



Attainable Housing: Preventing Human Trafficking & Supporting Survivors

Written submission to the Government of Saskatchewan



Giving Hope Today



Dear Minister,

We represent organizations that support human trafficking survivors in Saskatchewan. Our trained staff help vulnerable individuals avoid harm, exit their trafficking situations, and gain access to housing and other supports they depend on for their recovery. This work gives us a unique perspective into where we are collectively making progress. It also allows us to see where additional work is needed in our shared fight to end exploitation in the province and across the country.

Human trafficking is not well understood in Canada. Unlike the sensationalized stories that are depicted in movies like *Taken*, human trafficking is often far more subtle and is usually perpetrated by someone the victim/survivor already knows.¹ While anyone can be a victim, individuals who are more vulnerable to human trafficking tend to live in circumstances where familial and social supports are missing. Therefore, addressing these gaps is essential to ending this extreme form of exploitation. Policymakers must start with a plan that reinvigorates each aspect of Canada's social safety net and addresses the gaps that leaves people susceptible to trafficking.

Growing evidence demonstrates strong linkages between homelessness, housing precarity, and human trafficking. Lack of access to secure and safe housing creates significant emotional, financial, and physical vulnerabilities that traffickers exploit. Once in a trafficking situation, survivors' inability to access secure housing is the most significant barrier to leaving, and far too many are forced to remain with their traffickers or seek out other unsafe and exploitative situations.

A range of safe, secure, and affordable housing options is critical to disrupting human trafficking. It is essential for protecting people from being exploited, helps victims exit their trafficking situation, and creates stability for survivors as they recover. Housing, therefore, must be a priority in local, provincial, and federal responses to human trafficking in Canada.

Between 2019 and 2022, the Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline received 3,059 signals related to human trafficking across the country. Shelter and housing supports for victims and survivors were the most requested referrals on those signals.² Unfortunately, Hotline staff regularly find it difficult to connect survivors with immediate, short-, and long-term housing options due to gaps in policy and programming.

The enclosed submission identifies where policy gaps exist across the housing and shelter system and where the province can make a difference. **We are calling on the Saskatchewan government to:**

- 1.** Create a multi-year anti-human trafficking strategy that includes provincial coordinating bodies - a Saskatchewan Office to Combat Trafficking in Persons and a Survivors' Advisory Committee - to oversee and lead its implementation.
- 2.** Apply an anti-human trafficking lens to current and future housing and homelessness programming.
- 3.** Increase funding for the operation of housing dedicated to human trafficking victims and survivors, including short-term (e.g. safe houses) and medium-term (e.g. transitional) housing. This housing should be equipped to support the unique needs of historically marginalized populations that are particularly vulnerable to trafficking, including 2SLGBTQ+ adults and youth, Indigenous peoples, migrant workers, and people of colour.
- 4.** Increase funding for emergency shelters, transitional, and supportive housing agencies, and establish multi-year allocations. This funding should be used to enhance staffing salaries and provide trauma-informed support to survivors that transition through various housing options.
- 5.** Increase the capacity of the shelter and housing system to identify the signs of trafficking, support victims/survivors, and prevent human trafficking through ongoing on-site training and post-secondary education opportunities.
- 6.** Rapidly increase Saskatchewan's non-market (public, social/community, and affordable) housing stock to make safe and secure housing more accessible.
- 7.** Address components of the Saskatchewan Income Support Program (SIS) that hinder access to income assistance and increase housing precarity for recipients.

These recommendations are based on consultations with frontline service providers, survivors of human trafficking, and municipalities. We believe that implementing these 7 recommendations is critical to preventing human trafficking and supporting survivors on their path to recovery.

Thank you for taking the time to review our policy brief. We would welcome the opportunity to speak with you about our recommendations – and how we can support you in bringing them to fruition – at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,

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Detailed Recommendations

1. **Create a multi-year anti-human trafficking strategy that includes provincial coordinating bodies - a Saskatchewan Office to Combat Trafficking in Persons and a Survivors' Advisory Committee - to oversee and lead its implementation.**

Human trafficking is complex and spans different industries and policy areas. Victims and survivors often require support from across the public service, including in: housing, education, healthcare, mental health and addictions, immigration, employment, social assistance, law enforcement, and the criminal justice system. As a result, a whole-of-government approach is required to disrupt trafficking and support survivors.

Similar to other Canadian jurisdictions,³ the Government of Saskatchewan should create a comprehensive, holistic, and collaborative framework that includes the following components:

- a) **A dedicated strategy** to guide the work necessary for preventing and disrupting human trafficking in the province. This strategy should take a human rights-based approach, incorporate the breadth of policy issues impacting victims and survivors, concentrate resources across government, and be evaluated at regular intervals. A dedicated and coordinated strategy will ensure that the government's approach to such a complex issue will not be ad hoc or siloed.
- b) **A Saskatchewan Office to Combat Trafficking in Persons** to coordinate the implementation of the strategy and provide backbone support for anti-trafficking initiatives and programs. This includes developing and maintaining strong partnerships across government ministries whose work intersects with human trafficking and significantly impacts the experiences of victims/survivors (e.g. Ministries of Corrections, Policing and Public Safety, Health, Immigration and Career Training, Justice and Attorney General, Labour Relations and Workplace Safety, and Social Services). Trafficking Response Teams embedded in police services across the province should also be key stakeholders in this coordinating office.
- c) **A Survivors' Advisory Committee to incorporate survivors' lived experiences, voices, and insights** into legislation, policy decisions, and program development. Funding must be set aside to adequately compensate members of this committee and recognize their invaluable contribution to anti-trafficking work.

2. Apply an anti-human trafficking lens to current and future housing and homelessness programming in the province.

Since housing is crucial for preventing trafficking and supporting survivors, the Ministry of Social Services and the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation should play a role in anti-trafficking efforts. More specifically, they should collaboratively undertake the following activities:

- a) Conduct a thorough review of current programming** and funding agreements to identify the processes that deter or prevent human trafficking survivors from accessing emergency shelters, transitional housing, and permanent subsidized housing options. This includes application, eligibility, intake, and program requirements such as documentation, immigration status, location-specific service provision, and condition of stay policies/procedures. Human trafficking survivors, service providers, and case managers should be consulted to clarify where the barriers and challenges exist.
- b) Immediately respond to the program review** by addressing the barriers and challenges that deter or prevent survivors from using shelters and housing options.
- c) Facilitate regular opportunities for two-way input and information-sharing** with housing providers and other relevant community-based organizations in order to build stronger relationships within the sector.

3. Increase funding for the operation of housing dedicated to human trafficking victims and survivors, including short-term (e.g. safe houses) and medium-term (e.g. transitional) housing. This housing should be equipped to support the unique needs of historically marginalized populations that are particularly vulnerable to trafficking, including 2SLGBTQ+ adults and youth, Indigenous peoples, migrant workers, and people of colour.

Human trafficking victims/survivors have unique needs that often cannot be met at shelters designed for people experiencing homelessness or intimate partner violence. Shelter policies - such as curfews, scheduled closures during the day, limitations on accessing phones, the internet or social media, restrictions on substance use, and requirements to do chores - may mimic their trafficking experiences and unintentionally harm survivors in their recovery.⁴

Addressing the elevated risks to safety that exist for victims/survivors may also not be met by many housing and shelter options. Robust security protocols, especially in domestic violence shelters, can help to mitigate those risks. However, they are not always enough to deter traffickers from looking for survivors who have escaped or from recruiting new victims within the shelter system, including through peer recruitment.⁵

There is currently only one housing-based program dedicated to victims/survivors of human trafficking in Saskatchewan. Much more is required, and these programs should be barrier-free, flexible, safe, and spread across geographic areas. They should also include supports to help residents acquire life skills, pursue education and employment, and access counselling and other supports. These supports need to be trauma-informed and culturally relevant to take into consideration the unique needs of marginalized population groups. Additionally, survivor autonomy and the ability to make choices about their own readiness to participate in programming should be acknowledged and accommodated.

4. Increase funding for emergency shelter, transitional, and supportive housing agencies, and establish multi-year allocations. This funding should be used to enhance staffing salaries and provide trauma-informed support to survivors that transition through various housing options.

a) Increase funding for additional spaces in emergency and transitional shelters. In 2022, Saskatchewan's shelter capacity consisted of 501 emergency (homeless) shelter beds, 789 transitional housing beds, and 338 domestic violence shelter beds.⁶ A common theme in our consultations with shelter providers was their high turn-away rates, extended lengths of stay, and the growing use of waiting lists or call-back practices. While steps have been taken to create more spaces⁷, the existing supply is insufficient in meeting the increased demand. Without immediate access to emergency or transitional shelters, victims/survivors may have no option but to stay with their trafficker.

b) Commit to multi-year funding allocations, indexed to inflation, to shelter and housing agencies. Grant or project-based funding contributes to the instability of the sector,⁸ while low staffing levels and relatively low pay leading to high turnover and burnout cause additional strains on shelter capacity. The 2024 budget has allocated \$31.7 million to interpersonal violence, including annualized funding for second-stage shelters.⁹ However, if these amounts merely maintain

current operating levels, staffing and workload challenges in the sector will persist, and support for marginalized populations will be impacted.

- c) **Establish a designated caseworker or service provider to help survivors navigate the entire housing and shelter system.** This should be a specialized position requiring qualification and education levels that are commensurate with the complex needs of victims/survivors. During The Centre's consultations with stakeholders, the lack of continuity in support when moving between housing options (e.g. from shelter to transitional to permanent housing) was identified as a barrier to recovery.
- d) **Include funding to address the transportation challenges faced by shelter and housing services in rural and northern Saskatchewan.** Funding for social services is not always prioritized in areas with low population density. Limited public transportation within and between communities makes it particularly challenging for survivors to access the shelter and housing options they need. The province should examine how it can make transportation funding more flexible and allow for collaborative and innovative solutions (e.g., taxi chits, vehicle sharing between agencies).

5. Increase the capacity of the shelter and housing system to identify the signs of trafficking, support victims/survivors, and prevent human trafficking through ongoing on-site training and post-secondary education opportunities.

When specialized housing options are unavailable to victims/survivors of human trafficking, they are often served by homeless and domestic violence shelters as well as transitional and supportive housing programs. The needs of human trafficking victims/survivors are different from those experiencing homelessness or other forms of gender-based violence. Unfortunately, staff may not be equipped to support the unique needs of those impacted by trafficking. In fact, certain program components or requirements as well as misunderstandings or assumptions about trafficking in general may unintentionally harm them.¹⁰ Therefore, it is vitally important to increase the capacity of shelter and housing operators to identify and support victims/survivors and prevent instances of trafficking from taking place within shelters. This should be done by:

- a) **Mandating and funding annual anti-trafficking training** for shelter, transitional, and supportive housing providers to address the gap in knowledge

of human trafficking. This training needs to be ongoing and trauma-informed so as not to revictimize survivors.

b) Incorporating anti-trafficking training into human services programs in post-secondary institutions to ensure graduates entering the workforce have a foundational understanding of the issue. This could be done by adding anti-trafficking components to existing course curriculum or introducing courses dedicated to human trafficking.

6. Rapidly increase Saskatchewan’s non-market (public, social/community, and affordable) housing stock to make safe and secure housing more accessible.

Approximately 17% of renter households in Saskatchewan are in some form of subsidized housing (about 20,000 households).¹¹ It is a vital component of housing infrastructure that, in light of the rising cost of rental housing in the province,¹² is one of the few options available to people living with low incomes. Slow construction starts, complex and time-consuming eligibility and application requirements, and high vacancy rates in social housing buildings due to maintenance and repairs,¹³ have made non-market housing difficult to access.

In the last few years, the Government of Saskatchewan has invested time and money into increasing its supply of non-market housing. The *Saskatchewan Housing Action Plan 2022-25* includes capital improvements to community and social housing, the development of new affordable rental units, and supports for renters through funding programs such as the Shelter Enhancement Program and the Saskatchewan Housing Benefit.¹⁴ The 2024 Budget allocates \$93 million to the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation to repair and maintain existing units, prevent and reduce vacancies, and response to the increased demand for social housing.¹⁵ While maintaining existing units is a valuable commitment, the province should set a target to double its non-market housing stock to help bring Canada in line with the OECD’s average. This ambitious investment would address the growing needs of Saskatchewan generally, and human trafficking survivors specifically.¹⁶

7. Address components of the Saskatchewan Income Support Program (SIS) that hinder access to income assistance and increase housing precarity for recipients.

The Saskatchewan Income Support Program (SIS) is a crucial part of the province’s social safety net for its most vulnerable residents, including human trafficking survivors. However, minimal increases in monthly rates (which do not reflect the actual cost of

living) and changes to its delivery have not resulted in lifting people out of poverty. Rather, recipients of SIS continue to struggle to make ends meet which increases their housing instability. To mitigate these issues, the province should:

- a) Increase the amount of shelter allowance to reflect the high cost of rent and utilities.** The Shelter Benefit for a single person in receipt of SIS ranges from \$590 to \$650 per month. This is intended to cover rent, utilities, and other shelter-related costs. By contrast, the province-wide average market rent for all unit sizes is \$1,178.¹⁷ To cover this difference, SIS recipients may have no other choice but to use their Basic Benefit of \$355 per month for housing costs rather than the living expenses for which it is intended (e.g. food, transportation, clothing, etc.). Unfortunately, in many cases, this is still not enough.
- b) Make direct deposit to landlords for payment of rent and utilities an option that all recipients of SIS can choose.** When the program was launched in 2019, this direct payment option was removed in order to support recipients' self-sufficiency and independence.¹⁸ However, stakeholders we spoke with maintained that this change led to an increase in evictions for non-payment of rent and prevented landlords from wanting to rent to SIS recipients. While direct payment is currently available to "clients with complex challenges,"¹⁹ it is at the discretion of those operating the program. Allowing all recipients of SIS to choose how to pay their rent would be a better way to promote self-sufficiency. Making this change also aligns with the findings and recommendations of the Provincial Auditor's 2023 report to the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan.²⁰
- c) Improve access to the program by reducing the government's use of the call centre system.** The current call system has been shown to result in high rates of unanswered calls.²¹ Offering residents direct communication with staff and case managers will help ensure that survivors have a clearer understanding of the program. It will also provide quicker and easier access to SIS.

Endnotes

- ¹ Heidinger, L. (2023). [Trafficking in persons in Canada, 2022](#). Juristat Bulletin – Quick Fact, Statistics Canada, p. 8.
- ² Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline Data. Date range is from May 29, 2019 (when the hotline was launched) to December 31, 2022. Signals include phone, webchat, email, and webform. Data collection is an important, but secondary, purpose of the hotline. Staff take a trauma-informed approach when engaging with signalers. This means that signalers are not asked probing questions and are not required to provide specific demographic or geographic information in order to receive service. For this reason, hotline data is subject to minor variances and likely underrepresents instances of trafficking in Canada.
- ³ [British Columbia](#), [Alberta](#), and [Ontario](#) all have provincial strategies to combat human trafficking as well dedicated offices to coordinate its anti-trafficking efforts. Ontario has also established a Human Trafficking Lived Experience Roundtable.
- ⁴ Polaris (2018, October 30). [The Role Domestic Violence Shelters Play in Supporting Human Trafficking Survivors](#). Retrieved May 2, 2024.
- ⁵ YWCA Halifax (2021). [A Review of Housing Practices for Victims of Human Trafficking](#), p. 13; Noble, A., Coplan, I., Neal, J., Suleiman, A., & McIntyre, S. (2020). [Getting out: A national framework for exiting human trafficking for sexual exploitation in Canada](#). Toronto, ON: Covenant House Toronto & The Hindsight Group, p. 62.
- ⁶ Statistics Canada. [Table 14-10-0353-01 Homeless shelter capacity, bed and shelter counts for emergency shelters, transitional housing and domestic violence shelters for Canada and provinces, Infrastructure Canada](#). Retrieved May 7, 2024.
- ⁷ In October 2023, the government announced its [Provincial Approach to Homelessness](#) which will create more supportive housing and emergency shelter spaces, including for those with complex needs. The [2024 Budget](#) allocated an additional \$16.7 million to do this (p. 24).
- ⁸ Grafton, E., Fletcher, A., Giesbrecht, C., and Marchment, T. (2023). [Addressing GBV in Saskatchewan through Second Stage Housing: Mitigating Public Policy Deficits to Enhance Safety for Survivors](#), p. 15.
- ⁹ Government of Saskatchewan (2024). [Budget 2024-25 Classrooms, Care & Communities](#), p. 15.
- ¹⁰ Polaris (2018, October 30). [The Role Domestic Violence Shelters Play in Supporting Human Trafficking Survivors](#). Retrieved May 2, 2024.
- ¹¹ Statistics Canada (2022). [Census Profile. 2021 Census of Population. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2021001](#). Ottawa. Retrieved May 7, 2024.
- ¹² Between October 2022 and 2023, the average market rents for all unit sizes increased by 9.3% across the province while vacancy rates decreased by 43%. [Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation Rental Market Survey, Saskatchewan, 2023](#). Retrieved June 7, 2024.
- ¹³ The high vacancy rate in social housing buildings was cited repeatedly by service provider and survivor stakeholders during consultations as a significant barrier to access.
- ¹⁴ Saskatchewan Housing Corporation and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. (2021). [The Saskatchewan Housing Action Plan 2022-2025](#), p. 3.
- ¹⁵ Government of Saskatchewan (2024). [Budget 2024-25 Classrooms, Care & Communities](#), p. 24.
- ¹⁶ Young, R. (2023). [Canadian Housing Affordability Hurts: A doubling of social housing stock could help those in greatest need](#). Scotiabank.
- ¹⁷ Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. (2024). [2023 Rental Market Survey, Saskatchewan](#). Retrieved June 7, 2024.
- ¹⁸ Government of Saskatchewan. [Saskatchewan Income Support \(SIS\)](#). Retrieved June 7, 2024.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Clemett, T. (2023). [2023 Report – Volume 1, Report of the Provincial Auditor to the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan, Chapter 7: Social Services – Delivering the Saskatchewan Income Support Program](#), pp. 101-125.

²¹ Ibid.