

# Solution: Time is Now, Community Advocacy Network

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## Introduction

We are a group of passionate women who have joined the Leadership Waterloo Region class of 2021 for varying and diverse reasons. We all come from a variety of backgrounds and lived experiences. Collectively, we have a united desire to advocate for equitable housing options for the most marginalized folks in our community. Our journey together allowed us to speak with a number of key informants so that we could gain a better understanding of the scope and depth of the growing housing crisis within the Waterloo Region.

Waterloo Region is in a housing crisis. With increased visible homelessness, over 6,200 people on the waitlist for affordable community housing, and 27,320 households currently paying more than 30% of their income on rental housing, action is imperative and innovative approaches are needed. (Housing Innovation Round Table Fall Report 2020 Region of Waterloo, Community Services)

In Ontario 21% of immigrants are more likely to be in a housing need than non-immigrants. In Waterloo Region, Indigenous people are 30% more likely to need housing than non-indigenous people. There are 30,000 households that are precariously housed in Waterloo Region. (10-year housing and homelessness plan. 5-year review Region of Waterloo Community Services)

Lack of public awareness and urgency to make bold changes causes the issue of Affordable Housing to persist. No one wants to fight against the flow of traffic to make change. All parties involved choose to play it safe, acknowledging that there is an issue, but not acting on it as an emergency situation. There are many steering committees and roundtable discussions, the government knows the problem exists, yet still just talks about it. The Region of Waterloo has the money to build alternative housing that is affordable. Waterloo Region has the opportunity to set the standard of housing solutions in the Province by creating innovative solutions to a complex problem, and yet very little movement is being made. We believe complacency needs to end.

“The challenge is how to increase the general public’s awareness about the work that is being done to advocate for the human right of affordable housing for all residents in Waterloo Region. People need to know that NOW is the time to take advantage of land, property and funding to assist with the need for affordable housing. The people in power need to be influenced by the masses to create systemic change. If more people are informed and advocating, maybe the government will alter the funding and availability of appropriate affordable housing in the region. We need a system that moves people along. There is a seven-year wait for affordable housing, one-year waitlist for Special Priority Status (SPS) and three-year wait for Escaping Violence Status (EVS). In addition, Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Plan (ODSP) do not provide enough money to pay rent and buy food”. (Melissa Bowman YIMBY 2021)

*“It is urgent to take action on affordable housing right now because the lack of affordable housing had already reached crisis level before the Pandemic. In 2020, COVID and the associated financial downturn made it even worse. If we don't intervene now, we are looking at Toronto-like lack of accessibility within 5-7 years. The need is urgent. The other thing that makes now the right moment to act is that we have a unique opportunity to make effective change in this moment. For one thing, the housing market itself is shifting in significant ways. A change in interest rates combined with a shift in the priorities of the Canada Mortgage and*

*Housing Corporation (CMHC) to support affordable housing both create the conditions for meaningful action to be effective. There is also unprecedented support for acting on this matter. The emergence of the social finance sector is part of this. Socially conscious investors and funds have money ready to invest if we have the vision to lead it and show what could be possible. In Waterloo Region, local leadership is also making this issue a priority. Kitchener, Cambridge, and now Waterloo have all identified the pressing need to address the housing crisis. In short, the urgency is high because we are in a moment where need meets opportunity. There is political will, good market conditions. Soon interest rates will change and other matters might become political priorities, but right now these factors have arranged into the perfect storm to create meaningful change.” - Erica Robinson, Housing Innovation Round Table*

### **Who We Spoke To**

Melissa Bowman - Yes in My Backyard  
Nadine Green, Alvin Odea - A Better Tent City  
Laura Hamilton - Social Development Centre  
Lesley Crompton- Social Development Centre  
Pam Fehr - Catalyst for Housing Round Table  
Jessica Bondy - House of Friendship  
Erica Robinson – Housing Innovation Round Table  
Ryan Pettipiere – Region of Waterloo  
Chris Morton - Kitchener Downtown Community Health Centre  
Councillor Jim Erb – Region of Waterloo

### **Other Resources**

There are several additional examples of historical figures who have helped to shape and shift societal values and freedoms of marginalized folks. While there are too many to discuss within this report, here are only a few:

**Mahatma Gandhi** was the leader of India's non-violent independence movement against British rule and in South Africa who advocated for the civil rights of Indians. He is also referred to as the “Father of the Nation” by Indians. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahatma\\_Gandhi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahatma_Gandhi))

**Martin Luther King** was a leader who expanded the civil rights movement. His ideals and practical techniques were inspired from the work of Gandhi. King traveled over six million miles and spoke over twenty-five hundred times, appearing wherever there was injustice, protest, and action. In these years, he led a massive protest in Birmingham, Alabama, that caught the attention of the entire world, became not only the symbolic leader of American black folks but also a world figure. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin\\_Luther\\_King\\_Jr](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther_King_Jr).

Sometimes referred to as the next Gandhi, **Erica Chenoweth** is a Professor of the First Amendment at Harvard Kennedy School and at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. She leads the Nonviolent Action Lab at Harvard’s Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, studying political violence and its alternatives of nonviolent resistance. Her team compared over 200 violent revolutions and over 100 nonviolent campaigns. Results show that 26% of the violent revolutions were successful, while 53% of the nonviolent campaigns succeeded, suggesting that nonviolence promotes democracy while violence promotes dictatorship. Research data proved that every campaign that got active non-

violent participation from at least 3.5 percent of the population succeeded, and many succeeded with less. (<https://www.ericachenoweth.com/>)

## **What We Learned**

There are numerous people and organizations advocating for changes to Affordable Housing in Waterloo Region, however, it is unclear who the key informants are and who is doing what. There are so many variants involved in this issue; disability, newcomers, indigenous, aging seniors, homeless, precariously housed; to name a few. There appears to be little organization of all the key players advocating for changes to Affordable Housing and limited collaboration on the actions being taken.

We have seen advocacy efforts furthering many causes. The network of strong community leaders is the most influential and effective method to generate support of policy makers and leaders at all levels of the government.

Our team is focused on fostering a strong case for people struggling with housing challenges, and our efforts are focused on helping solve this issue. In collaboration with community leaders, we are hoping to successfully lobby this issue. To effectively prove our case, we have narrowed some key efforts in our Region that recently succeeded due to advocacy efforts:

- Constant Advocacy efforts to broaden Highway 7 between Kitchener & Guelph has reaped results after 5 years and was finally accepted earlier this year.
- Two-Way, All-Day GO service to help connect the corridor from Toronto to Waterloo region is supported by Manulife, Sunlife, Region of Waterloo, Universities, and all Chambers. This will help growth and job opportunities.
- Ion is the result of constant advocacy efforts for 10 years.

All the above points are examples of successful advocacy efforts by our community leaders. We are very sure that with this approach we will be able to have our voice heard with respect to increase affordable housing options in Waterloo Region.

## **Challenges**

Covid 19 has shown the Region that there is a great need for housing for all. Shelters are not the answer since they lack the ability to house everyone with significant individual issues. Many agencies realize that they need to work together since their clients overlap the services provided. On April 15<sup>th</sup> 2020, a broad cross-section of unsheltered people, service providers, community members, Regional staff and concerned citizens gathered to discuss the potential of creating a better tent city at Lot42. This resulted in the creation of a small self-organized community of people built on respect for each other and for their shared home.

A Better Tent City (ABTC) began as a low barrier/housing first approach to provide:

- an opportunity to move unsheltered people from dangerous conditions on the streets into a more safe and supportive community
- protection from the environment, adequate access to hygiene and sanitation facilities, and connection to services and healthcare on a path to stable housing

## **Positive Outcomes**

As ABTC has grown over the last year, it has surpassed the original goals and it has demonstrated significant positive outcomes in the first year of operations by:

- changing residents' lives for the better:
  - as they keep themselves and their belongings safely indoors ABTC residents no longer worry about frequent moves and the dangers inherent in living rough; they have a home
  - with access to a kitchen, whole, healthy food, and opportunities to contribute to collaboratively prepared evening meals residents are healthier, have an increased sense of well-being and belonging
    - regular visits and support from community health and outreach workers have further improved residents' health and connection to broader supports in the community
    - an on-site addiction treatment program is now supporting over 30% of ABTC residents to stabilize their lives enabling them to attend school and find and maintain jobs
    - paying residents to complete tasks necessary to maintain the space has increased dignity and self-worth and reduced theft in the community
    - creating a meaningful learning opportunity to document and continuously improve encampments for the unsheltered in our region and across the country:
    - jurisdictions from across North America have reached out to learn from the experiences at ABTC
    - advice and experience from ABTC have supported comparable initiatives across Ontario and as far away as Vancouver Island.

Despite all the current advocacy efforts, discrimination still exists even in projects like A Better Tent City (ABTC) that are established to support the people facing homelessness. This community is working with assistance from Fr. Toby Collins, CR (Pastor, St. Mary's Parish)

Stephanie and Joe Mancini (The Working Centre), Jeff Willmer (retired CAO of the City of Kitchener), Laura Hamilton and Aleksandra Petrovic (Social Development Centre WR) providing food, shelter, counselling, medical assistance, friendship and support.

Lack of awareness and urgency to make bold changes causes the issue of AH to persist. No one appears to want to fight against the flow of traffic to make change. All parties involved choose to play it safe, acknowledging that there is an issue but not acting on it as an emergency situation.

Landlords and builders continue to benefit from this ongoing challenge if it persists.

*"If affordable housing is not created and sustained in Waterloo Region, we are looking at Toronto-like lack of accessibility within 5-7 years. More people will be unable to afford housing and will end up homeless. More people will be priced out of the buying market. In general, the standard of living or accessibility will be lower as people are able to afford less and less after paying their rent/mortgage. In the broader sense, not acting will move us backwards as a community. It would make the city less accessible to live in, create more separation between those who can afford homes and those who cannot, worsen the effects of wealth disparity, and make the community less resilient to economic challenges and downturn." - Erica Robinson, Housing Innovation Round Table*

## What is Missing

**A collaborative wholistic response to affordable housing that is focused on community health and wellness vs the bottom line.**

*Public-private partnerships to make long-term affordable housing. What often happens is that developments include a time-bound contract to supply affordable housing for ~10 years or so. After that the prices go up. Developers haven't had the incentives to make it a priority in new developments, but the change in CMHC priorities and interest rates could change this. They need local leadership to lead the way/join them at the table. Urban village developments that are designed to be affordable at every level - not just in unit price but in lifestyle as well. Federal, provincial, municipal and non-profit partnerships to create a self-sustaining not-for-profit housing system. We need a comprehensive, unified strategy where all the players come together to coordinate effective + sustainable measures. If all players were at the table talking to each other, we could build a more public, inclusive conversation that has the chance to shape how we understand the problem and establish priorities and plans for the future. - We would benefit from a more holistic vision for the housing sector that prioritizes community rather than units and is aimed at building wealth for the whole community by ensuring affordability for generations to come." - Erica Robinson, Housing Innovation Round Table*

## Proposed Solution

Our proposed solution is to behove the policy makers and leaders in the community to respond to a **Call to Action for an equitable framework for Affordable Housing** within our community.

The terms of this Call to Action for an Affordable Housing Framework are as follows:

- 1) Local municipal and regional leadership will establish a *collaborative action oriented working group* which will include developers, grass roots organizations, advocates from organizations such as “Yes in my Backyard”, and a diverse group of persons with lived experience i.e., persons with disabilities, seniors, individuals identifying LGBTQIA+, as well as Black Indigenous and Racialized individuals.
- 2) This collaborative working group will engage in a more public and inclusive conversation that will shape how we understand the Affordable Housing problem and establish plans for the future.
- 3) This collaborative action oriented working group will capitalize on the current CMHC priorities and low interest rates, to help developers understand why the TIME IS NOW to make Affordable Housing a priority in this region.
- 4) This collaborative action oriented working group will develop a charter with agreed upon conduct and commitment to ACTION.
- 5) By December 31, 2021 this collaborative action oriented working group will establish 3 options for a sustainable long-term not-for profit affordable housing system.
- 6) By April 1, 2022 this action oriented working group will decide on which options the region will move forward with by April 1, 2022.
- 7) Action toward building our new sustainable long-term not-for profit Affordable Housing system will begin within the first quarter of the 2022 fiscal year (April 1 to June 30, 2022).

**Class of 2021 Affordable Housing Solutions Lab:  
Time is Now, Community Advocacy Network**



We all need to care and find an intentional way to support affordable housing and when we do that change will happen. Whether you work to help support the current grass roots agencies already established in Kitchener-Waterloo, volunteer your time to sit on a board of directors or use your time to work frontline to help those precariously housed. You will make a difference in your community. Set up food coolers on your front lawn for those who can afford shelter but not food, organize a non-violent protest to let the government know that now is the time to actually do something to assist all community members that can not afford a home.