

Hidden in Plain Sight: Women's Homelessness in Cambridge and Waterloo Region

We are writing as a network of local nonprofit organizations, leaders, academics and community advocates who are concerned about a quiet crisis unfolding in Waterloo Region, particularly in Cambridge. A lack of adequate support for the community's most vulnerable—women and gender-diverse individuals experiencing homelessness—is creating an all-out emergency. Despite numerous research reports and alarming data, these issues are not being discussed enough publicly and greater action is urgently needed. It must be a top priority of all elected officials in the region, especially those in Cambridge, to tackle the growing women's homelessness crisis.

In recent months, the number of women in Cambridge experiencing homelessness has been climbing drastically, with reports of rising numbers of women seeking shelter overnight in hospital emergency rooms, as well as mothers resorting to “camping” with their children due to rent increases and rent hikes that have made maintaining housing impossible. These troubling realities are highlighted by [Project Willow](#) and a comprehensive [report about women's homelessness in the city](#).

The Stark Reality

There are currently no women-specific emergency homeless shelter spaces anywhere in Waterloo Region. The lack of shelter space forces women to make unthinkable choices. Some return to or stay in violent housing situations if they are unable to access one of 90 domestic violence shelter beds in the Region because they have nowhere else to turn. Women seeking shelter cannot relocate to emergency homeless shelter beds in Kitchener because, as of June 2024, none are available for women. Moreover, they are reluctant to leave their personal support systems and community behind when movement within the region is reliant on a disjointed and sometimes inefficient public transportation system.

Support systems for people experiencing poverty and homelessness are often misunderstood. For many women, support means being close to familiar faces, services, and communities. They may also have children staying with relatives and cannot uproot and move to another city. Suggestions that women needing emergency support should move to where those supports are located reflects a profound misunderstanding and a lack of respect for the dignity of people experiencing homelessness while also ignoring their complex needs and human rights as individuals.

We applaud the work being done by area municipalities, including the Region's partnering with YWCA Cambridge to establish a 20-bed shelter in Cambridge and with YW Kitchener-Waterloo to develop better, more adequate supports for women experiencing homelessness in Kitchener, as well as their consideration of keeping the 84 Frederick building as a women's shelter. However, we are in the midst of a constant game of catch-up and our communities need more efforts and resources to be able to address this growing emergency.

Crisis in the Shadows

Women's homelessness often remains hidden, making it difficult for policymakers and society alike to grasp its full scope. Data shows that women experience homelessness differently from men and therefore require different solutions. An example of 'hidden homelessness,' is when women avoid shelters and other public-facing services, particularly those which are co-ed, to protect themselves from violence and/or out of fear that social services could impact their child custody. Instead, they may camp, live in their car or couch surf in order to survive.

The Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network (WNHHN), has [found that approximately seven per cent of women in Canada experience homelessness](#) with a possibility of this number being much higher due to hidden homelessness. This could mean 5,089 women in Cambridge alone (up to 20,634 in the whole of Waterloo Region) will be impacted by homelessness whether currently, at one time, or at some point in their lifetime.

Navigating a Service Desert

Across Waterloo Region, especially in Cambridge, housing and support services for women are severely lacking, creating "service deserts" as described in the YWCA report. There are no emergency shelter beds exclusively for women experiencing homelessness. This humanitarian crisis denies women and gender-diverse people their fundamental right to housing and fails to provide responsive support for their specific needs. This urgent human rights issue demands immediate attention.

While we appreciate the support from the Region of Waterloo in establishing a 20-bed emergency homeless shelter for women, Cambridge remains a "service desert" for housing and support options. It remains vitally important for this project to move forward quickly, it is equally important to recognize that 20 beds are simply not enough to address the gendered housing crisis facing this region.

Despite these challenges, service providers in Cambridge work tirelessly to support those facing housing instability, violence, health issues, and addictions. A service desert adds strain to an already underpaid and overworked workforce. Frontline workers deal with daily traumas, including overdoses and deaths, while striving to bring dignity and support to the community. They experience moral distress and burnout due to broader system failures, risking a troubling exodus from the profession.

Women's homelessness in Cambridge and Waterloo Region is an urgent issue requiring collective action. This problem transcends one level of government, necessitating Provincial and Federal support for an inter-governmental approach. We must also exercise regional powers to address this crisis. It's time to redefine support for those experiencing poverty and homelessness, advocating for shelters for women and gender-diverse individuals, and other housing solutions with appropriate support systems. These calls to action align with the region's [Plan to End Chronic Homelessness](#) and its vision for system transformation.

A Call to Action

Women's homelessness is not just a social and human rights issue; it's a humanitarian crisis that demands immediate attention and action. The rising numbers are exacerbated by the housing and affordability crisis, gender-based violence, and a lack of permanent and sustainable funding to provide dedicated services and resources. Gendered shelters with appropriate supports are essential to meeting human rights obligations such as those outlined in the [2019 National Housing Strategy Act](#) in which the Federal government affirms the right of every individual to have access to safe, accessible and affordable housing. They offer a lifeline to women and gender-diverse persons forced into invisibility by circumstances beyond their control which is further underscored in the recently released [National Standards for Emergency Shelters Across Canada](#).

The proposed women's emergency homeless shelter in Cambridge represents a significant step toward addressing this crisis. It acknowledges the urgent need for tailored solutions. To ensure projects such as this can move forward in a good way, we present the following calls to action for local elected officials:

- 1. Immediately green light shelters specifically for women and gender-diverse individuals:** Commit to ensuring accessible women's shelter beds are available across the region ahead of winter, through the prioritization of gender-responsive shelters for women experiencing homelessness that include robust wrap-around-supports. Gender-specific shelter opportunities for women should be comparable in numbers to those designated for men and should exclude co-ed shelters, as they are not trauma informed nor considered a best practice for women experiencing homelessness. (Region)
- 2. Require a Gender Based Analysis (GBA+)^{1*} for all region funding and investment in housing and homelessness:** To ensure this process, it is imperative that we immediately develop a responsive and reflective data strategy that accounts for women's hidden homelessness (moving beyond historical Point In Time counts), shelter availability, and related experience across our region. This data should be publicly available and be displayed in a revolving and transparent way. Further, significant focus and investment is needed in long-term housing solutions for women and in infrastructure for non-profits to respond to current and future identified gaps in support along the

¹ *Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is an analytical tool used to support the development of responsive and inclusive policies, programs, and other initiatives.

continuum of care. (Region)

3. **Use of municipally-owned properties and lands:** Area municipalities should immediately prioritize the use of unoccupied land and buildings to be made available for nonprofit organizations seeking to provide support to women experiencing homelessness, including shelter, housing, health care, basic needs and outreach. Further, municipalities should engage in a collective process with nonprofits and the various levels of government to identify and provide information regarding available properties and lands. (Region, Lower-tier Municipalities and Townships)

How community members can help:

1. **Educate Yourself:** Learn about the local crisis by reading the report "[Women's Homelessness in Cambridge: Knowledge Sharing and Interventions](#)" and Project Willow's data. Understanding the issue is the first step toward meaningful change.
2. **Write to Your Representatives:** Advocate for change by writing a letter or email to your mayor or Ward Councillor. Express your concern about women's homelessness in Cambridge and the broader Waterloo Region, and urge them to support the immediate development of gendered shelters and appropriate support services.
3. **Sign the Petition:** Show your support by [signing the petition](#) created by *WR Women's Shelter Now*, urging decision-makers in Waterloo Region to create a temporary emergency shelter for women and non-binary people.
4. **Raise Awareness:** Talk about women's homelessness in the region with your friends, family, and on social media. Share information, stories, and updates to keep the conversation alive and highlight the urgency of the issue.
5. **Stay Engaged:** Don't stop advocating until every woman in Cambridge and Waterloo Region has access to appropriate shelter and services. Attend local meetings, delegate at council meetings, participate in community discussions, and continue to push for sustainable solutions.

The women of Cambridge as well as Waterloo Region deserve more than temporary fixes and future promises; they deserve sustainable solutions and a community that truly sees and supports them, making them feel that they are not alone or at fault for circumstances that are a result of a broader system failure. Women deserve better. The network of support for women experiencing homelessness in Waterloo Region is in danger of collapse, and we need urgent action now. Until there are appropriate and sustainable solutions in place, we are and will continue to advocate.

Signed

The Aids Committee of Cambridge, Kitchener, Waterloo and Area (ACCKWA)
African Women's Alliance
Cambridge Council On Aging
Cambridge Food Bank

Cambridge Shelter Corporation
Citizens for Cambridge
Coalition of Muslim Women KW
Community Justice Initiatives
Fight Back KW
Kinbridge Community Association
Langs
Pineapple Flags
Porchlight Counselling and Addiction Services
Sanguen
Sex Workers' Action Network of Waterloo Region (SWAN)
Sexual Assault Support Centre of Waterloo Region (SASC)
Social Development Centre Waterloo Region
The Unsheltered Campaign
United Way Waterloo Region Communities
UW Women's Centre
Waterloo Region Community Legal Services (WRCLS)
Waterloo Region Supportive Housing Advocacy Group
Waterloo Women's Shelter Now!
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