



May 30, 2024

Marie-Josée Houle
Federal Housing Advocate
Canadian Human Rights Commission
344 Slater Street
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 1E1

Dear Marie-Josée Houle:

On behalf of the Government of Canada, I would like to thank you for your report, *Upholding dignity and human rights: the Federal Housing Advocate's review of homeless encampments*. Pursuant to subsection 17.1 of the *National Housing Strategy Act*, I am pleased to respond to your report.

I appreciate your efforts to bring about a wider discussion on the issue of homeless encampments. As Canada's first Federal Housing Advocate, your work is an important element of Canada's human rights-based approach to housing, and helps to ensure that the Government of Canada continues to be held accountable as we work towards the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing. I would also like to thank you for continuing work to advocate for action on addressing homeless encampments in the time since you shared your report with me.

The growth of encampments in communities of all sizes across the country demands immediate action from all orders of government in Canada. As you noted in your final report, communities that are on the frontlines responding to homelessness face barriers to delivering effective, human-rights based supports. We recognize that federal leadership must be shown on responding to encampments and that existing resources are simply not enough to address the needs of encampment residents. Responding to encampments will require effective coordination between all orders of government, as well as between different government agencies and departments. In addition, meaningful engagement with Indigenous governments will be crucial for communities to be able to address encampments in a manner that is both respectful of the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples and effective in addressing the root causes of unsheltered homelessness.

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Increases in homelessness, in particular unsheltered homelessness and encampments, are unacceptable. That is why in April, through Canada's Housing Plan and Budget 2024, our Government announced new funding to address homelessness and encampments and significant measures to solve the housing crisis. This includes \$1 billion in new funding for Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy, and an additional \$250 million in dedicated funding to addressing encampments. This encampments funding will support human rights-based community action plans that commit to a housing-first approach to ending encampments, and include supportive and transitional housing, housing-focused services, and rent supplements specifically dedicated to individuals living in encampments or experiencing homelessness. We intend to have this money in communities starting in fall 2024. We are encouraging our provincial and territorial partners to join us, and double our investment, for a total of \$500 million in funding. We expect to have additional news to share on the rollout of this funding later this summer.

Our government recognizes that homeless encampments present a complex challenge for communities and the reasons people experiencing homelessness live in encampments are varied. We also recognize that women and gender-diverse people, Indigenous people, and other equity-deserving groups face additional barriers to accessing services and supports. That is why federal homelessness initiatives are designed to provide flexibility so that municipalities and local homeless-serving organizations can target supports to meet the specific needs of people experiencing homelessness in their community, including those living in encampments.

In addition to investments that are meant to address homelessness, our government is also expanding federal investments into building more homes. We recognize that expanding Canada's affordable housing stock is an essential part of how we respond to the needs of those Canadians who are experiencing homelessness as affordability remains a barrier to many looking for a safe place to call home.

In response to your report, please find detailed below Government of Canada actions that will bring us closer to achieving the goals of preventing and reducing homelessness and creating safe and affordable housing throughout Canada. While the encampments funding referenced above is a dedicated source of funds that will go towards addressing the issues highlighted in your report, the following items include a range of measures our Government is taking to build more affordable homes and help those who can't afford a home. These measures include those already in progress, as well as upcoming measures announced as part of Canada's Housing Plan and Budget 2024.

Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy

The Government of Canada has a long-standing commitment to work collaboratively with provinces, territories, municipalities, and Indigenous partners to address homelessness in communities across the country.

To date, the Government of Canada has invested \$4 billion over nine years, from 2019-20 to 2027-28 under Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy, including approximately \$100 million in additional funding in 2023-24 to help communities to respond to urgent needs, particularly associated with rises in unsheltered homelessness, including encampments.

Reaching Home is a community-based program aimed at preventing and reducing homelessness by providing direct support and funding to urban centres, Indigenous communities, territorial communities, and rural and remote communities. This community-based approach provides communities with the flexibility to invest in proven approaches that reduce homelessness and enhances their capacity to develop long-term sustainable solutions to homelessness.

In Quebec, the Government of Canada works in close collaboration with the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux to support the implementation of the Canada-Quebec Agreement regarding Reaching Home 2019-2024, which respects the jurisdictions and priorities of both governments in addressing homelessness.

Reaching Home funding can be used for a wide range of activities, including hiring outreach workers to provide referrals to other community services (e.g., housing placements, employment and education, health, mental health, income supports) and providing targeted supports to encampment residents (e.g., harm reduction, groceries and/or hygiene supplies).

Further, Reaching Home's program design incorporates Community Advisory Boards and Regional Advisory Boards to set direction and priorities for addressing homelessness. Boards are expected and encouraged to have an engagement strategy in place that explains how they will achieve broad and inclusive representation (including representation of people with lived experience of homelessness), engage in meaningful collaboration with local Indigenous partners, coordinate partnerships with the necessary sectors and systems to meet priorities, and integrate local efforts with those of the province or territory.

Reaching Home supports the goals of the National Housing Strategy, including supporting the most vulnerable to maintain safe, stable and affordable housing and to reduce chronic homelessness by 50 percent by 2027-28. Using a Coordinated Access system to guide service delivery across local service providers, and using a common data system – either the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System or another accepted Homeless Management Information System – communities prioritize their specific population needs while also working towards Reaching Home’s five community-level outcomes:

- homelessness is reduced overall;
- new inflows to homelessness are reduced;
- returns to homelessness are reduced;
- Indigenous homelessness is reduced; and,
- chronic homelessness is reduced.

Responding to Indigenous Housing and Homelessness Needs

As you note, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirms a range of interconnected rights of Indigenous Peoples relevant to the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing and the human rights-based approach to housing. In particular, Articles 21 and 23 of the Declaration speak to the right of Indigenous Peoples to the improvement of their economic and social conditions, including in housing and sanitation among other areas, and their right to be actively involved in developing and determining health, housing and other economic and social programs affecting them and, as far as possible, to administer such programmes through their own institutions.

Indigenous Peoples are overrepresented among the population experiencing homelessness. The combined effects of colonialism, discrimination and the chronic underfunding of housing, infrastructure and services have had lasting effects for Indigenous Peoples across Canada.

Our Government is working to turn this around, with dedicated funding for homelessness programming and housing support for Indigenous Peoples. While Indigenous Peoples and organizations are eligible for services and funding under all streams of the Reaching Home program, there are also two funding streams specifically designed to meet the needs of Indigenous Peoples.

The Indigenous Homelessness funding stream under Reaching Home is investing \$686 million in funding to 37 urban, rural and regional communities. These investments fund culturally appropriate services and supports to address the specific needs of Indigenous Peoples who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. In most of the communities in this stream, Indigenous-led organizations are responsible for delivering funding through the program’s Community Entity model.

The Distinctions-based Approaches funding stream under Reaching Home is investing \$204.2 million to support homelessness-related initiatives determined in collaboration with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis partners to help ensure that programming meets their specific needs. A portion of this funding is also dedicated to support community-based homelessness initiatives led by Modern Treaty Holders with provisions in their treaties related to the delivery of social services.

Finally, the Territorial Homelessness funding stream under Reaching Home, while not Indigenous-specific, has a significant focus on Indigenous homelessness given the high proportion of Indigenous people in each of the Territories. The Government of Canada is investing \$69 million in the Territorial Homelessness stream.

As part of the Comprehensive Violence Prevention Strategy, the Government of Canada is also providing \$724.1 million through the Indigenous Shelter and Transitional Housing Initiative. This funding supports the construction of new shelters and transitional housing and the provision of culturally relevant supports for Indigenous women, children, and 2SLGBTQ+ people facing gender-based violence.

In addition to dedicated funding to address Indigenous homelessness, the Government has made significant investments in Indigenous housing strategies and programs across Canada.

Since 2015, the Government of Canada has committed more than \$10.7 billion to support co-developed distinctions-based approaches to Indigenous housing and homelessness. This includes funding for the First Nations Housing Strategy, the Inuit Nunangat Housing Strategy, and the Métis Nation Housing Sub-Accord, as well as the Urban, Rural and Northern Indigenous Housing Strategy. Building on these investments, Budget 2024 announced an additional \$918 million over five years to accelerate work in narrowing First Nations, Inuit, and Métis housing and infrastructure gaps.

We are working with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis partners and investing in programs and initiatives aimed directly at improving housing and homelessness outcomes in their communities.

Understanding and Addressing the Root Causes of Homelessness

Our Government recognizes that having better data allows for better analysis of the underlying causes of homelessness and allows us to develop evidence-based solutions and adjust federal programming to improve outcomes for people experiencing homelessness.

In October 2022, Infrastructure Canada conducted a National Survey on Homeless Encampments to better understand experiences of unsheltered homelessness from the perspective of Reaching Home Community Entities (municipalities or organizations responsible for distributing Reaching Home funding in their respective communities). Findings from this survey are publicly available on Infrastructure Canada's website.

As well, in January 2024, I held a roundtable to engage with stakeholders, including participants from your office, Indigenous homelessness partners, and people with lived experience, among others. Discussions from the roundtable have informed our government's role in addressing unsheltered homelessness, including encampments.

The Government of Canada has implemented multiple initiatives to enhance the quality and timeliness of national homelessness data such as automating data quality checks and individual updates, developing standardized protocols for analysis, improving data linkages, and increasing the efficiency of data processing and analysis. These improvements have reduced the time it takes to update national emergency shelter statistics while simultaneously reducing the reporting burden on communities supported under Reaching Home.

Targeted research and capacity-building initiatives

Along with improved data collection methods, our Government is also moving forward with new efforts to better understand and learn from people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness.

The Action Research on Chronic Homelessness (ARCH) initiative is designed to identify persistent barriers to addressing chronic homelessness and test potential approaches to overcome these barriers. The federal government is partnering with eight communities across Canada to conduct action research projects that foster collaboration across local and governmental partners, improve alignment between the homeless-serving sector and other public institutions, improve services and supports for Indigenous communities, and enhance the quality and use of data by communities.

Based on an understanding of existing knowledge gaps, each community research project is grounded in collaborative efforts bringing various partners – including community and Indigenous partners, and different orders of government – to work together towards a joint plan of action to reduce and prevent chronic homelessness. This research complements and aligns with ongoing community efforts and facilitates collaboration between a variety of partners across Canada to address chronic homelessness.

The Veteran Homelessness Program, launched in 2023, provides \$79.1 million over five years to fund local organizations that are providing rent supplements and wraparound supports for Veterans. Funding is also provided for projects to undertake research and build capacity to serve Veterans experiencing homelessness. Organizations began serving Veterans in spring 2024.

These initiatives are helping us to take targeted action to prevent and reduce chronic homelessness, including for those who are unsheltered or in encampments.

New Investments to Enhance Federal Homelessness Initiatives

While work continues to improve our understanding of the complexities of homelessness and its underlying causes, the Government of Canada is poised to take further action with our recently unveiled initiatives.

On April 12, 2024, the Government released *Solving the Housing Crisis: Canada's Housing Plan*. Canada's Housing Plan outlines how the Government will solve Canada's housing crisis by building more homes, making it easier to own or rent a home, and by helping Canadians who cannot afford a home. This includes increasing Canada's affordable housing stock and addressing homelessness and encampments. On April 16, 2024, Budget 2024 committed additional investments to help ensure all people in Canada can find a place to call home.

As mentioned earlier, Budget 2024 committed \$1 billion in new funding over four years, from 2024-25 to 2027-28, to stabilize funding for Reaching Home. Of this investment, \$50 million will focus on accelerating community-level reductions in homelessness. This will help communities across Canada adopt best practices and lessons learned from other jurisdictions and reduce the time it takes to move individuals and families into more stable housing.

The issue of encampments and unsheltered homelessness is particularly urgent. There should not be people living in tents in communities across Canada because they cannot afford a place to live or access much needed mental health and wellness supports. That is why the Government of Canada is also providing dedicated funding to support community responses to encampments by investing \$250 million over two years, starting in 2024-25. Encampments affect communities throughout Canada, which is why we have asked our provincial and territorial partners to join us, and double our investment, for a total of \$500 million in funding.

This funding will prioritize human rights-based community action plans that commit to a housing-first approach for encampments. Communities, and those with lived and living experience of unsheltered and encampment homelessness, have asked for more help, both through the engagement conducted by your office and through our own outreach. This targeted funding for encampments will enable those who are working hard to help those in greatest need to scale-up their efforts and train more homelessness support workers, respond to the unique experiences of those affected by unsheltered homelessness, including those living in encampments, and renovate and build more shelters and transitional homes for those who need them.

Community-wide action plans will help us to better understand what the priorities are for each community based on their unique needs. For example, we know more shelter spaces are needed that meet a wide range of needs, so we expect some communities will want to expand and retrofit shelters while others will want to create more transitional and supportive housing. Our intent with the community plans is to bring together various sectors in each jurisdiction such as the homeless-serving sector, including people with lived and living experience of homelessness, housing, corrections, police forces, child welfare, and health care.

While these plans may take time, it will allow for local connections to be made and for the transformational change that is needed to begin. However, I understand how urgently this funding is needed by our local community partners. While we are still in the early stages of working with our provincial and territorial partners on this initiative, our goal is to provide municipalities and community organizations with encampment funding starting in fall 2024.

While we know the issue of encampments is at an unprecedented level, we are also mindful that homelessness comes in various forms. This is why, while providing asylum claimants with a safe place to live falls under provincial and municipal jurisdiction, the federal government recognizes the need for all orders of government to work together to address pressures on the shelter system and unsheltered homelessness. Since 2017, the Government of Canada has provided almost \$960 million through the Interim Housing Assistance Program.

This Program helps provincial and municipal governments prevent homelessness for asylum claimants on a cost-sharing basis. Recognizing the need for further support, Budget 2024 proposes to provide an additional \$1.1 billion over three years to extend the Interim Housing Assistance Program. The federal government will continue to work with all orders of government to find long-term solutions to prevent asylum claimants from experiencing homelessness.

Helping People Who Can't Afford a Home

We understand that the growth of homeless encampments is the result of many factors, and it is a symptom of the larger housing crisis that Canada is facing. We need to build more housing faster, including more affordable housing options, to meet the diverse needs of people living in Canada, including Indigenous Peoples, racialized communities, newcomers, seniors, persons with disabilities, those fleeing gender-based violence, individuals across the income spectrum, and those who live in rural and remote communities.

As you will have noted, through Canada's Housing Plan and Budget 2024, the Government announced a comprehensive suite of measures to address the housing supply and affordability crisis. Investing in the construction, repair, and acquisition of affordable housing units is crucial not just for building homes, but for providing permanent housing solutions for people who face barriers accessing a safe place to call home.

Canada's Housing Plan includes the \$1.5 billion Canada Rental Protection Fund to protect the stock of existing affordable homes and support the acquisition of new affordable homes, while also ensuring units remain affordable over time by supporting community housing providers to acquire affordable rental units that would otherwise be sold to investors. It also includes a new Rapid Housing Stream under the Affordable Housing Fund that will provide almost \$1 billion over five years to build deeply affordable housing, supportive housing, and shelters. The latter investment will help people at risk of or experiencing homelessness by building new shelters and to repair existing shelters so vulnerable populations, including those in encampments, have a place to stay while they are being prioritized for housing. We are also making changes so the Affordable Housing Fund is easier to use, such as fast-tracking approvals and prioritizing projects that better support vulnerable populations.

Our investments are meant to support a range of housing options, including non-market housing such as housing co-operatives. Co-ops fill important gaps in the housing continuum, offering housing at rates that are generally more affordable than other private rental housing. To support the construction of additional co-op units across Canada, this summer we will launch our \$1.5 billion Co-operative Housing Development Program – the largest federal investment in the co-operative housing space in more than 30 years.

The Government is also using all tools available to convert public lands to housing. Keeping land under public ownership and leasing it to builders – instead of selling to the highest bidder – will enable new homes to be affordable. Through Budget 2024, the Government committed \$112.6 million over five years, along with \$4.3 million in subsequent years, to enhance the Federal Lands Initiative for affordable housing providers creating at least 1,500 homes, including 600 affordable homes.

Budget 2024 also announced the intent to reform the Canada Lands Company in order to transfer land from the federal government for \$1, whenever possible, to support more affordable housing. Canada Lands Company will also be supporting a new temporary modular housing program on four sites (Edmonton, Toronto, Montreal and Dartmouth), that will offer sites to social housing providers on a low-cost lease basis.

Recognizing the urgent need for more affordable and community housing supply, over the coming months, the government is working with all relevant partners to ensure funds can flow quickly, helping more people at risk of or experiencing homelessness move into safe and affordable housing sooner.

Making it Easier to Rent or Own a Home

Solving Canada's housing crisis will require more than just building new homes. We also need to put protections in place to help keep renters from being priced out, or unfairly forced out, of their homes. The Government is taking action to support people who rent by launching a new \$15 million Tenant Protection Fund. This will support legal aid and tenants' rights advocacy organizations to better protect tenants against unfairly rising rent payments, renovictions, or bad landlords.

The Government of Canada is taking a leadership role to protect renters with the recognition that provinces and territories hold many of the necessary levers. Our Government looks forward to continuing its fruitful, collaborative relationship with provinces, territories, and municipalities in an all-hands-on-deck approach to developing and implementing a new Canadian Renters' Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights is meant to protect renters from unfair practices, make leases simpler so everyone can understand what their obligations are, and increase price transparency.

Interdepartmental and Intergovernmental Coordination

The *National Housing Strategy Act* recognizes that the right to adequate housing is a fundamental human right affirmed in international law and commits the federal government to further the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing as recognized in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

However, no one order of government can do it alone. We need an approach with every partner pulling in the same direction to address housing and homelessness challenges.

Through *Canada's Housing Plan*, the Government of Canada is using all the levers at its disposal to address the housing and homelessness crisis. However, certain responsibilities are shared, or mostly led by other jurisdictions. For example, provinces and territories have the most direct control over landlord and tenant regulations, while local governments are typically responsible for zoning decisions and enforcing local bylaws. As well, local governments are typically responsible for the management of public parks and community centers, where encampments are often located.

Our Government is working closely with the provinces and territories, municipalities, Indigenous governments, as well as community organizations, to find areas of common ground, and support communities to adopt effective approaches to addressing all forms of homelessness in their respective jurisdictions.

One way we are working together is through the Canada Housing Benefit, co-developed and jointly funded with provinces and territories, which provides \$4.8 billion over eight years directly to people experiencing housing need, including \$630 million dedicated to those facing gender-based violence. The Benefit provides direct support to people at risk of or experiencing homelessness to help them find or maintain adequate housing.

To help facilitate ongoing coordination and collaboration with other orders of government, at the federal level, Infrastructure Canada is leading a Deputy Minister Committee on Housing and Homelessness. This committee ensures a whole-of-government approach is being taken to address housing and homelessness challenges and avoid duplication and ensure transparency with partners.

For example, noting the relationship between complex care needs and homelessness, the Health Canada Deputy Minister is a member of the committee. Health Canada has recently established bilateral agreements with the provinces and territories that include prioritization for people with complex needs who may experience difficulties accessing or maintaining housing (e.g., due to overlapping health issues such as brain injuries and struggles with mental health or substance use). The Deputy Minister Committee on Housing and Homelessness is helping identify additional opportunities to establish shared policy objectives across federal department mandates.

Results are already being achieved through this whole of government approach. Budget 2024 included \$150 million over three years for Health Canada for an Emergency Treatment Fund for the opioid crisis. This will contribute to providing much needed support to communities in responding to people with complex needs and those who struggle with mental health and substance use challenges, including those who live in encampments.

Our Government is committed to ensuring everyone in Canada has a safe affordable place to call home and have increased our investments at the federal level. We will continue to work with provincial, territorial, and Indigenous governments and communities to jointly identify priorities and align our efforts. However, as your most recent findings make clear, there remains much more to be done, but I, and my federal colleagues, are up to the task.

I thank you again for this report and its recommendations, which has and will continue to inform our work. Taken together, the housing and homelessness investments made since our response to your 2022-2023 Annual Report, *Advocating for Change: The Housing Crisis in Canada*, will enable us to continue to further the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing in Canada.

Sincerely,

The Honourable Sean Fraser, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Housing, Infrastructure and Communities