensure units are up to code and properly secured. Staff also mentioned that people should receive greater social and clinical support to maintain their housing and that more investment should go into eviction prevention programs.

The lack of affordable and safe housing options, the systemic discrimination faced by social assistance recipients, as well as the realities of safety concerns around gender-based violence for women are some of the challenges shared by the communities YWCA Toronto serves. We urge the provincial government to recognize access to affordable and dignified housing as a critical pillar of poverty reduction and to find innovative ways to accommodate the countless women living in shelters without a safe home to call their own. More government action must be taken to lift women out of poverty and ensure each and everyone of these women have a safe, affordable roof over their heads.

*“Ontario Works is not enough. You can’t expect people to get their life together with \$300.”*

## SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Ontario’s social assistance program does not meet basic needs. According to a study from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, the poverty gap (between total benefit income and the poverty line) for a single person on OW has nearly tripled, from 20 per cent in 1993 to 59 per cent in 2014.<sup>7</sup>

Income security allows families to reach their full potential for economic and social inclusion. In our province, for families on limited incomes, particularly on social assistance, life is harder than ever before due to the rising cost of housing, utilities, food and public transportation. Ontario’s social assistance program should provide enough resources to cover essential living expenses so that recipients can avoid falling into poverty. However, from our consultations, it is clear this is not the case. Our current social assistance system is deepening poverty and inequality for many recipients and creating unsafe living conditions for women in particular.

The women we spoke to repeatedly brought concerns forward regarding the inadequacy of social assistance rates, particularly single women on OW. Low social assistance rates make it difficult for women to find and maintain housing, build a life, support their families, and gain meaningful employment. As one woman stated, “I challenge any of them [political leaders] to live on OW for a

month and see what it’s like.”

Maximum OW payments for single adult recipients in Toronto is \$733, which includes both the basic need amount and shelter allowance. In a city where the average monthly one-bedroom apartment cost is \$1,374, this allowance is woefully inadequate.<sup>8</sup> It means that social assistance recipients are ineligible for most market housing and, given the long waitlist for subsidized housing, recipients have to wait many years for a permanent home.

Given the demand for subsidized housing exceeds the number of available units, even the City of Toronto advises applicants to consider “subsidized housing as a long-term housing plan, not an immediate solution to housing needs or emergency situations.”<sup>9</sup> This leaves many social assistance recipients in difficult and sometimes dangerous situations. Some recipients end up staying at a shelter because they simply do not have enough money to go elsewhere.

Women are more vulnerable to abuse and

sexual assault in co-ed shelters, but are sometimes unable to secure a spot at a women's shelter because there are so few beds available. As one shelter resident explains, "I was sexually assaulted in a co-ed shelter and received no support." This is a disturbing reality facing women navigating the shelter system, a vulnerability that is inherent in the allocation of shelter funds and the misalignment between social assistance rates and the cost of living.

*"They act like it [poverty] is a choice."*

The women we spoke to wanted the government to know that they struggle on a daily basis due to inadequate OW and ODSP rates and that poverty has taken a significant toll on their physical and mental health. They also expressed that information is fragmented, bureaucracies are convoluted, and income support programs are tricky to navigate. Frontline staff echoes this concern: "It is time to remove the red tape to income supports." There are too many eligibility criteria and wait times are too long before women can access the money they need to survive. As another staff member explains, "People need to access the money before they lose their housing."

It is imperative that the provincial government immediately increase social assistance rates, both OW and ODSP rates, as an effective poverty reduction measure. Income security is a critical component of any successful poverty reduction plan. OW and ODSP rates must be high enough to cover basic living expenses and keep up with inflation. Women on social assistance must be able to secure adequate housing with the money they receive and be given the opportunity to better their circumstance. For women fleeing violence, having access to financial resources to find a new home is critically important.

We urge the provincial government to reform social assistance, increase the rates, and ensure the system is gender-responsive and meeting the needs of women in our province today.

*“Our kids are dying.”*

## YOUTH

Another theme highlighted in our consultations pertains to youth who experience poverty. As a society, it is our collective responsibility to ensure the next generation is provided with the resources, services, and opportunities needed to succeed in life. But we are failing our youth when 1 out of 6 young people in our province are affected by poverty -- a number that increases for Indigenous, Black, racialized, and LGBTQ2S+ youth. Additionally, access to free youth programs and mental health services are not readily available. As one participant in our consultation said, “our young people are losing hope.”

Young people are particularly vulnerable to the harmful effects of poverty. Younger participants in our consultations pointed out that teenagers sometimes leave home due to violence but often have no stable or safe place to go. Shelter spaces for youth are limited and adult shelters often cannot provide youth with the peer support and positive role models needed to thrive. In addition, youth under the age of 18 cannot qualify for financial assistance through OW or ODSP without a guardians' permission, which can be difficult to obtain if family discord is involved. Given their developmental age, the stress of survival and poverty leaves many youth feeling anxious, depressed, and vulnerable to mental health challenges. As one 17 year old youth in our shelter system said, “How am I supposed to focus on school when I'm here [in the shelter]? I am anxious...I want to go to college but it's difficult to focus.”

Some mothers in our consultation also expressed that, given their limited finances, they are forced to live in neighbourhoods that are unsafe. They fear for the wellbeing of their children. As one mother said, “the streets are getting crazy...I need my son in after-school programs but all the free ones shut down.”

As outlined in the previous Poverty Reduction Strategy, supporting youth consists of providing them with income security, a stable home, and educational and employment opportunities. This requires considerable investment today that will result in positive downstream effects. Additionally, sustained mental health services and funding for recreational programming and specifically girls' programming, should be an essential part of youth supports as well.

YWCA Toronto offers a Girls' Centre



dedicated to helping girls learn leadership skills, build their self-esteem, collaborate with other young girls, and learn about the challenges of life in a safe environment. However, there is no government funding for our programs. Without funding, our programs cannot adequately respond to the needs of the girls accessing our services, the majority of whom are from communities that experience a high level of structural violence, discrimination and poverty.

Investing in the future of our province begins with investing in our youth. Supporting youth that face poverty, marginalization and other systemic inequities will ensure that, in the long run, youth who do experience challenges today are given the opportunity to become successful, happy and healthy adults.

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*“Why does it have to come to the point where they [children] have to hurt themselves before help is offered?”*

## MENTAL HEALTH

Income is a social determinant of health. Poverty is linked to poor mental health outcomes. The stress of survival can produce anxiety, depression and may aggravate existing conditions such as schizophrenia. However, limited mental health services exist for people on fixed and low-incomes. As one participant explains, “we need more mental health services...there’s just not enough support.” For OW recipients, many fear leaving the program and the security they feel from having access to the health benefits. Expanding Ontario’s public health care system to include mental health services is an urgent priority for many of the women we spoke to.

Poverty is also linked to poor mental health outcomes for youth. Toronto is one of the least happy cities in Canada and has a growing youth mental health crisis, with hospitalizations due to mental health doubling over the last ten years.<sup>10</sup> Hospitalizations among girls aged 15 to 17 years have increased and the waitlist for youth mental health services sits at 18 months.<sup>11</sup> According to staff, youth who access our shelters and other frontline services display increased mental health and substance use problems. Such problems are developing at a younger age and disproportionately impacting racialized and LGBTQ2S+ youth.

Women who have experienced gender-based violence or lost a loved one to gun violence are also more susceptible to mental health decline. YWCA Toronto supports survivors through programs such as Here to Help

(a program for child witnesses of violence and their mothers) and Choices for Living (a support group for women challenged by mental illness). The provincial government must apply an intersectional gender lens to increase funding and ensure that specific communities have access to trauma-informed, culturally-competent, therapeutic programs. The intergenerational trauma of poverty and violence, particularly for Black, Indigenous and other racialized communities, must be addressed by adequately funded gender-responsive health provisions.

Ultimately we believe all Ontarians should be able to access the health services they need, regardless of income. We urge the provincial government to expand our public health care system to include mental health and to provide increased funding for trauma-informed, community-led therapy programs.

*“Healthy food costs money.”*

## FOOD SECURITY

The right to food is a basic human right. Yet, families that experience poverty experience heightened food insecurity. Canada has signed onto the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) as well as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976) that recognizes the right to food as a human right. Regardless, last year there were over one million visits to food banks in the GTA.<sup>12</sup> When a woman struggles financially, the ability to purchase food is often compromised. For recipients of social assistance and minimum wage earners, after paying for housing, utilities, and other costs, there is very little money, if any, left for food. A lack of access to healthy, nutritious food impedes childhood learning and development, and harms the physical and psychological wellbeing of children and adults.

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The ability to access food when needed should be guaranteed to everyone and particularly ensured for families on limited incomes. Because women are more likely to live in poverty and often assume caregiving responsibilities such as preparing meals for children, women must have access to healthy, nutritious and cost-effective food options.

The women in our consultations expressed the need for healthy food options. They said that being limited to visiting a food bank once per week is not sufficient to ensure an adequate supply of healthy food. They hope they will be able to access food banks more frequently and urge greater government

support so they are financially empowered to make healthy food choices.

Access to healthy food is a disease prevention and health protection measure. Healthy food improves mental, emotional and physical health as well as offering long-term cost-savings for our already overburdened healthcare system. No woman or child should ever experience hunger in a province as wealthy as Ontario. The 2020-2025 Poverty Reduction Strategy must include adequate financial provisions to women and families so they can purchase healthy foods and invest more greatly in food banks and other accessible healthy food options.

# UNPAID CARE WORK

The responsibility for unpaid care work falls disproportionately on women and girls, leaving less time for leisure, political participation, paid work, and other activities. This burden can limit women’s engagement in market activities and can lead to a concentration in low-paid, informal, or home-based work as a means of balancing unpaid care work and paid employment. Unpaid care work, therefore, is a source of women’s poverty. Care work can include caregiving responsibilities towards elderly family members and family members with chronic illness or disability, as well as child rearing responsibilities.

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The mothers we spoke to expressed their frustration with the child care system. They relayed how unaffordable and inflexible the current system is. Given that some people work minimum wage and/or shift jobs with irregular hours, the current child care system is woefully inadequate in providing flexible care. Participants’ expressed the need for child care that offers flexible hours, is open on weekends and evenings, and is subsidized. Toronto has one of the highest child care fees in the country at \$1,685 a month for infant care.<sup>13</sup> Child care subsidies are difficult to obtain as the subsidy waitlist is long.

Other participants spoke to how unfair it is that the valuable care work they perform with parents and other family members goes unrecognized by the government and uncompensated. As one woman explains, “they’re [women] taking care of parents and providing a community service, so why are they not receiving financial compensation

from the government?” Unpaid care work comes at a high emotional cost but most caregivers do not have access to greater mental health or financial supports.

In short, the unequal distribution of caring responsibilities is linked to poverty for women. YWCA Toronto, along with movement partners, have advocated for universal child care for many years. Access to child care is directly linked to women’s labour market participation. We also believe the provincial government must provide greater financial support to caregivers and recognize the inherent value of care work. Improved government policies designed to support caregivers, either by putting money directly in their pocket and/or by providing greater caregiver support so that women can enter the paid labour market, is needed to provide sensible solutions to gender-based poverty in our province.

*“Canada is losing the brain and talent of newcomers.”*

## EMPLOYMENT

Women make up the majority of Canada’s minimum-wage workers and are more likely to be concentrated in part-time, precarious work than men. In our consultations, employment is flagged as a key issue. Many women in our shelter system and employment programs are eager and willing to work but find it difficult to secure a full-time, permanent job.

Women in our shelter system spoke about the impossibility of finding a full-time job when they do not have stable housing. Newcomer women expressed how difficult it is to gain employment in Canada as highly-educated immigrants with no Canadian work experience. All participants relayed that the cost of living in Toronto is so high, that minimum wage work “simply does not cut it.” Many women shared how they, or someone they knew, had to work two or three minimum wage jobs just to survive. Frustration with the difficulty of securing stable work that pays a living wage and offers health benefits was repeatedly expressed in our consultations.

The newcomer women we spoke to highlighted the multiple barriers they face when accessing the Canadian labour market. As one woman explains, “we are new to Canada. How do we acquire Canadian experience when all jobs require it?” Many newcomers find it difficult to secure a job in a field relevant to their qualifications.

The participants also mention it is difficult to upgrade skills and go through the accreditation process when the cost of living in Toronto is so high. When newcomers move to Canada, particularly from non-Western countries, they sometimes have to wait several years before their qualifications are recognized. This job market discrimination traps newcomer women in low-wage, precarious jobs and limits options for building new lives in Canada.

Participants believe education and skills training opportunities should be free for social assistance recipients. Staff mentioned that while some shelter residents may not have a formal education, they still have many valuable strengths and skills suitable for employment. It was highlighted that OW offers some assistance towards skills training, but that greater financial allowance for training opportunities are needed in order to help women on social assistance find paid work.

Some solutions flagged by participants were to incentivize employers to hire newcomers and create opportunities for newcomers to gain paid Canadian work experience; invest in educational and training opportunities for women on social assistance to upgrade their skills; increase the minimum wage and create stronger labour laws so that minimum wage workers have greater job protection and access to health benefits; offer free, expedited assessment services that allow newcomers to demonstrate Canadian equivalence of skills; partner up with employers to give women with criminal records a “second chance;” offer more training programs for women 30 years and older; and, create more partnerships with the business sector, particularly larger employers, to create job opportunities for women who face poverty, homelessness and other forms of hardship.

*“We should all have the opportunity to do something [productive].”*

Like the government, we believe employment offers a path out of poverty for women who are able to work. We urge the provincial government to invest in women-specific employment programs. Creating programs specifically targeted to women who face multiple barriers, such as employment programs with more intensive supports and a focus on foundational life skills, would be helpful. Furthermore, creating stronger labour laws and job protections for minimum wage workers, which are disproportionately women, will also reduce poverty in our province.

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# COORDINATED & TRANSPARENT CENTRALIZED COMMUNICATION

Another issue flagged by the participants we spoke to pertains to transparency, communication and the ease of access to information related to housing, social assistance, employment programs and other opportunities.

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Participants expressed how difficult it is to navigate multiple, complex forms of bureaucracies in order to qualify for social assistance and other financial supports. Many services, programs, subsidies and opportunities are available for people in need, but much of this information is fragmented, decentralized and difficult to obtain. Participants mentioned that while some caseworkers are competent and knowledgeable, others are less so, which results in inconsistent or inaccurate information being shared. As one woman said, “our case worker says one thing, and then we speak to someone else and hear something completely different.”

Given the difficulty of obtaining concise and accurate information, the women we spoke to said that it would be helpful to have all resources and information centralized in

one, easy-to-access location. Currently, many government websites lack clear and concise information on the support they provide, or the services one would be eligible for, leaving many stressed and confused as to how to navigate their next steps.

Greater inter-ministerial cooperation focused on client-centered service is required to ensure those in need receive the best possible care. Fostering ease of access and transparency should be of paramount concern to the government. Allowing women to access much needed supports through one central intake process for example, would streamline services so that women in need can access supports with greater ease and speed. For women in crisis, receiving inaccurate or incomplete information is unacceptable.

# BASIC INCOME

The idea of a universal guaranteed income, also known as a basic income, was also mentioned repeatedly by residents in our shelters and by clients accessing our employment programs as a potential solution to poverty.

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Too many women fall through the cracks between existing support programs. Since women undertake a significant amount of unpaid care work, the women we spoke to thought that women and mothers stand to gain the most from a guaranteed basic income program

The potential of basic income to contribute to gender equality is supported by research. The women we consulted flagged the lack of money as one of the main issues they faced: “How can I plan for the future when I’m just trying to survive?” As stories of the basic

income pilot project in Hamilton reveal, for women fleeing gender-based violence, having access to a guaranteed income can make the difference between fleeing an abusive relationship or not. Because social assistance programs can be stigmatizing, a guaranteed income would remove the stigma of poverty.

Women assume a disproportionate share of the responsibility for unpaid care work but should not fall into poverty because of it -- a strong basic income scheme could remedy some entrenched gender disparities rooted in the devaluation of women’s care work.



# SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

It is evident from our consultations that the communities YWCA Toronto serve are deeply impacted by poverty. Given that women are concentrated in minimum wage jobs, face a gender wage gap that is also racialized, and assume greater unpaid care work than men, women are more likely to face poverty, violence and other forms of systemic oppression. Gender-based poverty can also differ based on race, Indigeneity, ability, age, geography, and other factors.

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Without a Poverty Reduction Strategy that responds to the diverse needs of women, families in our province will continue to suffer — many in silence. Therefore, we call on the provincial government to apply an intersectional gender lens on poverty alleviation efforts. Addressing the specific needs of diverse women must be a central part of the solution.

Below is a summary of some of the recommendations highlighted in this submission:

- Increase social assistance rates;
- Create a continuum of housing options, including supportive housing options; permanent, affordable housing; and emergency shelters for women and non-binary people;
- Introduce housing incentives to owners to rent their empty homes and rooms for greater housing availability;
- Invest in recreational activities for youth, including funding for girls' specific programming;
- Enhance transparent communication with the public on available services, programs, and subsidies;
- Foster greater full-time employment opportunities for newcomers and social assistance recipients, and strengthen labour laws to protect minimum wage workers;
- Invest in women-specific employment and skills readiness programs;
- Improve current living conditions in public housing buildings;
- Address systemic discrimination in the rental market against social assistance recipients and racialized communities;
- Provide basic income to alleviate financial barriers; and,
- Expand public investments in mental health and other therapeutic services.

We require a Poverty Reduction Strategy that is ambitious and properly resourced. The new strategy must include specific targets, measurable objectives and an overarching framework that is informed by equity and inclusion. We encourage the province to undertake the creation of a poverty roundtable consisting of people with lived experience and agencies that serve marginalized communities to offer strategic advice and oversight on poverty reduction measures. The voices of women who face multiple and intersecting forms of inequality and oppression must be included in poverty reduction efforts in our province as well.

We all have a role to play in alleviating poverty. However, poverty reduction will not be possible without concrete and sustained government intervention. Substantial investments towards new initiatives aimed at reducing poverty, coupled with improvement of existing services, must be part of the solution. In terms of impact, the intersections of gender and race must be considered as well, and disaggregated data must be collected to ensure initiatives reach intended communities.

The goal of poverty reduction must go beyond advancing mere survival to allow communities to thrive. A robust strategy will not only support communities in need, it will strengthen the social safety net of our society to the benefit of all residents. In the spirit of partnership and collaboration, we urge the provincial government to make improved gender-responsive investments so that everyone in Ontario has the opportunity to succeed.

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