

Right to Housing

in Toronto

Canada has a human rights-based housing strategy – Toronto should too

Home is at the centre of human rights. Without a safe, affordable, secure, and accessible home, our other rights such as privacy, freedom of expression, equality, liberty, security of the person, dignity, and even life are threatened.

All levels of government have the ability and obligation to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to adequate housing. In June 2019, the government of Canada passed legislation recognizing housing as a fundamental human right. The National Housing Strategy has been put in place to ensure access to adequate housing for everyone in Canada over time. Toronto has a chance to do the same by bringing a rights-based approach into our next 10 year housing and homelessness plan - HousingTO.

What is the right to adequate housing?

UN covenants signed by Canada guarantee the right to adequate housing. This means that everyone has a right to housing that meets basic conditions. Adequate housing must be:

- Affordable - meaning that the cost of housing doesn't interfere with access to other basic needs such as food;
- Secure - meaning that residents are protected from arbitrary eviction;
- Accessible - meaning that people of all abilities have housing that accommodates their needs;
- Habitable - meaning that housing provides a safe, secure, and healthy environment in which to thrive;
- Located close to employment, education, and services;
- Serviced by facilities and infrastructure such as including safe drinking water, adequate sanitation, affordable heating, and access to communication technology;
- Culturally adequate - meaning that housing must respect and provide for the expression of cultural identity.

All people should have equitable access to adequate housing, without discrimination based on gender, race, disability, faith, place of birth, age, sexual orientation, and other grounds.

What would the right to housing mean for Toronto?

First, let's be clear about what the right to housing does NOT mean for Toronto:

- It does NOT mean that the City of Toronto would be obligated to provide every resident with an adequate home.
- It does NOT mean that individuals would be able to take the City to court to claim their housing rights.

Instead, it means that the City would:

- Consider how policies, programs, planning decisions, and budgets affect residents' access to adequate housing;
- Create and implement a plan to move toward ensuring the right to housing for every resident, over time, with priority to those who are most vulnerable;
- Invest the maximum of its available resources to fulfill the right to adequate housing;
- Act immediately to address urgent threats to human security and dignity, such as homelessness.

What would a human rights-based HousingTO Plan 2020-2030 look like?

A HousingTO Plan based in human rights would include protocols and mechanisms for upholding the right to adequate housing.

1. Rights-based decision-making

A rights-based HousingTO Plan would implement protocols for city staff and officials to review the impact of any decisions on the right to housing. In rights-based decision-making, human rights are a primary consideration, taking precedence over other factors. Decision-making processes go beyond consultation, to engage the meaningful participation of individuals and communities directly affected.

2. Coordinated governance & action

A rights-based HousingTO Plan would set out structures to coordinate the City's work on housing and homelessness. Currently, Toronto's housing-related functions are dispersed across multiple City divisions. In a rights-based approach, divisions would work together to coordinate action and resources in innovative ways that expand the impact of City investments.

3. Goals, targets, timelines, and mechanisms

A rights-based HousingTO Plan would include goals, targets, and timelines for the reduction and elimination of homelessness, and for ensuring adequate housing for all residents over time. The Plan would put in place specific policies and programs to meet those goals, identify the obligations of other levels of government, and set out precisely what the City is committed to doing.

4. Transparent, evidence-based monitoring

In order to ensure it is advancing the right to housing, the Plan would be tracked using high-quality data disaggregated by race, gender, age, income, and other variables, to determine the impacts of the Plan's policies and programs on the housing rights of priority populations and equity-seeking groups.

5. Rights-based participation and leadership

The Plan would be designed, implemented, and monitored with the participation and leadership of diverse individuals and communities directly affected by inadequate housing and homelessness, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders. Communities would have opportunities to provide input into decision-making processes.

6. Accountability mechanisms

A rights-based HousingTO Plan would include independent mechanisms, outside the court system, through which the right to adequate housing can be monitored, claimed, and enforced.

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