



A Framework for Ending Women's and Girls' Homelessness

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Authors

Shelley Yeo
Cheyanne Ratnam
Emily Paradis
Abe Oudshoorn
Babli Nessa
Janet Mosher
Susan Macphail
Saara Greene
Stephen Gaetz
Cheryl Forchuk
Carline Casimir
Kristy Buccieri
Marleny Bonnycastle
Helene Berman
Janice Arsenault
Ama Amponash
Kyla Aguila

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For more information on this project, please contact Dr. Abe Oudshoorn at aoudsho@uwo.ca

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1 Purpose

The purpose of this framework is to provide municipalities across Canada a tool that they can adapt to their local setting to end homelessness for women and girls.

Approaches to homelessness in Canada have been going through a significant shift from managing people during their experiences of homelessness to permanent solutions that end homelessness. These solutions take a more comprehensive approach in looking at the root causes of homelessness, and include prevention and rapid intervention. As well, these solutions are largely grounded in the philosophy and practice of Housing First, meaning that individuals are provided with appropriate housing with the right degree of support to sustain this housing with no requirements around treatment or participation in programs.

New approaches to homelessness are proving impactful, with communities seeing individuals who have been chronically homeless obtaining and maintaining housing in the face of significant concurrent addiction and mental health challenges. This has had a number of secondary benefits, including decreased use of emergency services, hospitals, and emergency shelters. However, it has been noted that these approaches have been implemented largely without a gender lens. Best practices in ending homelessness for women and girls have not been included in many community plans, although women are often mentioned as a ‘target’ population.

The majority of communities in Canada now have a community plan on homelessness. More recently, communities have begun to create targeted plans, and plans can be found for youth, First Nations and Aboriginal peoples, and those with mental health challenges. However, in our review we were unable to find specific plans for ending homelessness for women and girls. At a meeting during the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness 2014 conference it was determined that such a plan or framework would be helpful, but it was daunting to consider each community creating their own. Therefore, there was a request that a framework be created for such a plan, and this framework could then be adapted by each community to their local context. What follows is such a framework, and we hope that it proves to be a useful tool for your community.

2 Process

This framework was developed by a collaborative of researchers, front-line service providers, and women with lived experience. Motivated by a women's roundtable at the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness 2014 conference, we received Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Connection support for a 2-day intensive session at York University to draft the framework. Over the two days we explored language and models around homelessness and ending homelessness, sample community frameworks, best practices for front-line service provision with women, and key components of a framework. These components were then crafted into a draft framework, and the final model was completed electronically.

In putting this framework together we recognize that women's and girls' homelessness is a diverse experience, and the seventeen of us working in this framework cannot possibly express the full range of this diversity. However, it is our hope that we have provided a foundation here for others to work with. We welcome you to fully adopt, adapt, utilize, or reject this framework as you see fit. We also welcome your input on how we could make the framework better, please contact Abe Oudshoorn at aoudsho@uwo.ca if you have any suggestions or revisions.

It is our intention to both continue to refine the framework, and begin to implement it in our communities. There are many important voices we have not heard on the issue of women's and girls' homelessness, and we strive to include these voices. We would also like to hear from you if you would like to be included in these next steps.

3 What is home?

The Canadian definition of homelessness (<http://www.homelesshub.ca/homelessdefinition>) is thorough in defining different scenarios that constitute homelessness. However, this can be enhanced to reflect the breadth of experiences of women by a more basic consideration of what ‘home’ means. The following are sixteen features of home:

A) Home is a right.

Every Canadian has the right to a home. This is “essential to one’s sense of dignity, safety, and ability to contribute to the fabric of our neighbourhoods and societies” (<http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/right-home-report-consultation-human-rights-and-rental-housing-ontario/housing-human-right>). This right includes being free from discrimination in seeking access to housing.

B) Home is safe.

Violence is an overwhelming if not ubiquitous factor in pathways to and within the experience of homelessness for women. The experience of intimate partner violence increases one’s risk for homelessness four-fold. However, many current strategies and programs for rapid re-housing are not sufficiently attuned to addressing trauma, and do not include basic safety planning.

C) Home is affordable.

In most communities in Canada social assistance rates are not in line with market rents, and new units developed under affordable housing strategies at 70% or 80% of average market rent are also out of reach. 12.5% of Canadian households are in core housing need, or spend over 30% of their household income on shelter. With social housing wait lists growing and the private sector not developing at the lowest income level, many experience homelessness or are stuck in homelessness due to the inability to afford a home.

D) Home is quality.

Sub-standard housing exists throughout our communities and becomes a forced option for many women. With home being unaffordable, many Canadians are forced into unsafe, unsanitary, and inhumane shelter options. Building codes and property standards are at times not adhered to by landlords, and women find themselves in housing that negatively impacts their physical and mental health.

E) Home is permanent.

If women desire to maintain their tenancy, home is a place that is available as long as you need and want it. Forced moves are traumatic, and frequently an experience that precipitates homelessness. Permanence of housing provides a measure of security. Although short-term, high support programs can play a role in assisting women, it is important that any changes of tenancy be the tenant’s choice.

F) Home is self-determined.

Every woman should have an array of available options so she can choose her neighbourhood, building, type of building, where she stays, and how long she stays there. Choice is a key determinant of feeling at home.

G) Home is autonomous.

Women and girls should have control over their home. Whether home is owned or rented, a sense of ownership of one's own or one's shared space is a foundation for feeling power and control over one's life.

H) Home is supported, if necessary.

Some women require assistance from time-to-time, and some women require permanent supports. Supports can be informal or formal. Stability of housing can vary over time and can be more difficult for some than for others, so supports need to be flexible but ultimately geared towards assisting women in sustaining their home.

I) Home is accessible.

Accessibility is indeed about those who are differently abled, but it is also about equitable access to housing, as well as emotional, cultural, mental, social, and spiritual accessibility. One's housing should not be physically or mentally harmful. Different women have different needs for housing, and housing is not a home if these needs are not met.

J) Home is inclusive of family members.

Housing for women needs to include sufficient space and accessibility for family members, however family is self-defined. For some women family includes pets, and housing is not home if pets aren't welcomed. Women and girls should be able to define for themselves who is welcome in their home.

K) Home is free from surveillance.

To be autonomous, to have control over one's space, to feel safe, one's home must be free of unwanted intrusions including surveillance. As women require choice over who is in their home, they also require choice over who is not to enter their home without their consent.

L) Home is part of a community.

One's home and the community in which one belongs is an essential part of one's identity. Community matters, and women should be welcomed into the communities in which they live. To be home, one must belong.

M) Home is land.

For many women, the land on which they live, and autonomy and freedom regarding land is important to feeling home. In particular, for Aboriginal women and girls the ownership and right to land is paramount for being home.

N) Home is private.

Or, home is as private as women want it to be. For some, this means privacy in their room, for others privacy in their building, for others privacy in their neighbourhood. Women and girls should be free of unnecessary intrusions, and able to maintain a level of privacy of their choice.

O) Home is not burdensome to others.

Women struggle to feel at home if they feel they are a burden to others. Therefore, home can include interdependence or mutual autonomy, but should be free of feelings of dependence.

Homelessness means to be without a home. Therefore, to solve homelessness for women means more than just providing housing, it means providing a home with all of the essential features listed above. That said, it is important to acknowledge the diversity of ways that people define home, and therefore responses need to acknowledge and accommodate this diversity. Housing is an important component, but it is not enough to truly and permanently end homelessness. Therefore, in this framework you will see a comprehensive approach that gets at more than just bricks and mortar, and includes long-term, community-level, and interim components to ending homelessness.

4 The Diversity of Women and Girls

The risk of creating any framework is that it highlights solutions that work best for certain women with certain experiences. Yet, we know that the experience of homelessness is as diverse as the number of women who go through it. Therefore, every community must create solutions that are broad enough to encompass this difference. To highlight this diversity, Van Berkum and Oudshoorn (2015) created a literature review of best practices for women and girls (<http://londonhomeless.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Best-Practice-Guideline-for-Ending-Womens-and-Girls-Homelessness.pdf>), and highlight the following sub-groups of women and girls:

- Women and girls with children;
- Young women and girls;
- Older women;
- Women and girls engaged in survival sex;
- Women and girls who have been trafficked;
- Women and girls involved in the judicial system;
- Women and girls who identify as LGBTQQQIP2SAA;
- Indigenous women and girls;
- Newcomer women and girls;
- Rural/remote women and girls;
- Women who have served in the military.

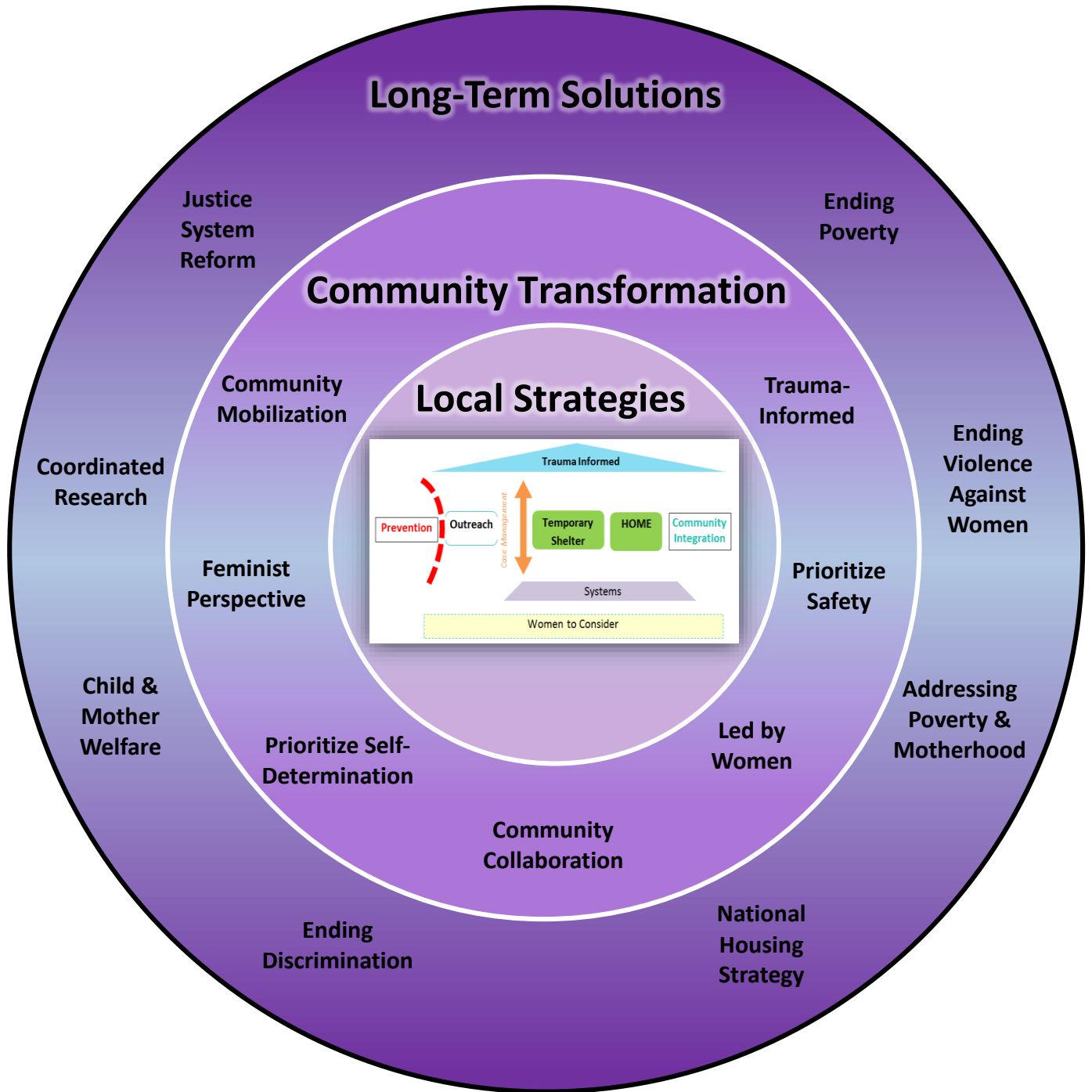
This is a non-exhaustive list and there are other ways of conceptualizing sub-groups of women. To Van Berkum and Oudshoorn (2015) we would add: women and girls living in First Nations communities and reserves, and women living with disabilities. For this to be a local framework, each community will need to consider how they would like to define sub-groups of women to consider. Needs vary across these groups, some desire congregate housing, others seek independence; some encounter language barriers, others encounter barriers around their minority sexuality; some experience lack of transportation to get to services, others experience the lack of bedrooms to regain custody of their children. Ultimately, supports geared to end homelessness must address each woman, one at a time, and understand her unique needs. That said, this best practices review (Van Berkum & Oudshoorn, 2015) did identify the following commonalities:

1. Women's homelessness is more hidden;
2. Violence and trauma are over-riding considerations;
3. Homelessness is not good for one's mental health;
4. Substance use is a common response to experiences of trauma;
5. Poverty is gendered, and homelessness is poverty;
6. Housing and supports need to be individualized;
7. Communities need more affordable housing;
8. Communities need thorough, accountable, participatory plans that address homelessness for women and girls;
9. Services need to be provided respectfully.

To this list of commonalities we would add: the pervasiveness of experiences of stereotyping and discrimination, and cultural practices being ignored in many responses to homelessness. Lastly, in consideration of both the diversity and the commonality of experiences, it is important to note that some women occupy more than one of the sub-groups identified above. In listing these sub-groups, it is our hope to shed light on the complexity of ending homelessness for women and girls.

5 Framework

Described in detail in subsequent sections, women’s and girls’ homelessness will only end when we make use of both long-term and local solutions. Long-term solutions are needed to address the underlying social factors that put women at risk of homelessness. Local solutions are needed to provide women with housing when they do experience homelessness, or to prevent homelessness.



6 Long-Term Solutions

Although the health and social consequences of homelessness are borne by individuals, the root causes of homelessness in Canada are structural. In particular, for women, structures of violence cause and perpetuate homelessness, so that homelessness will never be truly ended until these structures are confronted. Homelessness is a multi-faceted issue, and therefore political strategies to end homelessness are intimately connected to strategies to address a number of health and social inequities. To end homelessness for women and girls, local communities must engage in the following national strategies that engage all levels of government:

Ending Poverty

Women are more likely to experience poverty, and homelessness is an experience of poverty. Local communities need to engage in national activities designed to confront systemic poverty. These activities may include, but are not limited to:

- Consideration of a basic or guaranteed annual income
- Addressing inadequate social assistance rates
- Addressing inadequate minimum wages

Ending Violence Against Women

Violence and related traumas are at the root of so many experiences of homelessness for women and girls. Canada needs a national strategy to end violence against women, and local communities need to be engaged in crafting and implementing this strategy. This is in line with Canada being a signatory to the Convention of the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women and the International Bill of Rights of Women.

Addressing the Link Between Poverty and Motherhood

Single women caring for children are one of the sub-groups of Canadians most likely to experience poverty. Without a national childcare strategy, women are forced to make decisions about the best care of their children that have detrimental economic impacts. Being unable to engage in the workforce or education system limits opportunities for women to build their long-term financial stability.

A National Housing Strategy

The lack of housing available across all income levels continues to be a fundamental barrier to communities addressing homelessness. Canada needs a national housing strategy that includes a toolbox of housing options, from rent supplement, to affordable housing, to home ownership. The strategy must include a long-term plan for the federal government to be a partner in funding affordable housing on an ongoing basis. Although a degree of need varies across communities, all have some degree of need for more options to house those with low incomes. Other legislative tools could be included, such as inclusionary zoning or use of land transfer taxes.

Ending Discrimination

When listening to the voices of women experiencing homelessness, discrimination is a common theme both in pathways to homelessness and as a barrier to exiting homelessness. Discrimination is both enacted on a personal level by service providers, the public, landlords, and decision-makers, and built into systems as a form of structural violence. Anti-discrimination movements must be enacted at a national level in order to assist all women.

A Justice System That Works

For some women who experience homelessness, encounters with the justice system are part of the pathway to homelessness, part of the experience of being homeless, and a significant barrier to exiting homelessness. There are several concerns regarding laws that harm women, including laws that criminalize survival sex and other means to generate income (ex. panhandling), that fail to appropriately respond to trauma, that limit access to rehabilitative services, that disproportionately incarcerate Aboriginal women, and that remove children from the care of Aboriginal and African Canadian communities. Ultimately, our Canadian justice system requires a complete review using a gender lens and trauma-informed model to understand how women's rights can be secured and their access to justice enhanced and how homelessness can be exited and prevented.

Child and Mother Welfare

Many women who experience homelessness speak to problematic engagement with the child welfare system, both as parents or as crown wards themselves. There is a relationship both between becoming homeless and losing custody of children, and losing custody of children being a crisis that precipitates homelessness. A national review of child welfare strategies is needed that includes a focus on trauma and experiences of violence, and recognizing the primary concern of most women who are homeless and have lost custody of children is to regain custody. The review need also address the over-representation of children from Aboriginal and African Canadian communities.

Confronting systemic challenges involves naming and addressing policies and systems that have proven to be oppressive to women and girls. Until these foundational changes are made at a national level, local solutions can serve to address the crises as they arise, but not ultimately prevent them in the first place. Long-term solutions to ending homelessness are inherently political.

Coordinated Research

The hidden nature of homelessness for women and girls means that communities are often working with limited data and information in confronting the problem. This makes quality evaluation difficult. Coordination of research at a national level can include enhancing national definitions of women at risk, finding better means to enumerate women with different housing statuses, exploration of participatory methodologies that better meet the needs and interests of women with lived experience, means to disseminate best practices into action in services and strategies, and integration of mixed methods evaluation that includes more than just fiscal

analysis. The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (<http://www.homelesshub.ca/>) plays a key role in this coordination, and can be a leader in disseminating and promoting use of this framework.

7 Community Transformation

In addition to national political actions that will provide long-term solutions to ending homelessness, communities have the opportunity to transform the way they approach women's and girls' homelessness. The following are 7 key principles to transform your community and end homelessness:

1) Become a trauma-informed community.

Trauma-informed practice, according to SAMHSA (<http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA14-4884/SMA14-4884.pdf>) means: realizing the widespread impact of trauma; recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma; responding by integrating knowledge of trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and seeking to actively resist re-traumatization. With trauma being a key component of homelessness for women and girls, helping all members of your community to understand and value trauma-informed practice will transform the way your community responds to women. This can be implemented through leadership of trauma-informed training for politicians, service providers, community leaders, and other decision makers.

2) Prioritize safety.

Safety, safety planning, and safe spaces are crucial to assisting and protecting women. Responding to the reality of trauma and violence means being proactive in structuring safety. This may include crisis spaces, or assessing existing community services to determine the level of safety provided. In considering housing or re-housing, safety needs to be a top priority. Housing tenure will not be permanent if home is not safe.

3) Be led by women, including women of lived experience.

Communities will only be transformed as spaces where women can empower themselves when women have a lead role in guiding the community. To create responses that work for women experiencing homelessness means including women with lived experience throughout all planning processes.

4) Foster community organization, mobilization, and action.

Communities need to transform simultaneously from the bottom up, middle out, and the top down. Collaboration of both formal and informal sources of leadership holds the best promise for truly transforming existing systems that are failing women and girls. This means a move towards community empowered models from service delivery models. Communities must be bold in enacting the power that is theirs to provide a more just response to women in poverty and in crisis.

5) Be unabashedly feminist.

If we are to meet the diverse needs of diverse women, communities need to hold the principles of women front and centre. A feminist perspective holds gender as central in understanding power relations and the many aspects of marginalization identified throughout this framework.

6) Collaborate across systems.

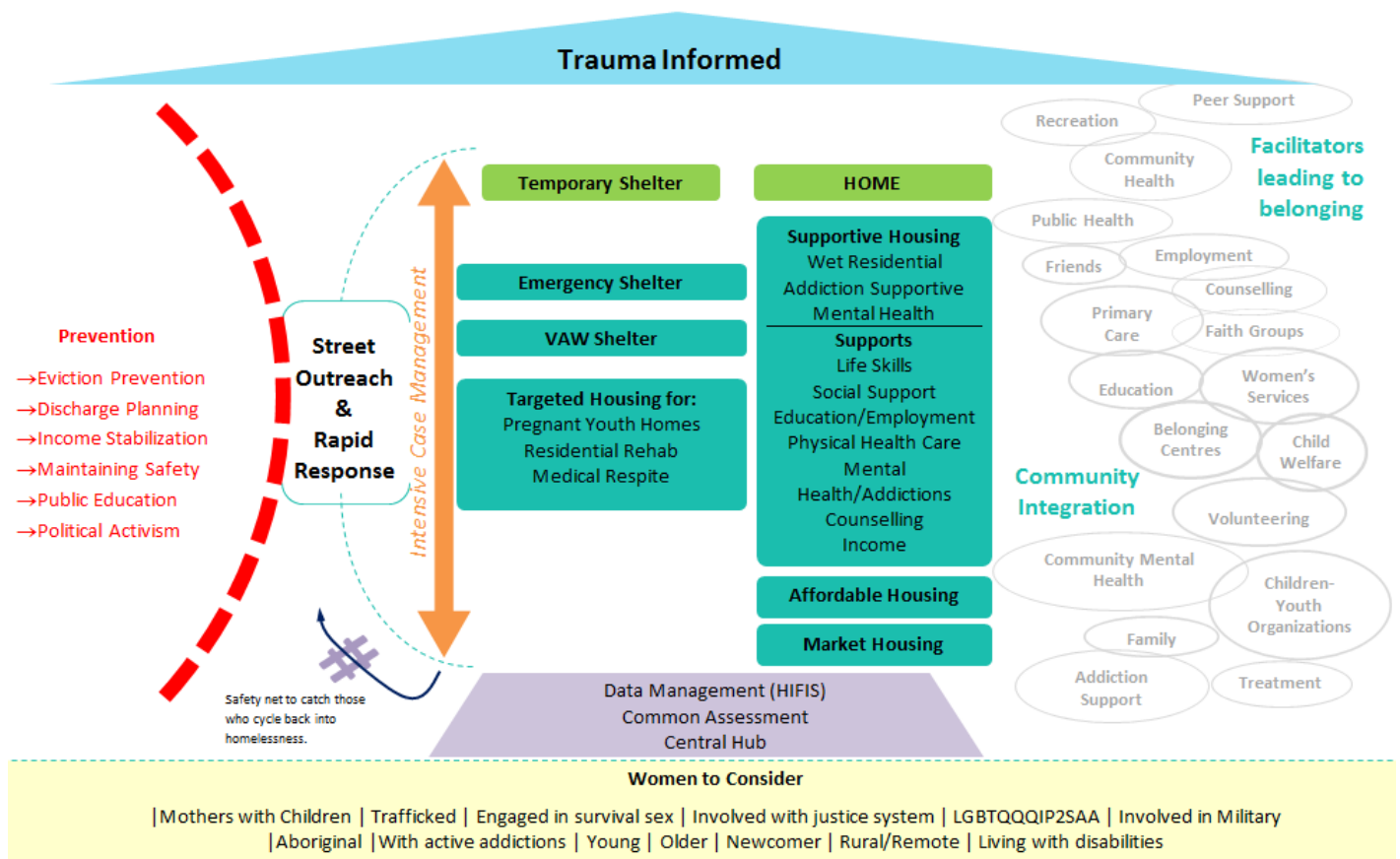
Although in silos by nature of their design and implementation, communities have great opportunities to enhance the collaboration of systems locally. These include, but are not limited to: *social housing, policing, health care, employment, child welfare, corrections, school boards, social assistance, immigration, childcare*, and other formal systems. These systems are often implicated in pathways into homelessness for women and girls. However, opportunities exist to enhance implementation of these systems in ways that prioritize women's self-determination and that prevent points of transition from becoming points of crisis. This is not to expect or even necessarily want integration of these systems, but rather to understand the existing points of disconnect that put women at risk. In addition to collaboration, problematic policies exist across these systems that can be named and addressed at a community level.

7) Prioritize choice and self-determination.

Unfortunately, attempts to assist individuals in need can themselves be disempowering. Communities can transform themselves by optimizing the ability of individuals to choose and to enact their own power.

8 Local Strategies

Long-term political strategies will address the root, systemic conditions that create homelessness for women, community transformation sets the stage for respectful and empowering action, and local strategies provide the details of housing that works for women and girls. The following is a model that shows comprehensive local strategies to help women find home:



This model for local strategies includes a number of points mentioned in the framework, including a trauma-informed community, acknowledgement of the diversity of women experiencing homelessness, and the sense that being home involves being part of a community. Several of the other components essential for such a model include:

A) Housing First

Housing First as a philosophy means immediate access to permanent housing with no conditions for housing readiness, choice in housing, a recovery model inclusive of harm reduction, with the appropriate supports as required by the individual or family, and including community integration. These components of Housing First align with the meaning of home for women. How this philosophy is subsequently implemented is also important, as implementation may unintentionally disadvantage women. Housing First needs to mean a permanent housing solution for all women in need, not just those who fit a select and limited criteria.

B) Peer Support

Peer support as defined by women is integrated throughout the model as identified by women. This means following best practices of peer support around education of peers, supporting the supporters, and self-determination of one's role and one's support.

C) Foundational Information Systems

Data management, assessment tools, and centralized services allow women to avoid redundancies in services while also rapidly accessing desired supports.

D) Rapid Response with Crisis Intervention

Homelessness is often the result of a health or social crisis. Safe, accessible, and well-resourced crisis responses are key to preventing homelessness and supporting housing stability. As crises are diverse and individualized, services need to be broad yet individualized as well.

E) Intensive Case Management

Intensive case management means that each woman or girl interacting with the homeless serving sector receives immediate support, and if this is insufficient to prevent homelessness or rapidly rehouse the individual or family, they are attached to a case manager if they so choose. Case managers assess the needs of each individual or family, and provide individualized supports and system navigation until permanent housing is obtained, that meets the requirements of home.

F) Flexibility of Supports

The degree of support required to end homelessness will vary significantly from woman to woman. Similarly, the degree of support needs can vary over time as women progress through different stages of their lives. Therefore, supports must be flexible both in terms of the requirements of each individual, and in terms of an individual's changing needs over time.

G) Variety of Housing Options

Flexibility of support and permanency of housing need to be artfully managed to include individual choice and Housing First. This means that at some times some women will need high levels of support in particular residential settings. This might include a managed alcohol program, crisis emergency shelter, or home for expecting mothers. These might not fit the ultimate criteria of 'home' in that they are not permanent, but do provide the level of support an individual is choosing at that time. That means that in the variety of housing options available, individual choice might mean that not every ultimate goal for housing is obtained immediately. However, these high intensity supports can be crucial for a period of time.