WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS IN CAMBRIDGE

KNOWLEDGE SHARING & INTERVENTIONS

YWCA
CAMBRIDGE

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SUGGESTED CITATION

ABOUT YWCA CAMBRIDGE

As a member agency of YWCA Canada, YWCA Cambridge is part of a national movement known as the country's oldest and largest women's multi-service organization, the largest national provider of shelter, literacy, life skills, employment and counselling programs, and is the second largest provider of child care services in Canada. For over 75 years, YWCA Cambridge has been a respected leader on issues that impact women and girls in our community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PROJECT FUNDER

Canada

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Historically, women's homelessness in Cambridge has been largely unacknowledged and therefore inadequately understood and addressed. This research paper aims to shed light and bring urgent change to the issue.

This research builds off the 2022 Project Willow Report, *"Don't Tell Them You're Homeless."*, which captured the voices of 61 women and gender diverse individuals experiencing or recently having experienced homelessness in Waterloo Region and the intersections of their experiences of homelessness with gender-based violence (GBV). To help paint a fuller picture of the situation in Cambridge in particular, this research project involved gathering voices of services providers and elected officials who are the people interacting the most with women experiencing homelessness and the issue of women's homelessness more broadly.

Project Willow research outlines the layers of violence encountered by women experiencing homelessness, and how such experiences help us understand why, for instance, women will avoid the only shelter option in Cambridge because it is co-ed, why they forego basic needs, the kinds of safety rituals they will employ and how community attitude contributes to the choices they make (Gordon et al., 2022).

Throughout this research, service providers shared their experience and insights as organizations in Cambridge who are directly or indirectly trying to support women experiencing homelessness. A number of trends emerged: **women's homelessness is glossed over** as a community issue, **Cambridge is a service desert** for women experiencing homelessness, **there is a lack of targeted resources** for those individuals and organizations trying to provide support, there is a **total lack of a continuum of housing** leaving very few housing options for women, and there is a **problematic reliance on services in other communities** to support women.

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The impacts of Cambridge being a service desert cannot be overstated. The lack of services responding to women's homelessness means women are faced with a number of impossible decisions: they often have to choose between the care they have currently around them and receiving basic shelter; they have substantially less access to the supports they need than if they lived in other large urban centres in the Waterloo Region; and women experiencing homelessness, as well as the organizations trying to support them, are faced with the personal, political and community toll left by the daily shortcomings of a lack of adequate services.

Also important to consider - particularly when we're presented with the opportunity to "get it right" in terms of establishing the necessary services in Cambridge - is the great divide between VAW (Violence Against Women) shelter models and women's emergency homeless shelter models. Overall, our environmental scan revealed that there tends to be an average of five to eight times more programming and supports documented as being offered within VAW shelter models (not considering supports for children) than those provided in women's emergency homeless shelter models.

A number of recommendations for how Cambridge can adequately address women's homelessness came out of this research:

Rebuild trust with women experiencing hidden homelessness
Women and service providers in this research talked at length with examples of situations in the community that have inherently broken the trust between women experiencing homelessness and the community, including service providers. This trust needs to be established so women will seek out services as they become available.

Start the Housing Continuum
There are significant gaps along the housing continuum, first starting with emergency shelter, a place to help women stabilize as they move towards longer-

term housing options. Then, we need options for women to progress into as they move out of homelessness.

Address the service desert
Shelter is one step in addressing the service needs of women. Further planning, investment and execution is needed to develop the wrap-around services needed for women to address their past trauma, stabilize their health, work through addictions, stay safe from GBV, and be successful in maintaining their housing.

Leverage relationships to rapidly build along the housing continuum
There is opportunity for developers, nonprofit and public sector leaders and bureaucrats to come together to explore, plan, create incentives and generate enthusiasm for these types of projects in the community.

Invest in prevention programming in the community
In the spirit of preventing women's homelessness (both from happening and escalating) in Cambridge, there is a need for an investment in programming that is designed to prevent homelessness both from happening and escalating.

Establish an equity lens in local decision making
Working with local levels of government and funders in the pursuit of equity through challenging assumptions and bias and building stronger knowledge bases when it comes to city planning, budgeting and social/community interventions.

Build empathy by reducing apathy
The dominant rhetoric in Cambridge around homelessness is working against the development of interventions, prevention work, and safety. A public education campaign, initiative, or conference, as well as related advocacy activities are needed to shift the community's attitude, outward public opinion, political will, and apathy to a perspective that centers change and growth as a community.

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This report exclusively reflects services, housing and shelter found within the Region of Waterloo's housing and homelessness system. This system is distinct from the Violence Against Women system which currently offers support and shelter to women experiencing intimate partner violence in Cambridge.

We hope this report acts as a launchpad for our community to once and for all come together with the shared goal of acknowledging and working collaboratively across sectors to bring the much-need interventions to women's homelessness in Cambridge.
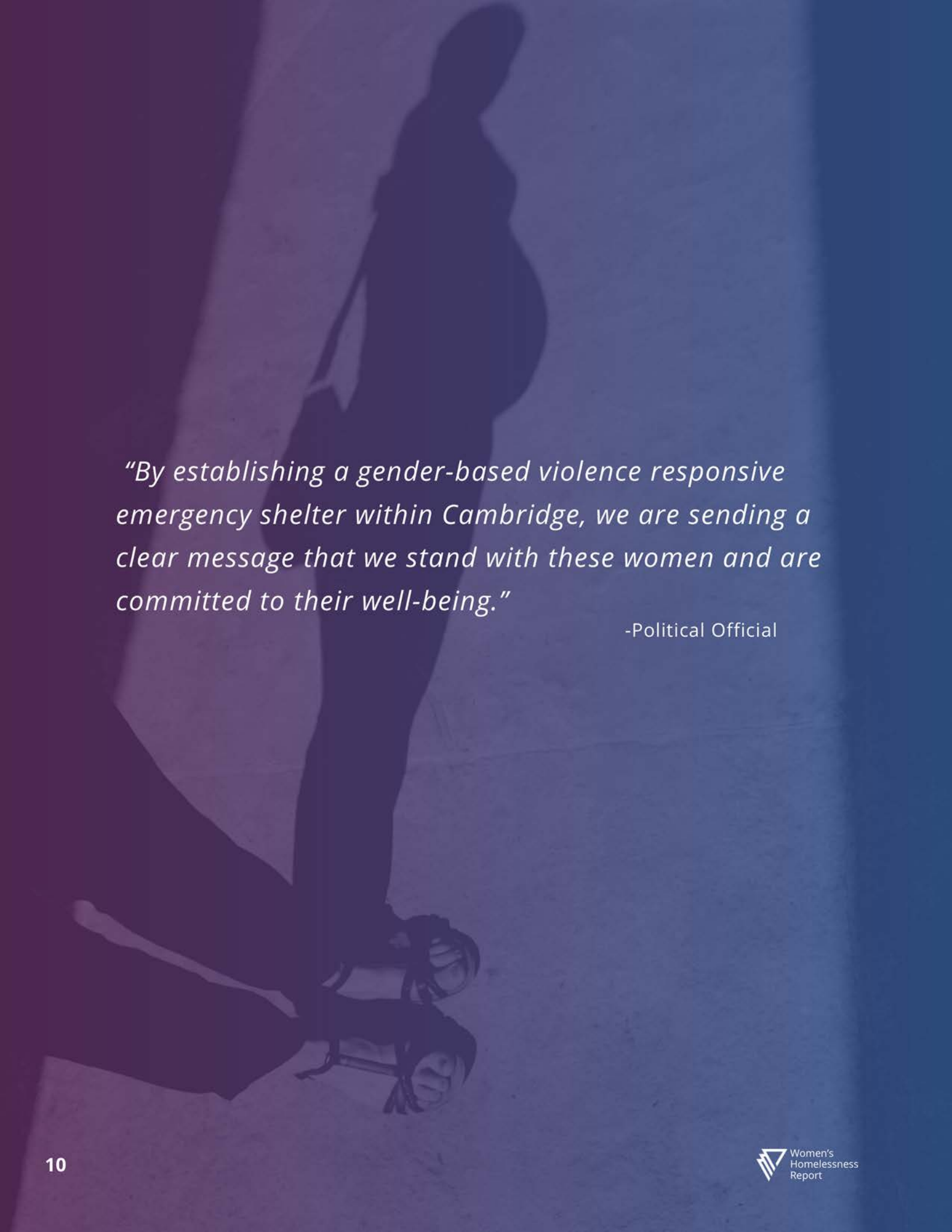
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INTRODUCTION

In July 2023, YWCA Cambridge embarked on a mission to bring light and change to the issue of women's homelessness in their community of Cambridge, Ontario through research. Historically, women's homelessness in Cambridge has been largely unacknowledged and therefore inadequately understood or addressed. Local community organizations and service providers have struggled for decades to support women experiencing homelessness who come forward and this work is often beyond their organization's scope, mission and budgets.

As YWCA Cambridge began exploring this research topic, it quickly became clear that momentum around finding and advocating for adequate solutions was already building in the community and this research project would be best suited to tapping into these networks, pulling together all of the stories, firsthand accounts and data, and telling this shared story.

This research builds off the 2022 Project Willow Report which captured the voices of 61 women and gender diverse individuals experiencing or recently having experienced homelessness in Waterloo Region and the intersections of their experiences of homelessness with gender-based violence.

To help paint a fuller picture of the situation in Cambridge in particular, this research project involved gathering voices of services providers and political officials who are the people interacting the most with the topic of women's homelessness. With this report, we hope to expose the issues and support gaps related to women's homelessness in Cambridge and to make recommendations for positive change. Through this research and documentation process, a community of service providers has found its collective capacity, its shared advocacy, and a new-found hope for progress in Cambridge.

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"By establishing a gender-based violence responsive emergency shelter within Cambridge, we are sending a clear message that we stand with these women and are committed to their well-being."

-Political Official

METHODOLOGY

METHODOLOGY

Information for this report was gathered through surveys and informational interviews with nonprofit and public sector leaders, letters of support requested by YWCA Cambridge for a Cambridge-centred intervention around women's homelessness, an environmental scan comparing shelters models nationally and internationally, and a review of current scholarship on the topic.

Survey

An online, mixed method survey with nine questions (checkbox and short answer) was developed. The survey focused on capturing service provider knowledge on the issue of women's homelessness and the shelter system in Cambridge and possible service solutions and considerations. The survey was administered through Google forms with an option for full anonymity or to provide contact information for follow up. This survey was by invitation only, engaging nonprofit and public sector leaders in Cambridge. A total of 23 invitations were sent with 16 recipients responding.

Letters of Support

A formal request for letters of support was issued in August 2023, asking relevant nonprofit and public sector leaders for support for the development of a women's emergency shelter in Cambridge. A total of 18 letters of support were received, with only one request being denied with the explanation that they felt more progress in the plan for a women's shelter was needed before a letter of support could be provided. In addition, one non-profit leader heard about YWCA's efforts and offered to provide a letter of support from their agency without our formal ask. The letters obtained included information describing the nuances of the issue of women's homelessness in Cambridge, why this issue needs addressing, services the respective organizations provide (funded and unfunded), as well as how establishing a women's emergency shelter could contribute to the continuum of care they provide as an organization.

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Informational Interviews

From May through August 2023, YWCA Cambridge conducted 25 meetings with over 30 organizations, government departments, bureaucrats, politicians and advocates around the issue of women's homelessness, particularly discussing interventions like shelter and supportive housing. The reasoning behind these meetings were: a. To gather information and learn more about the issue and possible interventions, b. To engage with potential partners and collaborators, c. To learn about current initiatives and gaps in social service support, and d. To gain knowledge on processes and procedures to consider when establishing a new shelter intervention. The majority of these meetings were held virtually, with several being in-person or hybrid. Following each informational meeting, the research team wrote general reflections and insights, which have been analyzed and grouped into themes for the purpose of this report.

Environmental Scan

The purpose of this environmental scan was to learn more about existing shelter models for emergency women's homelessness and violence against women (VAW) services, particularly those effectively responding to the needs of equity-seeking groups. A sample search was completed for shelter model examples across Canada, the USA, and select countries internationally which have similar social fabrics and systems of support to Canada. An online search was completed using Google Maps/listings, the Shelter Safe website, as well as key term searches in Google. Key terms used included: women's shelter, women's emergency shelter, homelessness shelter for women, gender-based violence (GBV) responsive shelters, VAW shelters, Indigenous shelters, LGBTQ shelters and Muslim women's shelters.

A total of 55 entries were recorded: 37 came from Canada (across each province), 10 came from the USA (specifically California, Oregon, Illinois and

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Washington), and eight came from abroad (Denmark, Switzerland and Finland). Information collected included location, type of shelter, services offered, and any notes of interest (which could include their service approach or ideology, supplementary services offered by an organization, how they were funded, etc.)

Systems Review

The purpose of this systems review is to document important systemic considerations and realities surrounding women's homlessness. This review assessed current population data in Waterloo Region analyzing it against local and national data trends and also involved a review of the scholarship related to the factors informing women's homelessness, including understanding hidden homelessness, the housing continuum and the right to housing.

Consent

Processes of consent and anonymity were considered in our survey and letters of support, allowing for direct quotes to be used for the purpose of this report and to be shared publicly. For our informational interviews, direct quotes were not used. Instead, general impressions and themes were extrapolated to ensure that the knowledge gained in these interviews was reflected in this report. The environmental scan was completed in collaboration with Feminist Shift and Project Willow.

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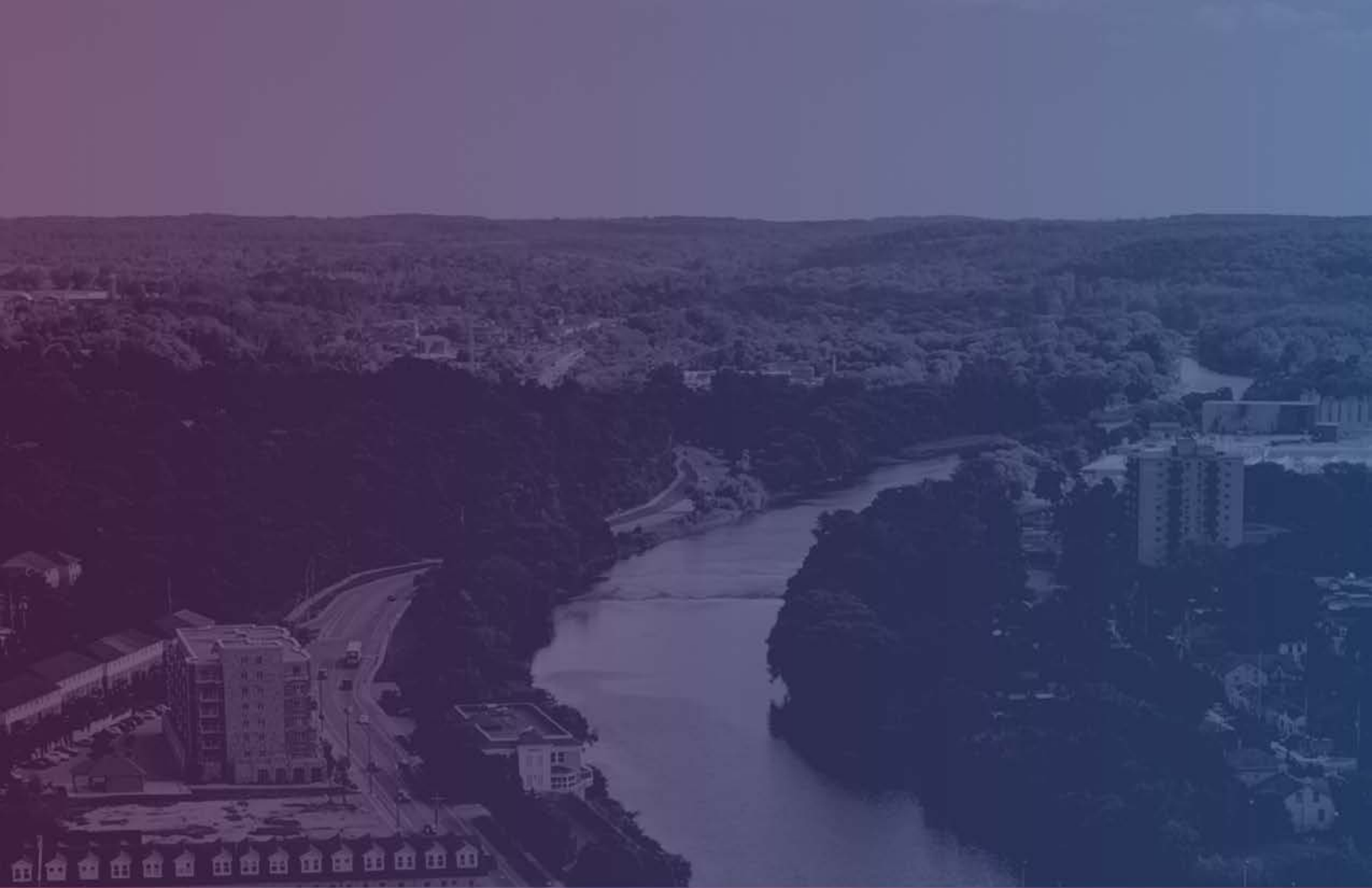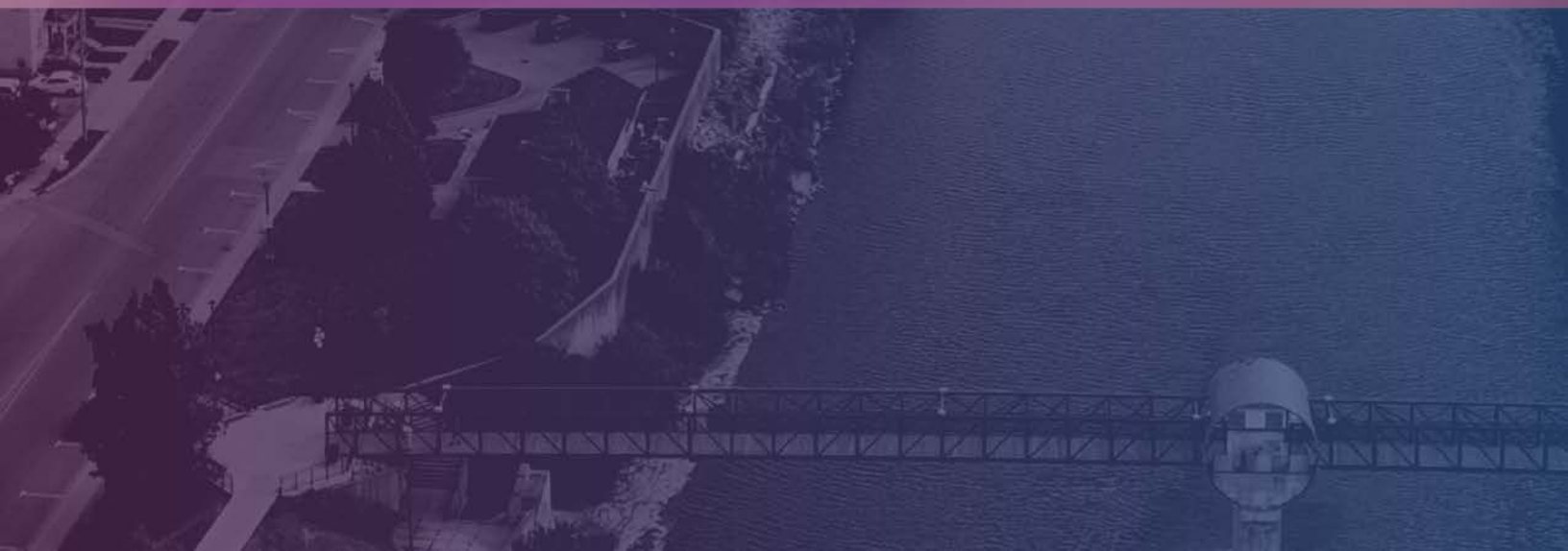
SYSTEMS REVIEW

SYSTEMS REVIEW

Hidden Homelessness

Understanding the complexity of hidden homelessness – root causes, manifestations of it and the difficulty in fully grasping the scale of it – is of particular importance when we think about women's homelessness. Hidden homelessness refers to people who have temporary accommodation with no guarantee of continued accommodation or immediate prospects of permanent housing (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2017). This population is considered "hidden" because they are not likely to access homeless supports and services and therefore do not show up in statistics regarding service usage which is part of how researchers and policymakers count homeless numbers.

As the Women's National Homelessness and Housing Network (WNHHN) points out, current ways of measuring and counting homelessness underestimate the scale of women's homelessness because women are more likely than men to experience hidden homelessness and are therefore less likely to appear in data such as Point In Time counts (which are the primary tool used across Canada for counting homelessness) (Schwan et al., 2020). Furthermore, current methods of counting homelessness don't take into account the fact that unsuitable, inadequate, inaccessible or unsafe living situations equate to being de facto homeless, per the definition of the right to housing, which will be discussed later in this section.

Some researchers estimate that for every one person counted as experiencing homelessness, there are about three who are not being counted (Schwan et al., 2020). According to WNHHN, seven per cent of women in Canada will have experienced hidden homelessness in their lives (Schwan et al., 2020). **This means an estimated 5,089 women in**

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Cambridge currently are, will, or have experienced hidden homelessness based on the 2021 Statistics Canada census data that states the population of women in Cambridge stands at 72,694). The recent *Plan To End Chronic Homelessness Mid-Project Key Findings Report* to Waterloo Region council cites the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario's (2021) estimation that as many as 80% of Ontario's homeless population experiences hidden homelessness (Overlap Associates & Region of Waterloo, 2023) .

The causes and conditions of homelessness among women and girls help us understand why they would be more likely to keep their homelessness hidden: Gender-based violence is among the key pathways into homelessness for women and, while experiencing homelessness, women are at extremely high risk of encountering more violence - sexual- and gender-based, including becoming involved in human trafficking, which is why so many try to stay hidden (Schwan et al., 2020). Women also tend to access services and supports as a last resort, and they're also far more likely than men to have dependent children with them while experiencing homelessness and they will make decisions like staying hidden to avoid the risk of having their children apprehended (Schwan et al., 2020).

Poverty is a key driver of homelessness among women, and many of the factors contributing to women's poverty are gendered. There is the persisting gender pay gap, the fact that women are far more likely than men to be in part-time and low wage work, and that child care remains largely inaccessible to many parents still while child care responsibilities fall largely to women (Financial Accountability Office, 2023).

Using both Statistics Canada data for Waterloo Region/Cambridge and national statistics from available research such as that by WNHHN and applying them to the population of Cambridge where possible, we can estimate the following:

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According to Statistics Canada, **6,200 women in Cambridge are considered low-income** (Statistics Canada, 2021), meaning - especially given the rising cost of living and out-of-control housing and rent costs - they are at risk of or already experiencing some form of homelessness.

In Cambridge, 5,650 one-parent families are women-led (compared to 1,575 led by men) (Statistics Canada, 2021).
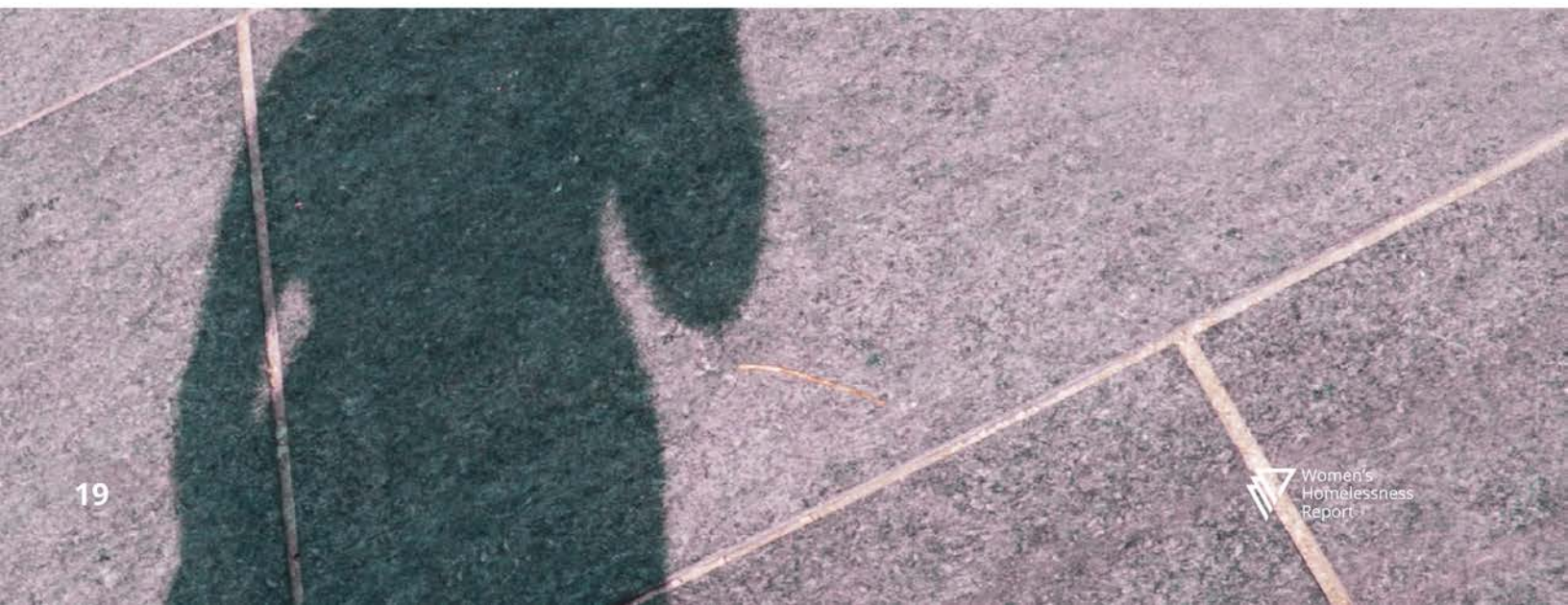
The national average of lone, women-led households in desperate housing need is 28% (or more than one in four) (Schwan Et Al., 2020), which equates to about **1,582 women-led households in Cambridge who are likely in need of transitional, supportive or affordable housing.**

Housing Continuum

Governments at all levels are increasingly prioritizing filling in the housing continuum in communities in recognition of the fact that simply having enough housing stock isn't the only and most conclusive answer to addressing homelessness. Having an adequate supply of housing that meets the diverse needs of everyone along all the intersections of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds requires significant policy change.

The housing continuum outlines the trajectory of moving from experiencing homelessness to housed and recognizes that many individuals moving out of homelessness, particularly those who have encountered numerous traumas, are facing physical health, mental health and addictions issues and lack their own support networks require more support as they move into permanent living conditions.

Beyond emergency measures such as shelters, there is a persisting and severe lack of transitional (short-term housing aimed at transitioning a person from shelter to more permanent housing) and supportive housing (can be longer term or permanent and includes wraparound supports and can also include rental assistance) dedicated to women and their families. Based on the demographic data outlined in the previous section, we can assume there is a significant number of women on the precipice of homelessness in our Region, and yet, the current makeup of our homelessness and housing system does not reflect this.

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Women's Housing Continuum in Cambridge

562
adult shelter beds
in Waterloo Region

38
units across
Waterloo Region

86
units across Waterloo
Region dedicated to
women

0
are dedicated to
women in
Cambridge

0
are dedicated to
women in
Cambridge

0
of those units are
located in
Cambridge

Emergency Shelter | Transitional Housing | Supportive Housing

Hidden Homelessness
Visible Homelessness

Affordable Rental Housing/ Home Ownership
Market Rental Housing/ Home Ownership

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When it comes to shelter beds, Waterloo Region currently has **562 adult shelter** beds (not considering motel stays which are occasional offerings to be used as needed) for people experiencing homelessness. Of those beds, **approximately 85 are located in Cambridge** with **zero per cent of those shelter beds dedicated to women**. In fact, **across the region only 13.8% of shelter beds (78) are designated explicitly to women,** way under the known need and just slightly higher than the national average of 13% (Overlap Associates & Region of Waterloo, 2023). The rest of the beds are dedicated to men or are co-ed, which local Project Willow research reveals over 70% of women will not consider using for safety reasons (Gordon et al.,2022).

According to available data, when it comes to **transitional beds** designated for those experiencing homelessness- per the Region of Waterloo website - **there are 38 units across Waterloo Region, of which zero are located in Cambridge** (Region of Waterloo, 2022)**.** Slightly outside of a homelessness focus, yet highly related, Porchlight Counselling Services has transitional homes for men and women; however, their women's house remains limited in capacity and chronically underfunded, leaving long waitlists for this service.

Addressing supportive housing, across the region there remains **only 86 units of supportive housing geared exclusively towards the needs of women** who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness (Region of Waterloo, 2022). **Of these units, zero are located within Cambridge.**

Overall, **Cambridge, which makes up 26.8% of the urban population in Waterloo Region** (Stats Canada, 2023)**, has between 0 to 14% of the current available housing inventory overall when considering emergency shelter, transitional housing and supportive housing.** When considering gender, Cambridge has 0% of the very limited housing stock geared towards women's needs in the region. Waterloo Region itself projects a tripling of homelessness by 2028 if more isn't done to intervene on current trends (Overlap Associates & Region of Waterloo, 2023). This is a call to build the housing continuum for women in the region as a whole, but especially in Cambridge where women are left virtually optionless.

Right to Housing

The *National Housing Strategy Act 2019* enshrined the right to adequate housing in Canada. This Act bestows on all levels of governments the obligation to respect, protect and fulfill the right for everyone, without discrimination. To ensure adherence to the progressive realization of the right to housing for everyone in Canada, the Federal Government established a Federal Housing Advocate who is responsible for monitoring the Act's implementation, receiving submissions from community members and organizations and submitting reports and recommendations to the Federal Government to help inform policy decisions.

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In their claim to the Federal Housing Advocate, WNHNN illustrates the systemic violations to women's right to housing, pointing to how these violations all derive from one common issue: "the invisibilization of our unique circumstances, needs, dignity, and rights as women, girls and gender-diverse people" (Schwan et al., 2022). We're seeing this in how market forces have eroded supplies of housing stock, have pushed people deeper and deeper into poverty and have led to the ballooning of homelessness in communities across Canada. While the Federal Government has spent nearly $89 billion on the National Housing Strategy, the vast majority of the projects to date have yet to produce that many affordable options, and despite a commitment of a 25% carveout for women-specific housing solutions, even that target continues to go unmet. The NHS capital investment programs to date have produced units the costs of which far exceed what low-income women and women-led families can afford (Schwan Et al., 2022).

Recent court cases involving encampments have helped affirm the human rights of people experiencing homelessness. Locally, the *Waterloo V. persons Unknown and to be Ascertained, 2023* established that encampment residents cannot be forced to move from where they are staying if they cannot be provided an accessible place to stay, a hard feat to accomplish in Cambridge where shelter is non-existent, therefor not accessible, and affordable housing options are scarce. Cases such as this one encourage the centering of human rights in each communities discussion and planning around housing and helps emphasize the dire need to build our housing continuums in communities like Cambridge which is woefully lacking.

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DEFINING THE ISSUES

DEFINING THE ISSUES

First-Hand Experience of Women's Homelessness in Cambridge

Understanding women's homelessness in Cambridge is difficult. The fact that most of the homelessness being experienced is hidden is exacerbated by the fact that Cambridge is also a service desert, meaning there are fewer connections being made with those experiencing hidden homelessness that could help inform our knowledge of the experience. Another important consideration is the safety risks of being visibly homeless in Cambridge for women.

in this research, all of these elements combine together to make it difficult to engage in research with women who are experiencing homelessness in Cambridge. To explore this topic, we are leaning on the Project Willow research, "*Don't Tell Them You're Homeless.*", to help us understand the experience of homelessness among women themselves and collecting additional, Cambridge-specific information from local social service providers. Our additional research with service providers helps us to articulate further how these experiences become exacerbated in Cambridge given its realities as well as the experience of service providers themselves as they try to care for

those experiencing homelessness without the resources they need to provide adequate support.

Project Willow Research and Cambridge

The Project Willow research report, "*Don't Tell Them You're Homeless.*", was published in July 2022. For this report, researchers engaged 61 women and gender diverse individuals currently experiencing, or recently having experienced, homelessness through surveys (48 completed) and interviews (13 completed) (Gordon et al., 2022). The research explored their experiences of homelessness, gender-based violence and their

recommendations for interventions and service needs. This research captured voices across Waterloo Region with many of the participants having experience using or attempting to use supports in Kitchener-Waterloo as well as Cambridge.

A number of trends appeared in the research that are particularly worrisome in a Cambridge context as they point to how the present system keeps women in Cambridge experiencing homelessness hidden in danger. These trends include the common experience of layers of violence, problems with the co-ed shelter model, safety considerations around prevention and diversion programming, forgoing basic needs, safety rituals and coming up against complex community attitudes.

Layers of Violence

Project Willow research found that over the course of a typical week, 92% of participants were likely to experience gender-based violence, 72% of participants had escalated experiences of gender-based violence up to twice a week, and a further 44% experienced it at least once a day (Gordon et al., 2022).

The frequency of these experiences of violence were matched with the reality that violence was happening at the hands of many different people, at many different times, at many different locations, and in many different forms. This reality describes a constant state of unpredictable violence and trauma that was fed, in a large part, by the constant exposure women experiencing homelessness face when navigating a community and trying to find support (Gordon et al., 2022). Sometimes social service agencies were found to play a role in mitigating these safety concerns, but in Cambridge, these services are not widely available.

Co-ed Shelter

Project Willow research uncovered a long history of negative experiences using co-ed emergency shelter, so much so that 73% of participants stated they avoid using co-ed emergency shelter services because of safety concerns (Gordon et al., 2022).

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In Cambridge, unfortunately, the only emergency homeless shelter option is a co-ed shelter, which over the years has continued to be increasingly dominated by men and as a result less safe for women.

Prevention & Diversion

Prevention and diversion programming has a goal to support people in preventing the loss of their current housing and to divert individuals from accessing shelter when possible. Project Willow research found that even without the influence of prevention and diversion programming that 83% of participants have stayed in a housing situation that is abusive or violent because it felt safer than being homeless (Gordon et al., 2022). Of the participants who did engage in prevention and diversion programming, 61% felt that this service actually kept them in unsafe or escalating situations (Gordon et al., 2022). We expect that if we expanded this research to gather more responses from women experiencing hidden homelessness in Cambridge, this number would be higher, simply because there is no accessible shelter to offer someone if they are not in a position to stay where they are. That fact leads to more effort to help women maintain their current unsafe housing so they don't have to leave their home community altogether to access shelter. We know that through conversations with organizations providing prevention and diversion services that this is a difficult position for their staff to be in as it contributes again to higher percentages of women in Cambridge staying hidden in danger.

Forgoing Basic Needs

Project Willow research participants readily admitted to forgoing their basic needs, including food, clothing and medical help (65%), with another 65% avoiding masculinized spaces, those spaces which are dominated by men and in which there is often an increased likelihood of violent or aggressive behaviour being present (Gordon et al., 2022). Unfortunately, these spaces were the ones most likely to offer services, particularly in Cambridge where there is a lack of services designed

specifically to meet the distinct needs of women. The reason for avoiding these spaces and forgoing their needs was the threat of violence happening and/or running into an abuser. Most services in Cambridge operate out of singular locations; thus, women are virtually forced to go without these services because they've deemed the risk to their safety to be too great.

Safety Rituals & Community Attitude

In absence of safe shelter and other supports, many women turn to their own safety rituals to try and stay safe from gender-based violence while living on the streets and sleeping rough. Two starkly different strategies or approaches came through the Project Willow research. The firs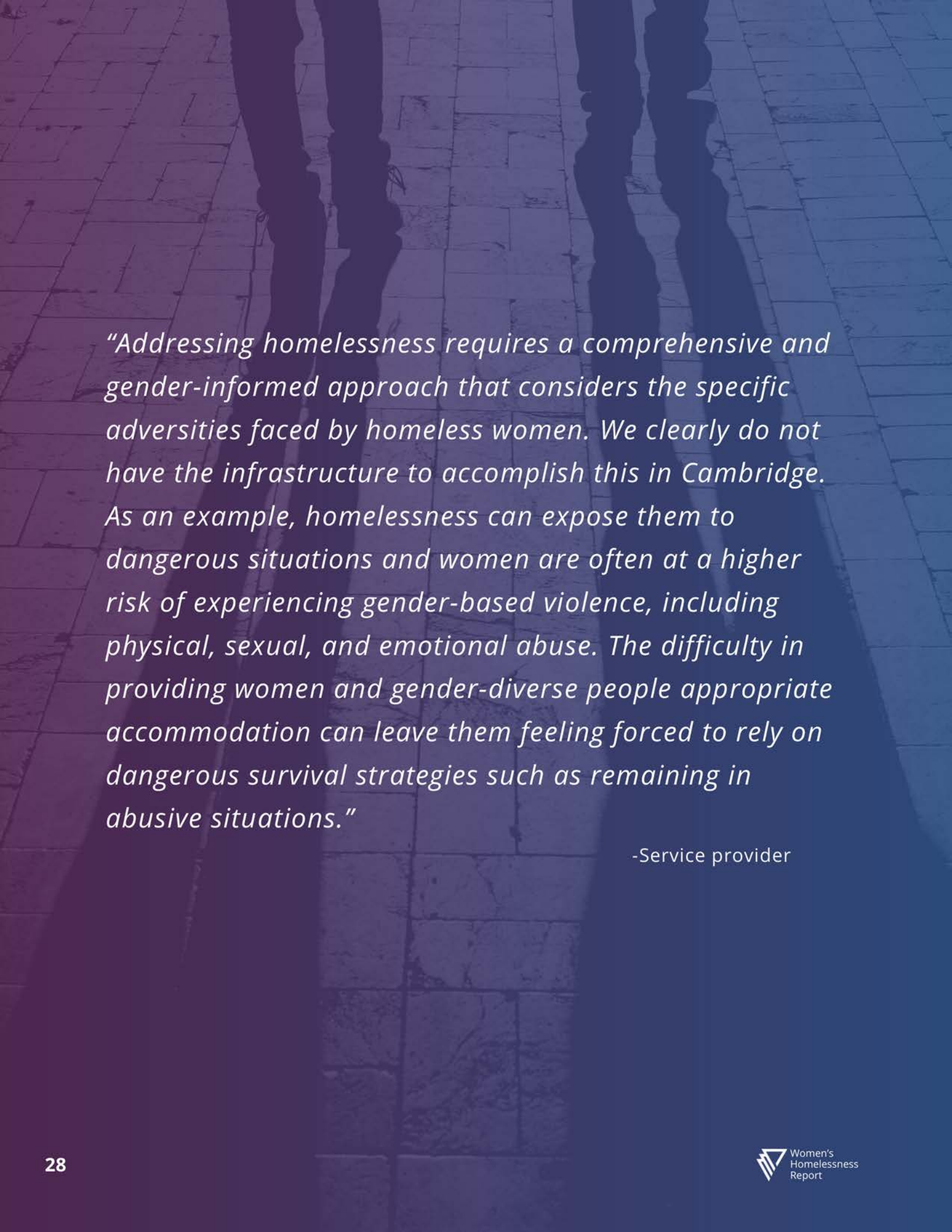t approach involved believing in the need to stay near others and never alone, while the second approach involved believing that isolating from everyone was the safest option (Gordon et al., 2022).

The community attitude in Cambridge towards homelessness and those visibly experiencing it has been characterized by many individuals contributing insights to this research project as 'unforgiving' and 'hostile'. This means that, for women visibly experiencing homelessness in Cambridge and who are relying on members of the general public for their safety, that there is a greater risk they could experience further violence in their lives by someone sharing this attitude instead of securing an ally. Further, in Cambridge, where there aren't many social services available to support women, there is more reliance on members of the general public to help provide safety as women go about navigating public spaces and search for the support they need to survive from a variety of spaces, places and people. There is an immense need to build stronger formal and informal safety systems for women.
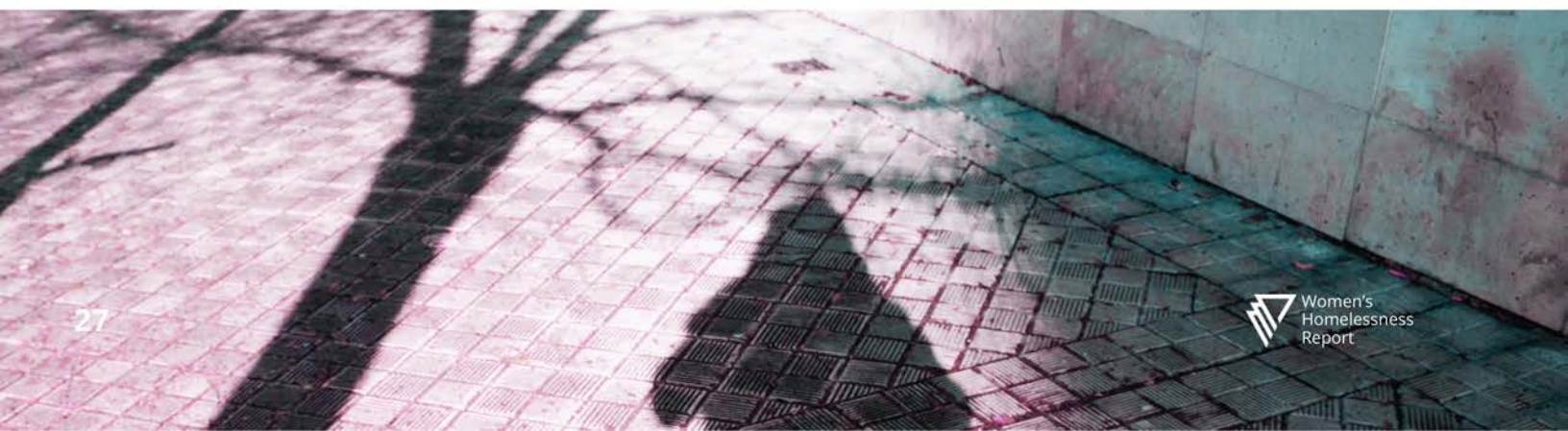
"Addressing homelessness requires a comprehensive and gender-informed approach that considers the specific adversities faced by homeless women. We clearly do not have the infrastructure to accomplish this in Cambridge. As an example, homelessness can expose them to dangerous situations and women are often at a higher risk of experiencing gender-based violence, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. The difficulty in providing women and gender-diverse people appropriate accommodation can leave them feeling forced to rely on dangerous survival strategies such as remaining in abusive situations."

-Service provider

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Service Provider Experience of Women's Homelessness in Cambridge

Service providers shared their experience and insights as organizations in Cambridge who are directly or indirectly trying to support women experiencing homelessness. A number of trends emerged: women's homelessness is glossed over as a community issue, the city is a service desert for women experiencing homelessness, there is a lack of resources for those individuals and organizations trying to provide support, there is a total lack of a continuum of housing leaving very few housing options, and there is a problematic reliance on services in other communities to support women.

Women's Homelessness Gets Glossed Over

Women's homelessness in Cambridge as a community issue is often reduced or avoided. Service providers felt that this was magnified by multiple issues, first being that it is often misunderstood. It is often assumed that women's homelessness experiences are very similar if not the same as men's:

"I wish we weren't still in the position of having to convince people that men and women experience everyday life differently."- Service provider

Service providers talked further about misunderstandings they hear or encounter when it comes to women's homelessness. These misunderstandings often led to people thinking that women experiencing homelessness had the

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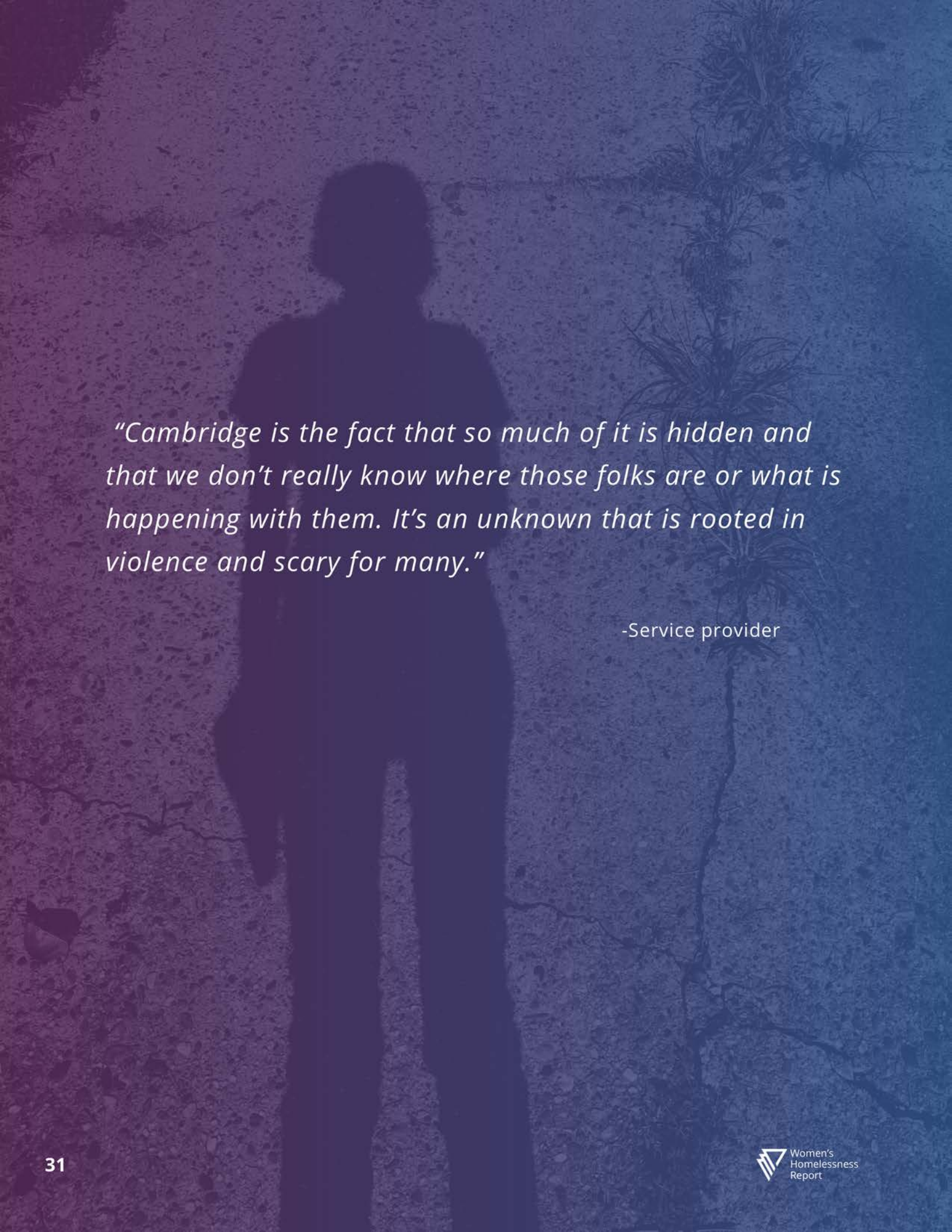
support they needed, one example is with shelter. Service providers were often made to feel like co-ed shelter was enough support for women because of the feeling that there must be very few women experiencing homelessness in Cambridge since they rarely saw them utilizing this service. Service providers were quick to debunk both of these misunderstandings, pointing out that more suitable supports are needed to support women experiencing homelessness and gender-based violence:

"Co-ed shelter- They do have women stay with them but they are by far the minority. This is within their funding but it is not an ideal situation."- Service provider

"I support calls for establishment of a women's emergency shelter in Cambridge, so that women in Cambridge can have the same chances of recovering from homelessness as do men in Cambridge."- Service provider

Contributing to this glossed over approach to responding to women experiencing homelessness is that the majority of women's homelessness in Cambridge remains hidden, which means we actually know very little about what is happening for women:

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"Cambridge is the fact that so much of it is hidden and that we don't really know where those folks are or what is happening with them. It's an unknown that is rooted in violence and scary for many."

-Service provider

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Service providers felt that a large contributor to this issue of hidden homelessness was due to a lack of services. This gap in services means fewer touch points for women to connect with help and for services providers to learn about their needs, and also fewer avenues by which to leave violent situations:

"Unknowns are fueling this. Because women are not showing up in services and they aren't showing up in point in time counts and stats, we don't how deep this goes. This makes it a priority concern."- Service provider
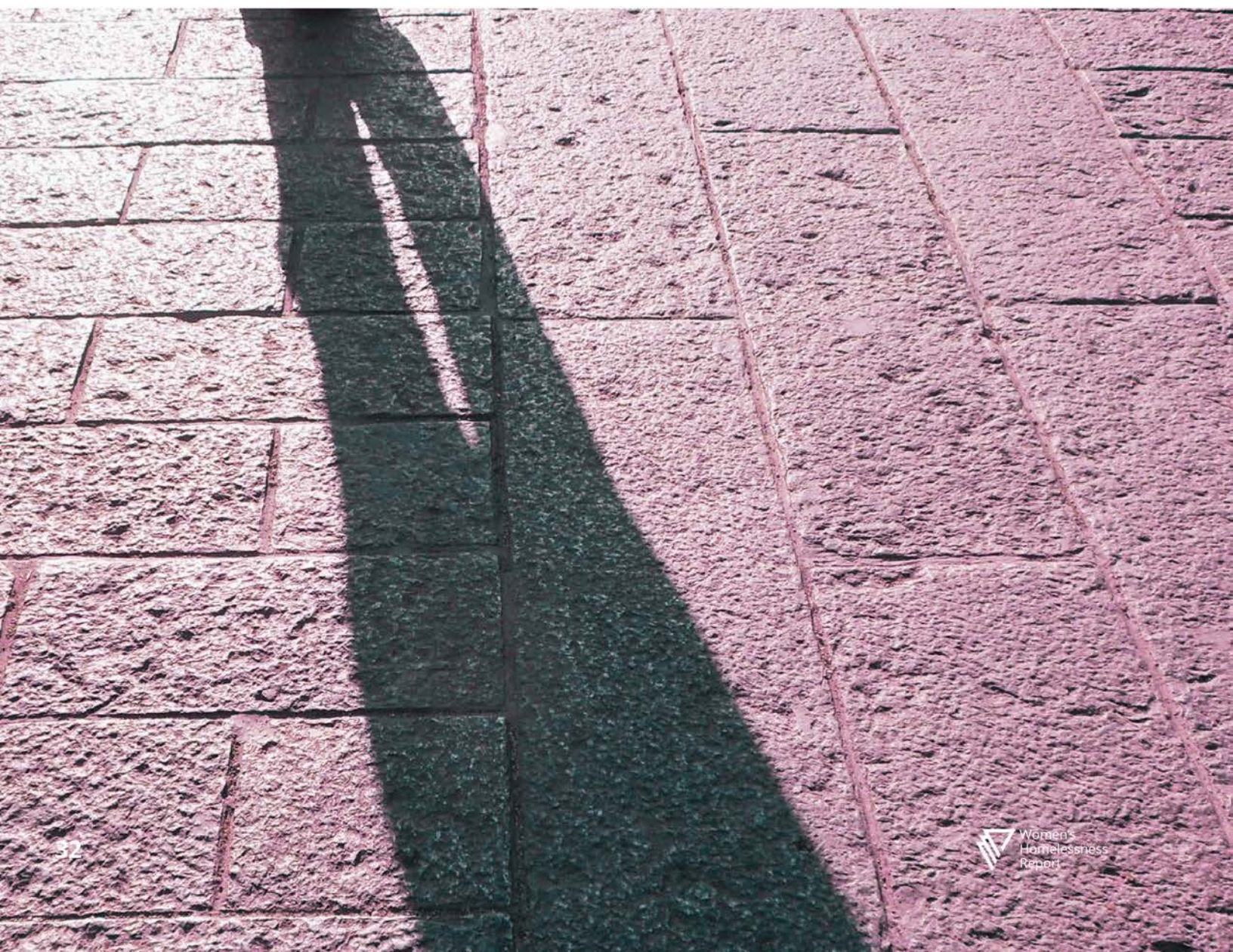
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"The reality for women experiencing homelessness in Cambridge is that they are faced with a variety of impossible choices - attempt to access the co-ed shelter in Cambridge, hope there is space and risk your safety, or attempt to access a co-ed shelter space in Kitchener hope there is space and risk your safety, and have the added burden of going to another city for the night and then trying to make your way back to Cambridge the next day to access your supports. Asking someone experiencing homelessness to commute to another city to access shelter nightly is neither low barrier nor accessible, and is not Charter compliant."- Service provider

"In recent years, the only shelter in Cambridge became primarily a shelter for male identifying individuals. This complicated our ability to connect women experiencing unsheltered homelessness with safe shelter. As a result, we saw increased incidences of women and girls seeking some measure of protection from exploitative relationships as they did their best to remain safe while living on the streets of Cambridge, often for many years. While we were occasionally successful in supporting women to access shelter services in Kitchener, this was usually an exception and only happened after women experienced gender-based violence and felt there were no options left for them in Cambridge."- Service provider

"Service desert" is the term used to describe Cambridge's nonprofit landscape and social safety net surrounding the needs of women experiencing homelessness. Numerous times we heard comments like "There is nothing to help women." or "There is nowhere for women to go!" and "We're doing it but only because no one else is." These comments became typical starting points as

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we attempted to map out where services did exist. What we found in the end was that:

A. Cambridge does not have the services or infrastructure in place to address and end homelessness;

B. There are uneven allocations of funding felt at a regional level as well as the need for further commitments from the provincial and federal governments;

C. Services trying to support women who do come forward admit that they are not the solution or necessarily the right organization to be providing the support;

D. Often organizations trying to fill service gaps are doing so outside of their agencies' mandates and are doing it off the sides of staff members' and volunteers' desks;

E. An equity lens in terms of gender, culture, disability and race is severely lacking in Cambridge and this is leading to considerations around human rights.

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Service providers were candid about the current state of supports in Cambridge when it came to women's homelessness, that state being "lacking" or "missing":

It's completely unaddressed, ignored and worsening. There is currently nowhere for a woman experiencing homelessness in Cambridge to go. When they interact with agencies they know and trust, the only options presented to them are the co-ed shelter, which we know most women avoid, and being sent out of the city to a city that does have a women's shelter. The problem is these shelters are often, if not always at or beyond capacity."- Service provider

Many service providers were as bold as to state that this goes beyond just a service desert. Technically ending homelessness in Cambridge will be impossible the way things currently are:

"Addressing homelessness requires a comprehensive and gender-informed approach that considers the specific adversities faced by homeless women. We clearly do not have the infrastructure to accomplish this in Cambridge."- Service provider

"It's a large and growing problem. There are no shelter beds for homeless women, extremely limited supportive housing, and a declining supply of affordable housing"- Service provider
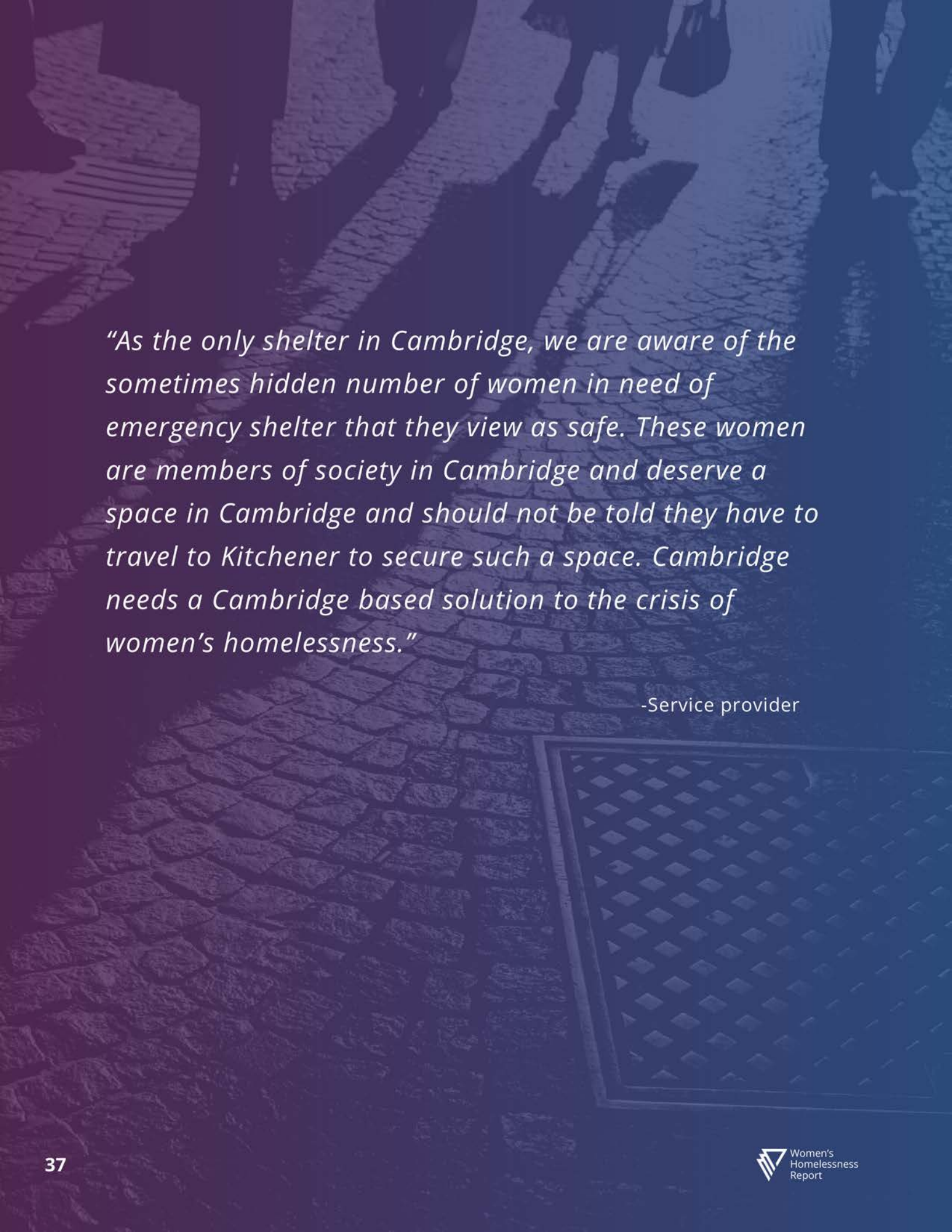
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Among the realities fueling this service desert are a lack of funding for resources. Service providers felt that there was a lack of investment in Cambridge to develop and sustain the supports needed to end women's homelessness. This lack of investment was felt at all levels of government, including feelings that, at a regional level, fewer resources were being allocated to Cambridge to address the issue of homelessness:

"Cambridge is significantly under resourced in supports to assist individuals in ending their homelessness when compared to the rest of the region. The funding is not enough"- Service provider

Service providers also talked about the reliance on the co-ed shelter and VAW shelter to meet all the needs of women experiencing homelessness. For some, there was a misconception that the VAW shelter was a universal shelter option. This was further clarified:

"Women who are experiencing homelessness and do not have immediate safety concerns relating to domestic violence or human trafficking would not meet VAW shelters mandate. These women would be better served by a homeless shelter and currently, we refer them to Kitchener. Women experiencing homelessness in Cambridge may not want to leave their community and could benefit from a homeless shelter in Cambridge."- Service provider

Further, when considering co-ed shelter, numerous organizations, including the host organization of the co-ed shelter mirrored the sentiment of the Project Willow research highlighting barriers to the co-ed shelter approach and women's safety:

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"As the only shelter in Cambridge, we are aware of the sometimes hidden number of women in need of emergency shelter that they view as safe. These women are members of society in Cambridge and deserve a space in Cambridge and should not be told they have to travel to Kitchener to secure such a space. Cambridge needs a Cambridge based solution to the crisis of women's homelessness."

-Service provider

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As a response, there is a trend of bypassing referrals to the co-ed shelter and instead referring women to shelter in Kitchener-Waterloo:

"Our organization has a multidisciplinary outreach team that provides medical care to women in Cambridge who are homeless. We aim to consider the social, psychological and medical needs of a person as a whole, as homelessness rarely is due to one simple issue. We have noticed that in the past few years, our local shelter has been required to exclude women from staying in their facility. Instead, women are often asked to be moved to Kitchener for emergency stays. This is a concern."
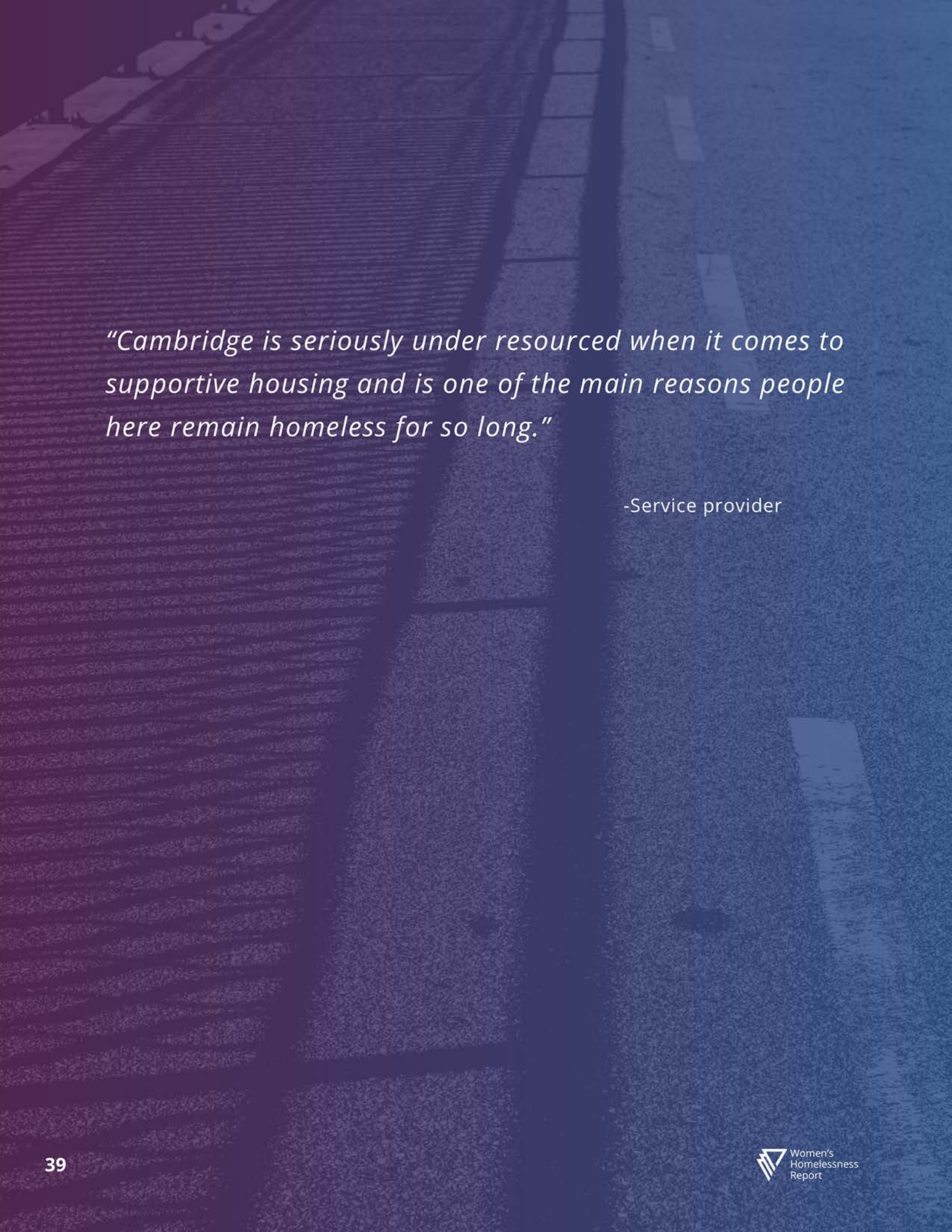*– Service provider*

Overall, that Cambridge is so lacking in services is leading to concerns about individuals' Charter rights and the need for a human rights approach to shelter:

"Earlier this year the Ontario Superior Court ruled that prior to evicting encampment residents the Charter requires that a municipality not only demonstrate that it has enough shelter beds to serve the number of people experiencing homelessness, but also that those beds meet the needs of the people they are intended to serve. In order to meet the needs of women and gender diverse people in Cambridge, a women's emergency shelter is required in Cambridge."- Service provider

Lack of a Housing Continuum

Not surprisingly, the trend of Cambridge being a service desert and under-resourced also shows up in the current housing continuum in Cambridge. Cambridge is experiencing complete gaps in its housing continuum. A well developed housing continuum has the potential for eradicating homelessness. The continuum starts with addressing emergency needs through an emergency shelter, through to transitional and supportive housing, then affordable market rent apartments and home ownership. When there are substantial gaps in this continuum, it isn't surprising when we see individuals remaining unsheltered or hidden in homelessness for many years:

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"Cambridge is seriously under resourced when it comes to supportive housing and is one of the main reasons people here remain homeless for so long."

-Service provider

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For those providers who are offering more permanent affordable housing, the issue becomes that there is nowhere for women to go as they wait to secure a unit. Some form of temporary, transitional housing or responsive shelter is needed to fill this gap. One service provider shared:

"On average, we receive about 50 calls a week from women in imminent need of housing. Unfortunately, because we do not provide temporary or transitional housing, we have no choice but to refer them to the Community Housing Access Centre or if space is available, at a local shelter."- Service provider

Supportive housing was also highlighted as the only opportunity for many individuals to end their homelessness, but that level of housing support won't be found for women in Cambridge:

"For many, their only hope of ending their homelessness for good is supportive housing, the vast majority of which, pretty much all of it, are in Kitchener and Waterloo."- Service provider

Community Apathy

Cambridge, as a general community, is known by services providers as being a place that can be hostile and unforgiving towards homelessness. Numerous informational interviews conducted shared examples of this in action in various ways, including highlighting a push to remove social services from the Cambridge downtown Galt core, a place where organizations have been providing services

and improving and saving lives for decades. The thinking is apparently that, by relocating services to other parts of the community - for instance outside of downtown cores - that the "homeless issue" will resolve itself. Of course, without developing places for individuals to go, simply removing people from any location will only mean they will need to settle elsewhere and it will likely also be another park, parking lot, or other public place. So far, this approach remains unsuccessful, yet still a very legitimate threat. Further to this approach is "ignorance is bliss" and the idea that women's homelessness is kept quiet, not discussed and therefore not actually an issue. One service provider shared:

> *"Women's homelessness is rampant throughout the city, but it seems it's not discussed or mentioned much in the media or in general discourse; from public, to business, to political circles. We don't hear about it much, yet community leaders and experts reinforce the fact that it's here and especially during and after COVID-19, it's approaching crisis levels." – Service provider*

For a service provider in Cambridge, public figure, or community leader there is a lot of risk in being open and talking about homelessness in the community, even more so in advocating for more funding, community supports, or interventions. Still though, there remain some champions at each level of government, in the community and in the nonprofit sector that are committed to change. They are forced into the shadows for their own safety but are working diligently to bring resources to the Cambridge community for women experiencing homelessness.

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"Our agency has been vocal in bringing the issue forward, and we are committed to working with our partners to support the establishment of appropriate supports for women experiencing homelessness in Cambridge. We believe that as a community we can and should wrap these individuals in care and support to avoid violence and further traumatization. We can work together to create a community that properly supports women."

-Service provider

Overall, this group of Cambridge leaders felt that the community is at a tipping point where ignorance can no longer be bliss and political will and action are needed:

"Cambridge needs the political will and the compassion to invest in creating solutions that are gender responsive and that can help women regain their footing. If we continue doing nothing, not only is it unconscionable, it's also abrogating basic human rights to safety and housing." – Service provider

Participants came with many suggestions on how to build more momentum and combat negative public opinions around homelessness and shelter, including more public education:

"… The benefits of a shelter need to be made clear to those that might be skeptical, and to illustrate the beneficial changes in a community if proper shelter systems are in place."- Public Official

As well as engaging upper levels of government for help:

"Homelessness is with us in every municipality in the country and around the world. In Canada, the issue has been exacerbated by wilful blindness to the developing problem by upper levels of government for the past two decades and more. The City of Cambridge needs help from those upper levels of government- regional, provincial and federal- to be able to better address the problem. We need more women's shelters in Waterloo Region, but ESPECIALLY in Cambridge."- Service provider

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There is nowhere for women who are homeless to go, and yet we know women's homelessness exists here. I have personally witnessed several women sleeping rough. Without a safe place for women to go, we cannot even truly assess how many women are staying in unsafe living conditions and/or are part of the hidden homeless because they know there is nowhere for them to go if they leave that unsafe home."- Service provider

Heard time and time again, Kitchener-Waterloo being the sole service option for women in Cambridge experiencing homelessness was lamented by service providers. The reasons were abundant but among them were the realities around transportation and having to leave behind existing supports:

"A lot of women are precariously housed. They don't want to go to Kitchener for shelter a lot of the time because all of their supports are in Cambridge. Transportation is long, hard and expensive between Cambridge and Kitchener."
- Service provider

Service providers were also concerned about the fallout impact of women having to leave their community to access shelter:

"We find that the complications of homelessness require solutions from medical and social supports, as well as family and friends who surround a person. If a woman is asked to stay in Kitchener or elsewhere for shelter, she is asked to leave behind any remaining local family, friend, and medical support structures (addictions treatment, counsellors, doctors) that she has, making it harder for her to recover."
- Service provider

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Service providers talked frequently about women they support or had supported refusing to leave Cambridge to seek shelter and understood the outcomes of these situations were women remaining unsheltered for many years as well as seeking shelter in unsafe places:

"There are women and girls who are homeless in Cambridge who will not go to shelters in KW, and as a result seek safety with men. These vulnerable women are at serious risk of exploitation, violence and coercion in order to have some small measure of safety."- Service provider

For those who did leave Cambridge to access shelter in Kitchener-Waterloo, it usually came with hardship, from capacity issues to fighting their way back to Cambridge:

"Two things we know, One, individuals wish to stay in Cambridge at all costs (some women resorting to sex work or to camping outside in order to stay in their home community) and two, if people are relocated to Kitchener- Waterloo, they spend considerable time and resources to get back to Cambridge in order to see their family and friends and be with community."- Service provider

In all of this, it is also important to highlight the many Cambridge women who do access the Kitchener emergency women's shelter and the pressure that places on it as they attempt to support for women across Waterloo Region. This shelter is being over taxed and experiences constant capacity issues:

"An increase in similar issues we have seen for many years now- lack of bed space in the one women's shelter in Kitchener, women in Cambridge staying in dangerous situations because they cannot or will not move to Kitchener, family separation when women do move to Kitchener, and a lack of opportunities in Cambridge for women."
– Service provider

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Impact of the Service Desert

In the end, the women who are seeking support are those who put up with the most from the realities of Cambridge and its lack of services. Service providers made some definitive statements on the impact they see.

Women experiencing homelessness in Cambridge often have to choose between the care they have currently around them and receiving basic shelter:

"Women are proven more vulnerable to violence and the perils of hidden homelessness but it also impacts their ability to recover, receive follow up care, and stay connected to their current supports when they are forced to receive basic shelter in another town."
- Service provider

Women experiencing homelessness in Cambridge have impossible decisions to make:

"Within our department, we have asked staff to identify early in the client's healthcare journey, if there is a lack of housing or living rough, so we can engage with our social worker and a connection can be made to help bridge the gap and connect the client to services. This is a challenge when they are having to be relocated to Kitchener if their follow up care and appointments are in Cambridge. Often the client will refuse to go to Kitchener, and subsequently resort of living at risk and not following up with their medical needs."
- Service provider

Women experiencing homelessness in Cambridge have substantially less access to the supports they need than if they lived in other large urban centres in the Waterloo Region:

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"A woman who is homeless in Cambridge, and has her supports (social, family, medial) in Cambridge, will be at a disadvantage because she will have to stay at a shelter in Kitchener while homeless. Cambridge shelter occasionally houses women but is routinely required to send them to Kitchener. During a vulnerable time, this means that women who are homeless in Cambridge are less able to access needed supports than if they had lived in Kitchener."- Service provider

Women experiencing homelessness in Cambridge and the organizations trying to support them are left with the personal, political and community toll left by the daily shortcomings of a service desert:

"We support women experiencing both homelessness and addiction to achieve sobriety and rebuild their lives in the community through our addictions programs. Through this work, we have extensive experience working with women experiencing homelessness, and we see the toll the current situation is taking on women in our community. It is well past time that a women's emergency shelter that is gender-based violence responsive established in our community." – Service provider

The equity needs of women experiencing homelessness in Cambridge are not being met when it comes to shelter and housing:

"Our organization has conducted community-based research with our partners on shelter needs of IPV survivors within the Muslim/racialized women community. This population is at risk of being homeless as shelter capacity is a major concern. This vulnerable population has unique challenges and require specific supports."
– Service provider

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Shelter Discrepancies: An Environmental Scan

Our environmental scan of shelter reviewed shelters across the Violence Against Women sector as well as the women's homelessness sector. We found a number of alarming, yet unsurprising, trends in this search, including a great divide between services offered, a long list of potential services to support someone experiencing GBV and resulting homelessness and some examples of exemplary shelters who are innovating.

The Great Divide

There is a great divide in the comparison between VAW shelter models and women's emergency homeless shelter models, and it's no more obvious than in the services offered as part of each model. This analysis has taught us that there are strengths and limitations in both models. VAW shelter models can miss out on responding to experiences on the continuum of gender-based violence, particularly when violence is at the hands of people, or multiple people not considered intimate partners or it isn't happening in an existing housing setting. However, they provide a consistent array of supports needed for victims/survivors to move forward. On the other hand, Women's emergency homeless shelters often only have bare minimum supports in place, most of which don't directly tackle safety needs or the trauma of gender-based violence and homelessness. However, they are more likely to be flexible and responsive to a wider array of women and the situations they are presenting with.

Here are some examples of this "divide" in action:

- It was the norm for VAW shelter models to provide 24/7 shelter support and access, whereas the norm for women's emergency homeless shelter was an overnight model, requiring women to leave during the daytime hours;

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- It was the norm for VAW shelter models to have built-in mental health support, whereas the norm for women's emergency homeless shelter was merely community referrals, a process that adds many more barriers to receiving support for trauma;
- It was the norm for VAW shelter models to provide robust, ongoing recreational and life skills-building programming, whereas the norm for women's emergency homeless shelter was programming that was one-off (unfunded and existing because someone took extra time to build the opportunity to offer it) and often centered around financial management;
- It was the norm for VAW shelter models to have built-in security measures such as secure access, fences, and cameras, whereas the norm for women's emergency homeless shelter was a ready connection to police services;
- It was more the norm for VAW shelter models to have some transition/second stage housing available (often within their organization or at least in direct partnership) and top priority standing on housing priority lists, whereas the norm for women's emergency homeless shelter was market rent housing, a waitlist for supportive housing, and regular priority standing on the housing priority lists.

Intervention Opportunities

Overall, there tends to be an average of five to eight times more programming and supports documented as being offered within VAW shelter models (not considering supports for children) than those provided in women's emergency homeless shelter models. With the question in mind of how to be responsive to GBV across a continuum within an emergency women's homeless shelter model, while also addressing the immediate, interim and transitional needs of women experiencing homelessness directly, we inventoried all the supports offered across service categories in both models captured in this environmental scan.

Table 1: Inventory of all supports across service categories

Safety

- Personal lockers
- No curfew
- Individual rooms that lock
- High level security
- Safety planning
- 24/7 access
- 24/7 crisis support line
- Risk assessments
- Secure street-level entranceway and reception

Physical Health

- On-site nurse
- Medical room
- Access to health care related to treatment
- Gym/physical activity programs
- Hospital visits
- Harm reduction supplies

Mental Health

- One-on-one counselling
- Group counselling
- Art therapy
- Music therapy
- Trauma counselling
- Counselling outreach for clients outside of the shelter
- Anger management

Food

- Dining room
- Coffee/tea/juice and snacks always available
- One meal provided each day
- Kitchens with full access for shelter users
- Integrated meal program

Life Skills

- Community events
- Life skills coaching
- Women's groups
- Employment readiness
- Financial literacy classes and savings programs
- Cooking
- Art
- Games/TV nights

Substance Use

- Agency-led harm reduction services
- Harm reduction supplies
- Staff- and peer-supported injection room

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Spiritual/ Cultural

- Community engagement
- Meditation room
- Smudging spaces
- Prayer room
- Outdoor gardens with culturally-specific foods and Indigenous medicine
- Crafts

- Elder guidance brought in
- Traditional teachings
- 4-week healing our spirits program
- Connections to outside spiritual or cultural supports

- Immigration and status assistance
- Spiritual support groups and community referrals
- English classes/ supports
- Robust language services on site or available upon request

Basic Needs

- Bed with bedding
- Storage space
- Small fridge/sink in their room
- Laundry
- Income assistance (OW/ODSP, CPP, EI, etc.)

- Debt services
- Kennel for pets
- Telephone support with voicemail
- Internet access/tech lounge

- Transportation support
- Clothing
- Personal needs
- Drop-in services for women who transitioned to housing

Transition Support

- Housing applications
- Accompaniment to appointments and community resources
- Community referrals
- Outreach support for shift to transitional or market rent housing
- Employment support
- Second stage housing
- Transitional housing
- Outreach to navigate service system outside shelter
- Post-shelter stay support for six months

Justice

- Residential tenancy issues, complaints, hearings
- Legal/court support
- Protection order assistance

Service Navigation

- Residential Councillors
- Case management
- Service tables
- Support plans

Public Education/ Advocacy

- Community building
- Awareness building
- General engagement with businesses/ landlords etc.

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Shelter Models and Equity-Seeking Groups

As a collective, emergency women's homeless and VAW shelters have much to build in terms of how they support women from equity-seeking groups. To this point, NYWS shelter in Toronto, according to their website, took charge by developing a shelter model that intentionally supports women who are often denied services and/or whose needs are missing in many shelter models (including women living with disabilities, trans women, newcomer women, Indigenous women and women of colour).

NYWS Shelter

NYWS shelter is for women and trans folks experiencing violence. This 17-bedroom emergency shelter can house up to 40 women and their children, has a kennel for pets, outdoor gardens for culturally specific foods and indigenous medicines, living rooms, a tech lounge, meditation rooms, a food justice and security program as well as trauma counselling. The shelter is connected intentionally to the Anne Marie D'Amico Community Collective, operating from the same space but open to the public. This community clinic provides trauma informed support that makes these services accessible to those often excluded by these services and all in one place to reduce the stress of traveling across Toronto for support. Further, they are intentional in how they engage and provide service for diverse women. Their goal is to help reduce the complexity of trying to navigate systems by providing services in one place while also supporting women by giving appropriate referrals and knowledge around their support needs.

Website reference: https://nyws.ca/our-center/emergency-shelter/#shelter

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Another model of interest in this environmental scan was NISA Homes, which provide supports across a spectrum of domestic violence, poverty or seeking asylum with a focus specifically on supporting Muslim women.

Nisa Homes

Nisa House is unique in that it has locations across Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia. According to their website, Nisa homes focuses its services and supports to feel like 'home' and envision a flourishing Muslim community in which help is available, shelter is attainable and healing is possible. They provide services like financial assistance, immigration support, basic necessities, programming and activities, mental health support, resources, case work and spiritual support (within their doors and referrals to the community).

Website reference: https://nisahomes.com/

This scan also captured how shelter models were responding to the needs of Indigenous women. This showed up through shelter models being intentional on the need to be free of racism and other forms of prejudice and violence as well as providing supports rooted in Indigenous knowledge, spirituality and customs. Oshki Kizis Women's shelter and the First Nation Healing Centre emerged as great examples of Indigenous-created and led emergency shelter.

First Nation Healing Centre Inc.-Fisher River Cree Nation

Adding to these services, First Nation Healing Centre Inc.-Fisher River Cree Nation provides a four-week Healing Our Spirits Program. This program focuses on healing coming from within and uses a holistic approach to meet participants needs.

Website reference: https://firstnationshelters.ca/shelters/

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Oshki Kizis Women's Shelter

Oshki Kizis Women's Shelter is an Indigenous shelter for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women & children centered in Ottawa and operated by Minwaashin Lodge-Indigenous Women's Support Centre. This shelter supports women through a holistic approach by showing awareness and respect for individual and cultural beliefs, spirituality and diversity. This approach transcends all of the supports they offer, such as advocacy, counselling, referrals, court accompaniment, traditional teachings, connection to Elders, crafts, community support, transitional support, educational services, crisis intervention, child and youth advocacy, 24-hour residential support and hospital visits.

Website reference: https://www.minlodge.com/oshki-kizis

One shortcoming that was observed within our environmental scan was around support for women with disabilities. Some shelters did state on their websites that they're inclusive of those with disabilities or are wheelchair accessible, but accessibility didn't appear to be considered deeply or consistently across the models. It seemed that sometimes the blanket statement of leading with the "autonomy of women utilizing their service," in that they are in control of what support they identify they want and how that happens was used as a way to show responsiveness. This approach cannot be in exchange for a model and approach with disability at the heart of it. YWCA Sudbury, however, did show more intentionality to capture the diverse needs of women with disabilities.

YWCA Sudbury

YWCA Sudbury operates Genevra House, a 32-bed shelter designed to support women fleeing abuse from their intimate partners as well as those 55+ fleeing abuse from their live-in caregivers. YWCA Sudbury also intentionally mentions that they are wheelchair accessible and provide transportation to the shelter, removing two large physical barriers to accessing their support.

Website reference: https://ywcasudbury.ca/programs/genevra-house-shelter/

Harm Reduction Shelter Models

In hand with how shelter models are being intentionally responsive to the diverse needs of women, learning how harm reduction approaches were informing shelter models was also of interest. Harm reduction was often used in the sense of substance use, offering needle programs and supplies or even a peer- and staff-supported space for safer drug use. This is just the tip of how harm reduction can inform a shelter model. Powell Place Emergency Shelter for Women on Vancouver's east side offered up layers of consideration when it came to harm reduction:

Powell Place Emergency Shelter for Women

Powell Place uses an intentional focus on serving women with the intersecting challenges that come from violence, abuse, poverty, mental illness and addiction. This wider mandate shows intentionality in their approach to recognizing the wide array of situations that might inform an individual experience of homelessness for women. Further, they aim to create a home like environment, are open 24/7, offer harm reduction supplies beyond just substance related items, and there is no curfew. Powell Place also takes an individualized or case-by-case basis approach to determine the length of stay for women at the shelter. With wrap-around services offered in-house, their goal is to engage in client-directed individualized support and goal-setting that helps women to move forward more successfully and more permanently.

Website reference: https://www.thebloomgroup.org/our-work/women-children/

The analysis of this environmental scan has highlighted the need to create a shelter model that is responsive to the women using it with intention. By approaching shelter from the perspective of "home," women are able to work on removing and overcoming the barriers in front of them to secure housing and move forward with stability.

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Emergency shelter doesn't stand alone in its work. Its strength comes from its ability to stabilize an individual or family while also bringing in and making connections in the community, recognizing that women need formal and informal supports in their lives to move forward from their trauma and this period in their lives. This environmental scan also taught us that the models that show the most promise are those with built-in, on-site supports, creativity in approach and a high degree of flexibility.

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A CAMBRIDGE
SOLUTION

A CAMBRIDGE SOLUTION

Throughout this research, the question of what a Cambridge solution to women's homelessness could look like was discussed at length. Building off of knowledge gained from the environmental scan, recommendations from participants in the Project Willow research and service provider insights, a number of different focus areas emerged, from the development of a GBV-responsive emergency homeless shelter for women through to prevention, advocacy and policy work. Beyond the best practices identified in our environmental scan, we also consulted the recommendations section of the Project Willow research report and explored this question with service providers in our survey and informational interviews.

Recommendations from Project Willow Participants

The majority of the 61 participants of the Project Willow research report had experience using multiple shelter models within Waterloo Region (including women's emergency homeless shelter, youth homeless shelter and/or VAW shelters) (Gordon et al., 2022). They shared their insights into what supports and services should be present in a shelter model that can be responsive to their needs around GBV and housing stability. Among the recommendations were:

A Shift In Attitude:

Participants called for a shift in how shelter is looked at across service providers in the region. They wanted to see a shift in attitude that embraces women's emergency homeless shelters not as a last resort but as a way to help women ensure their safety (Gordon et al., 2022). Without this shift, the risk is that the system will continue to corner women into staying in or taking more vulnerable housing options. This will also keep the issue of women's homelessness hidden and those women in hiding will have significantly less access to needed support in the community.

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Justice:

Engagement of a restorative or transformative justice process to address issues in need of resolution, among peers, with partners and their family, among perpetrators and with service providers (Gordon et al., 2022). This process ensures greater safety with the folks in their networks as well as a way to ensure interpersonal issues within shelter don't escalate or jeopardize anyone's ability to use the service.

Mental Health Supports:

Participants talked about how gender-based violence experienced prior to becoming homeless and while experiencing homelessness impacts their mental health and their dire need to address their current and past traumas (Gordon et al., 2022). Participants also drew a parallel to their use of substances being linked to the trauma of gender-based violence and being homeless (75%). With this in mind, mental health supports were presented by participants as a way to move forward as well as a way to reduce their drug use. However, it was preferred by participants that mental health supports be readily accessible to them when they do have the courage to come forward for help and be offered on-site. One participant even suggested on a 24/7 basis as often their mental health needs were greatest at night (Gordon et al., 2022).

Physical Health Supports:

Participants talked about forgoing their basic needs (65%), including their health needs in fear of running into an abuser or experiencing gender-based violence. With this in mind, they recommended more readily available physical health supports and suggested a nurse be stationed at the shelter (Gordon et al., 2022).

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Enhancing Safety Measures:

Participants talked about wanting to feel more security around the shelter to avoid unwanted or violent people from having easy access to them (Gordon et al., 2022). They equated this more with the security models seen at typical VAW shelters. Participants also talked about the need for 24/7 shelter access to avoid having to navigate the community and potential acts of gender-based violence that come their way. Lastly, participants talked about the need to mitigate, prevent and resolve violent situations between peers in the shelter (Gordon et al., 2022).

Recreation and Life Skills Programming:

Participants desired more opportunity for this type of programming, particularly those who had experienced the benefits of this kind of programming in their time using youth shelter and/or VAW shelter models. Participants felt this programming would help foster more positive mental health and peer relationships, while also giving opportunity to give back and be involved more intently in the shelter itself and caring for it as if it was home (Gordon et al., 2022).

Expanding Models:

Participants were not fans of current models of shelter where upwards of 60-80 people were all sheltered under one roof. One of the reasons for this was that it neglects the individualized needs for support that different individuals come to shelter needing (Gordon et al., 2022). A way of combatting this and being more responsive to individual needs was to look at smaller shelter models that offered more customized supports.

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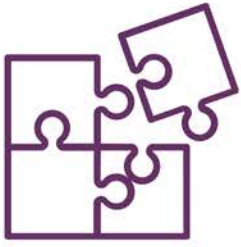
Stronger Engagement Among Services:

Participants talked about instances where they found themselves stuck between different systems that weren't communicating, talking largely about service systems like affordable housing, children's services, shelters, social services, police and hospitals (Gordon et al., 2022). Participants saw a lot of value in a system in which various points of service delivery spoke to each other and coordinated services.

Connecting Women to Community:

Project Willows research with racialized Muslim women showed a desire to see shelter embracing and connecting participants with informal supports in an outreach way to create more support for those outside shelter who are living in vulnerable situations. Part of this is in addressing the stigma that can come from staying at a shelter or even just leaving an abusive housing situation (Mitul et al., 2023).

Recommendations from Service Providers in Cambridge

"Many women are experiencing homelessness in Cambridge without the supports they need, there is very little shelter space available and what exists is co-ed only. Cambridge women have been using encampments to shelter and are facing regular evictions from City bylaw and recently from the Region of Waterloo. Cambridge women are often forced to try to travel to Kitchener to access shelter and supports. Cambridge women are often forced to choose between unsafe hidden homeless type situations, including staying in dangerous and abusive situations because they have nowhere to go." - Service provider

Cambridge nonprofit and public sector leaders gave deep systems-level insight about how to address the issue of women's homelessness in Cambridge and support women experiencing it. Some themes emerged:

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A Cambridge Solution in Cambridge:

Leaders felt that it was important for a new shelter intervention to be a Cambridge solution in Cambridge, meaning that it was responsive to the specific needs of women in the Cambridge community and that it was physically located in Cambridge:

"Let us work together to provide a safe, secure, and compassionate environment where these women can find the support they deserve, without being uprooted from their community."- Political Official

"It is imperative for Cambridge to develop a solution within its own boundaries to address the issue of women's homelessness. This is why we endorse the demands for the creation of an emergency shelter dedicated to women within the city of Cambridge"- Service provider

Take a Collaborative Approach:

Related to the desire for a Cambridge-based solution for Cambridge was a strong desire for this shelter to be developed collaboratively, with the voices of those with lived experience and nonprofit and public sector leaders' insights reflected.

"Something that brings together those with lived experience, community and service providers to dialogue and address the issue, includes transitional housing, funds coming from all levels of government."- Service provider

Project Willow's research connecting with those with lived experience and this research project connecting with service providers and community and political leadership, to provide insights around shelter is a great first step towards a foundation for ongoing collaborative approaches and relationships.

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Create Smaller Shelter Sites:

In synergy with recommendations made in Project Willow's research, service providers echoed the desire to have smaller shelter site models, with lower numbers of women accessing and therefore more opportunity to respond to the individual support needs of the women staying there. Another important consideration shared was that it should be separate from the men's shelter because of the vulnerability experienced in that environment.

"Cambridge needs a women's shelter, preferably separate from the men's shelter, because of issues of vulnerability there, as well as different needs. It does not need to be as large as the local men's shelter"- Service provider

"I believe women will be served well with smaller shelter locations that focus not only on a shelter bed but on the breadth of supports women need (childcare, safe transitional housing, etc.)." – Service provider

It Must be Culturally Relevant:

Leaders talked about the need to ensure that this shelter is developed within a culturally relevant, sensitive and responsive lens. This approach acknowledges the intersections of gender-based violence among race, gender identity, religion, sexuality, disability, culture, etc. A number of organizations came forward to lend their expertise and support in these areas:

"We would be happy to help in any way that we can and hope that this letter of support is also a letter of commitment to the efforts of getting this needed support in Cambridge… I am very excited at the prospect and truly supportive of the creation of a women's emergency shelter in Cambridge. I believe that this program is going to fill a much-needed gap in our community."- Service provider

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"A culturally sensitive shelter will connect with us with trust and collaboration in looking for resources etc. for the survivor. This will ease our burden of reaching out to multiple shelters. This shelter can help us empower abused women as a safe space to improve mental health and one can make better decisions. A shelter would also help us if it allows our community support workers to have office hours there or conduct programs from there. It will help us if the residential workers are well informed and trained to cooperate with culturally sensitive organizations like ours."- Service provider

"Sending us updates and how we can as a Muslim organization can help them."
- Service provider

"...some kind of raising awareness campaign, providing emotional support, providing interpretation services, inclusion in our cultural celebrations."- Service provider

Focus on Wraparound Support:
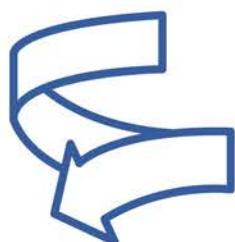
Leaders talked about the need to approach the development of this shelter intervention with harm reduction in mind, particularly paying attention to the needs and feelings of safety of the women accessing it:

"An intervention plan would be best to come from a harm reduction perspective and balancing women's needs and feelings of safety (potentially safe locations, separation from men, distance from substances) with an inclusive and welcoming space. This is a challenge and so will need to be carefully planned."- Service provider

This called for a shift in perspective from basic models of shelter to those which are more involved. Participants talked about the need for child care, housing support, mental health and addiction supports among other services:

"What I envision would be an emergency shelter within their community with access to childcare, so they are able to work, as well as wrap around supports to engage in housing conversations, mental health and addictions supports and relationships built with healthcare for a more positive client experience." – Service provider
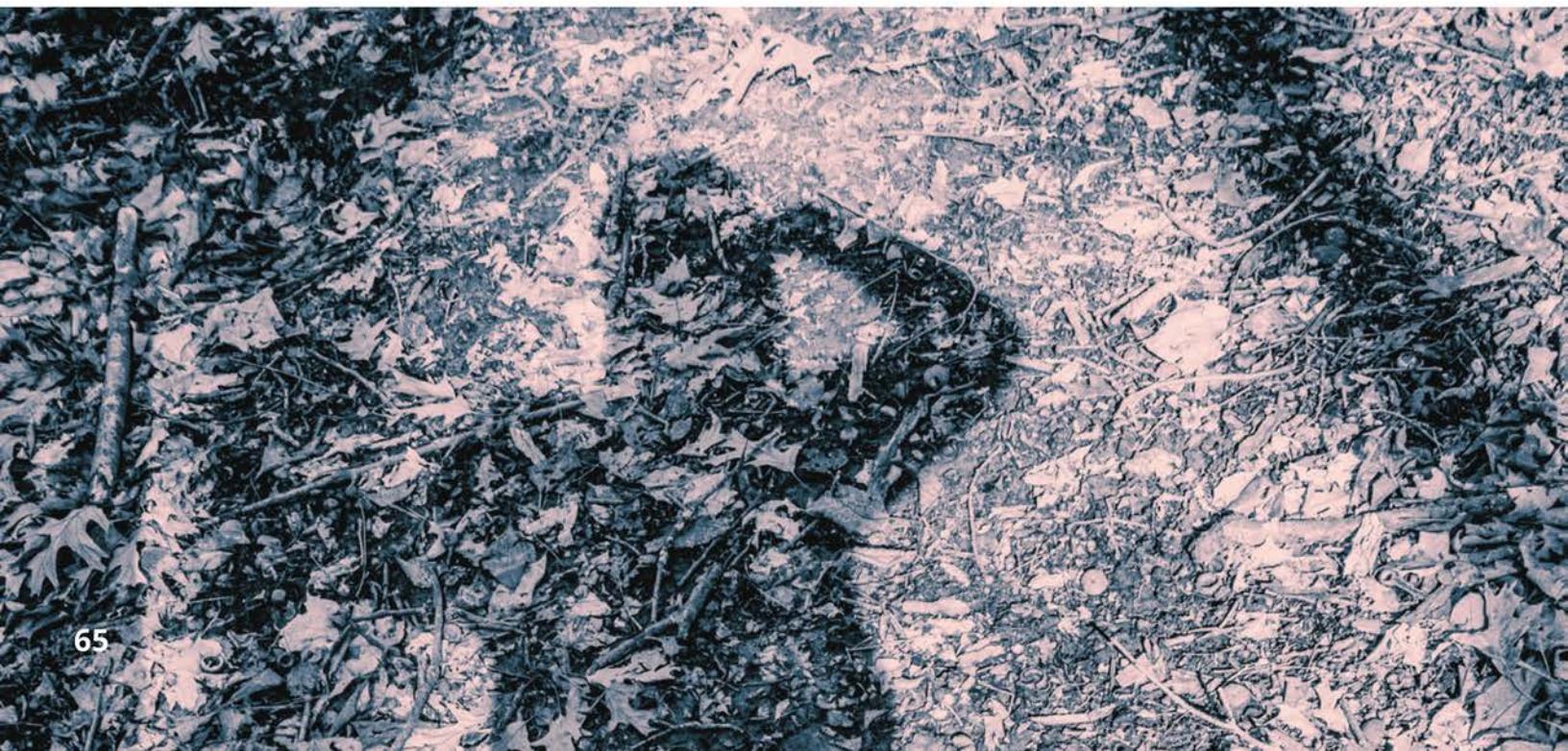
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"Support their employment and free daycare for their children, also better plan for community housing."- Service provider

"Acquiring a facility and education programs to help upstream."- Service provider

"A shelter that is sensitive to the unique needs and experiences of women facing gender-based violence can provide them with more than just a roof over their heads. It can offer specialized support services, counseling, legal assistance, and a supportive community that helps them regain control of their lives. It can empower them to break the cycle of abuse, rebuild their self-esteem, and ultimately transition to independent living, free from violence and fear."- Political Official

While leaders talked about wanting to see a shelter and variety of wraparound supports in Cambridge, they acknowledged that it needs to be organized in a way that is easy to navigate and prevents people from getting lost between services:

"A whole network of supports, but one in which all components talk to each other so no one falls through the cracks and so there's seamless transitions throughout the continuum of supports."- Service provider

Populate the Housing Continuum:

Leaders recognized that, while shelter is needed, it exists on a continuum of housing needs in Cambridge for women that include those that are transitional and supportive:

"We need a whole continuum of emergency shelter, to transitional and supportive housing to actually affordable housing, and we need there to be a specific emphasis on addressing *women's* homelessness and access to housing. Too often solutions are based on men's needs. This requires political will on the part of all levels of government"- Service provider

"Ultimately, I would like to see a variety of supportive housing available that meets the needs of a variety of population groups. There would be significant benefit to having women focused supportive housing here in Cambridge. In the meantime, there needs to be safe shelter available in our city, the city these women call home. They should not be expected to leave their community to have access to shelter."- Service provider

"An emergency homeless shelter as well as transitional housing would be great to bring to Cambridge."- Service provider

Shift Community Perspectives:

Leaders talked candidly during informational meetings as well as throughout their survey answers about the need to complement a new shelter service with public education efforts that encourage a shift in perspective to reduce apathy and build empathy around the issue of homelessness for many reasons, including to address the safety of women accessing shelter who by using the shelter will become visibly homeless:

"This requires political will on the part of all levels of government, but also a shift in perspective among housed residents."- Service Provider

"This is a crucial issue that has also been stigmatized by many, so an effective intervention plan must have an effective public relations strategy to counteract misconceptions and misunderstandings, while illustrating the clear benefits of a women's shelter and other supports."

-Political Official

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THE WAY FORWARD

THE WAY FORWARD

What an Intervention Could Do

Service providers talked about the impact that an intervention, starting with a women's emergency homeless shelter, could have at an individual and service level. At the individual level there was a greater sense of safety from gender-based violence, better ongoing mental and physical health support, better support to assist in safe use and combating addiction and overall, less risk of serious harm and death:

"Homelessness is a health concern. People are literally dying on our streets. Without a women's emergency shelter the human cost will be borne disproportionately by women."- Service provider

At a service provider level, an intervention like a women's shelter would mean agencies with expertise have the opportunity to provide supports needed, alleviating pressure on agencies working outside of their own mandates and budgets or outside their expertise and/or capacity.

"It would take some pressure off agencies doing the supporting outside of their own mandate and budgets. It would also alleviate some of the triaging pressure some frontline agencies have in trying to direct women to safe places to go which are, of course outside of Cambridge, or finding other supports.."- Service provider

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"This would fill an existing gap in the social services network and relieve the pressure on encampments and other supportive housing and shelter providers who are now overwhelmed and do not provide these services effectively to homeless women."
- Service provider

What an Intervention Could Be

This research talked at length about the need for an emergency women's shelter in Cambridge but our intervention as a community can't start and stop at this achievement. There is a belief among those in Cambridge that the connections among organizations (or intervenors) are there to not only solve these community issues but to innovate within the sector regarding how women's homelessness should be approached and supported. To do this, though, we need to rethink a whole span of services and historic decision-making if we want to consider ourselves on the path of ending women's homelessness in Cambridge.

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How an Intervention Could Be Built

1

Re-build trust with women experiencing hidden homelessness

Women and service providers shared many examples of situations in the community that have inherently broken the trust between women experiencing homelessness and the community. Further, the realities of hidden homelessness have left women without consistent supportive relationships and service providers with gaps in their knowledge about intervention needs. This ambiguity means that trust has to be rebuilt among women experiencing hidden and visible homelessness in the community, so that they can help build an intervention that is responsive, supportive, and meets their needs.

2

Invest in prevention programming in the community

In the spirit of preventing women's homelessness (both from happening and escalating) in Cambridge there is a need for an investment in programming that is designed to prevent homelessness both from happening and escalating. Many examples of these programs already exist including pre-employment programming for women entering or re-entering the workforce and gender-based violence prevention programming for youth.

3

Address the service desert

Shelter is one step in addressing the service needs of women. Further planning, investment (in current and needed supports) and execution is needed to develop the wraparound services needed for women to address their past trauma, stabilize their health, work through addictions, stay safe from GBV, and be successful in maintaining their housing.

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4

Leverage relationships to rapidly build along the housing continuum

Further to services, there needs to be heavy investment in securing opportunities along the housing continuum for women, especially in the areas of transitional, supportive, social and affordable market rent. This is an opportunity for developers, nonprofit and public sector leaders and bureaucrats to come together to explore, plan, create incentives and generate enthusiasm for these types of projects in the community. There is also a need to fund and build capacity with smaller nonprofits in Cambridge to support the writing of proposals, addressing organizational risk, securing finances, and gaining knowledge to take on these projects.

5

Build empathy by reducing apathy

The dominant rhetoric in Cambridge around homelessness is working against the development of interventions, prevention work, and safety. As suggested by a number of service providers and public officials, a public education campaign, initiative, or conference, as well as related advocacy activities are needed to shift the community's attitude, outward public opinion, political will, and apathy to a perspective that centers change and growth as a community. This work should also amplify the voices of women themselves experiencing homelessness in their advocacy in the community and encourage those with passion and empathy around this issue to speak up.

6

Establish an equity lens in local decision making

Working with local levels of government and funders in the pursuit of equity through challenging assumptions and bias and building stronger knowledge bases when it comes to city planning, budgeting and social/community interventions. This equity lens should also nod to geographic location, centering the needs of Cambridge as a community among the conversations. An example of this work in action can be found through the City Shift project out of Vancouver.

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7

Start the housing continuum

There are significant gaps along the housing continuum in Cambridge, first starting with emergency shelter, a place to help women stabilize as they move towards longer-term housing options. This women's emergency homeless shelter has the opportunity to be defined by the needs of women in the community and to cross the arbitrary boundaries around support options between emergency homeless shelter and VAW shelters. It has the opportunity to be culturally responsive and anti-oppressive and bring with it the values and elements found in transitional and supportive housing.

By doing this work, it will also alleviate the immense and known pressures placed on the Kitchener women's emergency shelter and increase their capacity to support the growing need of women in the Kitchener-Waterloo urban centre.

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IN CONCLUSION

IN CONCLUSION

Realizing the human rights of women, girls and gender diverse individuals experiencing homelessness requires deep investments, cross sectoral collaboration, and policy change. Municipalities and regions must invest in populating each point on the continuum in housing. There is work to do, but through this research we've found a committed group of service providers and political officials eager to take it on. It is YWCA Cambridge's hope that this report sparks the knowledge-sharing, advocacy, and responsive planning needed to support and end women's homelessness in Cambridge once and for all.
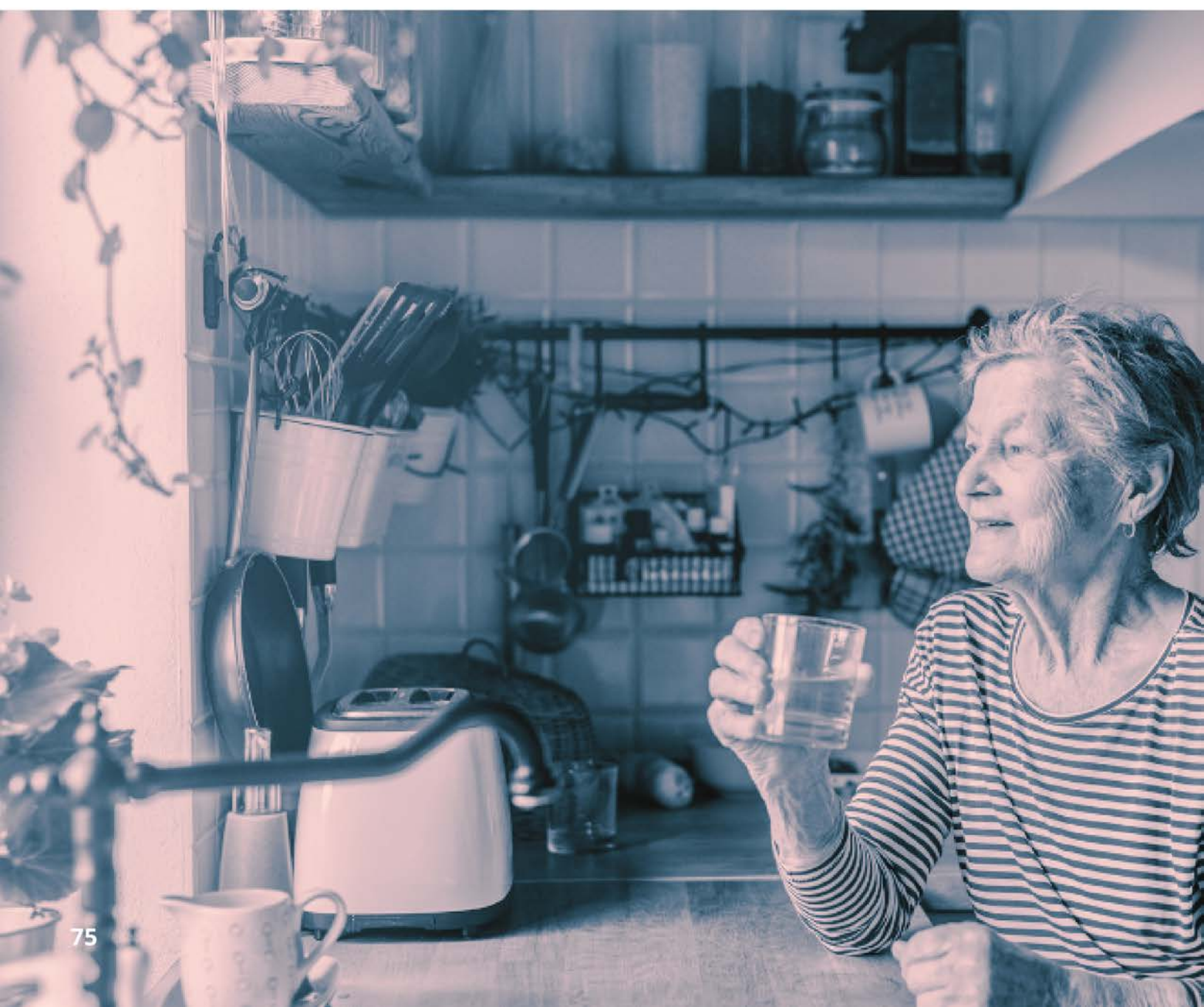
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