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A CHILDREN-FIRST NATIONAL HOUSING STRATEGY

A UNICEF Canada Submission to the
Department of Children, Families and Social Development

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Children are the largest and most vulnerable group of people in Canada – a quarter of the population at a sensitive stage of human development. They have the right to have their best interests considered as a priority in public policy. Housing is also a child's right. It is a foundation for well-being in all aspects of a child's life. Housing influences children's equitable physical, mental, emotional and social development. Deprivation of safe, stable, suitable, affordable housing affects children more than any other group due to their developmental stage and legal status. UNICEF Canada welcomes the Government of Canada's commitment to developing a National Housing Strategy and recommends that children's rights and well-being feature prominently in the strategy and in Canada's contributions to the New Urban Agenda of the United Nations' Habitat III Summit on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development. A child-first principle should inform all housing related legislation, policy, planning and development to help ensure that every child has access to safe, stable, suitable and affordable housing.

ABOUT UNICEF CANADA

As a UN agency, UNICEF is active in 190 countries and we have saved more children's lives than any other humanitarian organization. UNICEF Canada is a Canadian non-governmental organization (NGO) established 60 years ago and is the representative of UNICEF in Canada. We work tirelessly as part of the global UNICEF family to do whatever it takes to ensure that children and young people survive and thrive, and have every opportunity to reach their full potential. Our global reach, unparalleled influence with policymakers, and diverse partnerships make us an instrumental force in shaping a world where the rights of all children are realized.

UNICEF Canada builds awareness, raises funds, and mobilizes Canadians across the country to help save and protect the world's most vulnerable children. We promote public policy and practices in the best interests of children, informed by our global experience and international best practice, to contribute to the fulfillment of children's rights in Canada and around the world.

UNICEF is mandated by the United Nations General Assembly to advocate for the protection of children's rights, to help meet their basic needs and to expand their opportunities to reach their full potential. UNICEF is guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and strives to establish children's rights as enduring ethical principles and international standards of behaviour towards children.

UNICEF is entirely supported by voluntary donations and helps all children, regardless of race, religion or politics. The only organization named in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as a source of expertise for governments, UNICEF has exceptional access to those whose decisions impact children's survival and quality of life. We are the world's advocate for children and their rights. For more information about UNICEF, please visit www.unicef.ca.

OVERVIEW OF UNICEF CANADA'S POSITION

Designing a National Housing Strategy is a challenging task but increasingly necessary in a rapidly urbanizing and more unequal society. There are many vulnerable groups whose right to housing is precarious or unfulfilled, but children are disproportionately affected by housing need and have the right to a child-first approach. Children in low income, indigenous children, children in state care, children with disabilities, migrant children, children with mental illness, children

with diverse gender identities and street-involved children are disproportionately deprived of housing. UNICEF Canada is advancing a children's rights-based framework for Canada's National Housing Strategy, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), given the duty to fulfill children's rights including housing. We propose ways that the unique needs and contributions of children and youth can be included in the National Housing Strategy.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION #1: That a National Housing Strategy be designed with a child-first lens, consistent with children's human rights as defined by relevant United Nations conventions in international law.

RECOMMENDATION #2: That a National Housing Strategy include measures designed specifically to address the interrelationships between child poverty, health, education, social inclusion and housing, given the disproportionate impacts on children.

RECOMMENDATION #3: That a National Housing Strategy increase the range and availability of affordable, safe, stable, suitable housing options for families with children and for independent youth through measures such as integrated housing, affordable housing, housing benefits and connections to support services.

RECOMMENDATION #4: That a National Housing Strategy prevent homelessness, particularly among families with children and independent youth, by reviewing legislation, policies and programs from a child-first lens, ensuring dedicated temporary/transitional housing for these groups and expanding primary and secondary prevention programs for children and youth at risk.

RECOMMENDATION #5: That child-centred community planning be an important component in a National Housing Strategy, with federal, provincial and local government support for child and youth participation; monitoring progress; and expansion of the Child Friendly Cities initiative.

CHILDREN NEED A NATIONAL HOUSING STRATEGY

UNICEF Canada commends the Government of Canada's initiative to develop a National Housing Strategy in concert with other levels of government. Housing is more than just a roof over one's head. The daily conditions in which people live strongly influence their health and well-being.¹ Quality housing with access to clean water and sanitation are basic needs that governments have some responsibility to provide.² Housing must be safe, accessible, suitable and affordable.³ This means that it must be in good condition and absent of harmful damage, mould and other elements which can injure or sicken children.⁴ It must be of an adequate size to accommodate the number of persons living in it without being overcrowded.⁵ Overcrowding is associated with greater risk of respiratory and other illnesses in children. Housing should be equipped with features that enable children with disabilities to be safe, mobile and independent.⁶ Housing shouldn't cost more than 30% of a family's income, the standard of affordability.⁷ If one of these elements is lacking, the affected individuals have a housing need.⁸

Data from the 2006 census revealed that as many as one-third of Canadian households were living in housing need, many of them families with children.⁹ Single-parent households, families

new to Canada, visible minorities, indigenous families and families of individuals with a physical, developmental or mental health disability are at greatest risk of experiencing housing need.¹⁰ These population groups are also at greatest risk of living in poverty.¹¹ For many Canadians, affordability is the primary cause of housing need, exacerbated by a lack of lower-rent housing; an increase in precarious, low-income employment; and, for many, the high costs of child care and food.¹² Housing has become increasingly unaffordable as a result of higher housing costs, less availability, more precarious low-paid employment and rising costs for child care and other needs. Addressing these causes requires more than housing interventions, but a National Housing Strategy can play an important role to reduce housing need.

Housing need is for some a few short steps – or a paycheque – away from homelessness. Homelessness is the absence of a home both in the material sense and social sense - lack of a safe and secure physical space, a place to establish family relationships and the basis from which to participate in community life. For children, it often includes a series of temporary stays in shelters, couch-surfing, street living and entry to the child welfare system. The rise in shelter use between 2005 and 2009 is linked to an increase in housing need, with the sharpest increase in shelter use among families with children.¹³ Youth homelessness refers to the situation of children and youth who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers, but do not have the means or ability to acquire a stable, safe or consistent residence. In Canada, approximately 35,000 youth are homeless annually. Indigenous youth and youth who identify as LGBTQ2S may represent a quarter to a third of homeless youth, depending on the community.¹⁴ Youth leaving care and the justice and mental health systems are also overrepresented among homeless youth. Few young people choose to be homeless, and the experience is generally negative and stressful. Youth homelessness is a complex social issue linked to poverty, but is exacerbated by insufficient supports for families experiencing conflict, discrimination against youth on the basis of identity, having a mental illness and disengagement from school and community. Again, a National Housing Strategy can be coordinated with other actions to reduce the risks of homelessness.

UNICEF Canada welcomes the Government of Canada's reforms to child benefits and commitments to expand quality, affordable early child care; support youth employment; and reduce poverty. These should help reduce housing need and the risk of homelessness. The National Housing Strategy should play a role to further reduce the risks and effects of poverty and inequality by reducing housing need and homelessness. As the only G8 country without a National Housing Strategy, Canada has an opportunity to incorporate best practices from learned experiences in provinces, territories, communities and other countries that will form the architecture to fulfil our housing obligations under international law. A child-focused lens should be incorporated in all aspects of a housing strategy. Children can and should play a role to inform decision-making to ensure that the strategy meets their unique and diverse needs. As natural innovators, cultural agents and sustainability stakeholders, children and youth can play a role to design innovative approaches to affordable, sustainable and acceptable housing.

HOUSING IS CHILDREN'S HUMAN RIGHT

As a human right, children should be able to access secure housing connected to local services, schools, play and cultural spaces and employment.¹⁵ Beyond housing itself, the surrounding community and its social and physical infrastructure play an important role in ensuring that housing is safe, accessible, suitable and affordable. Access to a safe water supply, good air quality, food, safe and crime-free neighbourhoods, proximity to health care and accessible

public transit are important elements to help guarantee that housing satisfies the criteria outlined in human rights conventions.¹⁶

The legal imperative for governments to play a role in ensuring housing for all is enshrined in several UN conventions to which Canada is party. Housing status is recognized as a human right in article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights:

The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The States Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right, recognizing to this effect the essential importance of international co-operation based on free consent.¹⁷

Children's right to housing is also supported by article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Convention):

1. States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.
2. The parent(s) or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development.
3. States Parties, in accordance with national conditions and within their means, shall take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the child to implement this right and shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing.¹⁸

Article 6 of the Convention provides that 'State Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child'.¹⁹ Article 24 provides children with the right to the highest attainable standard of health, including through a framework of primary health care and the provision of clean drinking-water, which housing need often impedes.²⁰ Article 31 guarantees children the right to rest, leisure, play and recreational activities, which overcrowding, unsafe housing and environmental pollution can undermine.²¹ Housing is therefore a means to ensure a child's ability to enjoy her/his full and interdependent rights as defined in the Convention.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (the Committee) has elaborated on the importance of housing in fulfilling children's rights. The Committee's General Comment No. 15 on the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health details some of the criteria housing must satisfy in order to guarantee a child's right to health:

States should take measures to address the dangers and risks that local environmental pollution poses to children's health in all settings. Adequate housing that includes non-dangerous cooking facilities, a smoke-free environment, appropriate ventilation, effective management of waste and the disposal of litter from living quarters and the immediate surroundings, the absence of mould and other toxic substances, and family hygiene are core requirements to a healthy upbringing and development. States should regulate and

monitor the environmental impact of business activities that may compromise children's right to health, food security and access to safe drinking water and to sanitation.²²

In its General Comment No. 17 on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts, the Committee advises that,

Inadequate standard of living, insecure or overcrowded conditions, unsafe and unsanitary environments, inadequate food, enforced harmful or exploitative work can all serve to limit or deny children the opportunity to enjoy their rights under article 31. States parties are encouraged to take into account the implications for children's rights under article 31 when developing policies relating to social protection, employment, housing and access to public spaces for children, especially those living without opportunities for play and recreation in their own homes.²³

In the same General Comment, the Committee elaborates on what States must do in order to fully take these considerations into account, emphasizing the importance of children's views and cross-government collaboration:

(b)...Research is also needed into the daily lives of children and their caregivers and the impact of housing and neighbourhood conditions in order to understand how they use local environments; the barriers they encounter in enjoying the rights under article 31; the approaches they adopt to surmount those barriers and the action needed to achieve greater realization of those rights. Such research must actively involve children themselves, including children from the most marginalized communities;

(c) Cross departmental collaboration in national and municipal government: Planning for play, recreation and cultural and artistic activities requires a broad and comprehensive approach involving cross-departmental collaboration and accountability between national, regional and municipal authorities. Relevant departments include not only those dealing directly with children, such as health, education, social services, child protection, culture, recreation and sports, but also those concerned with water and sanitation, housing, parks, transport, environment and city planning, all of which impact significantly on the creation of environments in which children can realize their rights under article 31.²⁴

Article 30 of the Convention recognizes the rights inherent to children of minority and indigenous groups, who may require special measures in order to fully enjoy their rights on an equal level with other children.²⁵ As such the Committee recommends States parties to consider the application of special measures to ensure that indigenous children have access to culturally appropriate services, including in the areas of housing, health, and sanitation.²⁶

In adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, member states of the United Nations including Canada committed themselves to the Sustainable Development Goal of making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.²⁷ They further defined this objective by setting targets: access to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services; safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems and improved road safety; inclusive and sustainable urbanization and human settlement planning; reduced environmental impact of cities, with particular attention to air quality and waste management;

universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible green and public spaces; and integrated policies and plans towards inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change.²⁸

All levels of governments are required to respect, protect and fulfill these rights and targets. The federal government can help convene and coordinate efforts in a National Housing Strategy by setting a children-first priority, ensuring all aspects of the strategy consider and maximize benefits for children and youth, and earmarking dedicated funding for children-first policies, programs and services.

RECOMMENDATION #1: That a National Housing Strategy be designed with a child-first lens, consistent with children’s human rights as defined by relevant United Nations conventions in international law.

THE IMPACTS OF HOUSING NEED ON CHILDREN

Children who live in housing need often lack a standard of living adequate for their health, development and protection.²⁹ Housing status has a very strong influence on the health, development and protection of children and youth given their vulnerable stage of development.³⁰ For instance, living in housing need is often associated with prolonged exposure to environmental hazards, which disproportionately affect developing brains and bodies.³¹ The physical health risks associated with housing need include:

- Lower birth weights and need for specialized care at four times the average rate among children born to homeless mothers³²
- Wider and faster spread of communicable diseases, including respiratory tract infections and gastroenteritis, due to crowded housing³³
- Increased paediatric hospital admissions for respiratory tract illnesses due to crowded and inadequate housing³⁴
- Increased risk of asthma due to poor air quality and lead exposure³⁵
- Lower rates of immunization³⁶
- Increased exposure to health hazards and injury risks for disabled children whose homes pose mobility and accessibility challenges³⁷
- Lack of access to a primary health care provider due to housing instability and constant moving³⁸
- Food insecurity, hunger and inadequate childhood nutrition due to the high cost of housing, which draws resources away from other purchases³⁹

Given the diverse and grave health consequences of housing need among children, it’s no surprise that more than 50% of children accessing emergency departments and hospital admissions live in housing need.⁴⁰ Housing need also affects their mental health. Between 40 – 70% of homeless youth struggle with mental health issues, compared to 10 – 20% of housed youth.⁴¹ The range of mental health issues disproportionately affecting young people living in housing need is broad and includes:

- Anxiety, depression, mood disorders, withdrawn behaviour and somatic complaints⁴²
- Attention problems and aggressive behaviour
- Feelings of helplessness and low self-esteem, which are magnified for children with disabilities who may rely on others for their mobility⁴³

- Parents' stress about housing affordability can influence their parenting practices; children may internalize this or suffer confusion from changing parenting practices⁴⁴
- Higher reported rates of abuse and neglect⁴⁵

The mental health consequences that young people suffer affect their abilities to develop social relationships and trust others.⁴⁶ They can also impair self-regulation.⁴⁷ This reduces their ability to positively socialize with their peers and teachers in the classroom.⁴⁸ Furthermore, children who live in housing need often lack a suitable place in which to study or do homework.⁴⁹ Children who are homeless or who need to move frequently often miss school days or switch schools entirely. It is no surprise that poor mental and physical health and housing need are associated with lower academic performance.⁵⁰

Fluidity in residence has a number of its own consequences:

- Frequent school absences are detrimental to academic performance⁵¹
- Worrying about where they will sleep overshadows a child's ability to concentrate and do well in the classroom⁵²
- Each time they move, students fall back 4-6 months academically; homeless families move on average 3 times a year⁵³
- Children who have moved three times or more in their life are at higher risk of repeating a grade, being suspended or expelled from school⁵⁴
- Students who switch schools often have less supportive or non-existent social networks⁵⁵
- School continuity can be challenging, as school districts often deny admission due to residency requirements⁵⁶

Lastly, in addition to the physical, mental and academic challenges children in housing need often face, they suffer barriers to development and inclusion. Families in housing need tend to lack the resources needed to provide materials and activities which are considered normal for housed families, such as recreational and other developmental activities, books, school trips and events, new clothes and a space where friends can be invited over to play.⁵⁷ This can impair a child's chances of developing social connections, which are important to resiliency and inclusion.

The experiences of homeless youth are distinct. Unlike homeless adults, children and youth who leave home are leaving relationships based on social and legal dependence and suddenly face adult challenges, as well as unique challenges due to their minor status in law. Minors may access child welfare support but this is not consistently available or desirable. They have legal barriers that impede access to jobs and rental housing. The longer they are homeless, the more they are exposed to the risks of sexual and economic exploitation, trauma, under-education and declining health, and to remain street-involved.⁵⁸

The physical, mental, academic and social consequences that children and youth living in housing need or in homelessness often experience can be difficult to overcome. Reducing housing need now among children means that they will be less likely to grow up in and become adults in housing need or homelessness.⁵⁹

RECOMMENDATION #2: That a National Housing Strategy include measures designed specifically to address the interrelationships between child poverty, health, education, social inclusion and housing, given the disproportionate impacts on children.

CHILD-FIRST ELEMENTS IN A NATIONAL HOUSING STRATEGY

A National Housing Strategy is an opportunity to eliminate housing need and homelessness among children and youth. Universal access to safe, accessible, suitable and affordable housing will help fulfill children's rights in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children and youth need specific supports in the National Housing Strategy to help ensure their right to housing. UNICEF Canada thus recommends strategies and tactics to give children priority consideration in the National Housing Strategy.

Affordability

Affordability is the primary housing need experienced by most Canadians, and must be given due priority in the development of a National Housing Strategy. The provision of affordable housing units should include and prioritize families with children, and independent youth. The federal government should also consider portable housing benefits (dedicated income benefits, vouchers or subsidies) designed for low-income families with children and for independent youth.⁶⁰

Availability

Sufficient housing stock with enough space and suitability for families with children should be available in all communities. Incentives for community developers could favour the inclusion of family-friendly stock. Integrated housing for children with disabilities and for youth living independently of parents/guardians should be available. Independent youth require transitional and permanent housing of various kinds (including home-based and shelters) that link to supportive services and enable them to retain positive connections to school and community (e.g., to extended family, employment and youth programs).

For First Nations and Inuit children and youth, housing availability is a critical concern. Canada's indigenous population is growing at six times the rate of the general population, yet improvements to housing availability and quality have not kept pace.⁶¹ Indigenous children experience higher core housing need than the general population, and higher rates of homelessness.⁶² For some, lack of access to traditional land, degradation of the surrounding natural environment and administrative complexity limit the right to housing. The right of indigenous children to culture and community is denied when there is extreme housing need, forcing relocation.⁶³ Remedies that could be addressed in a National Housing Strategy include culturally-based, innovative housing and utilities, involving children and youth in their conception, development, construction and maintenance.

Homelessness Prevention

Preventing homelessness among families with children and independent youth must be a priority in the continuum from prevention to crisis response. Primary prevention can be improved through greater investment in the early years (including existing child benefits, while expanding child care and child development programs) and in the middle and adolescent years (including school and community engagement programs) together with more extensive and effective family counselling and support initiatives. Youth homelessness is associated with child poverty, but there are other risk factors that a National Housing Strategy should address. Two-thirds of independent youth who are homeless have fled a family home due to physical, mental or sexual abuse.⁶⁴ Family violence is an important causal factor to address to decrease youth homelessness.⁶⁵

Housing legislation and policies should be reviewed from a child-first lens. For instance, eviction should be a measure of last resort where pregnant parents, families with children and independent youth are affected. Homeless shelters and transitional housing designed for families with children and for independent youth must be a priority.

Youth leaving juvenile justice and mental health facilities and exiting from care are highly vulnerable to housing need and homelessness, and require support.⁶⁶ Australia uses a successful prevention model that involves identifying young people in schools at risk of homelessness, and using preventative methods to avert it.⁶⁷ Canada has home-grown approaches including Raising the Roof and The Way Home that should be part of a comprehensive housing strategy.

For youth who become homeless, a National Housing Strategy should foster a safe and nurturing transition to adulthood and independence. It should seek to eliminate chronic youth homelessness by providing better housing stability for youth through rehousing (Housing First for Youth), transitional housing and homing and family reunification – giving youth options. Approaches to ensure appropriate housing for indigenous youth, youth with mental illness and those with diverse sexual identities are needed. All of these youth need connected services to access education, health services, food, employment and other community supports.

Holistic Community Planning

The planning and design of urban environments helps determine whether housing fulfills children's rights to health, protection and healthy development including play and leisure. Canadian children have a very high rate of unhealthy weight and a low rate of outdoor free play in contrast to many other industrialized countries.⁶⁸ This trend is partly attributed to the 'nutrition transition' – a phenomenon whereby physical activity is decreasing due to increasing reliance on cars, limited accommodations for walking and cycling, fewer interesting recreational spaces, more screen time and a greater availability and lower relative cost of fast food and convenience foods.⁶⁹ Given that physical health is strongly influenced by community design, the World Health Organization has issued guidance on urban planning.⁷⁰ Collectively known as the Healthy Settings initiative, this guidance describes the conditions that contribute to the health of a city's inhabitants including children.⁷¹ The guidance recommends that urban planning prioritizes elements that are good for children and youth including:

- Well-planned networks of cycling and walking routes⁷²
- Streets with direct, safe and convenient access⁷³
- Local destinations within walking distance of homes⁷⁴
- Accessible open spaces for recreation and leisure⁷⁵
- Conveniently located public transport stops⁷⁶

It also advises against the proliferation of fast food and alcohol outlets in locations frequented by children, and suggests that regulatory controls on development and good environmental design can increase safety and decrease rates of crime in communities.⁷⁷ Protecting natural spaces for free play as well as designing recreational space is an important consideration. Countries where more children engage in free play tend to have higher overall child well-being.⁷⁸

Community planning should also connect housing with easy access to quality services such as health care, early child care, child development, youth programming, education and public transportation with the aim of social inclusion.⁷⁹ Services that children use should be a specific

priority designed for progressive universalism – widely available but with interventions to specifically include children in disadvantaged or at-risk situations. Child-friendly services may have reduced or no user fees, coordination in user-focused hubs, outreach appealing to young people and effective hours of service and locations. A child-centered community would offer the following services at minimum:

- affordable, quality child care and early learning and development programs⁸⁰
- proximity to early childhood education centers, daycares, schools, recreation sites and playgrounds⁸¹
- flexible school registration options⁸²
- primary health care facilities⁸³
- extended child care options⁸⁴
- food programs/weekend meals⁸⁵
- social assistance centers/offices⁸⁶

Well-planned neighbourhoods that are physically and socially constructed to deliver benefits for children's health and development are an important context to consider in a National Housing Strategy. As well, a broad framework of children's rights is needed in all aspects of local governance, so that optimal child development as well as protection and safety are priorities that inform laws and policies, planning and services and law enforcement. For instance, public safety and law enforcement often prioritize protection while undermining other human rights. As communities become highly planned and developed, spaces for free play and movement are reduced and confined.⁸⁷ Children and youth are at greater risk for charging in offences such as mischief, trespass and substance use. Bylaws that restrict child and youth play and movement such as street games or skateboarding and curfews should be screened for their impact on children's rights and well-being. Law enforcement should continue to expand the use of extrajudicial measures for trifling offences. Street-involved youth should be supported rather than criminalized, as they often are for survival-related activities. Child-friendly governance measures help communities keep children and youth and the full scope of their needs and rights in view, and get the balance right.

The UNICEF Child Friendly Cities initiative engages local governments to include children and youth in governance decisions so that they take into account the views of and impacts on children and youth. Child Friendly Cities are encouraged to have a commissioner or ombudsperson to help represent the needs and interests of children, and to use Child Rights Impact Assessment to help ensure that decisions take them into account. They have strategies and report regularly on progress against targets for child and youth well-being. Child Friendly Cities recognize that children and youth are among the most innovative, socially and environmentally conscious citizens and, as a large population, are a key stakeholder in legislation, policies, plans and services to provide housing embedded in thriving, inclusive, sustainable and prosperous communities. Children and youth can be important contributors to innovative approaches to housing and other basic needs including food. Children in housing need and street-involved children should specifically be included.

While Child Friendly Cities are much more established in many European nations, Quebec has more than 20 Municipalités amies des enfants (a partnership of Carrefour action municipale et famille and UNICEF Canada) and the City of Montreal recently established a Children's Commissioner. British Columbia has a robust network for child-friendly cities. A National Housing Strategy could support provincial/territorial, local and indigenous governments to

participate in a Child Friendly Communities initiative as it does for Age-Friendly Communities through the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Measurement and monitoring as part of good governance for children should involve children and youth in surveys of housing need and homelessness. Data should be disaggregated to reveal the groups of children most affected. Indicators should also include related progress such as the rate of children and youth charged with offences related to homelessness. Provincial and territorial statutory Child and Youth Advocates and related functions in local government could play a role to support and monitor the rights of children and youth in relation to housing need and at risk of homelessness – for some this would necessitate a broader legislative mandate to address children’s needs and services in a holistic way.

RECOMMENDATION #3: That a National Housing Strategy increase the range and availability of affordable, safe, stable, suitable housing options for families with children and for independent youth through measures such as integrated housing, affordable housing, housing benefits and connections to support services.

RECOMMENDATION #4: That a National Housing Strategy prevent homelessness, particularly among families with children and independent youth, by reviewing legislation, policies and programs from a child-first lens, ensuring dedicated temporary/transitional housing for these groups and expanding primary and secondary prevention programs for children and youth at risk.

RECOMMENDATION #5: That child-centred community planning be an important component in a National Housing Strategy, with federal, provincial and local government support for child and youth participation; monitoring progress; and expansion of the Child Friendly Cities initiative.

CONCLUSION

Housing is a children’s right, enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Safe, accessible, suitable and affordable housing is the foundation for children’s enjoyment of all their rights, including optimal health, development and protection and to have their best interests treated as a primary consideration. Canada’s National Housing Strategy must prioritize the needs and rights of children and youth, who are particularly vulnerable to the physical, mental, academic and social consequences of housing need. They are also agents for positive community development when included in it.

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