



HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED,  
GENDER-SENSITIVE

# NATIONAL SHELTER STANDARDS OVERVIEW



THE NATIONAL  
**RIGHT TO HOUSING**  
NETWORK



WOMEN'S NATIONAL  
HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS  
NETWORK



Canadian  
Centre for  
Housing Rights

**[Access the full report here](#)**

**“Advancing the Right to Housing for Women & Gender-Diverse Persons: Developing National Rights-Based Shelter Standards using a GBA+ Framework” is a project that received funding from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) under the [NHS Solutions Labs](#), however, the views expressed are the personal views of the author and CMHC accepts no responsibility for them.**



# ADDRESSING HOUSING NEEDS FOR WOMEN AND GENDER-DIVERSE PEOPLE

In Canada, women and gender-diverse people experience disproportionate levels of housing need and poverty. This issue is exacerbated by a severe shortage of affordable housing, forcing many to rely on emergency shelters that are often underfunded and overwhelmed.

Gender-diverse individuals, including transgender and non-binary people, face significant barriers to stable housing due to transphobia and a lack of gender-affirming services. Discrimination in housing markets and shelters often results in unsafe and hostile environments, making it difficult for gender-diverse people to find and maintain adequate housing. Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse people face some of the most egregious housing rights violations. These violations stem from historical and ongoing colonial practices that have dispossessed Indigenous Peoples of their lands, cultures, languages, and ways of living. Further, systemic barriers such as discrimination, violence, and lack of culturally appropriate services further compound these challenges, leaving marginalized populations particularly vulnerable within the shelter system.

# CREATING STANDARDS TO ADDRESS SYSTEMIC INEQUITY

The creation of these standards acknowledges that many shelters across Canada continue to function within colonial frameworks and intersect with other systems, such as the child welfare system, splitting families, and erecting obstacles in creating pathways to healing and reconnection of families and communities disrupted by colonial process and institutions. These standards were created under the context that, in 2019, Canada passed the historic National Housing Strategy Act (“NHSA”), which obligates the federal government to realize the right to housing. Canada’s National Housing Strategy (“the Strategy”) sets forward the plan and process, including outlining funds to construct, acquire, and update housing – including emergency shelters.

The NHSA recognizes that “housing is essential to the inherent dignity and well-being of the person and to building sustainable and inclusive communities,” echoing the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and cites “the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing as recognized in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights [ICESCR], to which Canada is a party.”

# CREATING STANDARDS TO ADDRESS SYSTEMIC INEQUITY

The "National Rights-Based, Gender-Sensitive Shelter Standards" were developed in alignment with international human rights law standards to address the significant gaps in the provision of emergency shelter services for women and gender-diverse individuals. These standards aim to address these deep-rooted inequities by providing a rights-based, gender-sensitive framework for shelter operations that prioritize the dignity and rights of all residents.

# PROCESS OF DEVELOPING THE STANDARDS

The development of these Shelter Standards has been a deeply collaborative effort. At each step of the development process, a diverse range of key actors, including people with lived experiences, service providers, human rights experts, and advocacy groups, were extensively engaged to ensure that the standards reflected a comprehensive understanding of the genuine needs and dynamic realities faced by those accessing emergency shelters across Canada. This included 18 members of the National Advisory Committee, who played a crucial role in shaping the standards. Extensive outreach was conducted, resulting in over 50 individuals, organizations and community groups revising the standards collaboratively, to ensure they are reflective of the needs of those they aim to serve.

**Implementing these standards represents a critical step towards transforming emergency shelters into spaces that uphold the dignity and rights of all residents. By adopting these standards, shelters can better foster more equitable and just environments for women and gender-diverse individuals, ensuring that all residents receive the support they need during times of crisis and transition.**

# THE RESPONSIBILITY OF GOVERNMENT

The successful implementation of these standards requires adequate resourcing and support from all levels of government. Governments have an obligation to ensure shelters are well-equipped to deliver services in alignment with human rights-based and gender-sensitive goals and outcomes. This includes setting aside operational funding for municipalities to offer training free of charge to all emergency shelters in their jurisdiction, establishing joint funding streams for shelters to upgrade infrastructure and services, and investing in staff well-being through mental health supports and equitable compensation.

## DID YOU KNOW:



**Governments must help shelters fulfill their critical role in upholding the right to adequate housing by providing the necessary resources and support.**



# HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED, GENDER-SENSITIVE NATIONAL SHELTER STANDARDS

1

## **IT IS ESSENTIAL FOR SHELTER LEADERSHIP AND STAFF TO ENGAGE MEANINGFULLY WITH RESIDENTS AND OTHER LIVED EXPERTS TO PROMOTE AGENCY.**

Shelter leadership and staff must engage meaningfully with residents, promoting agency and co-ownership. This involves creating mechanisms for residents to have a voice in decision-making processes, ensuring their participation is substantive and impactful. By recognizing residents as experts in their own lives, shelters can develop policies and practices that better meet their needs and support their well-being.

2


## **SHELTER LEADERSHIP MUST ENSURE THAT ALL SERVICES OFFERED AT THE SHELTER ARE ACCESSIBLE.**

Shelters must ensure that all services are accessible to individuals with disabilities and other marginalized groups. This includes not only implementing barrier-free designs and necessary infrastructure updates to accommodate physical and sensory disabilities, but also ensuring that services are available in multiple languages, including Indigenous languages, and providing interpretation services. Additionally, shelters should provide accessible formats for all written materials, such as braille, large print, and plain language, and ensure that digital resources are accessible to individuals with various types of disabilities.



**3**


### **SHELTER LEADERSHIP AND STAFF MUST RESPECT, PROTECT, AND FULFILL THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND TWO-SPIRIT PEOPLE.**



Shelters must respect, protect, and fulfill the rights of Indigenous women and Two-Spirit people. This involves supporting and facilitating Indigenous cultural practices within shelters, such as smudging and other traditional ceremonies. Shelters should also engage Indigenous residents in decision-making and governance, ensuring their voices are respected and centred in all aspects of shelter operations.

**4**


### **SHELTER LEADERSHIP AND STAFF MUST ENSURE THAT RESIDENTS OF SHELTERS HAVE ACCESS TO CULTURALLY ADEQUATE SERVICES AND SUPPORTS.**



Shelters must provide culturally adequate services and supports that respect and affirm the cultural identities of all residents. This includes offering services that are sensitive to the diverse cultural backgrounds of residents and ensuring that staff receive comprehensive training on gender-sensitivity, intersectionality, and anti-oppression. By fostering a culturally safe environment, shelters can better support the well-being and dignity of all residents.

**5**


## **SHELTER LEADERSHIP AND STAFF MUST PROHIBIT FORCED EVICTIONS INTO UNSHELTERED HOMELESSNESS.**



Shelters must prohibit forced evictions into unsheltered homelessness. This means exploring all viable alternatives to service restrictions and implementing policies that prevent forced evictions. Shelters must provide additional support to residents at risk of losing shelter, ensuring that they have access to safe and stable housing options.

**6**


## **SHELTER LEADERSHIP AND STAFF MUST ENSURE SHELTER RESIDENTS HAVE ACCESS TO BASIC NEEDS.**



Shelters must guarantee residents access to basic needs such as food, hygiene products, menstrual care products, and healthcare. By addressing these essential needs, shelters can help residents achieve greater stability, health, and well-being.

**7**

## **SHELTER LEADERSHIP AND STAFF MUST ENSURE PROCESSES FOR ACCESS TO JUSTICE TO CLAIM THE RIGHT TO HOUSING AND OTHER HUMAN RIGHTS.**



Shelters must ensure that processes are in place for residents to access justice to claim their right to housing and other human rights. This includes providing residents with information and assistance on legal rights, and supporting them in navigating the legal system to secure their rights.

**[Access the full report here](#)**