A PLACE CALLED

Home

Preventing & Ending Women-led
Family Homelessness in
St. Thomas-Elgin

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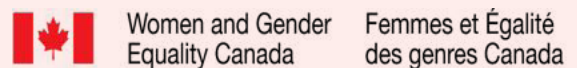
This report impacts women-led family households served in the City of St. Thomas and Elgin County.

Authorship

This report was prepared by OrgCode Consulting Inc. using insights, themes and analysis generated in its work with the YWCA St Thomas-Elgin's Women and Family Housing Stability Advisory Group, its community partners and families with lived/living experience. Errors and omissions in the analysis and insights contained in the report are the responsibility of OrgCode Consulting Inc.

Women and Family Housing Stability Advisory Group Members include:
Salvation Army
Elgin Middlesex Detention Centre, Social Work & Rehabilitative Services
St Thomas-Elgin General Hospital
Oneida Family Healing Lodge
The INN St. Thomas-Elgin
St. Thomas Elgin Social Services
Southwestern Public Health
YWCA St. Thomas-Elgin
CMHA Thames Valley Addiction and Mental Health Services
St. Thomas Police Service
Fresh Start Support Services
Victim Services Elgin
Elgin-Oxford Legal Clinic
Family and Children's Services of St. Thomas-Elgin
Second Stage Housing
Assertive Community Treatment Team 1 Elgin (Act 1)
Violence Against Women Services Elgin County
West Elgin Community Health Centre
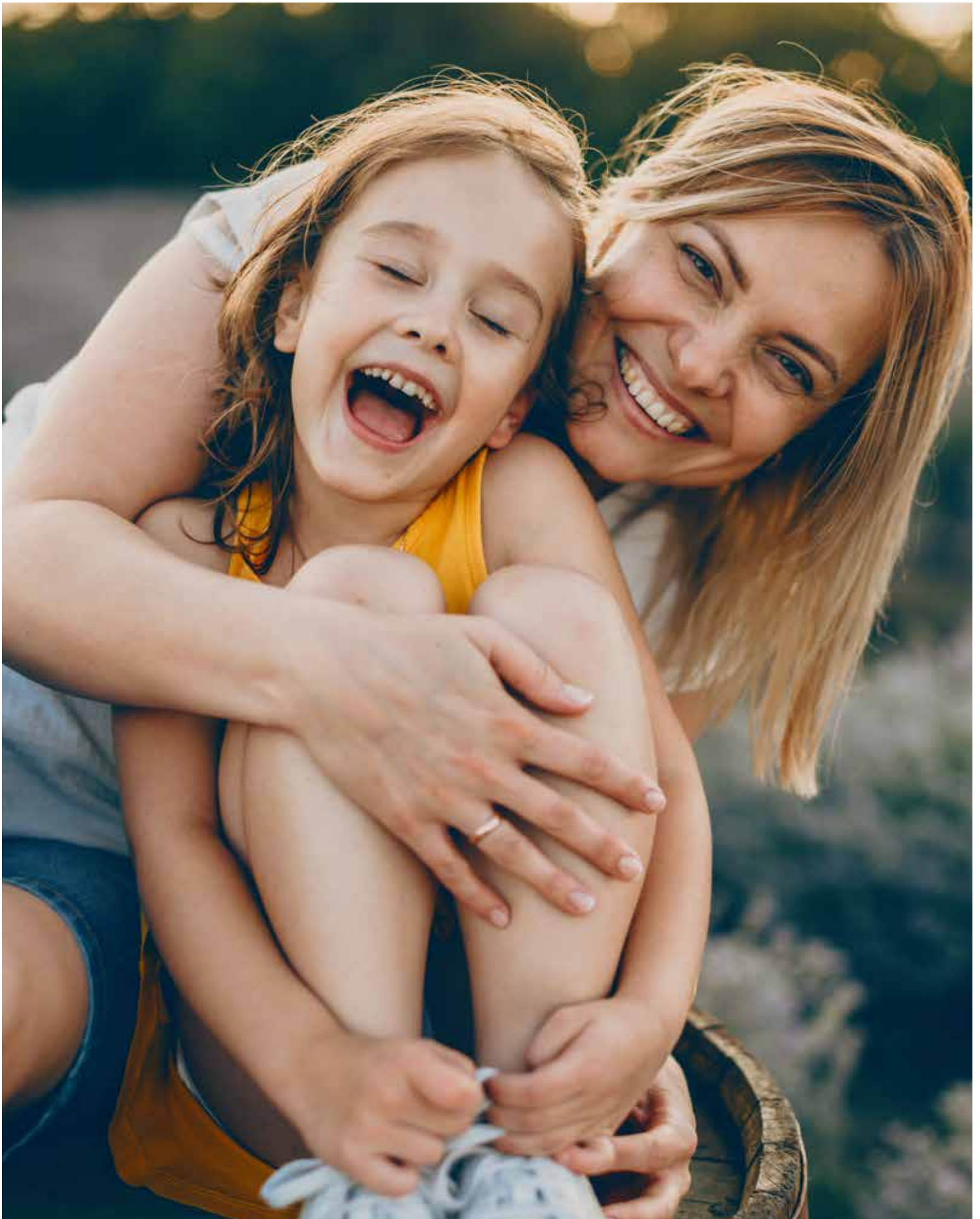Central Community Health Centre

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INTRODUCTION

When community members discuss homelessness rarely do they consider families with dependents that may be living each day without knowing where they may be sleeping tonight. This gap in knowledge about family homelessness often exists because families across Canada often experience hidden homelessness – staying with friends, family members, doubled up without legal tenure to the housing, and in unsafe and sometimes violent housing situations. Although some families experiencing homelessness in Canada can receive support via family shelters, only 10% of available shelter beds across the country are dedicated to families with children[29]. This leaves many families seeking shelter in temporary locations and experiencing a transient lifestyle that disrupts their physical and emotional wellness, the connection to schools for their children, and sense of safety. Research into and analysis of policy implications on family homelessness, especially in women-led families, is also limited. However, it is also clear that if communities and provinces can effectively meet the housing and support needs of mothers and their children as well as families, disrupting the intergenerational experience of homelessness of all people can occur.

For the community partners of St. Thomas-Elgin, enhanced understanding of and services for families experiencing housing precarity, housing crises, and homelessness has been identified as the next round of specialized research and service enhancements receiving attention. With the support of Women and Gender Equality Canada, the YWCA of St. Thomas-Elgin and its community partners have embarked on a four-year initiative to improve the local understanding of family homelessness, create a pathway to improve service coordination and service excellence to benefit families experiencing homelessness and housing crises and evaluate their efforts to positively impact family housing stability and reduce the occurrence of family homelessness.

As a Built for Zero Canada community, St. Thomas-Elgin partners are actively involved in identifying, assessing, and prioritizing households experiencing homelessness locally. However, it must be recognized that work is needed to ensure that the prevalence and reality of family homelessness is fully understood. Low vacancy rates (hovering at an unhealthy 1% within the City of St. Thomas[30]), the limited and unaffordable housing stock in both the City and County, the rate of poverty (1 in 5 children live below the poverty line[31]), the woefully inadequate income assistance rates and the challenges in responding to homelessness and housing needs of local families, addressing family homelessness must be prioritized by the City and the County.

Recent Homelessness Enumeration initiatives verified that family homelessness does indeed exist in St. Thomas-Elgin. The 2021 Count identified 10 families (12 adults + 21 children) were experiencing homelessness on September 29, 2021. Representing 24% of the population experiencing homelessness during the Count, 90% of these households were staying in Transitional Housing and the remaining family was staying with family/friends. The 2021 Count however did not include the number of women-led families attached to the Violence Against Women shelter. Given the 2018 Count summary that included 17 VAW households, the inclusion of the 2021 statistics would have likely demonstrated an increase in the overall understanding of family homelessness locally. Recognizing that both family homelessness and rural homelessness is often invisible or hidden (and therefore not easily captured during Point in Time initiatives), it is expected the scope and prevalence of the number of families experiencing homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin is currently underestimated.

This current report completed in May 2022 outlines the research regarding family homelessness, current resources, and activities as well as evidence-informed recommendations to enhance family-centred approaches to preventing and reducing family homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin. The available research into family homelessness is outlined in Section One, Section Two examines the realities and voices of families experiencing housing instability and homelessness locally and Section Three provides insights into the realities of services and supports gathered from local Service Providers. Section Four of this report identifies the recommendations for service enhancements, policies, approaches, and partnerships dedicated to preventing and reducing family homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin.

29   Employment and Social Development Canada. (2019a). *Highlights of the National Shelter Study 2005 to 2016*. Ottawa. Retrieved from **https://www.canada.ca**

30   CMHC Rental Market Report 2020. Retrieved from https://goodmanreport.com/app/uploads/2021/01/CMHC_2020_rental-market-report-69720-2020-en.pdf

31   United Way Elgin Middlesex sourced via https://unitedwayem.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FactsSheet-Elgin-FINAL.pdf

What We Know About Women-led Family Homelessness

Throughout Canada, homelessness is understood to be a complex social issue impacting hundreds of thousands of households each night. As a complex issue, it is also recognized that solving homelessness will require a systems approach that transcends the resources, policies, and realities of any one sector of service, government department, or social service approach. When examining family homelessness, however, the level of collaboration required by various sectors, mandates, funding sources, and policy areas creates unique challenges and opportunities. Obviously, to overcome many of the structural and systemic causes of family homelessness, collaboration will be required between housing, homelessness, child and family services, income support, violence against women providers, and health and justice sectors in a quest to eliminate the inherent discriminations, biases, and stigmas that govern our policies, practices, and approaches. Although the task of preventing and reducing family homelessness can appear to be impossible, community-based approaches that incorporate the voices and realities of families within collaborative and innovative initiatives dedicated to housing and appropriate supports holds the keys to success and housing stability.

Limited data is available on family homelessness in Canada. However, beyond their vulnerability to housing precarity due to economic poverty and lack of investment in affordable and appropriate housing, it is recognized that families experiencing homelessness are not a homogenous group[32]. Each household has its own unique strengths, areas of resilience, and life challenges. In understanding family homelessness, it is certainly possible to explore the following three risk factors and the interaction between them:

I. Structural Factors Impacting Family Homelessness

It is believed that structural factors create the greatest causes of family home-lessness in Canada. The following provides some of the realities that families face daily.

POVERTY: Inadequate income assistance, a minimum wage instead of a living wage and the high cost of childcare continue to provide immense economic pressures on low-income and marginalized families, increasing their risk of entering homelessness. The feminization of poverty makes it extremely difficult for many women-led families to afford rent and other necessities[33]. Since poverty and income inequity is also experienced along with racial realities, racialized families (Black, Indigenous, and people of

> "Shamefully, child poverty affects families who are Indigenous, racialized, recent immigrants, affected by disability or led by a female lone parent in disproportionate numbers."
>
> Source: Campaign 2000: End Child and Family Poverty, 2015, p. 3.

colour) are at a heightened risk for poverty and all the health, housing, and wellness risks associated with this public health and social issue[34].

With 42% of children in women-led, lone-parent families and 40% of all Indigenous children living below the poverty line in Canada[35], inadequate financial resources also limit sustainable housing options for families as they work to escape the trauma of homelessness.

LACK OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING: In addition to income shortfalls, the lack of investment in affordable and social housing in Canada in recent decades has created an additional structural threat for family homelessness. Many

32   Gaetz, S., Scott, F. & Gulliver, T. (2013). *Housing First in Canada: Supporting Communities to End Homelessness.* Toronto: Homeless Hub Press.

33   Van Berkum, A., & Oudshoorn, A. (2015). *Best practice guidelines for ending women's and girls' homelessness.* Ottawa: Homelessness Partnering Strategy. Retrieved from **https://www.abeoudshoorn.com**

34   Schwan, K., Versteegh, A., Perri, M., Caplan, R., Baig, K., Dej, E., Jenkinson, J., Brais, H., Eiboff, F., & Pahlevan Chaleshtari, T. (2020). *The State of Women's Housing Need & Homelessness in Canada: A Literature Review*. Hache, A., Nelson, A., Kratochvil, E., & Malenfant, J. (Eds). Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

35   Canadian Women's Foundation. (2018). *The facts about women and poverty in Canada.* Retrieved from **https://www.canadianwomen.org/the-facts/womens-poverty/**

families are forced to live in overcrowded, sub-standard housing and regularly make the choice between paying the rent and feeding their children. According to Statistics Canada (2019), housing precarity is dire for women-led households with 28% living in core housing need (compared to 16% of their male-led households) and an additional 35% of women-led households living in below standard housing[36]. In fact, research indicates that single mothers are at much greater risk of socio-economic marginalization[37] and experience higher levels of core housing needs compared to other groups[38].

Beyond being a cause of family homelessness, lack of appropriate, affordable, and sustainable housing also creates a primary barrier to leaving homelessness[39]. The lack of transitional and supportive housing options for families, long waitlists for the community, and rent-geared-to-income housing programs across the country ensure that housing precarity for families, especially women-led families continue[40]. Insufficient rental allowances in income assistance programs continue to further jeopardize the journey back to housing stability for families and create situations where parents and their families experience the health and wellness issues attributed to such trauma as poverty and housing precarity.

FAMILY AND INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE: In addition to economic poverty and deprivation of affordable housing, exposure to abuse and trauma is the root cause for most women and women-led families in Canada[41]. The interplay between homelessness and violence – as both cause and consequence – must be understood. Due to economic poverty, families, especially women-led families, are also more likely to experience environmental risks including violence, abuse, and exploitation[42]. For many families facing family violence, the desire for a stable home and reduced disruptions for their children as well as the fear of losing custody of their children may increase the pressure to stay or return to an unsafe situation[43]. For families that leave situations of intimate partner violence, housing stability and safety may not be imminent.

VIOLENCE is a cause and a consequence of **HOMELESSNESS**

HOMELESSNESS is a cause and a consequence of **VIOLENCE**

36   Statistics Canada. (2019a). *First results from the Canadian Housing Survey, 2018*. Retrieved from **https://www150. statcan.gc.ca**
37   Fotheringham, S., Walsh, C. A., & Burrowes, A. (2014). *'A place to rest': the role of transitional housing in ending homelessness for women in Calgary*, Canada. Gender, Place & Culture, 21(7), 834-853.
38   Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. (2019). *Core Housing Need Data — By the Numbers*. CMHC – SCHL. Retrieved **from https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/data-and-research/core-housing-need/core-housing- need-data-by-the-numbers**
39   Milaney, K., Ramage, K., Fang, X. Y., & Louis, M. (2017). *Understanding mothers experiencing homelessness: A gendered approach to finding solutions for family homelessness*. Retrieved from **https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/Family_Homelessness_Report.pdf**
40   Gulliver-Garcia, T. (2016). *Putting an end to child homelessness in Canada*. Retrieved from **http://www. raisingtheroof.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/10/CF- Report-Final.pdf**
41   Schwan, K., Versteegh, A., Perri, M., Caplan, R., Baig, K., Dej, E., Jenkinson, J., Brais, H., Eiboff, F., & Pahlevan Chaleshtari, T. (2020). *The State of Women's Housing Need & Homelessness in Canada: A Literature Review*. Hache, A., Nelson, A., Kratochvil, E., & Malenfant, J. (Eds). Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.
42   Duff P, Deering K, Gibson K, Tyndall M, Shannon K. *Homelessness among a cohort of women in street-based sex work: the need for safer environment interventions.* BMC Public Health. 2011;11(1):643.
43   Benbow, S., Forchuk, C., Berman, H., Gorlick, C., & Ward-Griffin, C. (2018). *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research,* 0(0), 1-11.

"Canadian shelter data identified that 90% of families using shelters are led by women, yet only 10% of all shelter spaces are dedicated to serving families."

II. Systemic Failures

DEFINITION, MEASUREMENT, AND IMPACT OF FAMILY HOMELESSNESS: How we define, measure and track homelessness incidents and prevalence complicate our understanding of the scope and depth of family homelessness. For example, Canada's National Shelter Survey does not gather information on motel vouchers which are often used as emergency housing options by communities, given the few family shelter beds available in the country. Also, it must be recognized that research into the homelessness of mothers is critical for understanding intergenerational and chronic homelessness. A 2011 research project in the United States demonstrated that a child born into homelessness is at risk of entering the homelessness system later in life[44]. In Canada, the 2018 national Point-in-Time

count data indicated that 50% of chronically homeless adults became homeless for the first time before the age of 25[45]. (This suggests that *chronic homelessness, adult homelessness, and intergenerational homelessness are linked to experiences of homelessness during childhood and youth, which in turn are inseparable from the experiences of mothers*[46].)

LACK OF FAMILY-CENTRED EMERGENCY SHELTER OPTIONS: Canadian shelter data identified that 90% of families using shelters are led by women[47], yet only 10% of all shelter spaces are dedicated to serving families[48]. Even within housing focused and family-centred shelters, escaping homelessness is further complicated since households must consider additional factors such as
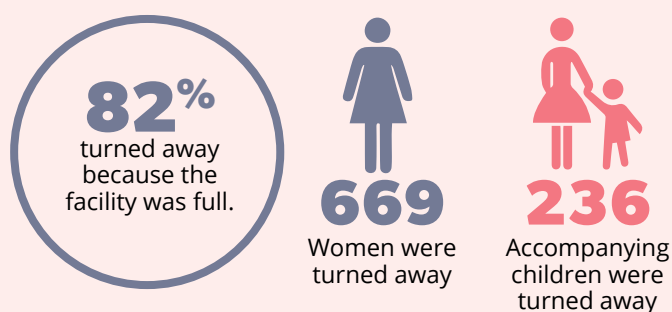
Women & Children Turned Away
from VAW Shelters on Snapshot Day (April 8, 2018)

82% turned away because the facility was full.

669 Women were turned away

236 Accompanying children were turned away

neighbourhood safety, proximity to children's schools, local day care and employment options, etc.[49]. For many women-led, lone parent families, fears of losing their children due to child protection concerns and the discrimination faced by homeless mothers create a barrier to accessing emergency shelters throughout the country, when such resources exist.

It is no surprise that both family shelters and Violence Against Women (VAW) shelters are consistently operating at full capacity with many women and children being turned away from shelters every day due to lack of space[50].

In addition to the lack of women-centred trauma-informed housing services and family-specific homelessness services, there is also a severe lack of supports for gender non-conforming and LGBTQ2S+ people within both the VAW and the homelessness services sectors, with only 53% of all VAW shelters in Canada in 2019 identifying that they provide supports to gender non-conforming peoples fleeing intimate partner violence[51]. The prevalence of family and intimate partner violence as a cause of family homelessness demands that both community-based emergency shelters and VAW shelters coordinate and collaborate to ensure that all families have access to safe, appropriate housing opportunities and the supports required to maintain stability in the community.

44   Crawford, D. M., Trotter, E. C., Sittner Hartshorn, K. J., & Whitbeck, L. B. (2011). *Pregnancy and mental health of young homeless women.* American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 81(2), 173-183.
45   Employment and Social Development Canada. (2019b). *Everyone Counts 2018: Highlights – Preliminary Results from the Second Nationally Coordinated Point-in-Time Count of Homelessness in Canadian Communities.* ESDC. Retrieved from **https://www.canada.ca**
46   Schwan et.al (2020), page 83.
47   ESDC (2017)
48   Schwan et.al. (2020), page 82.
49   McInnes, S. (2016). *4 things to know about women and homelessness in Canada.* Retrieved from **http://behindthenumbers.ca/2016/08/17/4-things-to-know-about-women-and-homelessness-in-canada/**
50   Statistics Canada (2019b) as cited in Schwan et. al (2020), page 11.
51   Statistics Canada (2019b), as cited in Schwan et.al. (2020), page 23.

CHILDCARE RESPONSIBILITIES AND LACK OF ACCESS: Childcare responsibilities continue to primarily rest on women within a family. Therefore, the lack of access to affordable childcare is an important factor to consider as both a contributing risk factor for family homelessness and a subsequent barrier for families escaping homelessness and trying to return to the community[52]. Lack of childcare and child-friendly services can make it difficult to locate and access housing and appropriate supports for mothers.

SILOED SYSTEMS NEGATIVELY IMPACT FAMILIES: The lack of sys-tems integration takes a toll on families and not only increases their risk of homelessness but can also increase the challenges related to escaping homelessness. If systems and sectors continue to operate in siloes, families remain at a heightened risk of "falling through the cracks" and not getting their housing and support needs met. Inadequate discharge planning from systems such as health care and justice can lead to adults and their children being discharged into housing precarity and/or homelessness. Without integrated system planning dedicated to keeping families together during the transition back to housing stability, a return to safety, stability and wellness is diminished for all members of the household. Systems approaches to pre-venting and ending family homelessness include coordinated access, system navigation strategies, case conferencing, and shared case planning. While there may be privacy hurdles that need to be overcome, having a family-centred approach to care within communities and across systems makes sense and proves to be a valuable investment[53].

CHILD WELFARE INVOLVEMENT: Linkages between child welfare involvement and homelessness are well documented in Canada. People that had previous involvement with child welfare and foster care systems are at a heightened risk of experiencing homelessness[54]. For many families across Canada, fear of using shelters due to mandatory reporting legislation, which may

lead to child(ren) apprehension decreases safe options when faced with a housing crisis and increases the risk of families staying in unsafe conditions. Recent research with families has demonstrated how child welfare policies and practices can contribute to cycles of inequity, marginalization, and homelessness in the lives of women, girls, and gender-diverse peoples[55].

When examining the interplay between child welfare involvement and the experience of family homelessness, it must also be recognized that child welfare involvement and apprehension is significantly higher among Indigenous families and families of African descent across Canada[56]. Experiences in care, and outcomes after care, are often worse for families, women, girls, and gender diverse peoples that identify as Indigenous and of African descent.

52   Gulliver-Garcia, T. (2016).
53   Gulliver-Garcia, T. (2016).
54   Gaetz et. al. (2016)
55   Martin, C. M. & Walia, H. (2019). *Red women rising: Indigenous women survivors in Vancouver's downtown eastside*. Retrieved from **http://dewc.ca**
56   Sources for the statistics include Public Health Agency of Canada, 2008; Government of Canada, 2018, OACAS, 2016; CASW, 2018; King et al., 2017 as cited in Schwann et. al (2020), page 96.

III. Individual and Relational Factors

Individual and relational factors encompass the unique circumstances and realities of the families that may result in them being at higher risk of experiencing homelessness. For example, these individual factors can include poor health or a disability for any member of the family, being racialized and therefore at higher risk of experiencing systemic discrimination and community exclusion, behavioural health risks such as compromised mental wellness or substance use concerns (or being the child of someone with such health concerns), exposure to trauma, abuse or exploitation (including economic poverty, intimate partners or family violence victim or witness, family breakdown, etc.), loss of employment or education opportunities, loss of support networks, experiencing gender or racial inequities, etc. Once again, the interplay between such individual and relational factors and the experience of homelessness must be recognized. These individual and relational factors are both the cause and consequence of homelessness creating a cyclical experience of trauma, homelessness, powerlessness, and stigma for so many families and their children throughout Canada. Due to this, efforts to prevent family homelessness (and the resulting negative health, stability, and academic outcomes on children) must be amplified.

The Reality of Housing Instability and Homelessness for Women-led Families in St. Thomas-Elgin

From February 8 to March 28, 2022, 72 women-led families with lived/living experiences of housing instability and/or homelessness participated in a survey to investigate the realities for families in St. Thomas-Elgin County. This section of the report provides a summary of the insights provided by these family respondents.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESPONDENTS

Of the family respondents, 87.32% of respondents identified that they lived in the City of St. Thomas, 5.63% of respondents lived in Aylmer, 4.23% lived in Central Elgin and 1.41% lived in West Elgin.

AGE: Almost 36% of respondents were aged 25-34 years of age, 23% identified that they were between 35-44 years old, 19% identified that they were 18-24 years old, 13% identified they were 45-54 years of age and 9% were 55-64 years of age and 1 respondent was under the age of 18.

**Figure 1: Age of Survey Respondents with Lived Experience**

What is your age? (N=70)
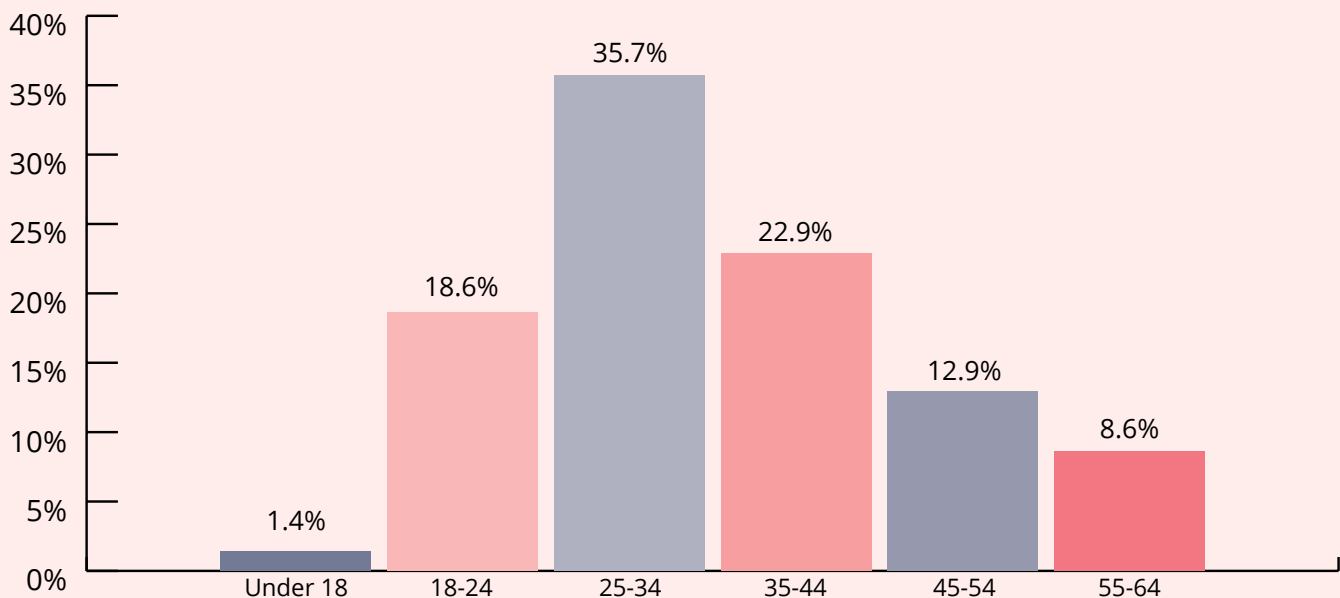
RACIAL IDENTITY: Almost 88% of all family respondents identified that their racial identity was White, 6% identified as Indigenous, approximately 1% identified as Black/Brown, Mixed Race, Person of Colour, and Other: West Indian.

Figure 2: Racial Identity of Survey Respondents

## Which of the following best describes your racial identity? (N=72)
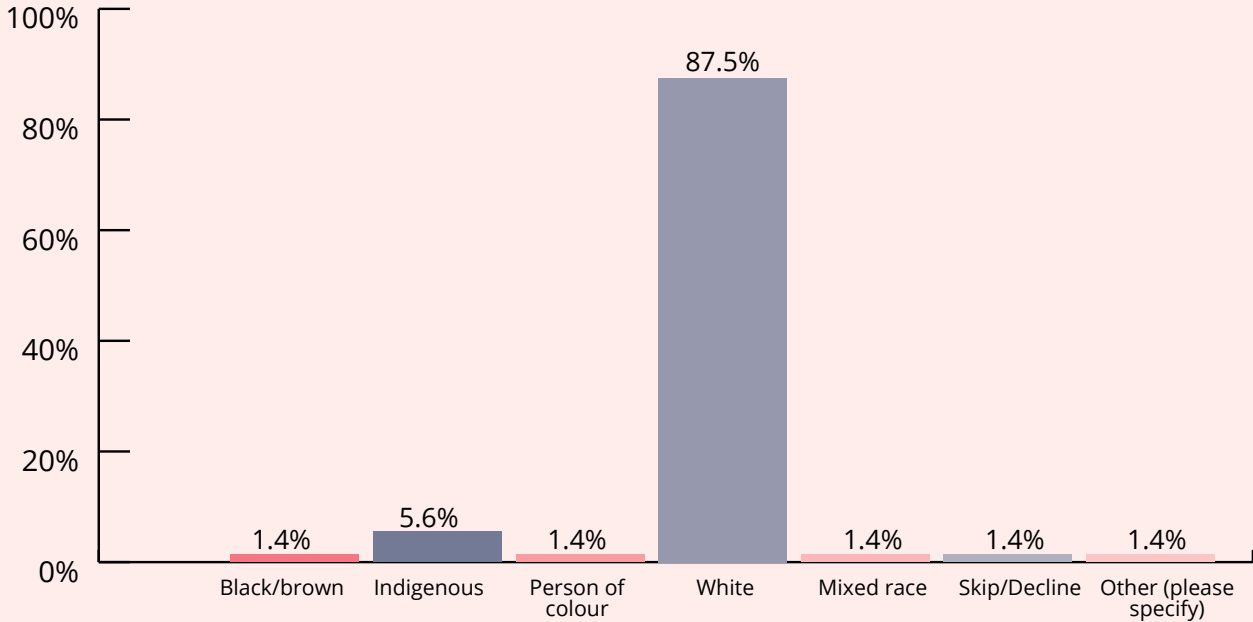
GENDER: Of the 72 respondents, 3 (4%) identified as Male, 65 (90%) identified as Female, 1 respondent identified as Non-Binary, 2 identified as Gender Fluid and 1 declined to answer the question.

LGBTQ2S+: Twelve respondents (17%) identified as LGBTQ2S+, 55 (76%) did not identify as LGBTQ2S+ and 4 declined to answer.

CHILDREN: 51% of respondents identified that their children live with them currently, 19% have children but they do not live in the household and 23% of the respondents do not have children. Five respondents that identified "other" response, clarified that their children are grown, have shared custody arrangements with partners, etc.

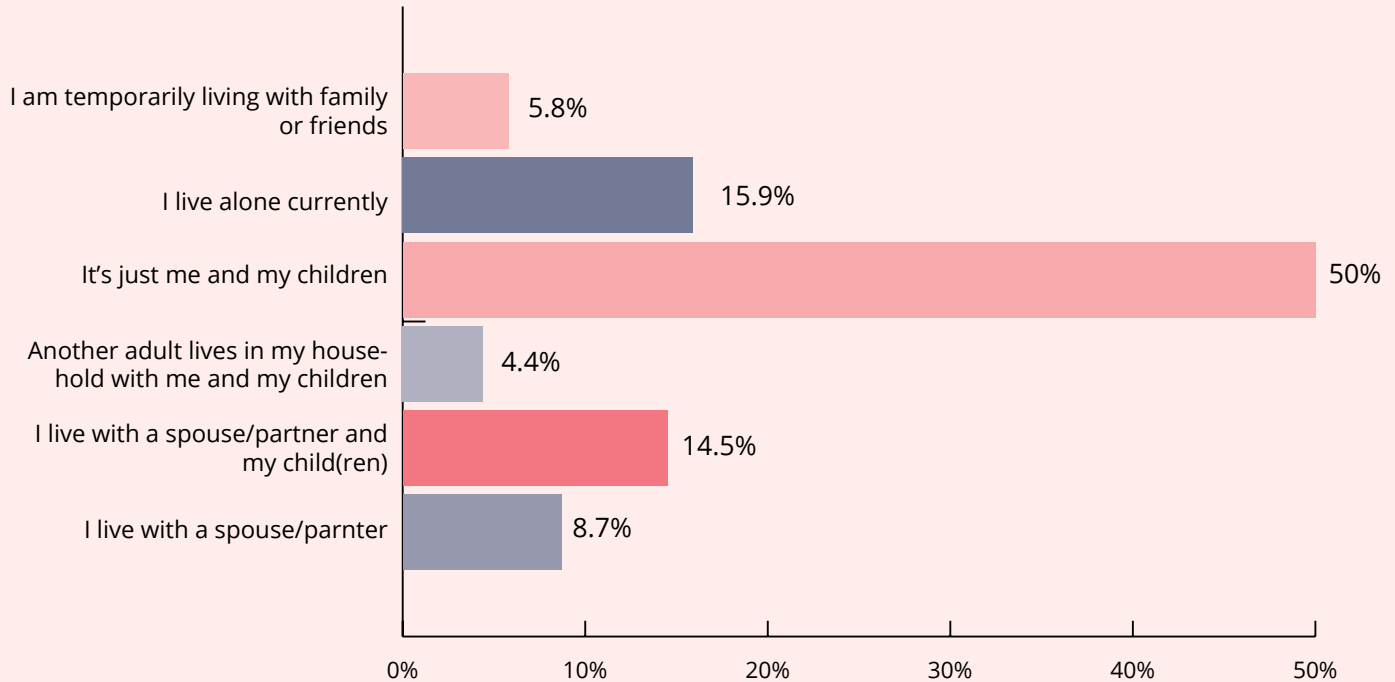**Figure 3: Presence of Children within the Households**

Do you have children? (N=70)
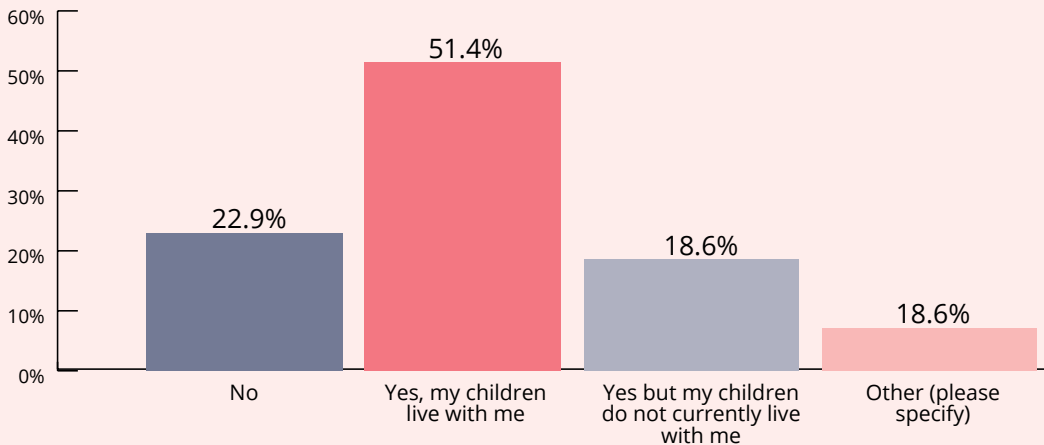
HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION: Fifty percent of the survey respondents live with their children, 15% live with their spouse/partner and their children, 9% live with their spouse/partner and no children, 16% live alone and 6% of respondents and their children live temporarily with family or friends.

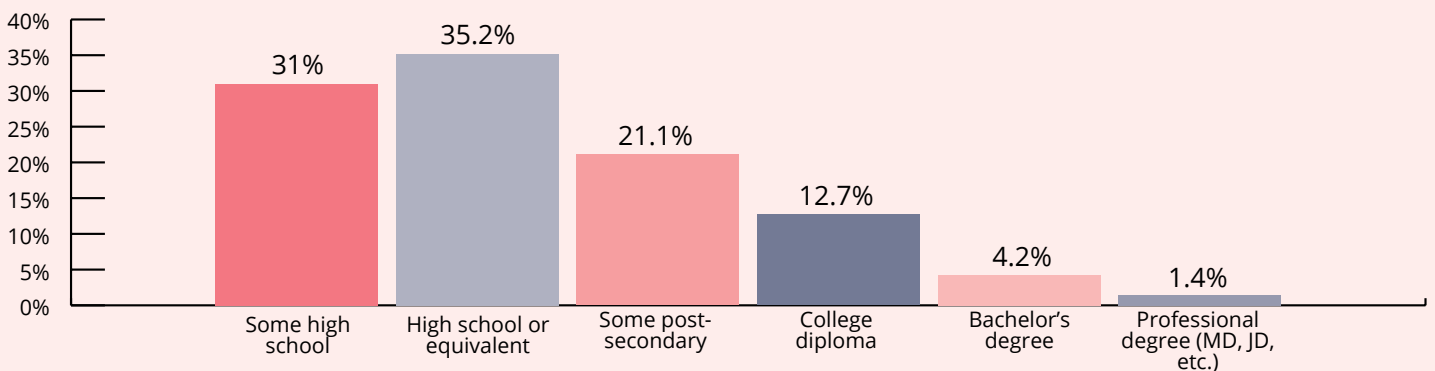**Figure 4: Household Composition for Survey Respondents**

Tell us a little about your household/family. (N=69)

Category	Percentage
I am temporarily living with family or friends	5.8%
I live alone currently	15.9%
It's just me and my children	50%
Another adult lives in my household with me and my children	4.4%
I live with a spouse/partner and my child(ren)	14.5%
I live with a spouse/parnter	8.7%

EDUCATION: Many respondents have some high school (31%), or high school diploma or equivalent (35%), 21% identified having some post-secondary, 13% achieved a college diploma, 4% achieved a bachelor's degree and 1 respondent identified having a professional degree.

Figure 5: What is the Highest Level of Education of Survey Respondents

Highest Level of Education Identified? (N=71)

Education level	Percentage
Some high school	31%
High school or equivalent	35.2%
Some post-secondary	21.1%
College diploma	12.7%
Bachelor's degree	4.2%
Professional degree (MD, JD, etc.)	1.4%

INCOME: 50% of all 72 respondents identified receiving Ontario Works, 28% receive Child and Family Tax Benefit, 25% receive ODSP, 23% are employed (full time, part time or casual), 22% receive GST/HST refunds and 4% identified not having any income.

Figure 6: What are Your Sources of Income?

Sources of Income for Survey Respondents
[Select all that apply] (N=72)
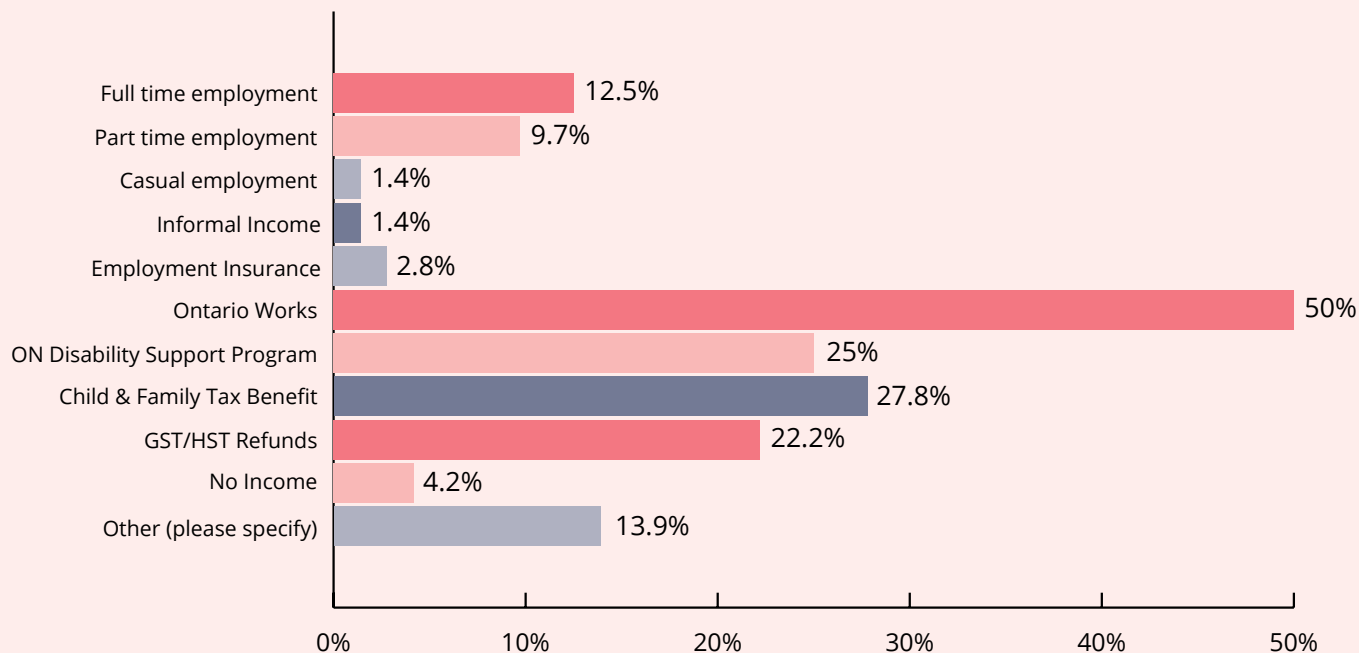
EXPERIENCE OF HOUSING INSECURITY AND/OR HOMELESSNESS

Of the 71 people that responded to the question about experiences of housing instability and/or homelessness, 87% identified that they/their family had experienced housing insecurity and/or homelessness in the past.

Figure 7: Experience with Housing Insecurity and/or Homelessness

## Have you/your family ever experienced housing insecurity and/or homelessness? (N=71)
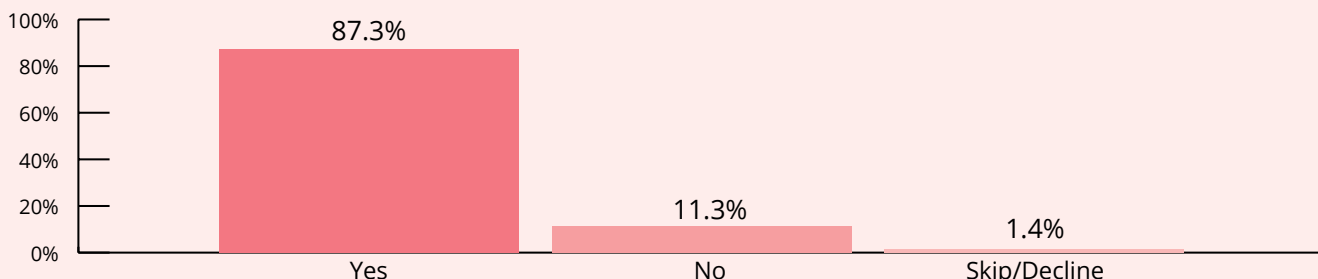
"For many families across Canada, fear of using shelters due to mandatory reporting legislation, which may lead to child(ren) apprehension decreases safe options when faced with a housing crisis and increases the risk of families staying in unsafe conditions."

Of the 72 respondents, 12 (almost 17%) identified that they were currently experiencing homelessness and 46 (64%) identified that they were not currently homelessness. Of the 10 respondents that identified "other", responses identified temporary housing (transitional or second stage housing), they had just received an eviction notice and/or they expected to be homeless within the next 30-60 days.

**Figure 8: Current Homelessness Experience**

Are you currently experiencing homelessness? (N=72)
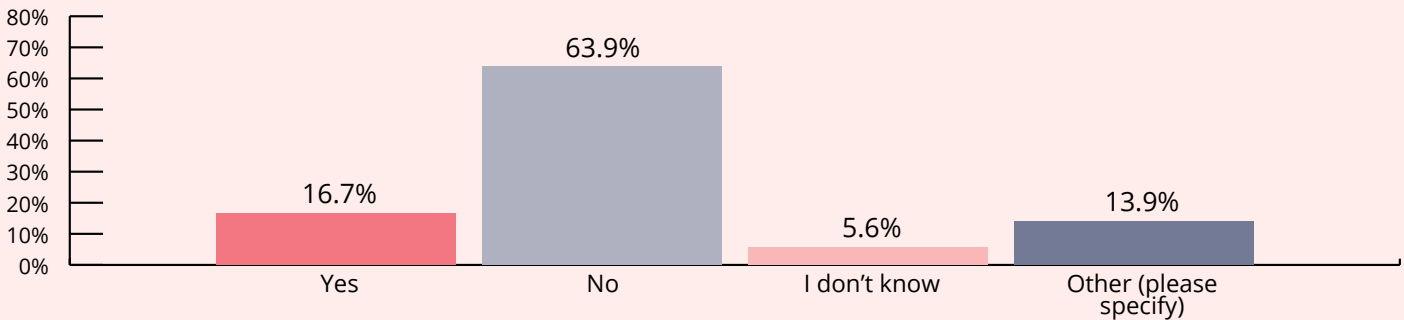
Of the 60 people that responded to the question "If you are currently homeless, where do you stay most frequently?", 60% of respondents identified that this question was not applicable since they were currently housed. Of those respondents experiencing homelessness, 25% were staying in transitional housing, 10% were living temporarily with family or friends, 8% were staying in an emergency shelter and 5% were staying in an encampment.

Figure 9: Places Where Families Stay When Experiencing Homelessness
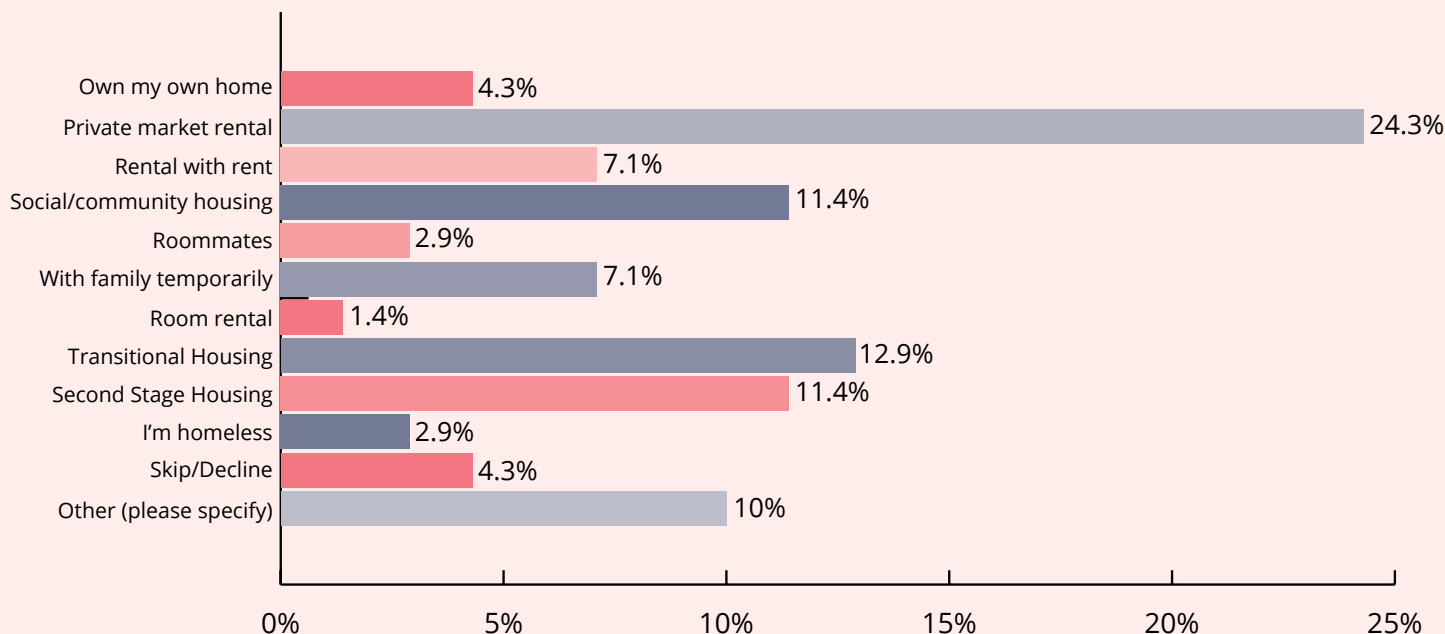
IF you are currently experiencing homelessness, where do you stay most frequently? (N=60)
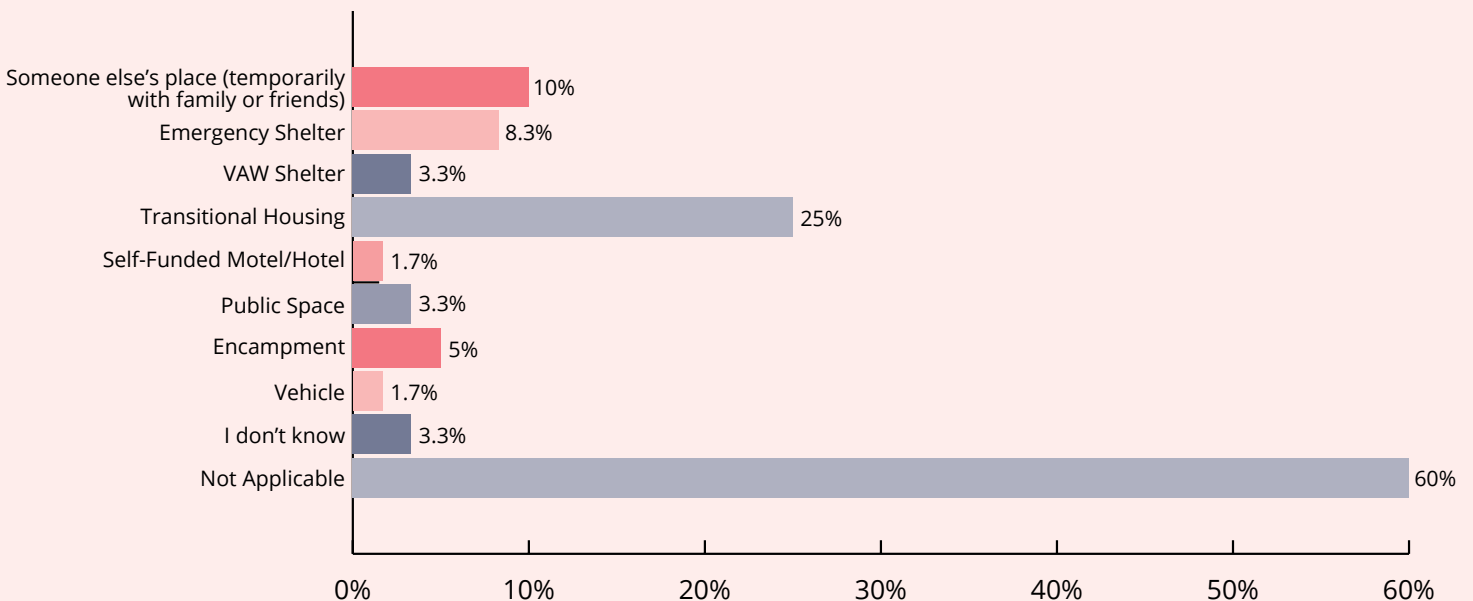
For respondents that were housed, identifying their current housing situation revealed that 31.4% of respondents live in private market rental with 7% of these tenants having a rent subsidy to offset rental costs. Just over 11% live in community housing, 13% live in transitional housing, 11.4% live in second stage housing and 7% are living temporarily with family.

Figure 10: Current Housing Situation of Survey Respondents

IF you are currently housed, tell us a little about your current housing situation. (N=70)

| Category	Value
Own my own home	4.3%
Private market rental	24.3%
Rental with rent	7.1%
Social/community housing	11.4%
Roommates	2.9%
With family temporarily	7.1%
Room rental	1.4%
Transitional Housing	12.9%
Second Stage Housing	11.4%
I'm homeless	2.9%
Skip/Decline	4.3%
Other (please specify)	10%

For those respondents that are currently housed, 36% identified that they have lived there for less than 1 year, 39% identified 1-3 years in current housing and 10% lived in the current location for 4-7 years. Only one respondent had been in their current housing for 8-10 years and 3 identified more than 10 years but less than 20 years in their current location.

BELIEFS ABOUT FAMILY HOMELESSNESS IN ST. THOMAS-ELGIN COUNTY

Of the 64 people that expressed their beliefs about service orientation, 53% agreed or strongly agreed that compassion for families experiencing homelessness is demonstrated throughout St. Thomas-Elgin whereas 33% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed and 14% neither agreed nor disagreed. *Enhancement of trauma informed care would be beneficial for families experiencing housing instability and/or homelessness.*

**Figure 11: Compassion for Families Experiencing Homelessness**

There is compassion for families experiencing homelessness. (N=64)
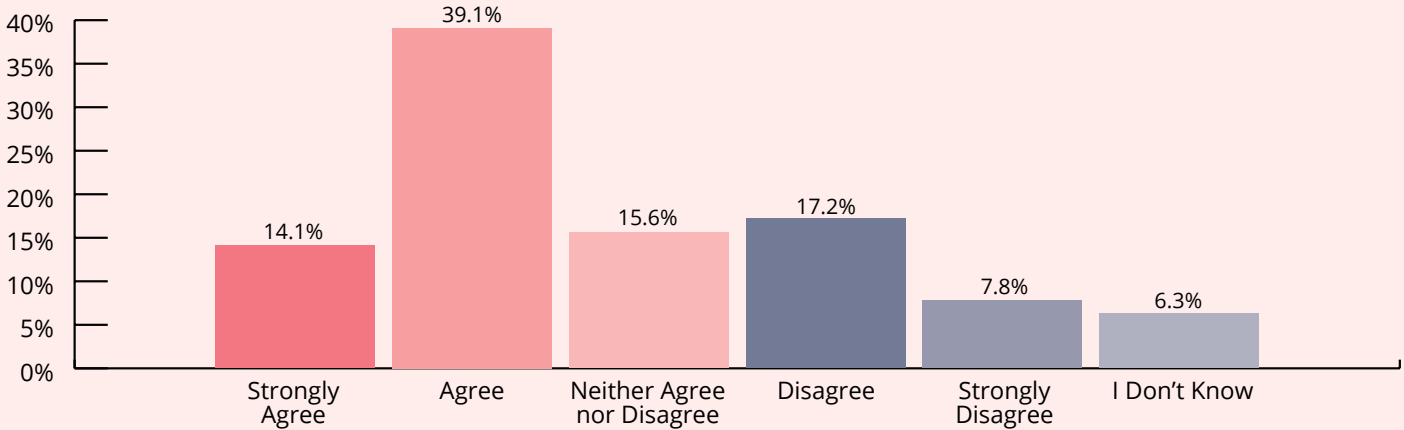
Of the 65 people that responded to the statement "housing that is affordable and appropriate is the solution to homelessness", 74% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

Figure 12: Housing is the Solution to Instability and Homelessness

Housing that is affordable and appropriate is the solution to homelessness. (N=65)
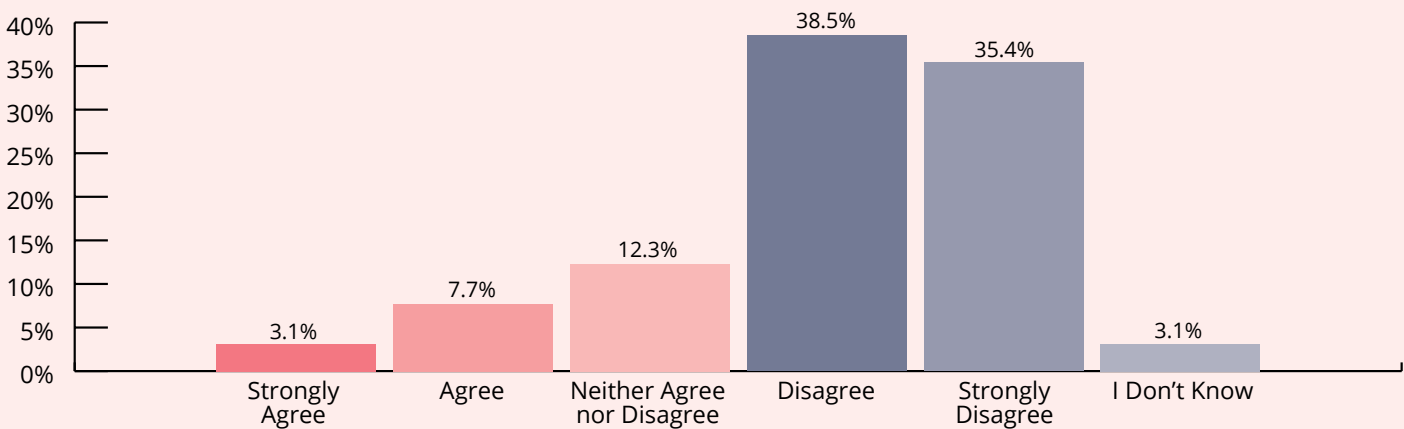
When identifying the **top 5 challenges impacting families facing housing instability and/or homelessness**, the most identified challenge was housing supply issues, followed by lack of homelessness prevention, then lack of housing support once re-housed. Beyond housing specific issues, insufficient income concerns and concerns over the lack of mental health supports rounded out the top 5 challenges facing families experiencing housing instability and homelessness.

"For many women-led, lone parent families, fears of losing their children due to child protection concerns and the discrimination faced by homeless mothers create a barrier to accessing emergency shelters throughout the country, when such resources exist."

Figure 13: Challenges in Preventing & Ending Family Homelessness

TOP 5 challenges facing families that are experiencing housing insecurity and/or homelessness - Overall Scores (N=64)
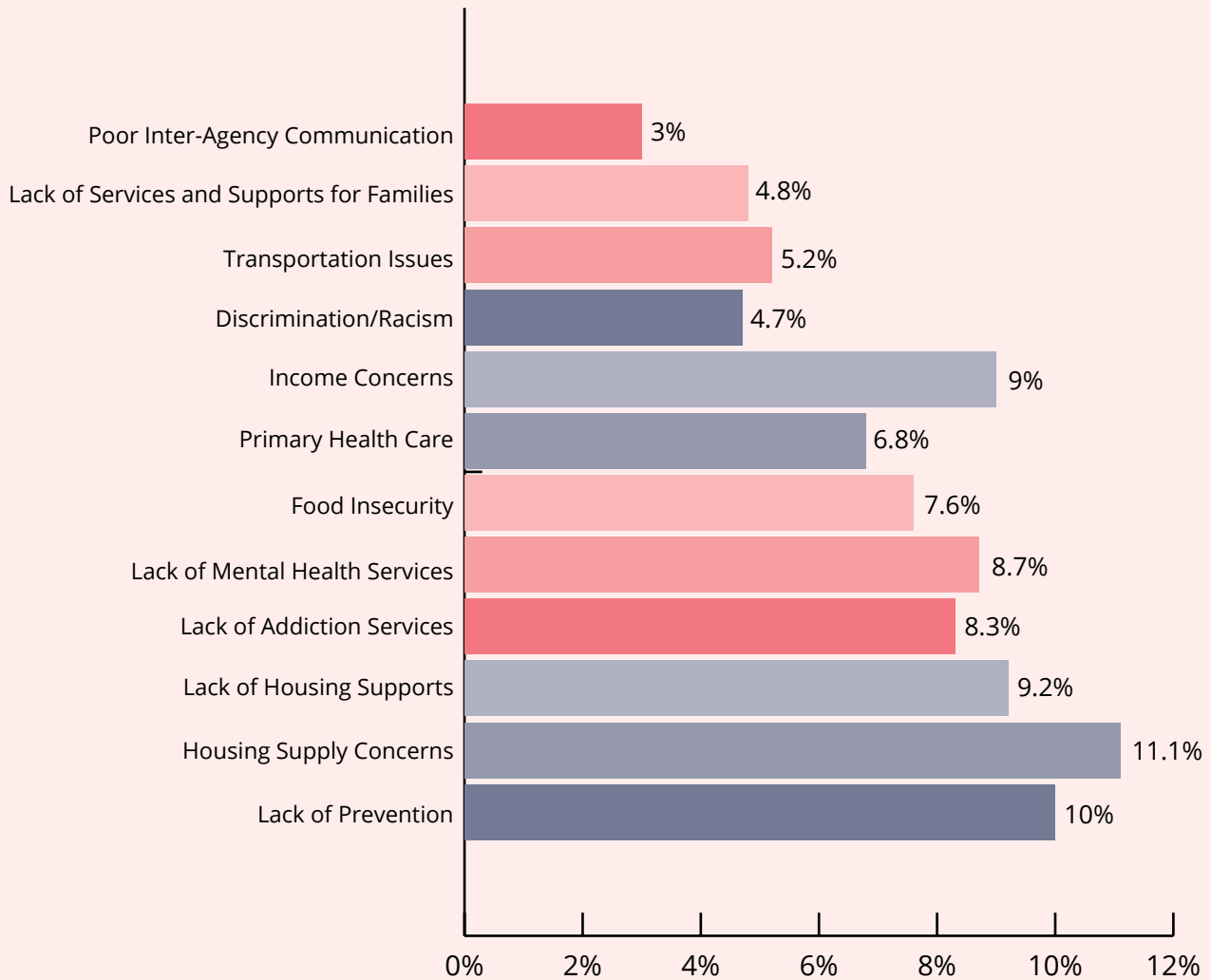

The impact and reality of family homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin is certainly apparent for households with lived experience with 43% of respondents identifying that family homelessness is a "major problem", 23% identifying it as a "moderate problem" and 16% of respondents identifying it as the "biggest problem" facing St. Thomas-Elgin.

Figure 14: Prevalence of Family Homelessness Locally

In your opinion, family homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin is... (N=70)
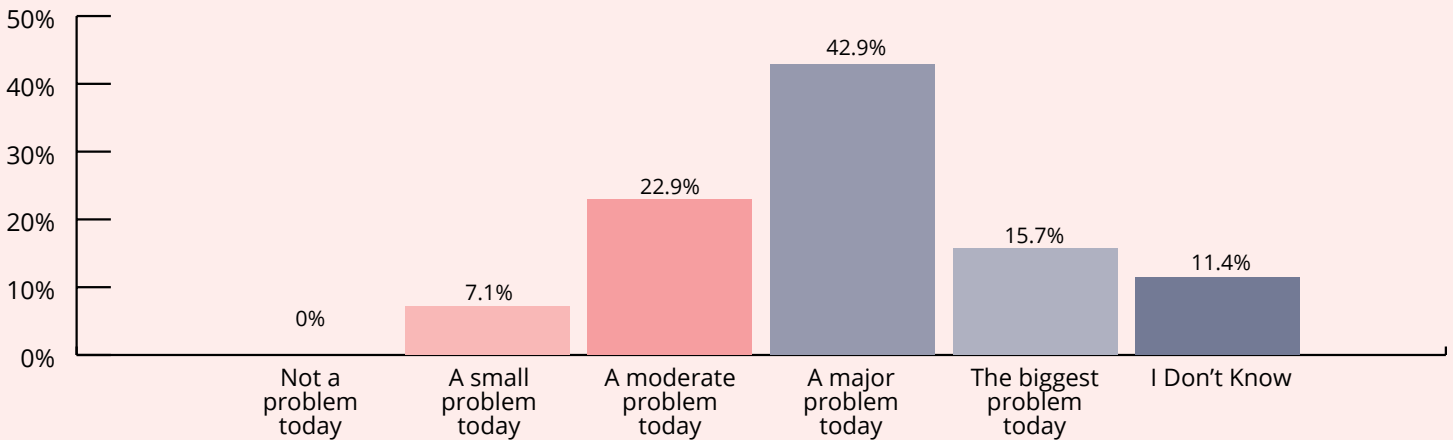
Since the start of the pandemic, 77% of family respondents identified that family homelessness has "gotten worse" and 17% stated "I don't know".

Figure 15: Impact of COVID 19 Pandemic on Family Homelessness

Since the start of the pandemic, would you say that family homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin County has: (N=69)
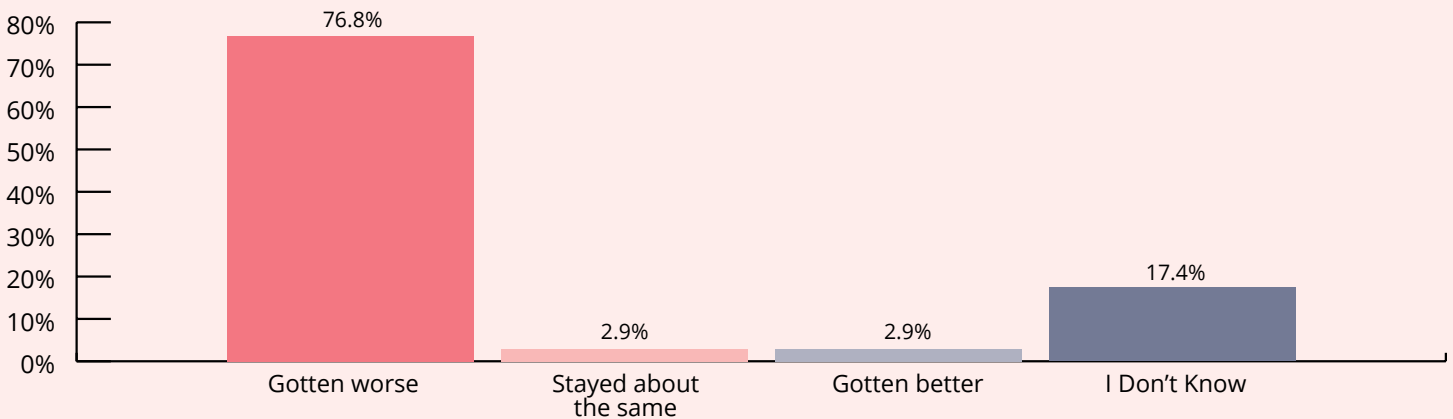
Respondents were also clear that there are not enough resources in the City of St. Thomas to meet the needs of families experiencing homelessness with 68% identifying that there were "not enough resources" or "no resources".

Figure 16: Availability of Resources in the City of St. Thomas

In your opinion, if a family becomes homeless in the City of St. Thomas, there are… (N=69)
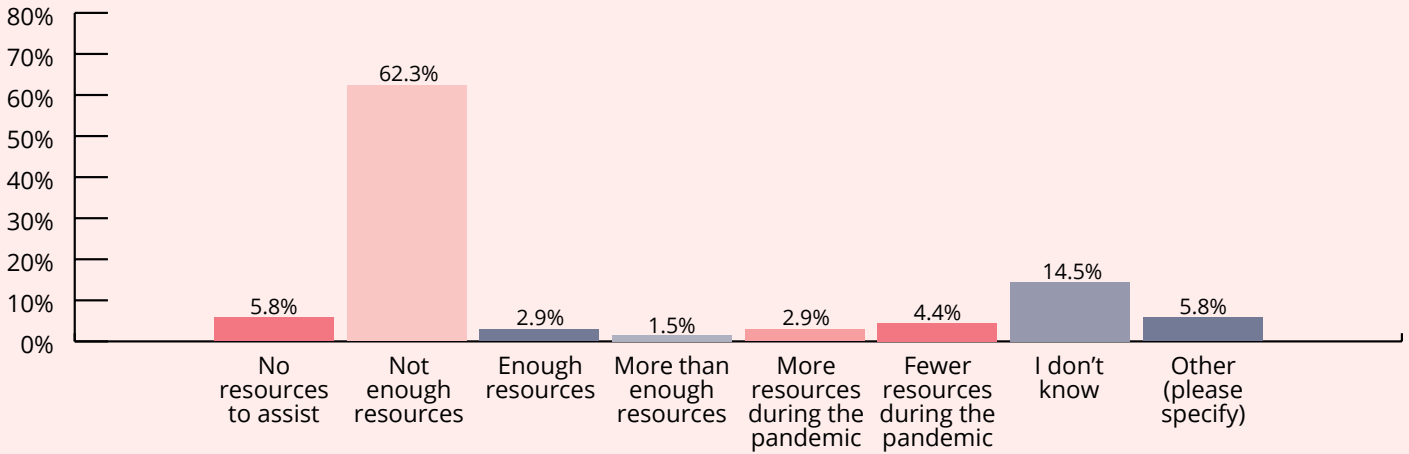
The belief about resource scarcity was also evident in responses regarding Elgin County. Of the 70 survey respondents, **68.5% identified that there were "not enough resources" or "no resources to assist" if a family became homeless in Elgin County** and 16% identified that they did not know.

Figure 17: Resource Availability in Elgin County

In your opinion, if a family becomes homeless in Elgin County (outside of the City of St. Thomas), there are… (N=70)
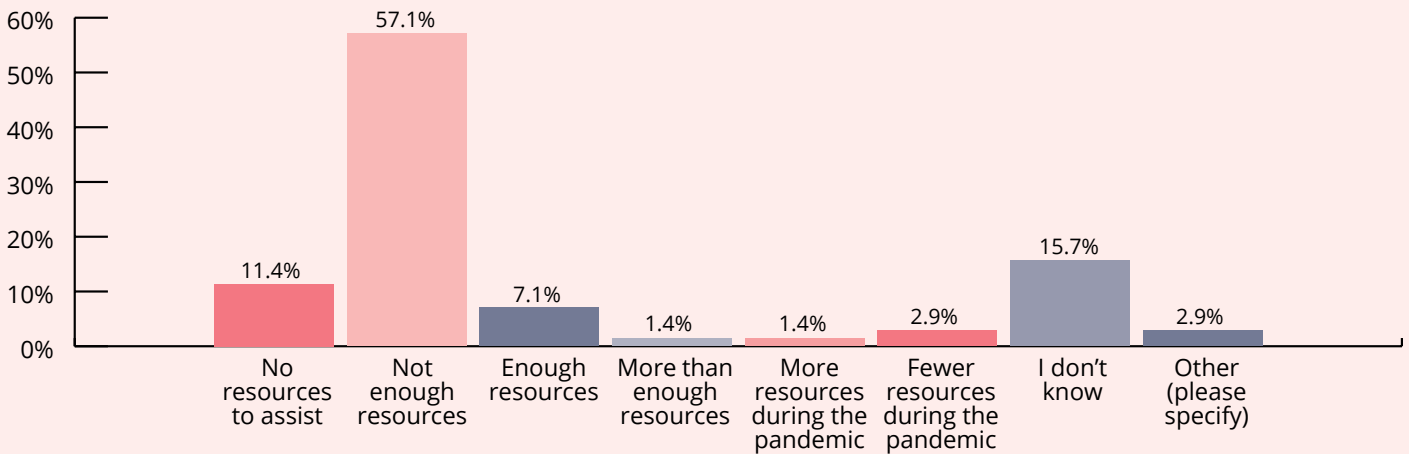
INCOME ASSISTANCE RATES: Of the 64 respondents to the statement regarding Ontario Works income assistance rates being sufficient to meet the basic need expenses of families, 83% of respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed with this statement. When asked about Ontario Disability Supports Program income assistance rates, 58% of the 64 respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed with this statement. The strong link between economic poverty and housing precarity was validated for the family households that participated in the survey.
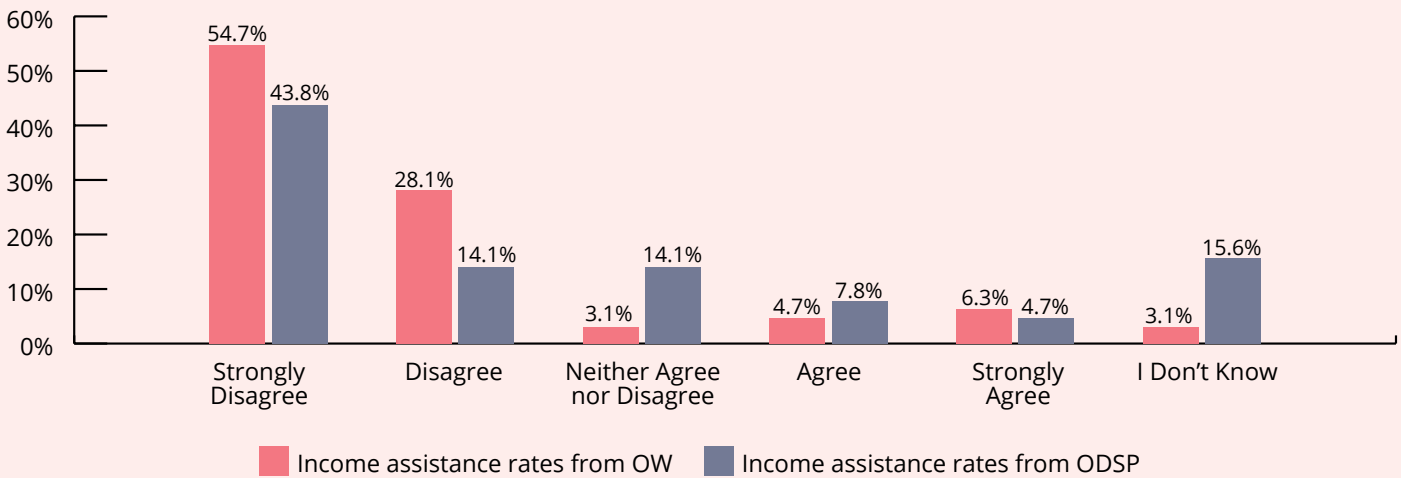
Figure 18: Are Income Support Rates Sufficient for Families?

OW and ODSP rates are sufficient to meet monthly housing and basic need expenses for families (N=64)

Legend: Income assistance rates from OW | Income assistance rates from ODSP

Households that responded to the question regarding what types of housing needed for families revealed that **80% agreed or strongly agreed that more Rent Geared to Income housing was required and 65% of respondents identified that more time-limited transitional housing was required**. Surprisingly – or perhaps a reflection of the experiences of households that responded to the survey – **only 43% of responded agreed or strongly agreed that permanent supportive housing was needed in St. Thomas-Elgin**.

Figure 19: What Types of Housing Do Local Families Need?

Types of Housing Needed for Families (N=64)

Legend: More permanent supportive housing | More time-limited transitional housing | Rent geared to income housing should be prioritized

ROLE OF HEALTH SECTOR IN PREVENTING & REDUCING FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

64% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the health care sector had a role to play in preventing and ending family homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin.

Figure 20: Health Care's Role in Addressing Family Homelessness

The health care sector has a role to play in reducing family homelessness. (N=64)
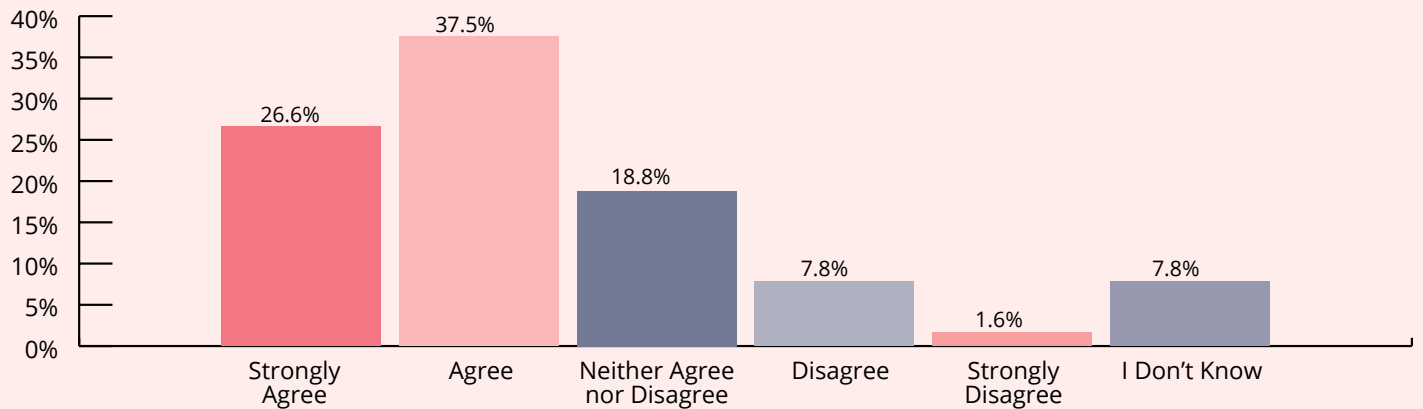
HOMELESS RESPONSE SERVICES: Again, perhaps as a reflection of the low number of respondents that had experienced homelessness, questions regarding the availability of meal programs, day services and harm reduction services readily available for families, resulted in a higher percentage of "I don't know" responses. Meal programs (36% strongly disagreed or disagreed) and daytime services such as drop-ins (43% strongly disagreed or disagreed) were identified as most insufficient for families in St. Thomas-Elgin.

Figure 21: Are the Services Available Locally for Families Sufficient?

Sufficient Services Available for Families? (N=64)
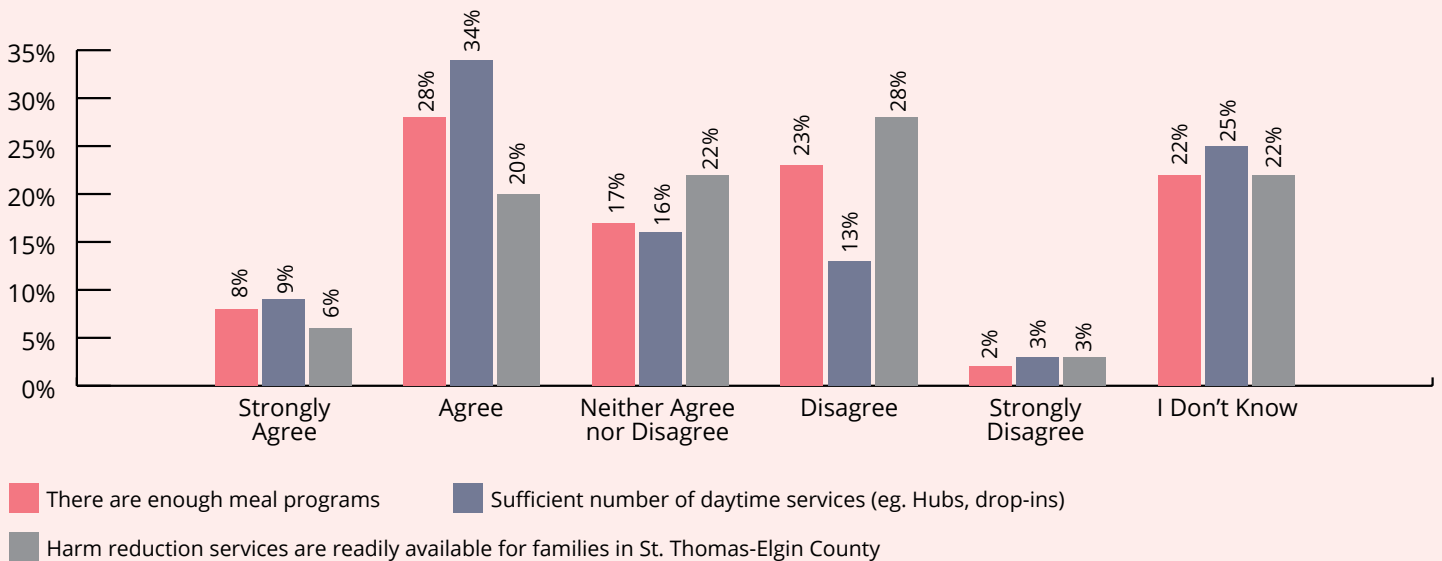
Figure 22: Is the Number of Shelter Beds Sufficient to Meet Needs of Families?

Sufficient Number of Homeless and VAW Shelter Beds in St. Thomas-Elgin? (N=65)

Legend:
- ■ Sufficient number of shelter beds for families experiencing homelessness
- ■ Sufficient number of VAW shelter beds

Data:
- Strongly Disagree: 21.5% / 18.5%
- Disagree: 47.7% / 35.4%
- Neither Agree nor Disagree: 4.6% / 13.9%
- Agree: 7.7% / 4.6%
- Strongly Agree: 1.5% / 3.1%
- I Don't Know: 16.9% / 24.6%
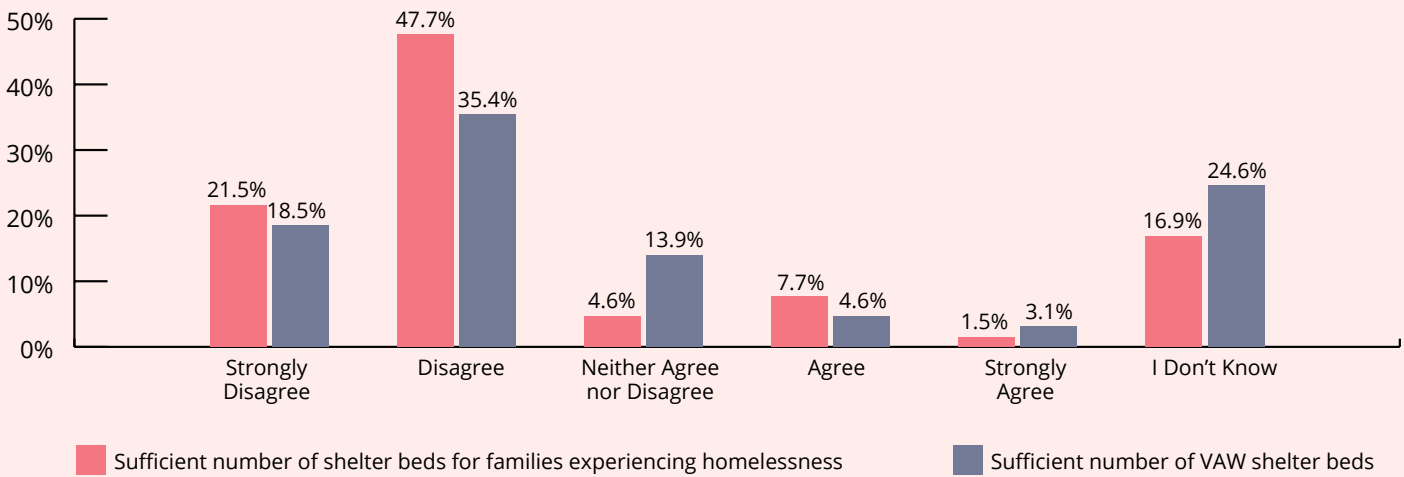
Women-led Family Homelessness Insights from Service Providers in St. Thomas-Elgin

Between April 18 and May 2, 2022, 63 community partners that provide services and supports to families experiencing housing instability and/or homelessness completed the Service Provider Survey.

When asked what services their agency provided, 22% of service providers identified that they provided homelessness response services, 32% provided re-housing and supports, 27% of the agency respondents delivered social services including counselling, 24% provided health services and an additional 22% delivered employment services.

Figure 23: Mandates of Agencies for Survey Respondents

Which of the following best describes your organization? Please select all that apply. (N=63)
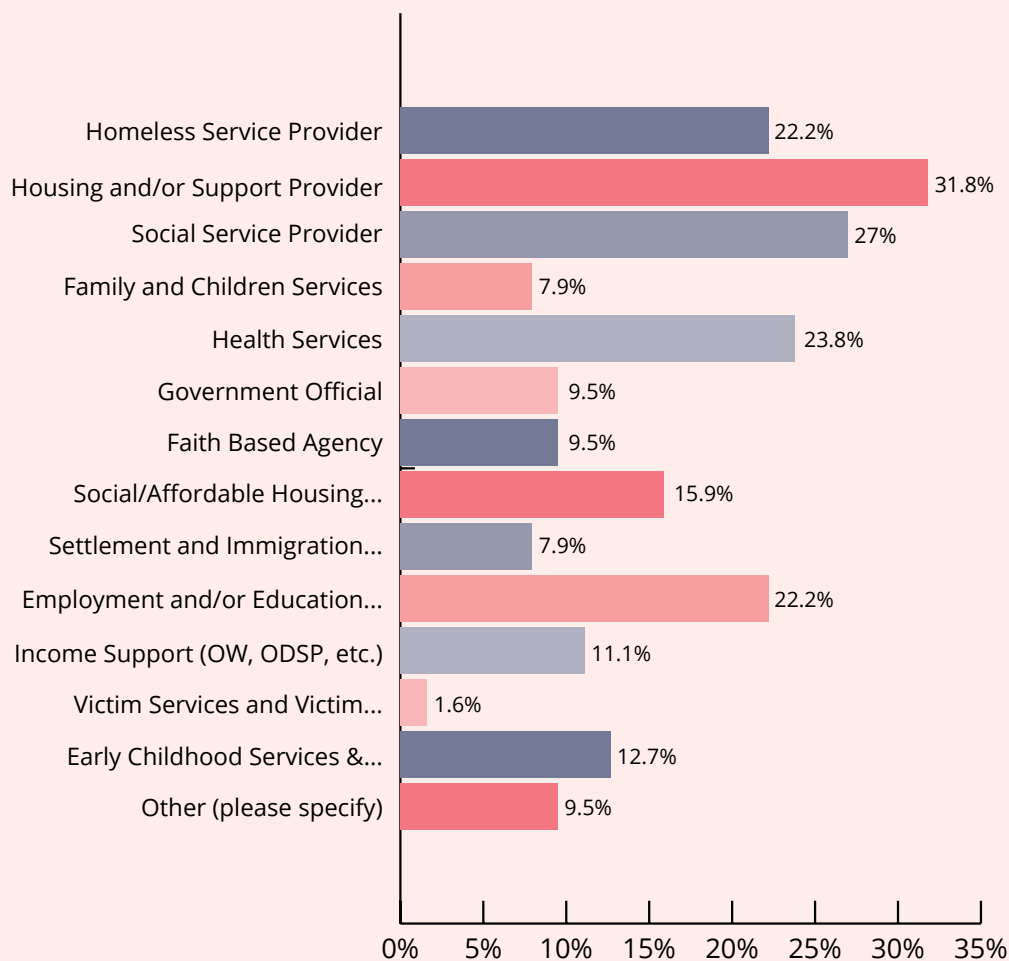
When asked to specify all the housing and homelessness services their agencies provided to families, 30% of the respondents identified that they provided housing options (private, non-profit, cooperative housing, community housing), 28% work to provide financial assistance to offset housing costs (income support, rental subsidies, etc.), 27% actively support families in supportive housing, 25% provide housing based case management supports to families, 15% identified delivering eviction prevention services and 22% administer financial supports to landlords. Unexpectedly, only 7% of respondents identified providing non-financial supports to landlords such as landlord tenant mediation to avoid evictions, only 3% identified providing emergency shelter services for families, only 5% identified provided VAW services to families, and 5% identified delivering diversion services for families facing literal homelessness.

BELIEFS ON SYSTEM PERFORMANCE TO ADDRESS FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

When asked to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their current system of care, **49% of service providers identified that the greatest strength was that local staff are well trained and professional in their work with families**.

Figure 24: Service Provider Views on Training and Professionalism of Staff

Local staff teams are well trained and professional in their work with families. (N=45)
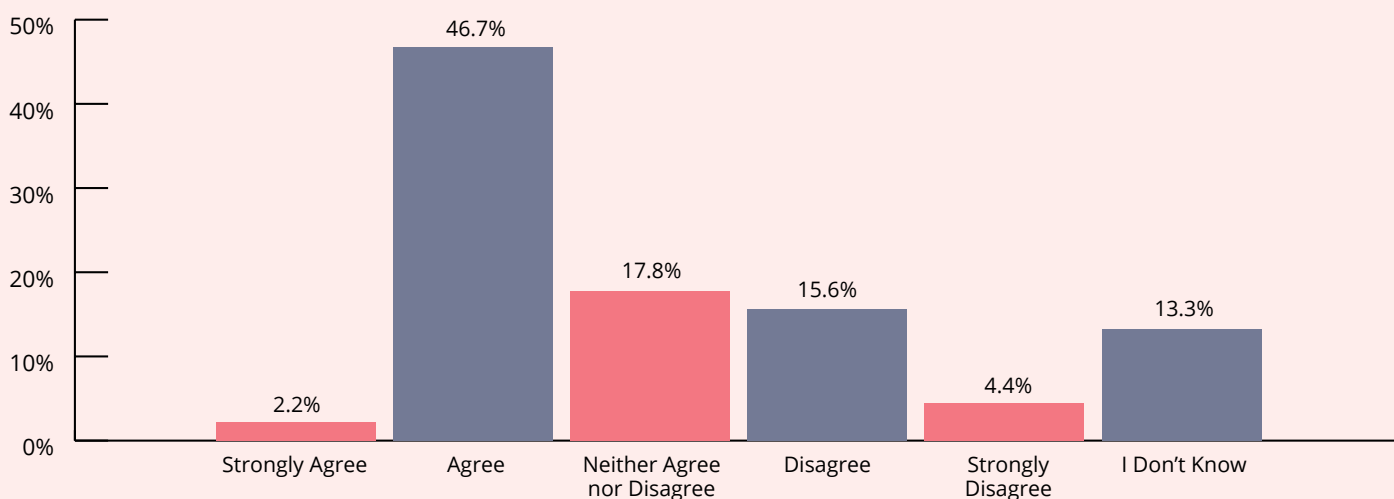
Achieving the goal of preventing and ending family homelessness? Regardless of the perceived high level of professionalism in serving families, **49% of respondents identified that they strongly disagreed or disagreed that the local agencies were meeting their goal of preventing and ending homelessness**. 31% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement and almost 16% responded "I don't know".

Figure 25: Service Provider Views on Goals Regarding Family Homelessness

Local agencies are meeting their goal of preventing and ending family homelessness. (N=45)
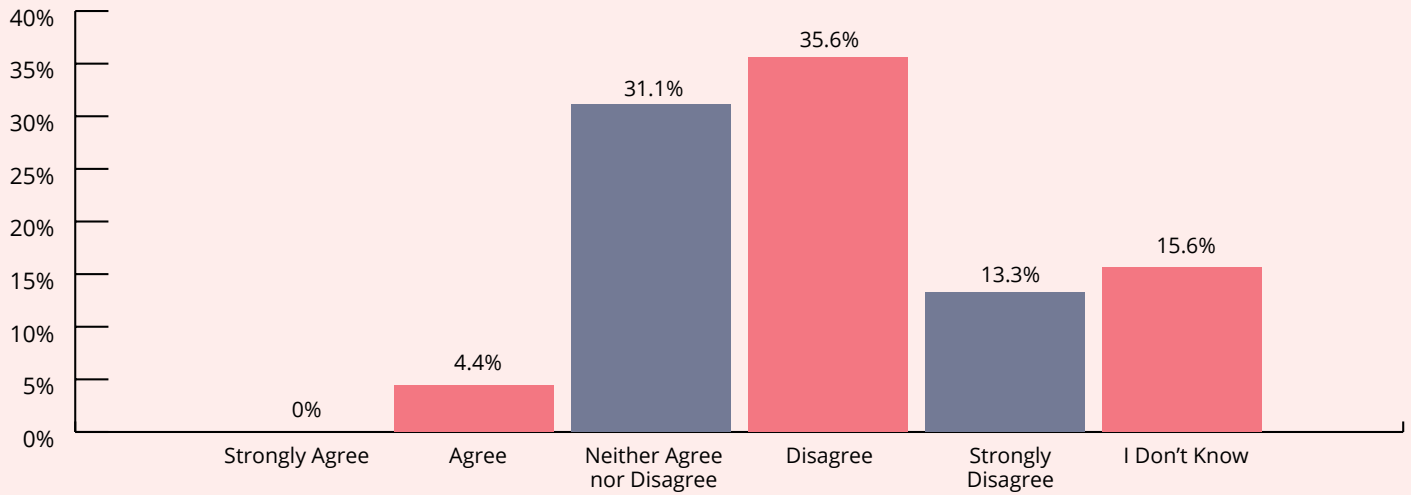
In examining local collaboration between agencies and sectors to provide continuity of care and a swift return to housing for families, **only 29% of respondents "agreed" that this collaboration was evident** while 27% disagreed or strongly disagreed. An additional 42% of the survey respondents identified that they "neither agree nor disagree" or "I don't know".

Figure 26: Is Collaboration Evident in Services to Families?

Service providers and housing providers successfully work together to provide families with continuity of care and swift transition to housing. (N=45)
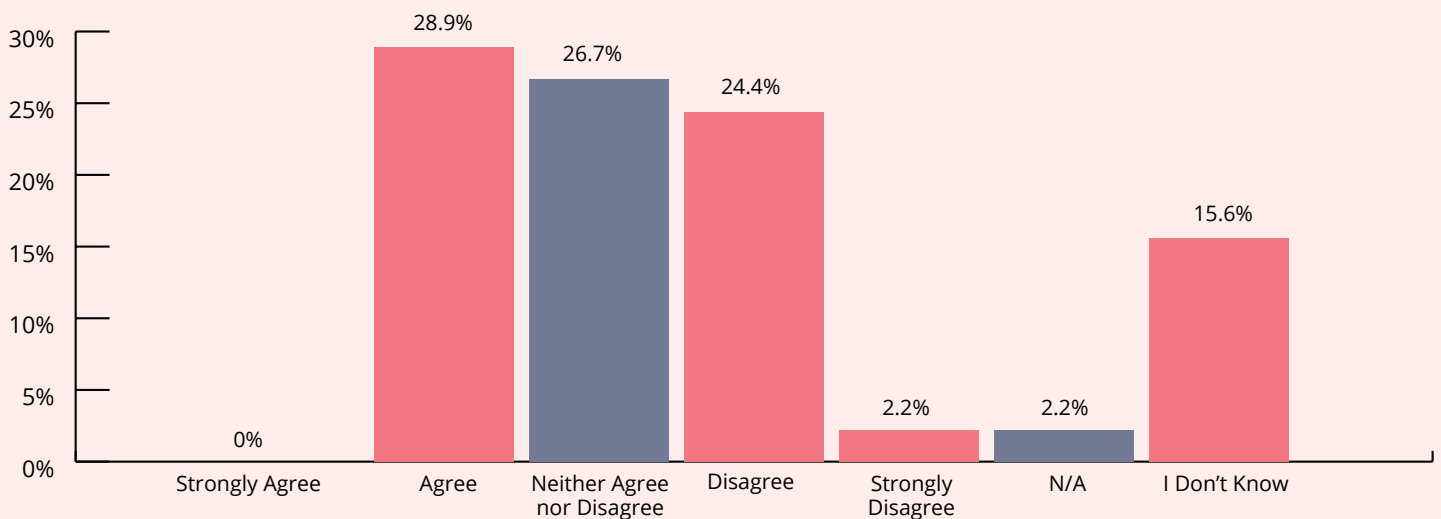
Service provider respondents were asked to identify their level of agreement with some key statements regarding local efforts and realities to address family homelessness. The following charts provide an overview of the sentiments shared.

SERVICE PROVIDERS WILL ASK HOUSEHOLDS ABOUT THEIR CURRENT HOUSING SITUATION: 66% agreed or strongly agreed that the housing situation of households serviced is explored. This can be improved upon locally to ensure early detection of housing precarity and/or homelessness.

Figure 27: Does Screening for Families' Housing Situation Occur Locally?

When families connect with social services agencies, the housing situation of the household is always explored to determine homelessness and/or housing instability. (N=47)
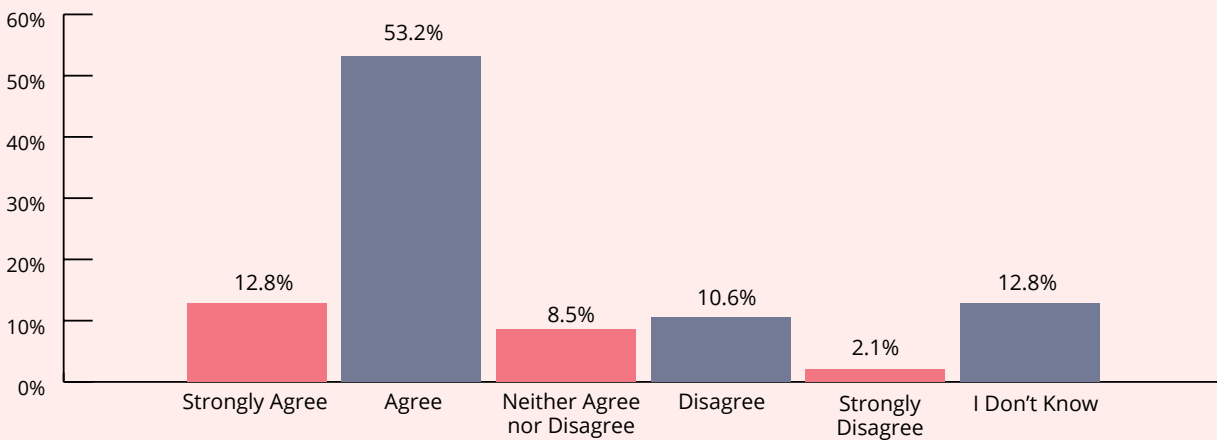
SAFETY SCREENING WITH FAMILIES SERVED: Safety screening is an essential component in trauma informed care provision yet **only 55% of the respondents identified that safety screening was performed with families**. This is another area for enhancement.

Figure 28: Is Safety Screening Completed with Families?

When families connect with local service agencies, safety screening is completed with the household to determine their current safety. (N=47)
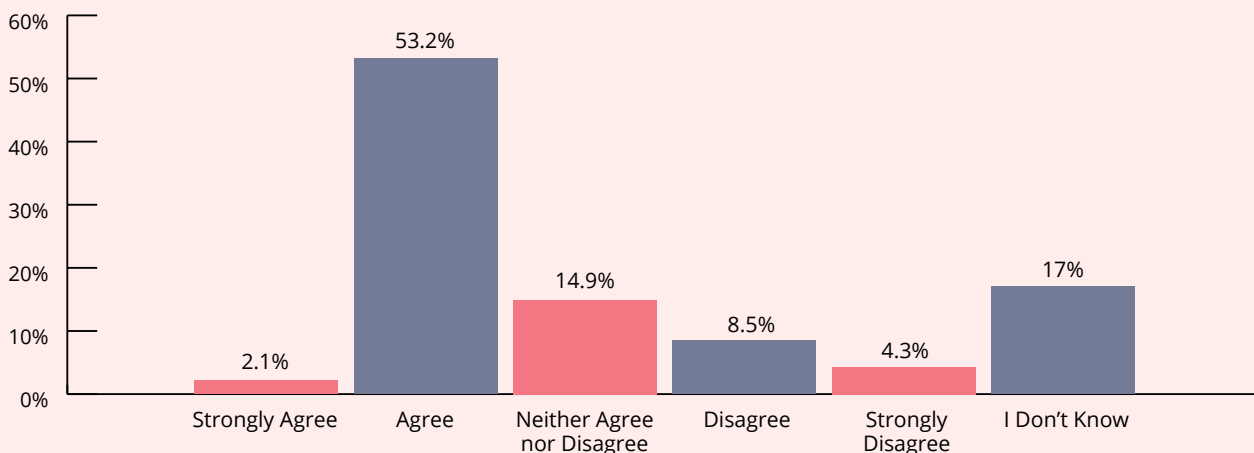
EVICTION PREVENTION SERVICES FOR FAMILIES MUST BE ENHANCED: When asked if families at risk of losing their current housing were quickly triaged and provided eviction prevention supports, only 24% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed, 47% disagreed or strongly disagree, whereas 16% of the respondents didn't know and an additional 13% neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.

Figure 29: Are Eviction Prevention Services Readily Available for Families?

Families at risk of losing their current housing are quickly triaged and provided eviction prevention supports (mediation, financial supports, legal guidance, etc.). (N=45)
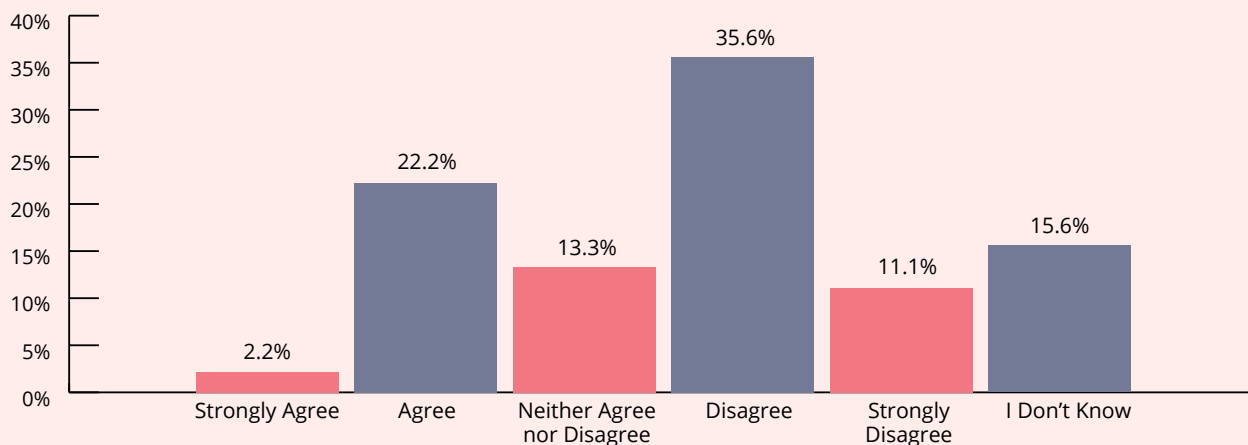
The targeting of family homelessness prevention efforts does not consistently occur in St. Thomas-Elgin with only 24% of respondents identifying that families at high risk of entering/re-entering homelessness receive high intensity services and deeper financial supports to prevent housing loss, while 16% didn't know and an additional 13% neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. Meanwhile, over 43% identified that such important prioritization did not occur.

Figure 30: Are the Services Provided Based on Unique Household Needs?

Families that are at high risk of entering/re-entering homelessness receive high intensity services and deeper financial supports to prevent housing loss. (N=45)
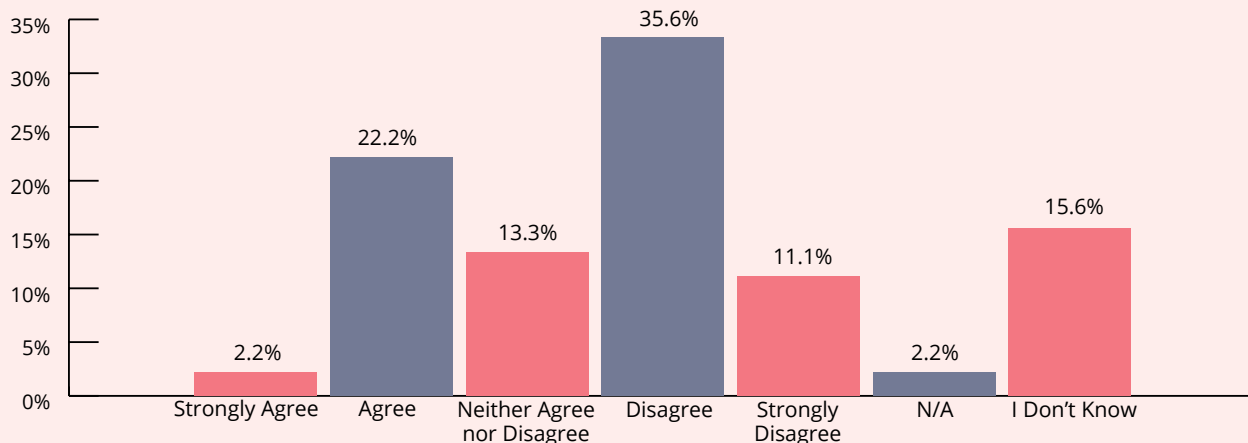
Inadequate emergency shelter space was very evident for families in both City of St. Thomas and Elgin County, according to the Service Provider survey respondents. When examining shelter option in Elgin County, 90% of service provider respondents identified that there were not enough options. For the City of St. Thomas, 93% of respondents identified that shelter spaces were insufficient.

Figure 31: Are there Sufficient Emergency Shelter Spaces for Families?

There are adequate emergency shelter spaces for families experiencing homelessness in… (N=45)
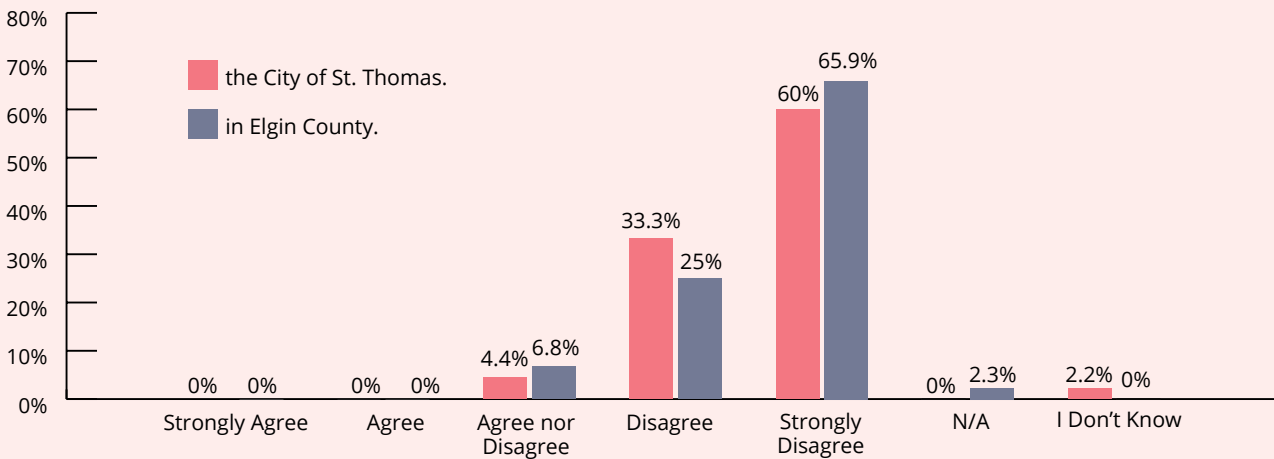
ASSESSMENT OF HOUSING & SUPPORT NEEDS: Once families are experiencing homelessness, only 29% of the survey respondents identified that their housing and support needs were assessed to identify next steps for support and housing options, 27% either disagreed or strongly disagreed and 29% identified that they neither agreed nor disagreed that accurate assessment occurred.

Figure 32: Are Families Experiencing Homelessness Properly Assessed?

Families experiencing homelessness are accurately assessed for housing and service needs. This provides direction for services, case management and housing. (N=45)
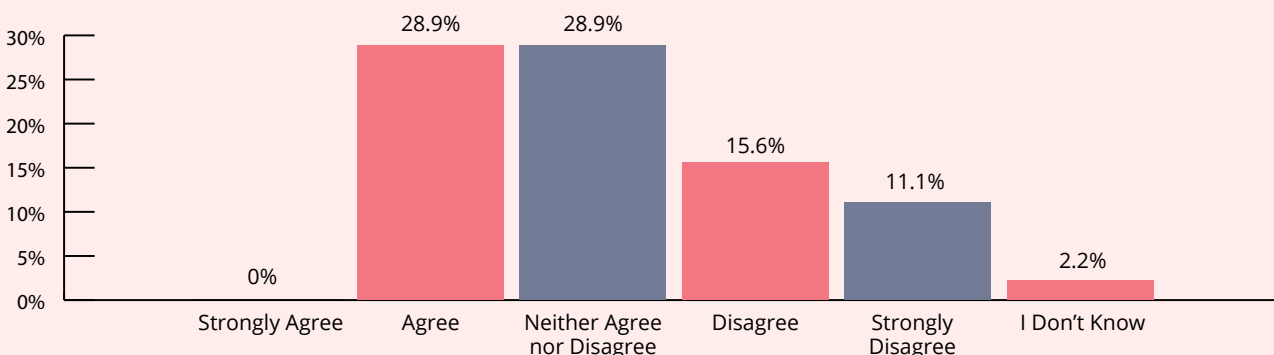
Beliefs that families connected with dedicated re-housing programs receive the housing stability supports needed were also bleak with only 22% of respondents agreeing with this statement, 33% disagreed or strongly disagreed and an additional 40% identified that they "neither agreed nor disagreed" or they didn't know.

Figure 33: Are Families Connected to Dedicated Re-Housing Services?

Families that are connected to dedicated re-housing services (i.e. Housing First, Rapid Re-Housing, Transitional Housing, Supportive Housing, etc.) receive the housing stability supports they need to achieve long term stability. (N=45)
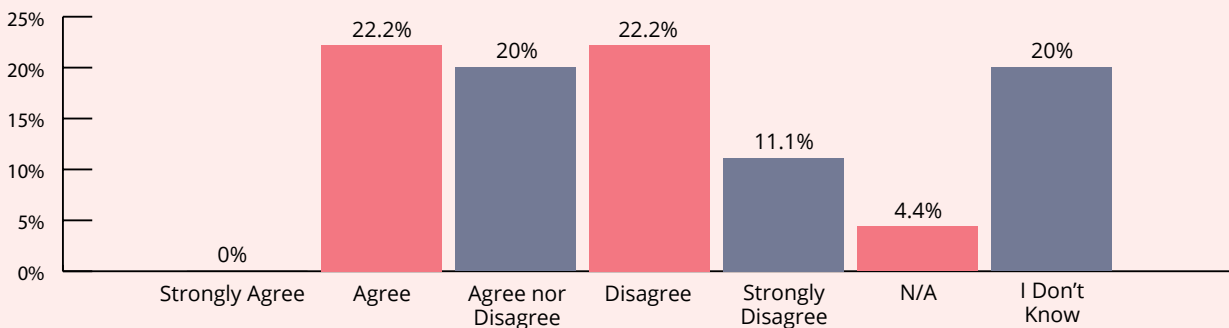
FAMILY HOMELESSNESS LOCATIONS ARE NOT WELL KNOWN: When identifying where homeless families stay in St. Thomas-Elgin, almost 94% of the 46 respondents identified that they stayed with families and friends where they were safe while 78% identified that homeless families stay in unsafe housing options. Such a safety determination would require a safety screen, which is not consistently completed currently.

Figure 34: Beliefs About Where Families Experiencing Homelessness Stay

In your experience, families experiencing homelessness most frequently stay in the following locations. (N=46)
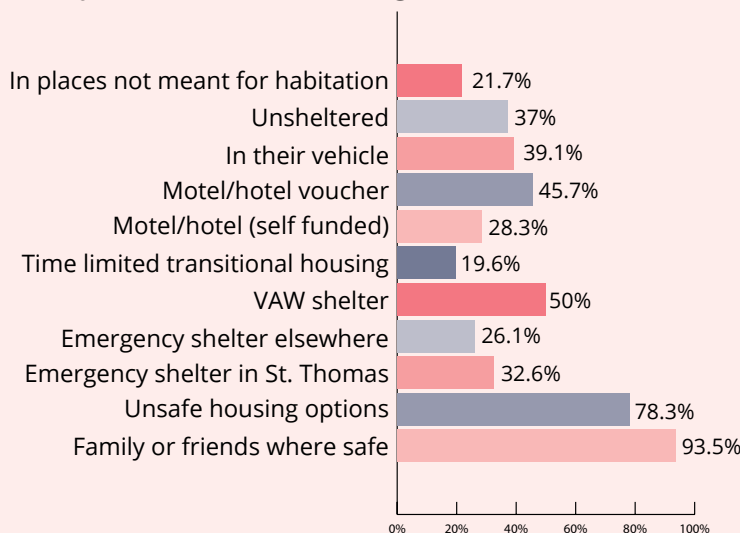
ENHANCEMENTS TO PREVENT AND END FAMILY HOMELESSNESS IDENTIFIED

In examining the **funding priorities for Housing Services**, the greatest ranked priorities included increasing affordable housing options (ranked at 8.9 out of 10), followed by increasing the availability of rental subsidies (ranked 8.4 out of 10), the development and operations of supportive housing options (ranked 7.7 out of 10) and then housing location and landlord supports (7.5 out of 10).

Figure 35: Prioritized Enhancements to Housing Services

If additional funding was available, please rank your top housing service areas for FAMILIES that require enhanced funding levels locally - Overall Ranking out of 10 (N=42)

Service area	Ranking
Employment readiness	4.6
Community trusteeship and budgeting programs for families	4.6
Increase affordable housing stock	8.9
VAW housing and support programs	6.5
Indigenous designed, led and implemented housing and support programs	6.2
Supportive housing development and operations	7.7
Increased availability of rental subsidies	8.4
Case management to stay housed	6.7
Eviction prevention services	7.1
Housing location and landlord supports	7.5

Funding priorities to enhance Homelessness Response Services for families experiencing a housing crisis and homelessness included health and mental health services to people experiencing homelessness (7.5 out of 10), case management services to support people with re-housing (7.4 out of 10), emergency shelter spaces for families (7 out of 10) and street outreach services to support homeless families (6.4 out of 10).

Figure 36: Prioritized Enhancements to Homelessness Services

If additional funding was available, please rank your top 5 homelessness service areas for FAMILIES that require enhanced funding levels locally - Overall Ranking out of 10 (N=42)
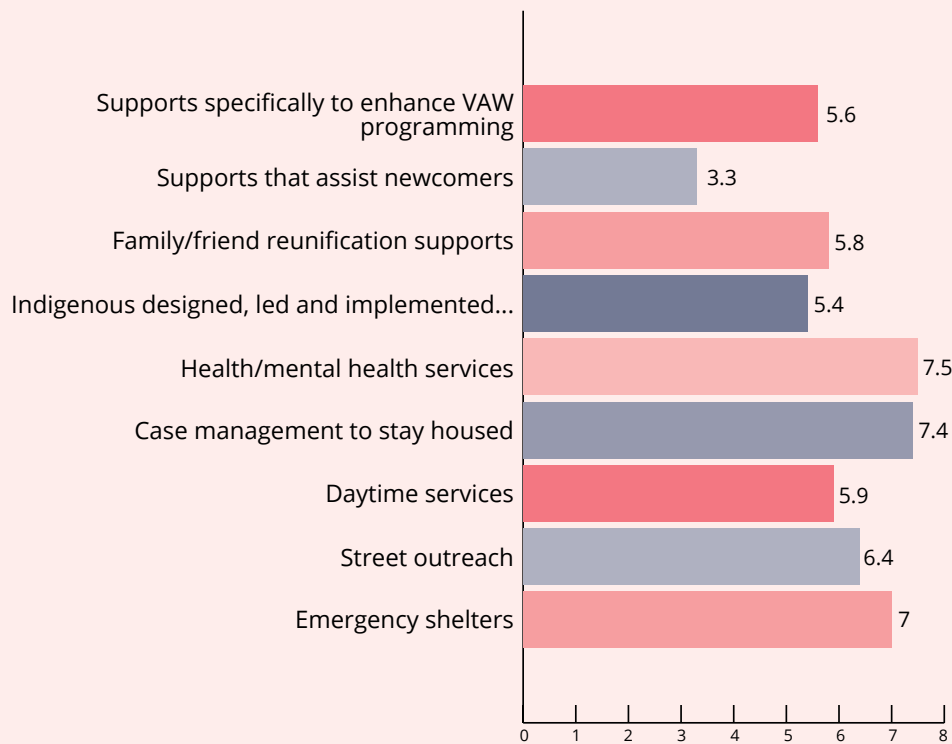
RECOMMENDATIONS
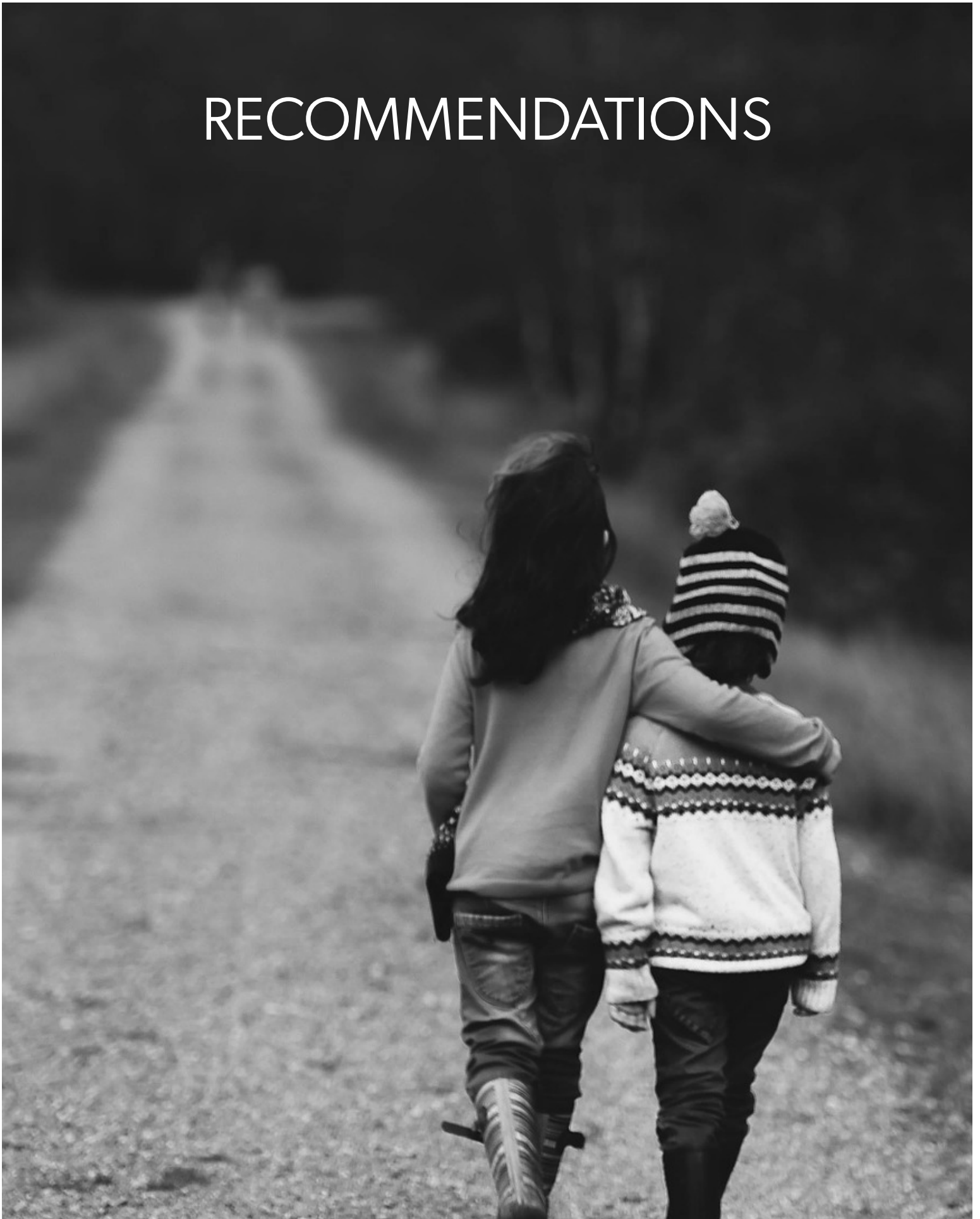
Recommendations to Guide the Prevention & Reduction of Women-led Family Homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin

Given the realities of family homelessness and the lack of family-specific homelessness response services across Canadian communities, much work and investigation will be required to better understand the prevalence of family homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin. Family homelessness and rural homelessness are known to be primarily hidden experiences so strategic outreach to these households must be deliberate and comprehensive.

It was evident from the responses to the Service Provider Survey that enhancements to safety screening, early intervention, prevention and diversion as well as homelessness responses for families will be an important component in determining the road ahead. The following recommendations are provided to enhance the performance of the local system of care to increase its understanding of, and response to, family homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin.

RECOMMENDATION 1
**INCREASE HOMELESSNESS SCREENING FOR ALL HOUSEHOLDS ACCESSING SERVICES AND SUPPORTS.**

Guidance on the action items to prevent and reduce family homelessness can only be effective if real time data on the prevalence of family homelessness is known. To improve efforts to determine the scope and realities of family homelessness, all service providers supporting families can incorporate a screening of their current housing situation (with subsequent updates occurring regularly) to identify housing precarity, eviction concerns, and/or current homelessness (hidden, sheltered or unsheltered).

The following questions may prove to be helpful for service providers to determine the current housing situation of families:
• Can you tell me a little about your current housing situation?
• Have you lived there long?
• Do you (and your children) live there alone or do others also live with you?
• Are you currently the owner/leaseholder for the housing?
• Do you have any concerns that you may not be able to stay there much longer? Any eviction concerns?

RECOMMENDATION 2
ALWAYS SCREEN FOR SAFETY AND HAVE A CLEAR WORKFLOW OF WHAT TO DO IF THERE ARE SAFETY CONCERNS

Recognizing that for many families – especially women-led, lone-parent families – housing instability and crisis may be caused by a variety of reasons, including relationship breakdown, economic stress, lack of safety, etc., the completion of a safety screening process aligns with trauma-informed care. Creating physical and emotional safety while assisting families to address their needs, including dealing with a housing crisis, will be essential. The following prompts will assist in screening for immediate safety:

First, I want you to know that your safety is very important to me.

If engagement via phone: Are you (and your family) in a safe place right now to answer some questions? Are you in a place where you feel comfortable answering some questions that might be personal?

If engagement is in-person: Are you/you and your family feeling safe right now? Are you/your family able to take some time to answer some questions that might feel personal?

If NO or the client identifies they are not in a safe place, proceed with a safety planning workflow. Below are a series of questions, as an example. Add additional questions, as needed.

If engagement via phone:

- Can I ask where you are calling from?
- Is the person making you feel unsafe with you right now?

If yes, can you/your family go somewhere safe like a neighbour, friend, or public space?

If no, do you need to get somewhere safe right now? (Immediately start problem solving around getting them safe right now)

- Do you need me to contact the police for you?
- Would it be easier to text me? If yes, provide them with the intake cell number

If engagement is in person:

- Is the person making you feel unsafe waiting for you outside?
- Would you like me to call the police or another first responder for you? We can stay right here as we wait for them to arrive.

If YES and the client is currently safe and able to engage in the prevention/diversion session, a script such as a sample below would assist:

Great, I'm glad you are feeling safe. So, let's discuss how I can assist you today…

RECOMMENDATION 3
ENSURE THE LONG-TERM HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS PLAN INCORPORATES FAMILY HOME-LESSNESS GOALS, KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS, OUTCOMES, AND IMPACTS.

The reality is that what gets measured, gets done. Given the responses to the surveys (both Families with Lived Experience and Service Providers), family homelessness is not currently identified as a priority within the local system of care. This lack of prioritization leads to a lack of knowledge about its scope, an inconsistent approach to identifying and measuring it, reduced investment, and potential invisibility which can be dangerous for families that find themselves in unsafe housing situations. Once prioritized with key expectations for screening, referral, and service coordination, the realities of family homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin can more effectively be addressed.

RECOMMENDATION 4
ENHANCE PREVENTION AND DIVERSION SERVICES FOR FAMILIES SEEKING HOUSING AND SHELTER ASSISTANCE

Reducing and ending family homelessness requires focusing on both inflow and outflow from the system of care. Homelessness prevention and diversion services help address inflow into the system of care. In examining the impact on reducing the inflow of families into the homelessness response system, diversion has the highest impact since it targets people who have already lost their housing and are seeking shelter admission or are preparing to stay outside. Prevention activities that target highly vulnerable households that are about to lose access to their current housing option, either through eviction or loss of formal housing connections have a significant impact on reducing inflow[29]. Traditional eviction prevention programs that provide financial assistance to households that meet the basic eligibility for service tend to have the lowest impact on inflows into homelessness.

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29 National Alliance to End Homelessness (October 19, 2020). *Effective Diversion: A Key Strategy for Ending Homelessness.* Source: **https://endhomelessness.org/resource/effective-diversion-a-key-strategy-for-ending-homelessness-webinar/**

Table 1: Impact of Targeted Prevention Activities on Homelessness System

High	Medium	Low
DIVERSION	HOUSING LOSS PREVENTION	EVICTION PREVENTION
Targeted to: People who have lost housing and are about to enter shelter or sleep outside	**Targeted to:** Extremely vulnerable people about to lose their housing.	**Targeted to:** Low-income people who have received an eviction notice.

Whenever it is safe and appropriate to do so, services need to help families not enter the homelessness response system. This often means an investment of time and resources at the "front door" of the system of care to detect and respond to the needs of households that have just become homeless or are at the precipice of entering/ re-entering homelessness. Prevention services must actively collaborate with households to find alternatives to entering the homelessness response system.

From this research-based understanding of the activities that have the greatest impact of preventing homelessness, definitions of prevention activities become apparent.

Homelessness Prevention activities occur before a household has lost their ability to reside in a housing option. The goal is sustaining an existing safe, appropriate housing, whenever possible. Two strategies of homelessness prevention prove to be most successful:

Eviction prevention is a form of prevention when the household is the legal leaseholder and is at risk of losing their legal tenure for this housing option. Households tend to access prevention services when the legal eviction process has been initiated by the landlord. Most eviction prevention work occurs within the 60 days prior to when the household is expected to leave the unit. Community based supports tend to involve the activation of community legal services and potentially include ongoing support to the household to access financial and housing stability supports if legal and/or landlord liaison activities identify that the tenancy can be saved.

Housing loss prevention is a form of prevention when the household is not the legal leaseholder but is still located in a safe and appropriate housing situation and may have formal ties to the housing. As an example, the person seeking service is not officially identified on the lease, but they have formal ties to the leaseholder/unit owner and potentially have been living in the unit for a period of time.

Diversion activities occur once a household has lost legal tenure for their housing option, but prior to entry into sheltered or unsheltered homelessness. Emphasis is on securing safe, appropriate options in the community - even temporary options - rather than literal homelessness, whenever possible.

TARGETING HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION SERVICES FOR FAMILIES

To be highly effective in reducing inflows into the homelessness response system, prevention services must shift from an eligibility focus to a prioritization focus. Although most people experiencing homelessness are also experiencing economic poverty, most people in communities experiencing economic poverty thankfully will never experience homelessness. The targeting of households with the greatest likelihood of experiencing homelessness will be essential for local agencies since no family household is "too high risk" to be supported in preventing their homelessness[30]. This means the following households and populations should be prioritized for a greater intensity of service:

- Households that previously experienced homelessness, including people formerly attached to dedicated Housing First programming: to reduce the emotional and financial costs of these households re-entering costly homelessness and re-housing services, prevention services ensure that customized financial assistance and follow-up housing stability supports are provided to these high-risk households.

- Households that have characteristics of chronic homelessness: people that present with housing histories (including homelessness) and life challenges that resemble households currently experiencing homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin are also at the greatest risk of entering sheltered and unsheltered homelessness.

- Households that are staying (even temporarily) in safe, appropriate housing options with family or friends: Working with households that have a formal connection to safe housing options – but no legal rights and responsibilities to the housing option - will prove to be essential in future housing loss prevention programs.

- Households that may not be protected by the provincial Residential Tenancy legislation, including those identified as "secondary tenants", sub-letting tenants, boarding room residents, etc. Such housing loss - not just eviction - prevention will have a positive impact on reducing inflow into homelessness.

- High housing-insecure households in specialized groups that historically have experienced systemic and structural discrimination such as Indigenous Peoples and People of Colour, single-parent households, households fleeing violence, families with multiple children, households residing in low-income communities that have high eviction rates, people with disabilities and those with extremely low income[31]. Given the demographics of St. Thomas-Elgin, highly housing insecure households may also include seniors living on fixed and extremely low incomes that have other health and life challenges.

RECOMMENDATION 5
ENHANCE THE AVAILABILITY OF FAMILY HOMELESSNESS RESPONSES

Given the current lack of emergency shelter, outreach, and drop-in services available for families experiencing housing crisis and homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin, it is recommended that the Women and Family Housing Stability Advisory Group complete a strategic planning session to consistently and transparently identify available homelessness services dedicated to homeless families. The inventory of homelessness responses must include family shelter options that allow families to stay together (for example, use of emergency motel/hotel voucher options), follow-up outreach as well as system navigation and housing location supports dedicated to rapidly resolving the homelessness of local families. It must be remembered that children of homeless families are at higher risk of experiencing homelessness again in the future[32]. Rapid resolution of family homelessness and the supports required to maintain housing stability will prevent future homelessness for the adults and the children in that household.

30 Shinn, M. B., Greer, A. L., Bainbridge, J., Kwon, J., & Zuiderveen, S. (2013). Efficient targeting of homelessness prevention services for families. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103(S2), S324–S330. https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301468.

31 Desmond, M., Gershenson, C., Who gets evicted? Assessing individual, neighborhood, and network factors, *Social Science Research* (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2016.08.017

32 Schwan et. al. (2020), page 30.

"By developing a system to share information between agencies, departments, and ministries, children and their families will be cared for more holistically and the ability to proactively prevent family homelessness will be enhanced. "

RECOMMENDATION 6
CONTINUE ENHANCING AFFORDABLE, COMMUNITY, SUPPORTIVE AND TRANSITIONAL HOUSING OPTIONS FOR FAMILIES EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

As identified by both the families with lived experience of housing instability and the local service providers, the top priorities for preventing and ending family homelessness depends upon a housing-based solution for the structural factors of economic poverty and deprivation of affordable, safe housing options. The City of St. Thomas (as Service Manager for St. Thomas-Elgin) and its community partners have been diligent in capitalizing on opportunities to enhance housing options for local households experiencing homelessness. All partners must be commended for their dedication. Continued efforts to increase the number and availability of community/social housing programs (especially via homelessness prioritization for rent-geared-to-income housing options and portable housing benefits for families), supportive housing (scattered site and place based) and time-limited stabilization and transitional housing programs will assist families in resolving their homelessness within a safe, supportive environment with access to services and resources dedicated to stability and community re-integration.

RECOMMENDATION 7
IMPLEMENTATION OF A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO PREVENT AND END FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

In addition to the incorporation of standardized screening to determine a family's housing situation and their current level of safety, all St. Thomas-Elgin community partners – regardless of current mandate and funding - are encouraged to use a Systems Approach to prevent and end family homelessness. It must be recognized that the disjointed provision of services throughout Canadian communities means that children and their families are served in a disconnected manner and risk getting lost in the system. Such siloed operations ensure that families do not receive the necessary supports and experience an increased risk of housing instability and homelessness. Several provincial/territorial ministries, as well as municipal service managers, provide services that impact families including social services, education, children's services, health including mental health and addictions, justice, income assistance, employment, childcare, housing, and homelessness. By developing a system to share information between agencies, departments, and ministries, children and their families will be cared for more holistically and the ability to proactively prevent family homelessness will be enhanced.

As identified in the *"Putting an End to Child and Family Homelessness in Canada"* report, the following 8 pillars must be addressed to effectively prevent and end child and family homelessness[33].

●	Poverty/Income	●	Intimate Partner Violence
●	Affordable Housing	●	Children's Mental Health and Family Well-being
●	Food (In)security	●	Stigma
●	Childcare	●	Discrimination

33   Gulliver-Garcia, T. (2016), pages 25- 86.

Given the structural and systemic failures involved in generating family homelessness, it is not surprising that no one agency or sector of service can tackle all these issues independently.

By creating a system of care in which children's needs are addressed comprehensively, homelessness can be prevented and resolved more easily. Such a "One Family, One File" concept has been explored by many communities committed to reducing structural and systemic failures leading to family homelessness[34].

A systems approach would require several developments:

a) Optimization of technology to share information, with consent, relevant to preventing and ending family homelessness;

b) Implementation of Information Sharing Agreements between multiple agencies/departments and ministries dedicated to preventing and ending family homelessness;

c) Actively incorporate service collaboration and coordination either via in-reach or outreach activities, service hubs, and co-location opportunities to assist families in gaining access to the housing, health, and support services they need;

d) Where possible, streamline housing and safety screening processes and common intake practices within information/data sharing agreements to reduce the need for families to re-tell their story multiple times;

e) Enhance local coordinated access policies and processes to incorporate centralized access and assessment for any family experiencing housing crises and homelessness, prioritization and referrals to the most appropriate homelessness response and re-housing services. A coordinated access point would also work to enhance service coordination between the VAW sector and the current homelessness and re-housing system. It would also influence family-centred discharge planning by other systems such as health and justice;

f) Provide cross-sectoral training to all agencies/sectors currently supporting families that may be at risk of or currently experiencing homelessness to enhance efforts to recognize, prevent and rapidly resolve family homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin. Continued emphasis on the incorporation of evidence-informed housing and homelessness practices, trauma-informed care as well as strength-based and person-centred supports will remain essential in the future;

g) Continue to conduct joint advocacy campaigns that focus on addressing the 8 pillars impacting family homelessness;

h) Support the identification of flexible funding and staffing resources to ensure that families at the greatest risk of homelessness receive the financial and housing stability supports required to prevent literal family homelessness throughout St. Thomas-Elgin with a steadfast focus on a quick return to housing stability, improved wellness and enhanced safety.

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34   Gulliver-Garcia, T. (2016), Page 122.

CONCLUSION

Although a daunting challenge, preventing and ending women-led family homelessness is indeed possible in all Canadian communities. Given the structural and systemic failures that have created increased risks and realities of home-lessness facing Canadian families, it must be recognized that all agencies, departments, and ministries that provide services to families throughout St. Thomas-Elgin must be willing and able to support the implementation of the seven recommendations identified above. A commitment to developing and incorporating evidence-informed and family-centred (not agency or sector-centred) approaches in assisting local families to get their housing and support needs met will ensure that each family in St. Thomas-Elgin has a safe place to call home.

Literature Review for Women-led Family Homelessness
A Place Called Home – Women-led Family Homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin
(Updated May 2022)

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