

Human Rights-Based Approach to Housing



A submission by The Salvation Army

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The Salvation Army welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) on the Government of Canada’s human rights-based approach to housing.

The Salvation Army is one of Canada’s largest providers of emergency shelter, social services, and programs for the most marginalized and vulnerable people. This submission is informed by these experiences and The Salvation Army’s collective knowledge and expertise about the causes, impacts and possible solutions to homelessness and poverty.

A fundamental shift

The Salvation Army recognizes and applauds the government’s commitment to “progressively implement the right of every Canadian to access adequate housing” and that their plan is “grounded in the principles of inclusion, accountability, participation and non-discrimination, and will contribute to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and affirm the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.”¹

In our experience, access to affordable and adequate housing is one of the most common barriers facing individuals and families seeking stability and health in Canada. In countless communities across the country, affordable, accessible, and adequate housing is out of reach for many and as a result causes extreme financial and emotional stress. On a very practical level then, we strongly support a rights-based approach to housing as it may prevent some individuals from needlessly exiting housing through eviction and to the subsequent cycles through homelessness and related services. We want to stress however, that a rights-based approach to housing is a fundamental paradigm shift in how housing is understood and administered in Canada.

¹ See www.placetocallhome.ca



Many individuals, corporations and governments in Canada still view housing as a commodity. The fundamental shift to housing as a right will take significant investments of time, energy, education, and effort in order to reprioritize the value associated with housing from the commercial domain to the human one. We encourage governments at all levels, supported by community organizations and individuals across the country, to **ensure that education and knowledge mobilization on our shared right to housing is a key element of the National Housing Strategy going forward**. Training and re-education will need to be developed for various stakeholders about what a right to housing means, and especially for individuals and communities who are currently under-served and under-housed in Canada.

The Salvation Army wishes to **highlight and endorse the full spectrum of rights-based housing principles (10) articulated by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, Leilani Farha**, in her report for the Thirty-Seventh Session of the UN Human Rights Council (February and March 2018). These principles provide a robust basis from which Canada may ensure that its Housing Strategy, policies and programs are meeting its overarching goals not only to articulate, but to fully enact a rights-based housing approach.

An opportunity for real change

The success of a rights-based approach will depend on the willingness of all levels of government, the private sector, community organizations, and the public in general to accept and embrace this change.

Across the country we regularly witness the impact on individuals and families when the right to housing is not upheld. Often, by the time clients seek out our services they have already been evicted and have been forced into a difficult cycle of homelessness. Similarly, however, we have seen the transformative power that stable, adequate, affordable housing can have on people's lives.

As one of the country's largest providers of homelessness and housing services, The Salvation Army recognizes that shelter is an essential service for people in housing crisis. Meeting people where they are in those emergencies, we have



learned that **four walls and a roof are not a solution unto themselves for everyone; often housing is a fundamental and integral part of a larger social mechanism that supports a person in exercising their right to housing.** We join other partners in stressing that there is no “one size fits all” solution to housing need. Ongoing and person-centred support for people with physical and mental health needs, long-term supportive as well as short-term transitional housing options, life-skills learning, homelessness prevention strategies, and other community-based, holistic programs, are, in our submission, all important parts of solidifying a rights-based approach to housing in Canada.²

The Salvation Army notes that one of the most significant challenges facing the populations we serve is the lack of supportive housing options. Supportive housing services assist people to maintain housing stability over time. The need for supportive housing is especially acute for those who have experienced long-term (chronic and episodic), homelessness; those who have been homeless a long time are statistically more likely to face multiple barriers to social inclusion, including mental illness, substance use disorders, and little in the way of lived experience of home and homemaking upon which to draw.

In our submission, the steps the federal government has already taken to adopt a rights-based approach prompts a further opportunity to enshrine in legislation and policy a set of coordinated programs and structures that aim to reduce systemic barriers to housing as they exist today. **Coordination between different levels of government and other related systems** (e.g. health, mental health and financial sectors, etc.) **is essential to ensuring that the rights-based approach is not just a theory or a nice idea, but a truly practical and implementable system that empowers and enables people to access stable housing.**

² See also:

<http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Housing/OralStatement37HRCsession.pdf>



A rights-based strategy

The Salvation Army submits that a rights-based housing strategy requires that housing and all interrelated policies (including all associated procedures, institutions, benefits allocation, etc.) be designed so as to recognize the underlying purpose of realizing and protecting the right to housing. Therefore all elements of the National Housing Strategy and subsequent policies need to be understood in light of this aim, ensuring that all people in Canada have access to adequate housing and to a social service system that re-houses them as quickly as possible.

In its Discussion Paper, the government has set out a number of key elements it proposes to support a rights-based approach to housing and has asked for stakeholders to comment on them. Each element will be considered below:

A new National Housing Council

The Salvation Army supports the development of a Council with diverse participation, especially by those with lived expertise. We suggest that the Council be designed to **provide practical, lived-expertise based input to the Housing Advocate and others to ensure the Strategy and its programs are responsive.**

A new Community-Based Tenant Initiative

The promise of greater engagement for those often at the margins of society and civic participation is welcome. The details regarding this program are what matter. The initiative will need to recognize the different communities that exist across Canada and the significant divergent needs which exist in each.

A new Public Engagement Campaign

Rights-based housing represents a truly fundamental shift in the way Canada approaches and views housing. The Salvation Army recognizes that changes such as this do not happen overnight and more importantly cannot be realized without the **support and engagement of all people in Canada, governments and community organizations.**



New Legislation

The content of the legislation to be enacted around National Housing Strategy will be essential to ensuring the centrality of the rights-based approach to housing.

In order to ensure that ‘real world’ and ‘real time’ data informs policies and programs, The Salvation Army encourages the government to **embed in the rights-based approach an ongoing process for community organizations, individuals with lived expertise, and others in the housing sector to engage with the Housing Advocate, Council, and Minister responsible.**

A new Federal Housing Advocate

The Salvation Army supports the creation of a Housing Advocate, encouraging a more robust role. In order to be truly effective, we suggest that **the Advocate be independent of government and appropriately resourced** in order to adequately and effectively research, engage, and report on housing issues and realities across the country, including customized solutions for Indigenous Canadians.

In addition to the elements set out above, we suggest that the following also be considered:

- Adequate funding (sustainable and stable) for all housing types and services (including shelters, housing workers, supportive housing, transitional and long-term supports; subsidized and market-based rental buildings, cooperative and independent ownership, etc.)
- A method for potential housing-rights violations to be investigated, pursued and corrected. This is especially necessary for situations of systemic infringements.
- While we support any effort to reduce homelessness in Canada, we suggest that a 50% reduction in homelessness falls short of Canada’s international obligations. A rights-based approach to housing, in our view, means that no one should ever experience long-term homelessness.



Conclusion

A place to call home is something many people in Canada may take for granted. A rights-based approach to housing – including legislation that protects the rights of all people in Canada to adequate housing – is a landmark moment for this country. The Salvation Army recognizes the power of “home” and the ways in which safe, affordable, and adequate housing transforms lives.

Since a good home is fundamental to a fulfilling and healthy life, strong communities, and a functioning economy, we encourage the government to proceed boldly with a rights-based approach to housing strategy in order to bring about the fundamental change we need.

