



The Right to Adequate Housing & COVID-19:  
A Human Rights Response to the Pandemic for the City of Toronto

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## COVID-19 and Human Rights

*“Now, and as we emerge from this crisis, all governments must ensure that legislation, policies, services and programs aimed at supporting Canadians and bringing our economy back to health have human rights principles baked-in. While we recognize the tremendous efforts of governments during this pandemic, we must all ensure that those people living in vulnerable circumstances are front and centre in our minds and our actions.”* Marie-Claude Landry, Chief Commissioner, Canadian Human Rights Commission<sup>1</sup>

In June 2019, Canada’s National Housing Strategy Act affirmed the right to adequate housing in Canadian law for the first time. In December 2019, the City of Toronto followed suit with a 10-year housing and homelessness plan based in human rights. By these commitments, our federal and municipal governments pledge to progressively realize the right to adequate housing for all over time, and to provide immediate relief to those in urgent need.

Only months later, those commitments are being put to the test with the global coronavirus pandemic. As UN High Commissioner on Human Rights Michelle Bachelet reminds us, the pandemic is not only a threat to health but a threat to human rights - and it demands a human rights-based response.<sup>2</sup>

Human rights principles and oversight are especially critical in times of crisis, when groups facing marginalization and discrimination are at even greater risk of scapegoating and exclusion.<sup>3</sup> Crisis responses have unequal impacts. Emergency programs designed to support the population as a whole are less likely to meet the distinct needs of equity-seeking groups who are already ill-served by income security programs, healthcare services, and other state institutions. Increased controls and surveillance implemented to protect public health will have disproportionate effects for individuals and communities facing targeted policing and criminalization.

Despite its ability to infect anyone, coronavirus is not, as some have suggested, “the great equalizer.” Demographic differences in infection rates and death rates expose the health

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<sup>1</sup> Landry, M-C. (2020). Statement: Inequality amplified by the COVID-19 crisis. Canadian Human Rights Commission. <https://www.chrc-ccdp.gc.ca/eng/content/statement-inequality-amplified-covid-19-crisis>

<sup>2</sup> Bachelet, M. (2020). Informal briefing to the UN Human Rights Council, 9 April 2020. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25785&LangID=E>

<sup>3</sup> Amnesty International Canada. (2020). A call for human rights oversight of government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. [https://amnesty.ca/sites/default/files/COVID%20and%20human%20rights%20oversight%20public%20statement%20FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://amnesty.ca/sites/default/files/COVID%20and%20human%20rights%20oversight%20public%20statement%20FINAL_0.pdf)

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impacts of economic and social inequalities.<sup>4</sup> In cities, this includes socio-spatial inequalities between neighbourhoods: US and Canadian studies have shown stark neighbourhood differences in how well residents are able to protect themselves and their families.<sup>5</sup> This means that, in the words of Bachelet, “Unchecked, the pandemic is likely to create even wider inequalities, amid extensive suffering.”<sup>6</sup>

The human right to adequate housing has emerged as particularly critical in the context of the pandemic. The requirements for physical distancing and social isolation reveal that the right to health and the right to housing are inextricably interdependent. The UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing has called housing the “front-line defense against the outbreak.”<sup>7</sup>

This paper draws on analysis of the COVID-19 crisis from human rights experts to consider the implications for the right to adequate housing in Toronto. We ask:

- During and after the immediate crisis, what does a City response grounded in the right to housing look like?
- What has the crisis revealed about the risks and impacts of a system that fails to realize the human right to housing?
- What immediate measures are necessary to safeguard fundamental rights to life, dignity, and security of the person?
- What measures can protect tenants and others from housing insecurity and homelessness during the immediate period of physical distancing and the economic downturn to follow?
- How do we prevent financialization, mass evictions, and other consequences of the economic impacts of COVID-19?
- How can measures implemented in response to the crisis become the foundation for new housing policies and programs that deliver affordable, accessible, and quality homes?
- How do we seize this moment of unprecedented change to build a rights-based housing system in the future?

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<sup>4</sup> Lyster, L. (2020, 8 April). 42% of those killed by COVID-19 in US are Black, analysis of available data shows. Associated Press. <https://ktla.com/news/coronavirus/42-of-those-killed-by-covid-19-in-u-s-are-black-analysis-of-available-data-shows/>

<sup>5</sup> Valentino-DeVries, L., Lu, D. & Dance, G. (2020). Location data says it all: Staying at home during coronavirus is a luxury. *New York Times*, 3 April 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/03/us/coronavirus-stay-home-rich-poor.html>

Jones, A. (2020). Phone data reveals who is staying home during COVID-19. CTV News, 11 April 2020. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/phone-data-reveals-who-is-staying-home-during-covid-19-1.4892194>

<sup>6</sup>Bachelet. See note 2.

<sup>7</sup> Farha, L. (2020). “Housing, the front line defence against the COVID-19 outbreak,” says UN expert. UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, 18 March 2020. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25727&LangID=E>

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## The Human Right to Housing in Toronto

The new Toronto Housing Charter included in the *HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan* recognizes housing as a fundamental human right. In the Charter, the City pledges to advance this right for all over time, prioritize those most in need of adequate housing, allocate the maximum of its available resources to realizing the right to housing, and ensure equitable access to adequate housing without discrimination. Some commitments in the Charter are of heightened relevance in the current crisis: to take action to prevent threats to human security and dignity; to ensure coordination and collaboration across City divisions; to prevent criminalization of those facing homelessness; to provide for rights-based participation of affected individuals and communities; and to implement the Toronto Housing Commissioner, an independent accountability and monitoring mechanism to hold the City to its duties.

The Toronto Housing Charter stands on a foundation of provincial and federal law on the right to adequate housing. Ontario's Human Rights Code prohibits discrimination in housing on the basis of race, gender, disability, and other protected grounds, while its Residential Tenancies Act defines the rights and responsibilities of tenants and landlords. Canada's National Housing Strategy Act requires the federal government's housing policies to focus on improving outcomes for those most in need. It establishes a new human rights architecture to implement the right to housing, including the National Housing Council and Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, whose role is to monitor progress, engage rights-holders, and hold government accountable to address systemic housing barriers.

These commitments are in line with Canada's duties under international human rights law, which charges all levels of government with the duty to protect, respect, promote, and fulfill human rights. This includes economic and social rights, such as the rights to health, an adequate standard of living, and adequate housing. In order to uphold their duties, governments must dedicate the maximum of their available resources, and show that they are steadily moving towards realizing the rights for all, with priority to those who are most in need.

In order to be compliant with the human right to adequate housing, homes must be affordable, accessible, safe, and culturally appropriate; residents must have security of tenure and be protected from arbitrary eviction; and housing must be located in proximity to employment and services, and equipped with necessary infrastructure such as heat, water, sanitation, and information and communications technologies. Homelessness violates all of these rights, and is considered a prima facie violation of fundamental human rights such as dignity and security of the person. Canada has committed to the UN Sustainable Development Goal to eliminate homelessness by 2030.

## A Four-Part Human Rights Response to COVID-19 in Toronto

In responding to the coronavirus pandemic, governments have implemented sweeping measures to protect the health of the general public. At the same time, these measures may not be sufficient to reach those in greatest need. Human rights experts around the world and

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here in Canada have called on governments to prioritize those most at risk and those for whom impacts may be most severe.

A group of UN experts directs governments to ensure that everyone, without discrimination, has equitable access to protection of their life and health. This entails dedicating extra supports and resources to those whose economic, social, or housing status increases their risk, and / or diminishes their ability to undertake recommended measures for self-protection: “People with disabilities, older persons, minority communities, indigenous peoples, internally displaced people, people affected by extreme poverty and living in overcrowded settings, people who live in residential institutions, people in detention, homeless people, migrants and refugees, people who use drugs, LGBT and gender diverse persons – these and other groups need to receive support from governments.”<sup>8</sup>

The Ontario Human Rights Commission echoes the importance of prioritizing needs of vulnerable groups in the pandemic, and sets out necessary actions governments must take to protect human rights, including the right to housing.<sup>9</sup>

This crisis also requires governments to transcend partisan and jurisdictional constraints, and adopt a flexible approach with emphasis on urgent, coordinated action. This is particularly important in relationship to housing and homelessness, where shared or unclear jurisdiction often becomes an impediment to concerted action. Human rights advocates are urging municipal, provincial, and federal governments to adopt an approach similar to Jordan’s Principle<sup>10</sup>: where jurisdictional responsibility is unclear, governments must act to protect life and health, and work out later who should pay.

Even as Toronto implements measures to address the immediate crisis, we must also plan to mitigate the near-term economic and social impacts of the pandemic, and to rebuild human-rights-based housing system in the recovery period. This crisis starkly reveals the consequences of past failures to implement human rights. Instead of returning to “normal,” we can learn from past mistakes and create a future in which everyone’s human rights are upheld.

## 1. Immediate Crisis Response – Protect Life and Health in the Pandemic

Public health directives to “stay safe, stay home” have made everyone more aware of the vital importance of a safe, secure place to live for every person in our city. In its response to the

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<sup>8</sup> UN High Commissioner on Human Rights. (2020). No exceptions with COVID-19: “Everyone has the right to life-saving interventions” – UN experts say. UN Special Procedures statement 26 March 2020.

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25746&LangID=E>

<sup>9</sup> Ontario Human Rights Commission. (2020). Actions consistent with a human rights-based approach to managing the COVID-19 pandemic. <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/actions-consistent-human-rights-based-approach-managing-covid-19-pandemic>

<sup>10</sup> Jordan’s Principle is a principle [first defined by the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society](#), and later [affirmed by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal](#), that directs federal and provincial governments to provide all necessary services to ensure the well-being of First Nations children, regardless of jurisdictional issues. <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1568396042341/1568396159824>

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immediate crisis, **Toronto must prioritize the life and health of people facing homelessness, vulnerable tenants, and other groups at increased risk.**

a. Protect residents of City-administered facilities

The City is responsible to help protect public health at large; this duty to protect is heightened for those residing in City-administered facilities, including residents in Long-Term Care and persons accessing shelters and respites.<sup>11</sup> **The OHRC sets out specific duties in relation to persons living in government-administered institutions<sup>12</sup> – these should be applied to the Long-Term Care and homelessness sectors.**

In the shelter and respite system, this means immediately providing settings that enable required physical distancing. While Toronto has achieved important progress in de-concentrating shelters and opening new congregate sites, it is still not implementing its own public health standards in all shelters and respites. Human rights advocates charge that this violates the rights to life and security of the person, with a disproportionate impact on people who are Indigenous, Black, racialized, and those with disabilities, who are over-represented in the shelter system.<sup>13</sup> **The City must immediately implement public health directives in all shelter settings, including physical distancing requirements, screening, testing, cleaning, disinfection, and protective measures for staff.**

Recent shelter outbreaks demonstrate that congregate facilities simply don't offer adequate protection for residents or staff.<sup>14</sup> Evidence from other cities demonstrates the risks of a selective approach in which self-contained hotel units are made available only to those identified as vulnerable, resulting in outbreaks among staff and residents of congregate shelters.<sup>15</sup>

**In order to uphold its duty to protect the health and life of those who rely on City services for shelter, Toronto must dedicate the maximum available resources to acquiring and operating self-contained spaces to replace congregate shelter settings.** These must include provisions for

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<sup>11</sup> R2HTO has limited knowledge of the issues and solutions in long-term care, so our recommendations focus on shelters, respites, and drop-ins for persons facing homelessness.

<sup>12</sup> Ontario Human Rights Commission, see note 9.

<sup>13</sup> A coalition of legal clinics sent a letter to the City of Toronto warning that they would take legal action if the City does not bring its Shelter Standards into conformity with public health guidelines for physical distancing. They note that shelter conditions disproportionately impact persons who are Indigenous, members of racialized communities, and people with disabilities. <https://ccla.org/cclanewsletter/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2020-04-21-Letter-to-City-of-Toronto-re-COVID-19-and-Toronto-shelter-system.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> As of April 27, the City had reported active outbreaks in 14 shelters, with 213 cases among shelter residents, and 25 among staff. <https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/8fb1-Shelters-with-Case-and-Death-Count-Apr-27.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Fuller, T. (2020). Major outbreak in San Francisco homeless shelter underlines danger for the homeless. *New York Times* 10 April 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/10/us/coronavirus-san-francisco-homeless-shelter.html>

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residents' needs including food, attendant care, harm reduction and safe consumption, and other supports. The Province must provide necessary funding to staff and operate shelter programs within hotels and other self-contained options.

b. Protect persons sleeping outside and residents of encampments

Closure of City facilities such as libraries and recreation centres, as well as small businesses, means the loss of access to washroom facilities and resting-places for persons without a home of their own. Due to Out of the Cold closures, reduced capacity at shelters and respites, and the closures of some drop-in centres, more people are forced to sleep outside; others may choose to do so to avoid the health risks associated with shelter overcrowding.

**To protect people forced outside, the City has provided some portable toilets and handwashing facilities in the downtown core. These must be expanded and improved, to enable necessary sanitation in all areas across the City. The City must dedicate additional resources to outreach and support, and provide necessary equipment and supplies including tents, sleeping bags, food, and harm reduction supplies, to enable people to sleep outside safely.**

Policing of social distancing in parks and other public spaces has disproportionate impacts for people facing homelessness, who have no access to private spaces in which to rest or gather. This is particularly the case for persons who are Indigenous, racialized, young, and / or members of LGBTQ2S+ communities, who already face a greater degree of criminalization and stigma in public spaces. **The City's stated approach of treating everyone "equally" with regards to patrolling parks and issuing fines in fact exacerbates the deep inequities faced by people who are homeless, and must be revised.**<sup>16</sup> **Recognize that people who reside in shelters or encampments together are members of the same household, and that those resting on park benches in public areas have no private space in which to "isolate at home."**

Residents of encampments are at particular risk and require special protection. A UN expert says that governments must declare an end to all forced evictions of encampments, and instead provide for sanitation, washing facilities, health care, harm reduction, safe consumption, and other essential services to preserve health and life for residents. Cities should work with residents to raise awareness of self-protection measures and to create a plan for isolation of vulnerable residents and treatment for those who become ill.<sup>17</sup> **Toronto's moratorium on clearing encampments, and its provision of necessary services, are in line with human rights requirements, and should continue beyond the immediate crisis period.**

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<sup>16</sup> When asked about reports of by-law officers harassing homeless people in public spaces during an April 14 press conference, the director of Shelter, Support and Housing Administration responded, "My expectation is that homeless people will be treated the same as any other member of the public" and that they should expect to be "moved along" by authorities if sitting on a park bench.

<sup>17</sup> Farha, L. (2020). COVID-19 Guidance Note: Protecting Residents of Informal Settlements. Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate housing, 28 March 2020.  
[https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Housing/SR\\_housing\\_COVID-19\\_Guidance\\_informal\\_settlements.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Housing/SR_housing_COVID-19_Guidance_informal_settlements.pdf)

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c. Promote the rights of residents of rooming houses and rental buildings

Tenants in rooming houses and rental buildings are often at increased risk, due to socio-economic status, crowded living conditions, and long-standing deficiencies in cleaning and maintenance of their buildings. **The City has taken important action to impose public health safety measures in rental housing and licensed rooming houses; however, tenant organizations report that in many rental buildings, these requirements are not being met.** Long-standing maintenance problems and contraventions of the City's RentSafe guidelines are also exacerbating tenants' risk in the context of coronavirus: a common example is that of towers in tenants are forced to choose between crowding into the lone functioning elevator, or impossibly long waits.

**Public health requirements in rental buildings require effective monitoring and enforcement, including, where necessary, directly implementing necessary measures and including costs on owners' property tax bill. Municipal Licensing and Standards should review all buildings' cleaning plans mandated under RentSafe to ensure that they adhere to public health requirements. The City should also work with community partners to ensure tenants living in unlicensed multi-tenant homes are aware of their rights and have access to necessary supplies and equipment to maintain safety in common spaces.**

The COVID-19 crisis has led to loss of employment and income for hundreds of thousands of tenants, and emergency benefits are insufficient in relation to Toronto's average rents. In the immediate crisis period, tenants are temporarily protected by the Province's moratorium on eviction orders. Nevertheless, landlords are permitted to continue to issue eviction notices, which some tenants may misinterpret as requiring them to move immediately; some landlords are also contravening the moratorium and carrying out evictions. **The City must proactively inform tenants about their rights, and work with community partners and tenant associations to ensure tenants have access to legal information and advice.**

d. Strengthen human rights accountability and oversight

In order to ensure emergency responses are compliant with human rights requirements, the Ontario Human Rights Commission advises governments to include human rights experts on emergency planning bodies, and establish independent oversight committees with representation of human rights experts, representatives of affected communities, and persons with lived expertise.<sup>18</sup> **Toronto should include human rights experts and persons with lived expertise in its Emergency Response and Recovery Planning teams, to ensure that City decisions and actions are compliant with its human rights obligations.**

2. Near-Term – Prevent Eviction and Promote Housing Security

As Toronto and Ontario "flatten the curve" of community transmission, the City must act quickly to mitigate immediate threats to housing security.

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<sup>18</sup> Ontario Human Rights Commission, see note 9.

a. Protect security of tenure and prevent eviction

Workers most affected by income loss are likely to be tenants. They need immediate financial support and protection from eviction, but also protection of their housing stability in the post-crisis period, when accumulated arrears and other debts could lead to housing loss. **The City must work with the provincial and federal governments to improve income benefits so that they are easier to access, and cover rent for all tenants, including those who don't qualify for emergency benefits.**<sup>19</sup> In particular, Toronto's Rent Bank program must broaden accessibility to tenants who don't currently qualify, and convert loans to grants for tenants in arrears. The City should also continue to work with community partners to ensure that Torontonians have access to information and support to navigate income benefits programs.

Promoting human rights requires the participation and leadership of communities directly affected. **The City should work with community organizations and tenant associations to develop and implement a comprehensive plan to preserve tenants' security of tenure, including the roles of other orders of government.**

b. Protect tenants by supporting small landlords

Homeowners who rely on secondary suites to pay their mortgage are often immigrants, or young first-time homeowners who bought at the peak of the market. They are also facing income loss, and are less able to absorb lost rent. High debt servicing costs may threaten housing security for them and their tenants. **The City must implement measures to prevent the loss of secondary suites. Property tax relief and other protections for small landlords should be tied to respecting tenant rights, and maintaining affordability and good repair.**

### 3. Recovery Period – Build a Rights-Based Housing System

Decades of underinvestment and privatization have produced a housing system that generates unaffordable housing, housing instability, and homelessness for increasing numbers of people. These disproportionately affect First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people, members of racialized communities, women, persons with disabilities, those with low incomes, immigrants and refugees, members of LGBTQ2S+ communities, survivors of violence, people who use drugs, and other marginalized groups.

While the pandemic has revealed the economic and human costs of structural inequity, unprecedented government investment in response to the COVID crisis also demonstrates that resources are available to change these conditions. Improvements to income security programs, health care, and housing implemented in the crisis response should become the scaffolding for a new system that fulfills the human rights to adequate housing, standard of living, and health.

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<sup>19</sup> Mclsaac, E. (2020). First things first: Help people pay their rent. *First Policy Response*, 12 April 2020. <http://policyresponse.ca/first-things-first/>

a. End homelessness

The City's actions to protect people experiencing homelessness—through coordinated access, rapid re-housing, and relocation of residents to self-contained hotel units—are transforming the emergency shelter system. In keeping with the human rights duty of “non-retrogression,” these transformations must not be reversed once the crisis ends. Instead, they should mark the beginning of the end of homelessness – both for the individuals re-housed during the pandemic, and for the City as a whole.

**The City must adapt and expand its emergency measures to make them permanent features of its response to homelessness. Rapid re-housing through a coordinated access system should become the norm for everyone who enters a shelter. Hotels and rental buildings acquired during the crisis to house persons facing homelessness should be repurposed as permanent supportive housing, with long-term operating funding provided by the Province. Modular housing should be expanded and fast-tracked. Hundreds of social housing units should no longer sit empty for need of repairs, but instead be brought back on-line as quickly as possible. Short-term rentals that have been returned to the standard rental market should be prioritized for an expanded housing allowance program. Shelters must return to their intended emergency function, and episodes of homelessness must become rare, brief, and non-recurring.**

b. Promote equity through fiscal stimulus measures

Human rights experts point out that measures to rebuild the economy should mitigate inequality, not deepen it: "Fiscal stimulus and social protection packages aimed directly at those least able to cope with the crisis are essential to mitigating the devastating consequences of the pandemic."<sup>20</sup>

There is a risk that fiscal stimulus will benefit financial actors and investors, leaving out low- and moderate-income people. Toronto is looking to an “urban Marshall Plan” as a key focus of economic recovery.<sup>21</sup> **The City must channel its own investments, and those from other orders of government, to benefit disadvantaged households, neighbourhoods, and communities - or it will risk leaving them even farther behind than they were before the pandemic.**

c. Prevent predatory acquisition and financialization of housing

Analysts predict that the global pandemic will lead to a global economic downturn on a scale not seen since the Great Depression. In the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008, devalued and distressed land and buildings were acquired by investment firms, leading to financialization of housing that has contributed to the housing affordability crisis in cities worldwide. Toronto's

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<sup>20</sup> UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. (2020). Statement UN Independent Expert on foreign debt and human rights <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25732&LangID=e>

<sup>21</sup> Elliott, M. (2020). Help Toronto and you help the country : Why Canada needs an “urban Marshall Plan.” *Toronto Star*, 21 April 2020. <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2020/04/21/help-toronto-and-you-help-the-country-why-canada-needs-an-urban-marshall-plan.html>

economic development policies in this period contributed to the problem, with their emphasis on attracting investment rather than a focus on the housing needs of low- and moderate-income residents.

This crisis poses similar risks. As tenants' incomes decrease, lost rents will lead to bankruptcy for some landlords. At the same time, in the context of plummeting stock markets, investors are turning to real estate as a safe haven for capital. Both trends increase the risk that housing will be further financialized and subject to predatory speculation. **The City must work with other levels of government to prevent speculation and financialization through measures including planning regulations and taxation policies. It must also place the right to adequate housing at the centre of its economic recovery plans.**

d. Acquire land and properties, and build new housing

The risks of this economic crisis also present opportunities. Development, renovation, and construction are proven economic stimulus measures, generating employment and providing housing stability. Social and public acquisition of land and buildings can quickly expand our social housing portfolio, preserving affordability and improving conditions for sitting tenants.

**The City should work with the federal government and non-profit housing operators to develop and administer an affordable housing acquisition, renovation, and development program, in which “affordable” is defined in relation to tenants’ incomes. New affordable housing development must heed the lessons of failed mid-century public housing projects, and implement participatory planning processes to create thriving, diverse, equitable, and complete neighbourhoods.**

4. Never Return to “Normal”: Learn from the Past, Change the Future

As we adapt to unprecedented changes, Torontonians are more conscious than ever of the mundane joys of normal life. At the same time, taken-for-granted injustices have never been more apparent. The crisis offers the chance to reconsider what we will accept as “normal,” and create a just future.

a. Implement human rights oversight and accountability mechanisms

Amnesty International Canada and other experts have underscored the importance of human rights oversight in times of crisis.<sup>22</sup> The global pandemic has highlighted the importance of robust, effective human rights accountability mechanisms – and the devastating consequences of allowing structural inequities and human rights violations to persist.

The establishment of the offices of Toronto’s Housing Commissioner and the Federal Housing Advocate were both delayed due to the COVID crisis. As a result, government responses to the

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<sup>22</sup> Amnesty International Canada. A call for human rights oversight of government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. [https://amnesty.ca/sites/default/files/COVID%20and%20human%20rights%20oversight%20public%20statement%20FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://amnesty.ca/sites/default/files/COVID%20and%20human%20rights%20oversight%20public%20statement%20FINAL_0.pdf)

crisis lacked human rights input and sometimes exacerbated inequities. **Toronto’s Housing Commissioner Office must be quickly implemented and adequately resourced so that it is in place to redress the human rights violations that have left Torontonians vulnerable in the current crisis, and help guide responses to future crises. The City must also be accountable to the ongoing participation and leadership of communities directly affected and persons with lived experience.**

b. Address the root causes of disproportionate risk

Even as Ontario and Toronto flatten the curve of community transmission, the pandemic is far from over. Recent trends suggest that its cumulative impact will be greatest among people living in congregate settings, including shelters and long-term care homes. Chronic overcrowding in the shelter system created the conditions for dangerous outbreaks – not only of COVID, but other illnesses that threatened residents’ well-being. Underfunding of long-term care created conditions that have resulted in tragic outbreaks and deaths. **The City must permanently improve these systems so that they protect life and health.**

Many of those losing jobs and income due to the pandemic, as well as many “essential” workers, have long experienced housing insecurity due to low wages and precarious employment. Most are also members of equity-seeking groups: women, racialized, young, and / or born outside Canada. **Toronto must stand up for these workers’ rights to wages, job security, and working conditions commensurate with the importance and risk of their work. The City and other orders of government must also build a housing system that protects households in times of economic insecurity.**

Toronto’s commitment to the right to adequate housing is just the tool the City needs right now. The Toronto Housing Charter should serve as a roadmap to guide the City’s actions and decisions as it navigates this crisis, and whatever lies ahead.