



# Right to Housing

# in Toronto

R2HTO Statement on COVID-19

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau, Premier Ford, Mayor Tory, Minister Hussen, Attorney General Downey, and Deputy Mayor Bailao,

The Right to Housing in Toronto (R2HTO) is a coalition of organizations and individuals working to support the implementation of the human right to housing in the City of Toronto.

The global pandemic brought on by COVID-19 is a stark reminder that the right to housing and the right to health are inextricably bound up with each other. As public health officials daily tighten the protocols for self-isolation to “flatten the curve” of the pandemic’s impact, many Canadians have never been more aware of the importance of having a safe, secure home.

We are writing to urge you to take urgent measures to ensure the right to adequate housing for all, as a fundamental basis for health and well-being in responses to COVID-19.

In Canada, universal health care means that COVID-19 testing and treatment are available to everyone who needs it. It also means that the population as a whole is less vulnerable to the worst impacts of the virus because of a good average state of health, thanks to life-long preventative and primary care. This public health emergency decisively demonstrates the value of our public investment in health care.

Unfortunately, this health crisis also demonstrates the risks of our long failure to implement the human right to adequate housing. After decades of under-investment in housing by successive governments, 1.5 million renter households face core housing need, and 235,000 people experience homelessness each year. Now, faced with the possibility of an epidemic that could overwhelm our health system, the ability to contain transmission of the virus is severely compromised by the stark inequities in our housing system.

Those whose housing is unaffordable, overcrowded, and precarious are often unable to afford to take time off work – whether for self-isolation or because they are ill, caring for ill family members, or looking after children whose schools and daycares are closed. Workers most affected by loss of income due to containment measures—including those in the hospitality, entertainment, service, retail, and arts

industries, and the gig economy—are disproportionately renters. People who are homeless are at high risk of contracting COVID-19 in overcrowded shelters and drop-ins, and many are vulnerable to the worst effects of the virus because of their age and pre-existing health conditions.

In June 2019, the Government of Canada made a historic commitment to the human right to adequate housing in the National Housing Strategy Act, the first time Canada’s international social and economic rights obligations have been implemented in domestic law. In December 2019, the City of Toronto followed suit with its Toronto Housing Charter, affirming that “All residents have a right to a safe, secure, affordable home in which they can live in peace and dignity and realize their full potential.”

By these measures, the federal and municipal governments recognize their duty to progressively realize the human right to adequate housing through investment of the maximum available resources, with priority to those in greatest need, and responding immediately to urgent needs.

In keeping with these commitments, we join many others in urging you to immediately implement emergency measures to rapidly reduce homelessness and address the effects of the pandemic on those who are homeless and those in precarious housing circumstances.

*Until Canada’s Chief Public Health Officer declares an end to the pandemic and lifts all directives for self-isolation and social distancing ...*

*... we call on the Government of Canada to:*

- Expand access to Employment Insurance so that all types of workers can receive support. Implement a simple, expedited application process.
- Ensure an adequate income for all residents, including those not currently eligible for EI, using existing delivery mechanisms to enable improvements to be implemented quickly (for example, through an improved EI system and / or an income-tested refundable tax credit, so that the most amount of support goes to people with low-incomes)
- Widely publicize new income supports and the means to access them via traditional and social media, direct mail, and other methods.
- Provide facilities and resources for safe, dignified 14-day isolation of incoming refugee claimants and asylum seekers who have no destination within Canada where they can self-isolate. Fund municipalities to provide shelters, housing, and supports for refugee claimants, asylum seekers, and others with precarious status.
- Provide emergency funds to municipalities to support local resources, such as rent banks, for those who fall through the cracks of federal systems, and for the other actions described below.
- Increase funding to municipalities for homelessness services and housing.

*... we call on the Province of Ontario to:*

- Suspend all eviction applications at the Landlord and Tenant Board, and delay enforcement of evictions already granted.
- Direct the Landlord and Tenant Board to deny future eviction applications for non-payment or persistent late payment of rent during the period of the COVID-19 outbreak, where tenants’ ability to pay has been affected by illness, caring for others who are ill, caring for children during school and daycare closures, self-isolation requirements, and / or loss of income due to the outbreak.
- Suspend evictions by social, public, non-profit, cooperative, and supportive housing providers.

- Require employers to protect all employees' positions during COVID-related reductions or shutdowns; to allow work-from-home and / or provide paid leave to employees affected by daycare and elementary school closures, or self-isolation requirements; and to provide paid sick leave to workers who are ill or caring for family members who are ill.
- Prevent discharge of anyone from the health system into homelessness or into the homeless shelter system.
- Prevent the release of anyone from detention into homelessness or into the homeless shelter system.
- Immediately expand the capacity of the Violence Against Women shelter system so that all women and children requiring safe shelter can be accommodated, and isolation measures can be implemented where necessary.

... we call on the City of Toronto to:

- Expand funding for the Rent Bank and Eviction Prevention programs in order to keep vulnerable tenants housed. Enable simple online applications for Rent Bank funds, provide funds as grants not loans, and publicize the service widely via traditional and social media.
- Immediately expand the capacity and personnel of the shelter, drop-in, and respite system so that recommended distances can be maintained between residents at all times. Make emergency use of community centres and other closed City facilities, and ensure the accessibility of shelter and drop-in spaces to persons with disabilities.
- Implement screening for COVID-19 risk and symptoms at all shelters and drop-ins, and provide appropriate isolation options.
- Increase funding to cover all necessary equipment, materials, supplies, and personnel for personal hygiene, disinfection, cleaning, screening, and other containment measures in shelters, drop-ins and respites. Prioritize staff in these settings for Personal Protective Equipment.
- Acquire self-contained housing units to rapidly re-house people out of the shelter system with the required financial and personal supports, with priority to older adults, those with pre-existing conditions, and others at risk for the worst effects of the virus.
- Acquire safe, appropriate, and dignified facilities for isolation and treatment of individuals who show symptoms of COVID-19 or test positive while in a shelter, respite, or drop-in.
- Provide medical personnel at all shelters, drop-ins, and respites.
- Increase street outreach and supports to people staying in encampments and other places not intended for habitation.
- Provide all necessary facilities, supplies, and information for personal hygiene, disinfection, sanitation, harm reduction, and overdose prevention to people staying in encampments and other places not intended for habitation.
- End evictions of encampments; instead, work with residents and Indigenous organizations to improve health and safety in the short-term, and plan for voluntary relocation to adequate, safe, secure, appropriate and permanent housing.
- Halt any evictions from Toronto Community Housing. Wherever possible, delay City-ordered building closures on the basis of fire safety; where not possible, ensure residents are moved directly to alternative, permanent, self-contained housing, not into the shelter system.
- Ensure timely, accessible communication to residents of Toronto Community Housing, shelters, and other areas within the City's jurisdiction, via a range of platforms including off-line options for those without digital access.

As the long time horizon for the epidemic becomes clear, we also urge all levels of government to work in cooperation with the community housing sector and Indigenous organizations to create, implement, and resource a plan to ensure safe, secure, accessible, appropriate, and affordable housing for all.

Many of these measures are in the process of being implemented, while others are being considered. R2HTO supports these initiatives and recognizes the dedication of all in the public service who are working tirelessly to respond as new circumstances unfold.

In the midst of this unprecedented crisis, we stand ready to work together to protect the most vulnerable members of our communities. We look forward to hearing from you about how we can be supportive in these critical times.

Sincerely,

On behalf of the Right to Housing in Toronto

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.cc Toronto City Councillors, Members of Provincial Parliament and Members of Parliament