

# Domestic Violence and Housing Forum 2016

## Final Report

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Homeward Trust

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<b>Introduction and acknowledgements</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Key-note address overview: Guddy Helevuo-Burnet</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Presentations overview: Homeward Trust and Alberta Council of Women Shelters</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Presentations overview: Alberta Residential Landlord Association and Capital Region Housing Corporation</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Findings: systems and agencies</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Findings: landlords and property managers</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Conclusion and next steps</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Appendix A: Domestic Violence and Housing Network</b>	<b>12</b>

In partnership with staff from the Centre for Public Legal Education and Lois Gander, QC from the University of Alberta Faculty of Extension, Homeward Trust hosted the Domestic Violence and Housing Forum on October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

The forum brought together over 40 professionals working in sectors that affect or impact women and families experiencing and fleeing violent domestic situations. Representatives from domestic violence shelters, the Government of Alberta, City of Edmonton, landlords, property managers and housing providers came together to discuss the overall guiding question: *How do we make sure survivors of domestic violence are connected to permanent housing?*

This forum was a key activity for Homeward Trust, which in September 2016 recorded 49% of women who are active clients in the Housing First program as having been exposed to or fleeing a domestic violence situation<sup>1</sup>. Homeward Trust is committed to facilitating further collaborative action to address the priority areas identified at the forum.

### Priority areas identified and next steps:

- 1) To create a collaborative network consisting of key players from domestic violence shelters, housing sector, landlords and property managers to carry on the conversation and strengthen communication within the sector.
- 2) To extend research done on domestic violence and housing options beyond the shelter system. Evidence based research is needed to support the sector in increasing housing options such as second and third stage shelters, and in adopting Housing First principles for women fleeing domestic violence.
- 3) To increase educational opportunities for landlords and property managers across the city to ensure they are equipped to recognize signs of domestic violence. This will increase their sensitivity to the unique needs of women fleeing domestic violence. When landlords and property managers are more flexible and accommodating, women and children have better chances of maintaining safe and secure housing.

### Acknowledgements

Homeward Trust would like to acknowledge and thank the speakers, organizers, facilitator, participants and staff for their valued participation during this forum and contributions to this report.

### Speakers:

- Minister Stephanie McLean, Minister for Status of Women (Opening Remarks)
- Elder Elsie Paul (Blessing)
- Susan McGee, CEO Homeward Trust (Welcome and Opening Remarks)
- Lois Gander, QC (Keynote Introduction)
- Guddy Helevuo-Burnet, Peabody UK and DAHA (Keynote Address)
- Giri Puligandla, Director of Planning and Research, Homeward Trust
- Carolyn Goard, Alberta Council of Women Shelters
- Sandy Pon, Alberta Residential Landlords Association
- Esther De Vos, Capital Region Housing Corporation
- Peter Faid, Community Services Consulting (Forum facilitator (pro bono))

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<sup>1</sup> Unpublished Housing First Data, Homeward Trust 2016.

## **Keynote Address: Guddy Helevuo-Burnet**

Peabody UK and the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA)

This presentation highlighted the unique position that housing providers and their frontline staff are in, given their access and proximity to homes which tend to be the sites of domestic violence. They are strategically placed to observe and report occurrences of family violence, and to inform women and children about the supports and services that are available to them. Guddy provided an account of the UK experience in this regard, following which, participants discussed ways in which this experience can be applicable to the Edmonton context.

*“Housing providers can play a vital role in identifying and supporting families affected by domestic abuse. Housing providers have unique entry into the ‘hidden’ spaces occupied by perpetrators and individuals experiencing abuse” (Guddy Helevuo-Burnet, 2016).*

### Social housing and domestic violence in the UK

In the UK, social housing is owned and managed by government-registered providers such as Gentoo & Peabody. These are independent, not-for-profit organizations that can use any profit they make to maintain existing homes and help finance new ones. 4,1 million people in England and Wales rent their homes through social housing. The social housing sector in the UK is large, employing more than 150,000 people across the UK.

In view of the size and reach of the social housing sector, the Domestic Abuse and Housing Alliance (DAHA), a partnership between Gentoo, Standing Together Against Domestic Violence and Peabody, aims to position housing providers to improve the housing sector response to domestic violence. To this end, Peabody has trained over 43 housing providers nationally to be more aware and responsive to signs of domestic violence. As a result, reporting of domestic violence by housing providers has increased by 1,425% in the last 8 years.

### Applicability in Edmonton

Participants drew several lessons from the UK experience that are applicable to Canada and Edmonton. Agencies in the domestic violence serving sector in Edmonton should consider collaboration and communication with housing providers to improve the response to domestic violence. As in the UK, this could include:

- domestic violence awareness training for landlords, property managers and their frontline staff  
These include building caretakers, contractors, neighbourhood managers and community development officers, all of whom tend to be in regular contact with tenants and are therefore well positioned to report domestic violence. This group can be alerted to signs to be aware of such as broken furniture and fixtures or punches in walls;
- strengthening ties between housing providers and local authorities across the city  
This way, housing providers will not hesitate to call authorities at early stages when they have recognized signs of domestic violence, and in this way, prevent further harm.

## Homeward Trust

**Presenter: Giri Puligandla, Director Planning and Research**

Homeward Trust advocates for the domestic violence and housing sector in Edmonton to apply Housing First universally as a commitment and evidenced based approach to ensuring housing security for survivors of domestic violence.

Studies show that one in four women in Domestic Violence shelters were at the facility before. Evidently, too many people use shelters as a form of long term support. As we examine housing needs for women experiencing domestic violence, there is an opportunity to fit in a new conceptualization of permanent supportive housing; supports could include in-reach services from mainstream systems combined with mobile family case management and on-site services focused primarily on tenant security and peer support.

## Alberta Council of Women's Shelters

**Presenter: Carolyn Goard, Director of Member Supports and Services**

For women fleeing domestic violence to successfully re-establish their lives in terms of safety, security, housing, employment and mental health, the domestic violence and housing sector in Edmonton must provide long term supports beyond shelters. However, Edmonton is lacking appropriate housing options for women with a history of experiencing domestic violence. These housing options need to be centred on trauma-informed care. They also must account for intersecting barriers such as women's poverty, women's concerns about maintaining custody of their children, and the unique barriers faced by immigrant, refugee and aboriginal women who are fleeing domestic violence.

## Alberta Residential Landlord Association

**Presenter: Sandy Pon, ARLA Board of Directors Chair**

The changes made in August, 2016 to the Residential Tenancies (Safer Spaces for Victims of Domestic Violence) Amendment Act, Termination of Tenancy (Domestic Violence) Regulation, and amendments to the RTA Ministerial Regulation allow victims of domestic violence to end a tenancy early, and without financial penalty. Tenants and landlords alike have responsibilities outlined in the Residential Tenancies Act that, when adhered to, can help in the detection of domestic violence.

## Capital Region Housing Corporation

**Presenter: Esther de Vos, Director of Policy, Research and Strategic Initiatives**

CRHC faces significant barriers that prevent the flexibility required to assist people fleeing domestic violence. The work to get people into permanent, safe and affordable housing operates within the context of incredibly hard legislative pieces, rules and criteria regarding who is allowed in, and how long they can stay.

The housing priority list is based on a point- score in Social Housing and Accommodations legislation. Unfortunately, there are no additional points for people facing homelessness *and* fleeing domestic violence, meaning there is no way to move people fleeing domestic violence up on the priority list. This calls for this sector to advocate for a new social housing regulatory framework to respond better in cases of domestic violence.

The presentation closed with information about *Ready to Rent Alberta*. This is a suite of tenant education programs where tenants learn roles, responsibilities, effective communication and financial stability. There may be future potential to use completion of these modules instead of a reference check to secure housing for those who may struggle with obtaining reference checks, which is common for women experiencing domestic violence.

## Systems and Agencies

In a facilitated small group discussion, participants were encouraged to reflect on the systems and agencies that serve women fleeing domestic violence in Edmonton using the guiding question: ***how can systems and agencies support women experiencing domestic violence in accessing permanent housing and supports to help them forward?***

The outcomes of the small group discussions are summarized into five themes below. Participants believe systems and agencies can better support women experiencing domestic violence to access permanent housing and supports by:

- a) **focusing on efficiency, improving outcomes and on measuring performance;**
- b) **being more responsive to the unique needs of individuals;**
- c) **becoming more data and information oriented;**
- d) **being flexible in service delivery style as this improves accessibility and availability of supports; and**
- e) **extending research on domestic violence and housing options for women and families beyond the shelter system**

### Renewed focus on efficiency, improving outcomes and performance measurement

Inefficiencies in the systems that serve women fleeing domestic violence create barriers and unnecessary delays, during which some women lose heart and return to abusive homes. To break cycles of domestic violence, agencies must deliver services in a timely manner and systems need a renewed focus on improving results and on measuring performance and outcomes.

One way to eliminate barriers and delays is by having centralized supports for women and families. For example, a “one-stop-shop” set up where women only need to access one place to get connected with housing and the immediate supports they require would limit the time spent finding a specific agency that suits their needs. In this model, the one-stop-shop assumes the role of a navigator, quickly connecting women to the appropriate agencies and equipping them with the information that they may need to navigate the system. A model such as the centralized 311 and 211 calls system in Edmonton can be adapted for people fleeing domestic violence. For accessibility sake, this phone number would need to be memorable and well advertised.

With so many agencies in both the domestic violence and the housing and homelessness sectors, improving efficiency and speeding up the time it takes to get women safely housed and connected to supports can only work with deliberate and effective coordination of all stakeholders, from landlords and property managers to shelters, health and housing agencies. This calls for a marked increase in the amount of communication and collaboration within these sectors. This includes joint forums such as this one that bring the wide spectrum of stakeholders together in one room.

Part of being results-driven as a sector includes focusing efforts on improving client outcomes. Some forum participants raised the need to overcome the unpredictability of outcomes from case to case. Currently,

outcomes typically depend on which intake worker or case worker is assigned to a case and whether they are resilient and knowledgeable about resources. Coordinating services will also ensure that all the services available are made known to clients. Relentless connectors and navigators at each agency are necessary; these are caseworkers and agency staff that are determined to see results for clients and that are well informed about where to find the resources clients need.

### Agency responsiveness to unique cases

Many participants at the forum voiced the frustration felt by community members when agencies fail to respond to their unique needs. When support workers or property managers respond in an impersonal, prescribed, or inflexible manner, they fail to make the optimal referrals for each individual case.

Responding to the unique needs of each woman and family fleeing domestic violence requires case workers and agencies to be flexible. Staff in the sector need to keep in mind that each case is unique and will require a different suite of services for clients to be successfully and permanently housed.

This also requires increased awareness and sensitivity to issues that disproportionately affect or are particular to women such as poverty, child safety and having full family supports.

### Diversity awareness and training

Indigenous and minority groups are particularly vulnerable in situations where domestic violence and homelessness occur. Housing First data show that overall, indigenous clients are more likely to report having been in domestic violence situations than other clients. Participants concluded that the sector needs to invest in more indigenous and culturally focused housing that helps create supportive community. At the service level, agencies could consider introducing more balance between traditional indigenous and modern forms of healing and medicines for victims of family violence. For housing providers, the forum spoke of the need to recreate familiar cultural communities for women and children fleeing domestic violence as a way for them to feel welcome, grounded and supported.

One important part of making sure people feel welcome at agencies is making sure staff receive cultural and diversity training so that they are sensitive to cultural differences. Front-line staff also need to address stereotypical thinking about who gets affected by domestic violence. Deliberate messaging through posters and pamphlets could ensure that all accessing the services feel represented and welcome. This is true for indigenous groups, ethnic minority groups and other minority communities such as the LGBTQ2S youth and adults.

Equally, the sector needs to find ways to ensure that those beyond the housing sector, especially the non-indigenous supporters such as health professionals and teachers also receive cultural and diversity training and are made aware of the unique needs of women fleeing domestic violence.

At a higher system and policy level, work needs to be done to address the differences between supports for families experiencing domestic violence from the province and on-reserve supports. These differences

perpetuate the vulnerability of indigenous women trying to secure safe and permanent support for themselves and their children.

Participants emphasized the fact that indigenous awareness needs to include the links between colonialism, residential schools, how these translate to generational and vicarious trauma, and how this all impacts homelessness today.

### Availability and accessibility of services and supports

Examinations of how accessible supports and services are in Edmonton should consider current intake and assessment processes. On this issue, some participants argued that the current assessment tools used for women fleeing domestic violence to obtain housing need to be revisited to check for appropriateness and usefulness. Assessment tools can easily become unnecessary barriers for women trying to get a permanent home, and so they need to be aligned with the up to date research and knowledge the sector holds on the experiences and trauma women fleeing domestic violence often carry. Multiple risk assessments can also retraumatize survivors.

Finally, the pre-assessment process for Housing First (e.g. using the Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool- SPDAT) needs to be available in more agencies to ensure that women across the city have equal access to attaining supports and permanent housing.

### Addressing the root causes of domestic violence

Participants were concerned addressing the very root of domestic violence can easily be overlooked in this busy sector. Trauma informed service provision can help stop domestic violence passing from generation to generation. These services must be holistic, allowing everyone in the family – perpetrators, victims and children the opportunity and support to heal from trauma.

In the case of indigenous families, participants reflected on the existence of traditional teaching and cultural knowledge that promotes a positive and respectful image of women. Families in Edmonton need to be reconnected to traditional teachings where women had an important role as teachers and healers. This could a starting point for changing the paradigm in which domestic violence thrives.

Some participants argued for more attention to be paid to the perpetrators of domestic violence. If the justice system required anger management and trauma training/therapy for perpetrators and victims alike, this could be an effective way to tackle domestic violence at its roots.

Lastly, participants called for agencies and systems to be dedicated to ensuring children receive education about domestic violence and its effects as well a therapy. Focusing supports on children will help prevent continuous cycles of violence in communities.

### Extending research and housing options for women experiencing domestic violence beyond the shelter system

Participants expressed the need to extend research, housing options and collaborative work in the domestic violence and housing sector beyond the shelter system if systems and agencies are to succeed in ensuring permanent housing solutions for women and children fleeing domestic violence.

Many participants felt that support programs are currently not long enough; more time is needed for victims of domestic violence to recover and develop life skills. There is an overall shortage of available housing options, and so while shelter bed numbers do need to increase, shelters also need to allow for longer stays.

More collaborative work between housing first, the housing and the women shelter sectors is necessary in order to extend support and research beyond the shelter system. These different players need to understand and be aware of each others' work, and appreciate the important role each fills in the sector. With more collaboration, will come better coordination of services; ensuring successful transfers from emergency shelters to permanent housing. Collaboration will also help make the system more approachable for women and families as all service providers start to move towards using shared meanings and definitions.

To extend beyond the shelter system, there need to be more housing options available for women and children fleeing domestic violence. These include 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> stage shelter options as well housing options based on unique circumstances such as emergency and non-emergency situations; women with children; professionals; unemployed women and women from diverse cultures and ethnicities.

Participants called upon housing providers to set aside safe and secure units specifically for survivors of domestic violence and their families. These and other affordable housing and housing services need to be decentralized so that they are accessible to women across the city.

## Landlords and Property Managers

In a second facilitated small group discussion, participants discussed how to improve landlord and property managers' responses to domestic violence and role in securing stable and safe housing for women and children. This session was guided by the question: **what can landlords, property managers and housing providers do to support housing security for people experiencing domestic violence?**

The main themes from this discussion were about increasing collaboration and communication between the landlord and property managers sector on one hand and the domestic violence agencies and agencies providing supports on the other. Participants agreed that working together will achieve:

- a) Increased education and awareness about domestic violence amongst landlords and property managers**
- b) increased sensitivity amongst landlords and property owners to the unique needs of women fleeing domestic violence**

### Increasing education and awareness about domestic violence amongst landlords and property managers

Following the lessons from the keynote address, participants brought forward the important point about the physical proximity of landlords and property managers to sites of domestic violence. They are therefore well positioned to be witnesses, offer assistance and give women information about the supports and services offered by domestic violence sector agencies. To do this effectively however, they need to be trained in recognizing the signs of family violence. They also need to have current, up to date information about agencies, systems and supports.

For coordinated and successful participation in ensuring women's safety, the domestic violence and housing sector needs to develop clear guidelines for landlords and property managers to follow in situations of domestic violence, and what they can do to make the process of securing housing easier for women fleeing domestic violence. The educational material they receive should dispel myths about domestic violence and also offer information on relevant legislation in Alberta on domestic violence.

### Strategies for landlords and property managers to assist women fleeing domestic violence:

With some flexibility and understanding of the needs of women and families facing domestic violence, landlords and property managers can take steps to ensure women do not lose their secure housing, do not get evicted for offences the perpetrator committed, and are not penalized in the future when trying to access other safe and secure housing.

- Property managers can take the initiative to move tenants experiencing domestic violence out of those units and direct them to buildings with better on-site security.

*"Studies of women's experiences of domestic violence have consistently shown that a major reason why women stay in, or return to violent relationships is lack of safe, affordable and independent accommodation"*

*(Morley, 2000).*

- Property managers and landlords can allow people fleeing domestic violence to go on month to month leases, so as to not feel trapped in their housing.
- They can also offer women options to transfer units at no penalty for instances of domestic violence and for purposes of safety.
- On site monitors, can also be appointed, specifically for watching for signs of family violence and for ensuring the safety and security of all tenants.

As they are closest to tenants' daily lives, on site property managers can be effective conduits of safety information and contact details for women and families seeking supports:

- They can post up visual prompts on posters, pamphlets or elevator T.V screens detailing this information, as well as information on steps that other tenants can take to report instances of domestic violence.
- "Tenant responsibilities" can be added to leases for all tenants, with guidelines on what they can do when they realize their neighbours are in trouble.
- Landlords can also identify and make connections with designated police agents in the neighbourhood who they can call in cases of domestic violence. Neighbourhood law enforcers can also take the time to implement crime free programs in rental buildings to show their solidarity and support.

Approachability and sensitivity are key in this relationship as women and families fleeing domestic violence are dependent on landlords and tenants for good referrals to secure their next homes. When an instance of domestic violence has occurred, it is important that landlords do not punish the victims along with the perpetrators by evicting them both and giving bad referrals for both. Landlords can help women and families feel safe by reassuring them they will support their applications for new homes. Landlords can also cooperate with women to remove only the abuser from a lease, preventing women and children from entering homelessness.

Lastly, the domestic violence and housing sector needs to make strides to ensure as many landlords and property managers as possible are included in this conversation and receive the educational materials to raise awareness about the role they could play. This sector needs to identify "champions" in the landlord and property manager community to spread awareness and a positive approach to dealing with domestic violence. Part of this includes ensuring that the information and strategies for dealing with domestic violence reach those landlords that are not part of an association.

### Increasing communication between agencies, systems and landlords/property managers

Evidently, the importance of collaborative work to bring an end to domestic violence and to ensure the safety of women and children cannot be overstated. Regular communication between landlords and agencies serving survivors of domestic violence will ensure all key players are operating on shared concepts, standards and values. As noted above, good communication between landlords and community policing would also be beneficial. The ideal situation is the existence of a core team of motivated key players including social workers, police and landlord teams, all committed to ensuring the safety and security of those fleeing domestic violence.

### Conclusion: working towards better communication

To conclude, the overall feedback on the forum given by participants has been positive. Many agreed that this Domestic Violence Forum is an example of the level of communication and information sharing that participants desire amongst shelters, housing providers, landlords and property managers. A forum like this one provides a venue for landlords to hear the issues faced by women fleeing domestic violence, and for the sector to brainstorm innovative solutions that take advantage of the unique position that landlords and their staff are in to respond to women's housing needs.

This type of communication can be facilitated in various ways; through sector-wide large conferences such as these, or in multi-stakeholder sub action groups that discuss and tackle the priority issues raised here and that are already well known in the sector.

In addition, participants identified landlord and property manager education on the barriers women fleeing domestic violence face when accessing housing as a vital part of keeping women and families safe and secure. In conversations throughout the day, many participants felt certain that property managers that are sensitive to the needs of women and children can be flexible and accommodating on issues that have immediate impact on whether women will be able to maintain a home. This includes issues such as down-payments, lengths of leases and eviction procedures after cases of violence in homes.

### Next steps

Homeward Trust's intention is to support facilitation and coordination of the communication in this joint sector. The first step towards this is the establishment of the Domestic Violence and Housing Network (appendix A), consisting of attendees at this forum and staff from their agencies. Several stakeholders have already expressed interest in forming this network, and Homeward Trust has reached out to all interested parties to add them to this communication network.

Further next steps identified by forum participants include:

- creating sub action groups to start the work of addressing the key priority areas defined at this forum;
- holding a yearly Domestic Violence and Housing Forum such as this, where sub action groups, agencies and other stakeholders can provide updates on the work that has been done;
- identifying champions amongst landlords and starting the conversations about domestic violence training for frontline staff and property managers.

## Domestic Violence and Housing Network

October 2016 Domestic Violence & Housing Forum

**The Homeward Trust Domestic Violence and Housing Network consists of staff members from the following organizations and departments:**

Organization
University of Alberta, Faculty of Extension
Edmonton Community Legal Centre
Residential Tenancy Dispute Resolution Service
Metis Capital
Institute for Advancement of Aboriginal Women (IAAW)
Community Initiatives Against Family Violence
Ambrose Place
First Nations and Metis Relations, Alberta Indigenous Relations
Wings of Providence
Status of Women, Violence Against Women and Girls Unit, Gender Policy Strategy and Innovation Division
Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton (SACE)
PolicyWise
Bissell Centre, Director Community Programs and Services
Centre for Public Legal Education (CPLEA)
Capital Region Housing, Policy Research and Strategic Initiatives
Alberta Residential Landlord Association
Alberta Human Services, Community Services and Supports
Alberta Human Services, Edmonton Region Child and Family Services Division, Family Violence Prevention Unit
Lurana Shelter Society
Bent Arrow Society
WinHouse Shelter