

Oct 18th - Oct 28th, 2021

5TH ANNUAL
PAN CANADIAN VOICE FOR WOMEN'S HOUSING
2021 SYMPOSIUM

atira.bc.ca/what-we-do/projects/pcvwh/





* Due to the ongoing Covid -19 pandemic, the event was held with the attendees attending the different sessions virtually.

2021 Symposium Participants

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2021 Advisory Circle Members

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2021 Symposium Funder

The 2021 PCVWH Symposium was funded by CMHC



INDEX

SUMMARY OF THE SESSIONS	1
ADVANCES	3
SETBACKS	5
ANALYSIS OF THE SIX CALLS TO ACTION PRESENTATION BY DR. CAROLYN WHITZMAN, PHD	8
CMHC	9
NEXT STEPS	10



“What kind of message are we sending to our children if we let people live in inadequate conditions?”

Lived Expertise Participant



Summary of the Sessions of the 2021 Symposium

In 2021, the Pan-Canadian Voice for Women's Housing symposium gathered a diverse range of participants from across Canada who attended five days of in-depth sessions on the state of housing for women, children, and gender minorities across Canada.

The symposium began on October 18th, 2021 and completed on October 28th, 2021. Due to ongoing travel restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic the sessions were conducted virtually, and there is an expectation that future symposiums will be able to meet in person, or will be conducted with a mixed digital and in-person components.

Each day began with lived expertise testimony from individuals who shared their stories, inter-generational traumas, and ideas about housing, from their unique perspectives as experts. Extended video interviews were created and shared with all symposium participants and served as a learning opportunity and a way of grounding everybody in the work: hearing and expressing voices from across Canada about the disparities that exist at the intersection of gender and housing.

"When Covid first hit, we saw all kinds of money for rapid housing, shelters etc. But, it shouldn't have taken a pandemic to get that money out of the government. And if they could do it then, let's keep doing it."

Housing Provider

The Pan-Canadian Voice for Women's Housing has increasingly tried to speak with, and for, those whose lives are historically and systemically outside those lines of privilege in Canada, including Black, First Nations, Métis, Inuit, women of colour, as well as women fleeing violence, queer communities, two-spirited people, and people with disabilities.

Notably, there have been recent advances in the state of representation and diversity in the most senior positions in the federal housing system. Canada's Minister of Housing, Diversity, and Inclusion, the Honourable Ahmed Hussen, PC, MP has lived experience in social housing, as a refugee, a Somali-Canadian, and as a Black Canadian. The current CEO of CMHC, Romy Bowers, is just the second woman to hold the position, and is someone of mixed ancestry, who was born in Japan to a Japanese mother and Canadian father.



Advances

1 SIGNS OF SUPPLY

There were reports that new affordable housing units and supportive housing units are opening, beginning construction, or have received funding approvals across the country. In many communities these are the first new units created in decades. It was also clear throughout the symposium that the immediate need for more affordable housing supply was an emergency level concern for every region of the country.

“In St. John’s some new and exciting things are happening. First Indigenous housing team in this community, which does great work. They closed their shelter, renovated it, and turned it into long-term housing.”

Housing Provider

2 REPRESENTATION

Canada now has a Minister Responsible for Housing, Diversity, and Inclusion with lived experience in Canada's social housing and this is a kind of representation that is rare in senior positions within housing in Canada. Ultimately, the symposium would like to see people with lived expertise in community housing represented throughout CMHC and on its advisory boards.

Participants also had the opportunity to meet with the second woman in history to become Chief Executive Officer of the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Romy Bowers, who joined the symposium for an extended question and answer session with participants. The importance of inclusion was central to the discussion.

“There are northern, rural, reserve and coastal communities as well, who all need to be represented.”

Participant

Throughout the symposium there were clear signs of positive trends throughout the housing system. Housing providers and lived expertise participants reported on examples of real changes they are seeing organizationally, politically, and on the ground in their communities.

3 RESEARCH

Dr. Carolyn Whitzman presented research updating participants on the progress of the Six Calls to Action from previous symposiums of the Pan-Canadian Voice for Women's Housing. Increasingly, a wide body of new housing research is providing evidence of where policy gaps and failures are occurring. More help is needed, and research is helping identify the scope of work and specific challenges ahead.

"People talk about safety and don't realize how many other people don't have it."

Participant

4 VOICES

The Pan-Canadian Voice for Women's Housing has been able to present the issues from symposiums to leaders at CMHC for five years now. We have heard from a wider diversity of people due to online platforms, and continue to add the voices of women who are marginalized to our advisory groups and invite list. The voice for housing is growing.

"Why do women fleeing violence have to go to shelters? Why is that the only system?"

Participant



Setbacks

Despite aspirations of major advances in the state of housing for women, children, and gender minorities, the symposium consistently heard expressions of worry and alarm that policy makers do not understand the magnitude, nor the emergency nature, of the housing crisis in Canada.

For women living without shelter, in shelters, fleeing violence, or in abject poverty they are barely surviving, or dying before help comes. For many survivors it will take years to recover from this traumatic time. Their long-term recovery depends on Canada's sense of urgency about this now.

1 URGENCY

There are a lack of crisis shelters, and then no permanent options for people to escape from violence or poverty. Women, children, and gender minorities are often driven back into violent situations because of a lack of housing options in our society.

When people need urgent and immediate help their government does not currently have answers. That needs to change. Climate related emergencies, insufficient income assistance programs, a lack of housing supply, and a rise in violence against women through the pandemic are all adding to the daily burdens of the most vulnerable.

“People spend six months in a shelter or going through transitional program, and then there is nothing at the end for them. They have to go back.”

Participant

2 AFFORDABILITY

There is a growing disparity between income and housing. The Canada Housing Benefit is not high enough to pay the rent, especially for single mothers in larger cities. Benefit programs do not take into consideration the increasing costs of rent, internet, food, and heating in the North. Provincial income assistance levels in Canada are woefully inadequate, and food money is often spent on rent. There is no disposable income, no savings, and no ability to prepare for emergencies for populations made vulnerable. This is occurring during a time of great wealth expansion in Canada.

“For kids aging out of care, the amount of money they are given for shelter isn't enough to pay the rent. So what are they going to eat?”

Participant



CLAWBACKS AND BARRIERS

Canada's provincial and federal child welfare, disability, and income assistance programs trap people in poverty. Governments must work better together. Instead, they often overlap, clawback, and lack any common process that easily works for people.

Children's benefits are included in calculations of "income" for housing, trapping people into unaffordable situations. Shelter benefits are so disconnected from rents that food and heat money are essentially clawed back to pay rent, or buildings are left to deteriorate. Often any income from work, child support, benefit programs, or savings, are clawed back by governments in such a way that nothing remains for the basic essentials of life.

The clawbacks aren't just a financial measure, they erode family connection. Child apprehension systems compromise any notion of housing security. When somebody loses their children, they lose their housing, and then cannot reunite with their children until they have adequate housing – which often does not exist, and they do not quality for when it does. These government policies are tearing families apart.

Similar barriers apply for women who want to improve their education. All of these barriers apply to people leaving incarceration.

"If you try to go to school for two years then you will lose your housing."

Participant

4 ACCESSIBILITY

Canada's new housing supply must take into account universal design, and people with disabilities must be able to seek support for accessibility tools or housing units with an expectation of support. Often, housing policy and housing design hasn't taken into consideration the whole family of a person with a disability and this must change. Participants urged housing leaders to ensure people with disabilities are represented in policy making and executive roles.



5 BUREAUCRACY

Different ministries must come together to make the application process for housing supports simple and easier to understand. Across the country the symposium heard from rural areas where women have to deal with slow mail-in processes and paperwork. Participants expressed a desire for either timely funding, or in-person assistance in navigating these systems, or access to advocates who can work on their behalf.

Sometimes governments themselves are the owners and operators of inadequate housing. Who can represent citizens in those situations?

Governments at all levels should consider streamline application systems, removing barriers for non-profit housing. Common cookie-cutter processes for individual applications, and more opportunities for tenants to directly receive financial support so they have choices in how those dollars are allocated.

“The biggest barrier are the resources. No knowledge, support, or connections. Over time I learned, but a lot of people don't have that. They get lost along the way, and they give up.”

Lived Expertise Participant

6 COLONIALISM

In 2021, across Canada, thousands of unmarked graves of children who died and/or were murdered in the residential school system were found. Historic theft of land often dominates conversation about housing, but the theft of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children from their families and communities forms a central part of a genocide, and is part of the legacy of colonialism causing inter-generational trauma.

Still today, many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people do not know the fates of their ancestors. Suicide, poverty, homelessness, and incarceration rates are disproportionately high among First Nations people, and Canada has offered no clear path towards reconciliation of these impacts of its colonial roots.

Under Canada's colonial systems women were not allowed to hold positions of power in government, and matriarchal leadership was outlawed in community, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people were not allowed to vote. Land was stolen, languages were lost, and people were displaced. The impact of all of this underpins our systems today, and the lack of representation of women in positions of power is one of colonialism's failures that has become systemic.

“I've never lived in my traditional territory before ... instead I was sent to youth in care, or skid row as a teenager.”

Lived Expertise Participant

» Analysis on the Six Calls to Action

Throughout the symposium participants reflected on the six calls to action and were presented with an analysis on progress from Dr. Carolyn Whitzman, PhD.

KEY FINDINGS & CONCERNS

People with disabilities are forced to have secondary incomes to make ends meet

We have 22 and 23 year-olds living in long term care facilities

No national housing advocate has been appointed, three years after promised

The majority of funding being disbursed federally is not creating any permanently affordable housing. Subsidizing private landlords doesn't create affordable housing units in the end

The National Housing Council does not include representation from people with lived expertise nor human rights expertise

CMHC required municipalities to adhere to a gender-based analysis in the Rapid Housing Initiative. Why shouldn't provinces and territories have to sign on to a rights-based approach to housing that includes a gender-based analysis?

The federal government has promised national standards for long-term care homes and home supports, and standards of pay must be part of that discussion

Basic income might address some of the gap between income and rent, but there is still a critical shortage of affordable rental homes



CMHC

CMHC's response to the calls to action from the Pan-Canadian Voice for Women's Housing seems to be very active, and there are funds being distributed. Dialogue is strengthening and women are being included in those conversations more often. The CEO of CMHC, Romy Bowers, made it clear in the symposium that CMHC is willing to listen, adapt, and learn from women on the front lines of the housing crisis.

Despite the urging of PCVWH, CMHC has not taken an active role in the promotion of programs like basic income, but there still should be metrics that at least calculate a minimum livable income. While supply issues are critical, and there are signs of progress, there has been no major advance in the income side of the equation.

"The hoops applicants have to jump through are not feasible for non-profits. Remote organizations might have to spend almost \$100,000 just for the pre-application requirements."

Participant

"The definitions don't reflect hidden homeless, so misses refugee women."

Participant

Heatwaves, floods, and wildfires in Pacific Canada have escalated the need for emergency housing supports and added to the uncertainty for many. In Northern Canada, participants urged CMHC to provide speakers and paperwork in indigenous languages when working with those communities, and expressed concern that many of the forms they are asked to fill are based on urban needs, are often irrelevant, expensive, and time consuming. CMHC seems interested in examining this.

Participants urged CMHC to take risks on innovative approaches: land donations, land trusts, pre-approvals. Let non-profits and First Nations have access to money fast enough to compete with REITS.

"Can CMHC reinstate the Shelter Enhancement Program, and make the program available to women's organizations on and off reserve?"

Lived Expertise Participant

"CMHC needs to know that it's more expensive to build now due to COVID, but these new costs haven't been reflected in the funding"

Participant



Next Steps

After two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are still unsure whether the next Pan-Canadian Voice for Women's Housing Symposium will be held virtually or in-person. We are grateful however that CMHC remains committed to funding our 2022 Symposium.

Members of our Advisory Circle have started planning and will continue to explore ways to improve participation and engagement whether virtual or in person. We will keep PCVWH participants informed, through our social media, virtual town halls and on our soon-to-be-launched website.

We will also continue to advocate for women and gender diverse women's health and housing and we intend to keep lobbying for our Six Calls to Action to be implemented. Our work towards creating systemic and political change for women's housing in Canada remains as critically important as ever.

2021 Advisory Circle Members

Janice	Abbott	Vancouver, BC
Annetta	Armstrong	Winnipeg, MB
Cindy	Chiasson	Whitehorse, YK
Lori	Deets	Moose Jaw, SK
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Hajar	Masoud	Vancouver, BC
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