



A TURNING POINT
FOR WOMEN



Winona's Place Safety Project

The Winona's Place Committee is raising funds in support of Winona's Place, a supportive subsidized residence for Women of Aboriginal descent, and an integral component of the Elm Centre, YWCA Toronto's affordable and supportive housing complex in downtown Toronto. The great majority of the residents have experienced the trauma of violence and a home at Winona's Place represents an opportunity for women to heal in a supportive and affordable community.

YWCA Toronto Elm Centre

This innovative mix of residents at Elm Centre has been developed from our experience working with many women in our shelters, transitional homes and permanent apartment complexes who have demonstrated an increased need for support for mental health challenges in order to maintain stable, permanent housing.

The YWCA Toronto Elm Centre offers a wide range of programs and supports in order to help women who, due to mental health and addiction issues are at risk of homelessness. This supportive model of housing includes a Mental Health Specialist, an Occupational Therapist, a Leadership Skills Specialist and a clinic with physicians and referral for psychiatric supports.

In-house support staff are trained in the areas of mental health, addiction, life skills, employment, education, parenting, trauma and housing. Counsellors work to provide consistent reliable support on an individual basis which reduces the development of crises and helps tenants to build connections directed towards achieving long-term stability in an encouraging community.

Winona's Place

Fifty of the 300 apartment units at the YWCA Toronto Elm Centre are rent-geared-to income available to individuals and families of Aboriginal descent (including 10 units for women fleeing violence). Called "Winona's Place," this wing of the Elm Centre is located on the south side of our welcoming multi-storey yellow and blue complex.

Support at Winona's Place

Our goal is to provide supports, reduce stigma and build community among the diverse tenant population. It is essential that tenants coping with intense difficulties are not marginalized and do not become isolated but rather, thrive and grow.

For those who are struggling with mental health and addiction challenges, economic and social difficulties can become an insurmountable burden if they are not receiving necessary support. This will often result in increased incidences of crises and hospitalization and even leading to eviction. This is particularly true for Aboriginal women, for whom there are limited culturally-sensitive supports and services. The Elm Centre provides Aboriginal tenants with strong culturally appropriate community support where they can find skillful professional assistance, compassionate peer support, and ongoing opportunities to identify and use new resources to build capacity, recovery and stability within the community.



A TURNING POINT
FOR WOMEN



The crucial component of the YWCA Toronto Elm Centre's model of care is our multidisciplinary team, who apply a 'trauma-informed approach' in working with women with mental health and/or addictions issues. Many of the women we serve have relied on coping mechanisms such as drugs or alcohol that typically put them at further risk. Our trauma-informed approach means we do not punish women for the choices they make, but instead, offer alternatives and insights to help women find the best path to a healthy and strong future.

The YWCA Toronto Elm Centre gives such women the opportunity to live independently in their own community while minimizing incidents of crisis.

Violence against Aboriginal Women

There is a clear consensus about the causes of violence against Aboriginal women and the factors that make them more vulnerable to violence than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. This violence can be traced through a long legacy of socioeconomic disadvantage, racism, and trans-generational trauma and violence. The damage resulting from the residential school system has been particularly profound for the women living at Winona's Place, even generations later.

Such experiences have contributed to the normalization of violence within Aboriginal communities and the long-term impact that continues to feed a cycle of limited opportunity, poverty and violence.

Poverty is an underlying factor that contributes to the prevalence of violence against Aboriginal Women - it forces women into homelessness and is often the reason why Aboriginal women decide to work in the sex trade. The need to fund an addiction also pushes many women into prostitution and increases the risk of violence further.

Stage One of the Winona Security Project

Many of the residents at Winona's Place have experienced the trauma of poverty and violence, unsafe and precarious housing, emergency shelters and below standard housing. Living at the YWCA Toronto Elm Centre represents a new start for families, and our priority is to provide decent, affordable and safe housing.

Located directly across from the Toronto Coach Terminal, residents of Winona's Place have been regularly exposed to a transient population with its accompanying negative influences. For women and children who have already been exposed to the chaos resulting from drugs, alcohol and violence, this is an unacceptable risk for YWCA Toronto.

Nestled amongst the three towers of the apartment complex, the Elm Centre's popular amenity courtyard is a sheltered lawn and safe recreational area for residents. Unfortunately, for tenants of Winona's Place access to the courtyard from within the building was not available and due to unsafe activity originating from the street it became necessary in early 2014 to start securing the gate at 5 pm each weekday and full-time on weekends to minimize the incidence of the public using the courtyard, particularly in the evenings. This was not an ideal permanent solution and it became obvious that direct access was necessary to ensure that women and children living at Winona's Place were both safe and encouraged to access the amenities and community of the Elm Centre.

With the help of our donors, we were so pleased to have addressed some vital security issues at Winona's Place. The project made safe access directly from Winona's Place to the outdoor amenity courtyard a reality, as well as access to the play area located in the centre of the building complex. The project involved site clearance and walkway installation; expanding an iron courtyard enclosure fence to include an area where an open garden currently exists; modifying an emergency exit door in the building to create an entrance to the new enclosed outdoor space, and addressing all attendant electronic security and wheelchair adaptations inside and outside, including Chubb door operators with magnetic locks. Now tenants are able to access this secure area by means of a security fob.

Making the courtyard both secure and accessible to the residents at Winona's Place 24 hours a day means less risk of exposure to the increasing prevalence and influence of drugs, crime and youth gangs in the nearby streets and bus station. The new security fence has established a safe, secure area where kids can play and women can socialize, and feel confident that they will not be harassed by men passing on the street, which was previously the case.

In addition to full access to the courtyard, YWCA Toronto was successful in augmenting important safety issues including the addition of a security office in the lobby of Winona's Place and the installation of cameras in hallways, patios, lounges and laundry rooms. A secondary door was installed in the staff office to make it possible for staff to enter or exit easily during an emergency.

As many of these tenants have escaped violence, these particular security measures are vital to their safety and wellbeing as we know that violence escalates dramatically immediately after a woman flees from an abusive partner. According to 2014 RCMP statistics, 40 percent of Aboriginal women who were murdered were killed by either a spouse or boyfriend, 23 percent were murdered by family members and 30 percent were murdered by acquaintances.

Many of the residents are coping with the effects of violence and struggle to maintain good mental health and healthy coping strategies in the aftermath of abuse. The new secure access to Irma Brydson Place has been extremely helpful in terms of connecting tenants to support workers. In the past, women feeling vulnerable while struggling with anxiety, depression and addiction were discouraged from accessing personal support, Irma Brydson Place community events and the health clinic because they would have to leave the safety of Winona's Place and would have to make an external walk past the bus station in order to enter Irma Brydson Place. This may seem insignificant; but was found to be a deterrent that was easily corrected through a simple change in physical design.

Stage Two of the Winona Security Project

Stage Two will continue to improve security measures and provide the tenants the same rights and privileges as those living in Irma Brydson Place in the other wing of the Elm Centre. Originally, the plan was to host a Security Guard in the entrance of Winona's Place; however, we have since realised that a model more in line with that of Irma Brydson Place is a better fit with our approach.

An unfortunate effect of the Security Guard's presence was the perception that the women themselves were being monitored while our intention is to monitor problematic visitors who pose a threat to the women and children living in the building. While it is necessary to have security at Winona's Place, we do not want the women to feel that they are being monitored in their own homes.

The proposed solution is to change the reception desk to a 24-hour concierge model that will be staffed by Community Engagement Workers (CEWs) who would be primarily focused on the safety and wellbeing of residents and their children. CEWs would be recruited with the aim of hiring women who identify as Aboriginal and who are familiar with the culture and practices of the residents. They would provide tenants with valuable personal and tenant support including tenant and community information, crisis support, referrals and liaison to the Community Support workers. We feel that this change in focus will continue the positive momentum in establishing Winona's Place as an important cultural hub for Aboriginal women in downtown Toronto.

In Closing

Violence against Aboriginal women and girls in Canada is a problem of massive proportions, and its manifestation in Toronto is particularly pronounced. Despite overwhelming statistics concerning disappearances and murders of Aboriginal women and girls, our society has failed to address this major human rights violation.

This failure is integrally linked to the fact that Aboriginal women are amongst the most discriminated against and socially and economically disadvantaged groups in Canada. This social and economic marginalization makes Aboriginal women and girls easy prey for violent perpetrators.

In 2014, we took positive steps to make Winona's Place a supportive community that addresses the effects of trauma from poverty and violence; however, we are determined to go further and fulfill our obligation to do everything possible to prevent acts of gender-based violence against our residents.