



# How's the weather... **NOW?**

## **WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS IN HAMILTON**

### CURRENT CONDITIONS

Despite a significant increase in funding over the last five years to address women's homelessness in Hamilton, the crisis persists with seemingly no end in sight. With rents increasingly out of reach for anyone on low income, more and more women are finding themselves in precarious housing situations and facing the last resort of an emergency shelter system operating at or above capacity.

In 2012, the Women's Housing Planning Collaborative (WHPC) began its work in the community posing a simple question, "How's the Weather?," drawing attention to the growing, yet largely invisible, crisis in Hamilton – single women<sup>1</sup> at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Five years later this report aims to answer the question, "How's the Weather Now?," providing a community update on the impact of system planning through the WHPC on both the emergency and long-term responses to women's homelessness in Hamilton.

### GOVERNMENT INVESTMENTS REFLECTING A GENDER LENS

The voice of the WHPC has had a tremendous impact on homelessness funding directed through the City of Hamilton's Housing Division. Since 2013, the overall funding investment for homelessness services increased by \$2.1M across all demographics (men, youth, Indigenous, family) with the women's system receiving \$1.7M or 80% of the total. This responsiveness to the WHPC-identified needs in the system illustrate the impact of applying a gender lens and increasing the understanding of single women's experience of homelessness.

In the City of Hamilton there is a shift away from managing homelessness to ending homelessness. The recommendations in this brief report will point to that shift.

### FIRST VOICE INCLUSION

In order to create a woman-centred system responding to homelessness, the WHPC operates through three tables of different women's perspectives: a Steering Committee of decision makers and policy influencers; a Service Coordination Committee bringing the front line point of view from service providers; and most importantly, the voice of women themselves Advisory Committee who have had to navigate the system at some point as women experiencing homelessness.

<sup>1</sup> Single women is used to signify women who are seeking housing without a partner or dependent children. Recent local research showed over 80% of single women experiencing homelessness in Hamilton have children but they are older or not in their custody.



# Is a really gender lens necessary?

In order to do more, it is necessary to recognize the experiences of women are very different than those of men and, therefore, so are the solutions. In Hamilton, there have been responses to the experiences of men facing homelessness for close to 60 years. While some of what has been learned can be applied to other demographics, those responses must be nuanced and evidence-based to reflect the unique barriers faced by women, youth, and Indigenous people.

While there are increasing numbers of women who face homelessness due to economics alone, the pathway to women's homelessness most often starts with an experience(s) of trauma and/or violence and may become further complicated with substance use and/or poor mental health related to the original trauma(s).

The 2016 Point in Time Count by the City of Hamilton, offered new information on women's experiences of homelessness in terms of the chronicity and acuity of the problem. However, with women making up only 28% of the over 500 respondents to the survey, the scope of the problem remains less visible as women are a large part of the hidden homeless in this community.

Of the women who did complete the survey, they reported higher rates of violence and exploitation since being homeless, along with emotional, physical, psychological or sexual trauma experienced in childhood

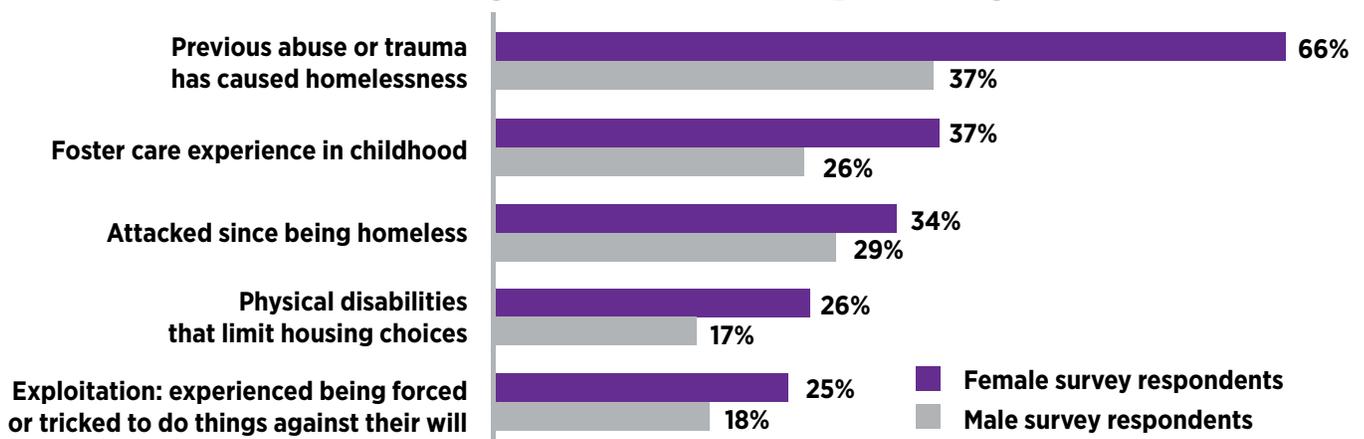
or later contributing to their homelessness. Women also have higher rates of physical disabilities for which there are fewer housing units to meet their needs (26% for women, compared to 17% for men).

The survey also found that women reported more child welfare interventions and foster home experiences prior to their homelessness than men. Women experiencing homelessness in Hamilton were more likely to have been in foster care as a child (37% female; 26% male). Add to this the systemic barriers faced by women in the labour market leaving them more economically insecure and a housing market out of reach for anyone in poverty, and the picture of homeless women and their complexities sharpen.

One more unique feature of women makes this picture even more difficult when it comes to housing – pregnancy. Of the 145 women in the city's survey of homeless people, 12% were pregnant. Without a home, the women are at high risk of losing their babies to the child welfare system, starting the next generation of homelessness.



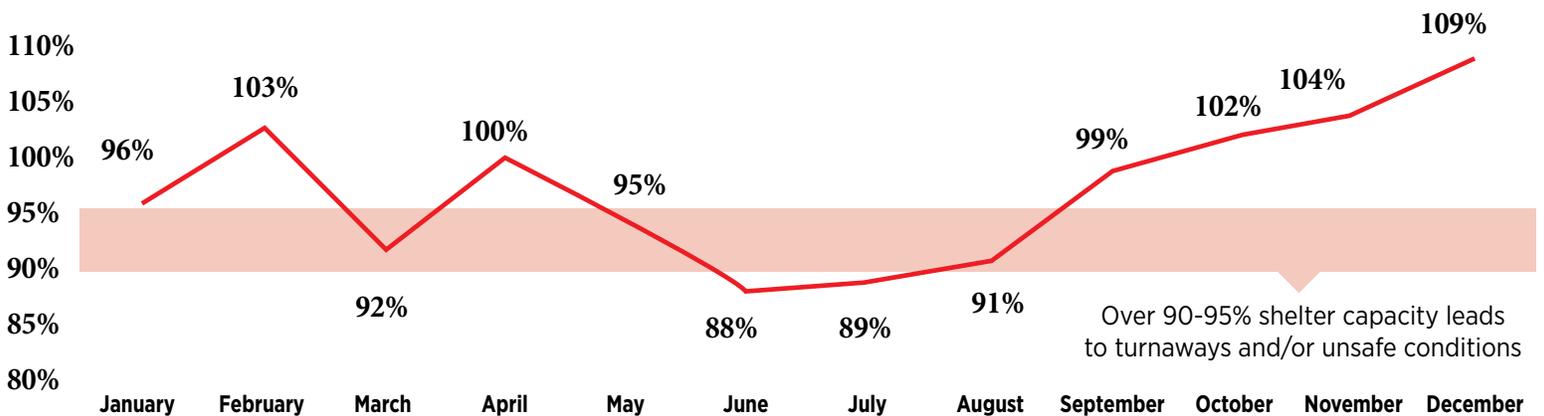
## Selected differences among women and men experiencing homelessness



# Investments in women's homelessness: Catching up but critical gaps remain

In recognizing the reality of single women's homelessness, the City of Hamilton has allocated more provincial funding to the emergency side of the system while it remained stretched to over-capacity. In December 2017, the city's shelter beds were operating at 109% capacity. Shelter staff turn women away an average of 19 times per night due to lack of bed space across Hamilton's emergency beds for women and Violence Against Women shelters. Turnaway data is not individual women, as women contact multiple shelters before one of the women's emergency or VAW shelters is able to make room to ensure the fewest number of women are left without a safe place to stay.

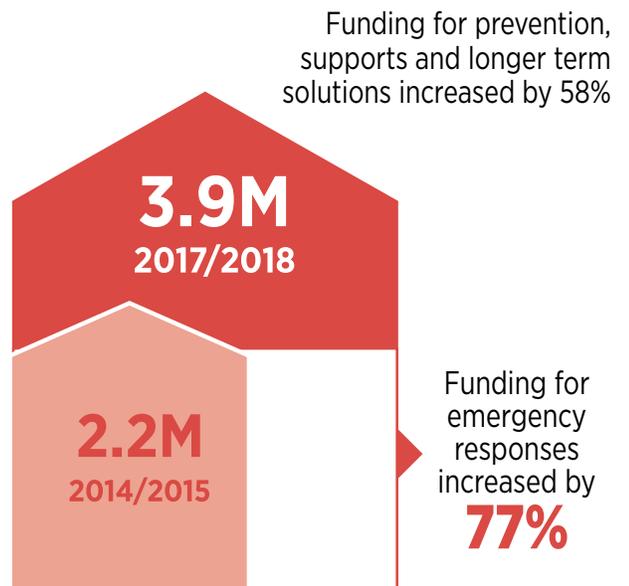
## Shelter usage (% of funded beds in use), women's emergency shelters, city of Hamilton, 2017



In 2017, the new National Housing Strategy included a directive that all federal government funding in homelessness and housing adopt a gender lens, and allocate at least 25% of investments for women and girls. Locally, a shift toward a gender lens is already happening: there has been a jump in provincial and federal funding to address the growing homelessness crisis across the system, and the city of Hamilton has responded by directing a large part of this increasing funding to services that address women's homelessness specifically. The total funding in the women's system to address homelessness has grown from 2.2 million in 2014/15 to 3.9 million 2017/18 (Chart 2). The largest funder is the provincial government at about 70%; federal funding is about 26%. The municipal funding is about 4%, but the city of Hamilton has a pivotal role in investment decisions, leveraging, and system coordination, for all funding from all levels of government.

There is no doubt of the continuing need to fund core services such as emergency shelter beds at an adequate level but stakeholders in the city, shelter system and other women's services, recognize emergency shelters are only short term responses. Longer term solutions, such as homelessness prevention, transitional housing, improved supports for women to stay housed, housing subsidies, and more affordable housing, must be better funded as well.

## Growth in total funding to address women's homelessness in Hamilton, City of Hamilton, 2014/15-2017/18



Data source for both charts: City of Hamilton Housing Services. Excluded provincial funding for violence against women shelter beds and supports

# THE FORECAST FOR WOMEN - NO WRONG DOOR!

Applying a gender lens to homelessness in Hamilton has resulted in the strengthening of existing services and the creation of new ones to ensure better outcomes for single women at risk of or experiencing homelessness. The commitment from the women's community to build gender specific services has received endorsement by way of increased funding from all levels of government. The doors below represent some of the enhanced or new system parts leading single women experiencing homelessness to housing and supports that best meet their needs.



## WHAT IS NEEDED TO END WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS?

**Each level of government has recently taken steps that, while not all gender specific, could benefit women experiencing homelessness if a gender lens is used.**

- Federal government increases Canada Child Benefit and launches the National Housing Strategy with 25% focus on women
- Provincial government increases minimum wage and funding to address homelessness
- City of Hamilton adds 20 additional shelter beds in 2015 - five to Mary's Place and 15 to the newly created Mountain View Program at the Native Women's Centre
- City of Hamilton commits \$40 million over 10 years for new affordable housing and improving quality of housing in aging social housing stock
- City of Hamilton implements "by-name list," a real-time, priority ranking for the people using homelessness services or experiencing homelessness

**Major steps are still needed to end the reliance on emergency responses and bring sustainable solutions to end women's homelessness, including:**

- Fully funding the National Housing Strategy with a 25% focus on women, along with implementation of promised legislation to promote a human-rights approach to housing
- A Portable Housing Benefit to provide affordability support directly to families and individuals in housing need
- Social assistance reform as called for in the province's Roadmap for Change report
- Increased funding for housing with supports to promote housing stability over the long term
- New affordable housing to reverse the trend in loss of units due to aging stock and to keep up with increasing population

An intentional effort to address the specific experience of single women impacted by homelessness in Hamilton has resulted in deeper understanding of the issues, greater collaboration, increased investment in services, and the implementation of more coordinated, evidence-based responses. Yet despite that progress, the crisis that is women's homelessness continues to be critical in this community. While safe and affordable housing for all women is the essential long term goal, a balance is needed to ensure adequate funding remains for emergency shelters, transitional housing, and drop in services necessary to minimize the potential lethality of homelessness for women.