



# A PLACE CALLED *Home*

FINAL REPORT

March 2024

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



**WOMEN & FAMILY  
HOUSING STABILITY**  
*Advisory Group*



Women and Gender  
Equality Canada

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## LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

OrgCode is situated on the treaty lands and traditional territory of the Mississaugas, Neutral, Huron-Wendat and Haudenosaunee. This land is covered by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabek to share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. We acknowledge the Indigenous Peoples whose footsteps have marked this land for time immemorial.

This report impacts 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 Women-Led Family Housing Stability Advisory Group, the YWCA, its community partners and women with lived/living experience. Errors and omissions in the analysis and insights contained in the report are the responsibility of OrgCode Consulting Inc.

ABOUT ORGCODE CONSULTING INC. THIRD PARTY EVALUATOR



OrgCode Consulting Inc., are experts in housing and homelessness. Their core services include action-oriented research, data-informed analysis, robust facilitation, and program evaluation, as well as training and technical assistance. Their expertise in homelessness and housing takes them throughout North America and this experience is an asset to each of their clients. They can infuse promising practices from other jurisdictions where they fit within the local context. OrgCode works from an empowering and anti-oppression framework, sensitive to issues pertaining to gender, culture, age, economic inclusion, health and wellness, language, and other considerations. With over 50 years of combined professional experience, their staff combines a dynamic mixture of multi-talented individuals. In the OrgCode team, you'll find policy analysts, program developers, front-line practitioners, public sector executives, trainers, graphic designers, coaches, and facilitators.

Special thanks to the Government of Canada for funding this project through Women and Gender Equity Canada



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# INTRODUCTION

From July 2021 to March 2024, OrgCode Consulting Inc. was honoured to support the work of the community partners, women with lived/living experience and front-line service providers involved in the Women and Family Housing Stability Advisory Group (WFHSAG) in St. Thomas-Elgin. The WFHSAG was dedicated to lifting the voices of lived and living experience of housing crises and homelessness and improving community supports to identify, prioritize and resolve women-led family homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin. This final report summarizes the work completed to fulfill the intersectional and trauma informed collaborative work completed locally to enhance gender-based equity in service delivery, support provision and local innovation. Throughout this project, all activities and approaches ensured that women-led families remained at the center of all the work completed. Once again, community partners in St. Thomas – Elgin demonstrated their commitment to family-centred care and the dedication to their belief of “nothing about us, without us”!

This final report will provide insights into the following primary goals of this multi-year Women And Gender Equality Canada initiative in St. Thomas-Elgin:

- 1.** Understanding the Current Context: Global and Local Realities on Women-Led Family Homelessness & Recommendations on Preventing and Reducing Homelessness for this Specialized Population
- 2.** Creation of a Community Plan to Prevent and Reduce Women-Led Family Homelessness
- 3.** Measuring Impact and Outcomes of the Community Plan

By applying a gender-based lens on the realities of housing access, instability and homelessness, the WFHSAG focused on identifying and addressing the realities women-led families face in the region. The commitment to ensuring that this gender-based lens informed their community plan and system protocols ensured that women-led families received improved access to service and supports that meet their unique needs and circumstances in the future. Throughout this multi-year project, all collaborations and activities focused on a dedication to an approved list of Guiding Principles to ensure that women-led families would benefit from the best service approach possible, with access to the supports and resources that they identified as best meeting their and their families needs.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- I. *A Family Centred approach:*** Ensured that all decisions and services focused on children's safety and needs within the context of their families and communities. Families were defined broadly to include birth, blended, kinship, and foster and adoptive families. Supporting families with this approach ensured a commitment by service providers and community collaborations to focus on meeting the unique needs of the family, to consider child development, child safety, and to prioritize the least disruptive intervention for children. Such a family centered approach supports families to utilize their skills and strengths to self-identify and resolve issues and challenges tied to housing and support delivery by following the lead of the family to direct services. Women and Families are experts in their own lives, nothing for us or about us, without us.
- II. *Trauma Informed Care:*** It is recognized that for women (and their families), housing instability and homelessness is not just tied to a lack of affordable housing in community, it is further complicated by the unique systemic and structural inequities that negatively impact their opportunities for wellness, income, housing and safety within Canadian life. Recognizing that intimate and partner gender-based violence is both a driver and a consequence of housing crisis and homelessness for women in Canada, the WFHSAG committed itself and its work to the enhancement and implementation of trauma informed systems, supports and service responses for women-led families.
- III. *Diversion is a Priority:*** A commitment to preventing literal sheltered and unsheltered homelessness ensured that local service providers prioritized and delivered housing focused diversion services to women-led families upon connecting with access points for support.
- IV. *Informed Consent and Confidentiality:*** A commitment to trauma informed and family centered care also demanded that all women-led families supported throughout this project fully understood and consented to the collection, storage and sharing of relevant information to assist in accessing housing and support services. Being open and honest about consent and what information would be shared and for what purposes helped to create relationships and trust with women and their families, making it easier for the individual to be truthful. This also allowed the women to have a say in the services being provided; the who, where, and when to be within their control and the reassurance in knowing their information was being given to those who are relevant to their service goals and the allowance to revoke consent at any time necessary.





## COMMITMENT TO LOCAL COLLABORATIONS AND INNOVATION

Prior to 2021, local partnerships to enhance a gender-based analysis of the experience of homelessness began with the Taking Action on Women’s Homelessness Committee. This work then evolved into the Women and Family Housing Stability Advisory Group (WFHSAG). All member agencies involved in the WFHSAG signed a Collaborative Agreement to formally outline the roles, responsibilities and communication approaches that guided all interactions and service coordination during this initiative. A copy of the Collaborative Agreement can be found in [Appendix A](#) and included the following organizations:

- Canadian Mental Health Association Thames Valley Addictions and Mental Health Services (CMHATVAMHS)
- Central Community Health Centre (CCHC)
- Family and Children’s Services St. Thomas and Elgin (FACS)
- Fresh Start Support Services
- St. Thomas-Elgin Second Stage Housing
- St. Thomas-Elgin Social Services
- The INN St. Thomas-Elgin
- West Elgin Community Health Centre (WECHC)
- YWCA St. Thomas-Elgin (YWCA)

To ensure transparency in its mandate, the WFHSAG also clearly defined women-led family homelessness as:

“

*“A woman with dependents who is without stable, safe, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means, and ability of acquiring it.”<sup>1</sup>*

”

This definition was established to meet the requirements of the funded grant for the women-led family homelessness community plan. The Advisory Group also acknowledged that when working with women who are pregnant, choosing the right pathway of support will be completed on a case-by-case basis to align with the unique needs and wants of each woman. The WFHSAG supported a woman’s self-choice as to whether she would like to utilize the women-led family service model.

The YWCA as the designated backbone agency for this initiative, together with community partners and women with lived and living experience collaborated over a three-year period to co-design a community plan that reflected opportunities for system-level enhancements, a positive distribution of decision-making power, as well as inclusive policies and practices to support women’s equity.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the Canadian Definition of Homelessness, Canadian Observatory on Homelessness.

# AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE CURRENT CONTEXT: GLOBAL AND LOCAL REALITIES OF WOMEN-LED FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

The initial research completed for this multi-year Women And Gender Equality (WAGE) initiative confirmed what advocates and services providers have recognized for decades:

## *Systemic and Structural Inequities are Primary Drivers of Women-Led Family Homelessness in Canada*

The feminization of poverty places women-led families at the forefront of housing crises and homelessness risks. An inability to afford increasing rental costs and other necessities<sup>2</sup> create precarious scenarios. Since poverty and income inequity is also experienced along racial realities, racialized families (Black, Indigenous and people of colour) are at heightened risk for poverty and all the health, housing and wellness risks associated with this public health and social issue<sup>3</sup>. With 42% of children in women-led, lone-parent families and 40% of all Indigenous children living below the poverty line in Canada<sup>4</sup>, inadequate financial resources also limit sustainable housing options for families as they work to escape the trauma of homelessness.

An ongoing scarcity of affordable and appropriate housing places women-led families in a higher risk of homelessness. 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<sup>5</sup>. In fact, research indicates that single mothers are at much greater risk of socio-economic marginalization<sup>6</sup> and experience higher levels of core housing need compared to other groups<sup>7</sup>. Beyond being a cause of family homelessness, lack of appropriate, affordable and sustainable housing also creates a primary barrier to leaving homelessness<sup>8</sup>.

In addition to economic poverty and deprivation of affordable housing, exposure to abuse and trauma is the root cause for homelessness experienced by a majority of women-led families in Canada<sup>9</sup>. 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<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>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>

<sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup>Canadian Women's Foundation. (2018). *The facts about women and poverty in Canada*. Retrieved from <https://www.canadianwomen.org/the-facts/womens-poverty/>

<sup>5</sup>Statistics Canada. (2019a). *First results from the Canadian Housing Survey, 2018*. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca>

<sup>6</sup>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.

<sup>7</sup>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>

<sup>8</sup>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](https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/Family_Homelessness_Report.pdf)

<sup>9</sup>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.

Lack of family centred emergency shelter options remains an ongoing barrier to understanding and addressing homelessness, especially for women-led families. In Canada, only 10% of all shelter spaces are dedicated to serving families<sup>11</sup> and shelter data identified that 90% of families using shelters are led by women<sup>12</sup>. 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<sup>13</sup>. 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. Even within housing focused and family-centred shelters, escaping homelessness is further complicated since households must consider additional factors such as neighbourhood safety, proximity to children's schools, local day care and employment options, etc.<sup>14</sup>.

## Women-Led Family Homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin – Voices of Lived Experience

In the first three months of 2022, seventy-two families with lived and living experience of housing crises and homelessness shared their realities via a participant survey (See [Appendix B](#) for a copy of this survey). The majority of the lived experience voices (96%) were from women-led, lone parent families, 17% identified as 2SLGBTQI+ and 51% had children living with them. Sixty-six percent of respondents identified having completed some high school, a high school diploma or its equivalency. Seventy five percent of the respondents relied primarily on income assistance, either Ontario Works (50%) or Ontario Disability Support Program (25%). Of no surprise, 87% of all respondents identified that they had personal experience of severe housing precarity or homelessness, with 17% of participants experiencing literal homelessness at the time of the survey. The majority of these households were experiencing hidden homelessness (staying with family or friends), sheltered homelessness or currently residing in transitional living programs.

When identifying the top 5 challenges that impact families facing housing instability and/or homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin, survey respondents highlighted:

- housing supply and affordability issues
- income concerns reducing housing access and sustainability
- lack of homelessness prevention initiatives
- lack of housing support once re-housed
- lack of mental health supports required to maintain housing and improve wellness

<sup>10</sup>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.

<sup>11</sup>Schwan et.al. (2020), page 82.

<sup>12</sup>ESDC (2017)

<sup>13</sup>Statistics Canada (2019b) as cited in Schwan et. al (2020), page 11.

<sup>14</sup>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/>



## Lived and living experience testimonial

*I joined this group because I am passionate about sharing my knowledge and experience with others and I felt comfortable sharing and exploring problems and solutions with housing among my peers and the past and present facilitators. Talking about problems that we face when navigating housing costs and landlords and people that we are beholden to when it comes to why we cannot seem to “do better” for ourselves is not only a relief that we are among others who have experienced something similar; it is also empowering because you are surrounded by people who know what the struggle is like and they offer compassion and support and suggestions that may help you out. We share personal resources and things we have learned about how to try to thrive.*

*when we are dealing with children who are ill or have special needs, navigating parenting struggles with former prtners who are abusive and or controlling, weighing the cost and benefits of choosing childcare or transportation costs versus attending a class or program to better ourselves. These are only some of the topics that are covered in our discussions as lived experience members of the women and family homelessness and stability group. The facilitators bring areas of discussion from the parent committee and ask us to give our feedback and lend our expertise on the situation. We have a discussion and pose potential problems and solutions to policies or the wording of programs. We advocate for change to the services designed to help us because they are not accessible or easy to use or understand. Sometimes we are surprised to see that our suggestions are met with comments like: that information you request isn't feasible because it's too wordy or looks messy. And we may reply with too bad, this is what people who access these services need in order for them to be helpful. We celebrate the small successes and the big ones in the subgroup.*

*This group doesn't just serve as a sounding board for the individuals that come regularly. Our individual voices of 5 or 6 people that meet monthly create a roar that reverberates through the bones of the service providers in place to help us! I believe that it affirms the reason why people in the service provider sector chose this work in the first place. When we are understood and validated and presented with mindful problem solving we are empowered and rejuvenated. Our mental health improves and we have a built in network of resources from professionals-peers and facilitators.*

*Additionally, the facilitators kindly provide us with food or a light snack which may seem like a small offering but to me it has a huge benefit because I may not have been able to eat well or at all before the meeting scheduled from 1-3. This sub-group has also shifted and acknowledged the individual needs of its members; there is always an offering of pens, paper, crayons and colouring sheets for those who need to multitask in order to focus or express themselves non-verbally. In the past year I have watched a particular individual colour at every meeting: she rarely filled in more than a fraction of the page with the same crayon, pressing so hard she would snap a crayon and at the last meeting she practically coloured the whole page with different colours. No matter what the reason for this I choose to believe that this group has enabled her to feel safe and comfortable enough to colour her world with whatever crayon she chooses! This fills my heart.*

*The last half hour of our meeting we “shop”, picking out donated items of food or clothing or personal items that the Ywca has acquired which greatly enhances my quality of life bc as someone with a low income has to make difficult choices between bills and housing costs associated with navigating this technical world and getting the rest of our basic and psychological needs met.*

*The format and consistency of this meeting and all that it entails is guaranteed affecting more than the handful of people that attend! It affects our children, our partners, family, our neighbours, service providers, and strangers all for the better. For the low price of 2 hours per month!*

*~Towanda the Amazon woman “hear me roar!”*



## Women-Led Family Homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin – Voices of Service Providers

In April and May of 2022, 63 community partners that provide services and supports to families experiencing housing instability and/or homelessness completed the Service Provider Survey. Although service providers acknowledged that local staff were highly committed and trained to support families experiencing homelessness, they also were open in their assessment that based on limited resources and partnerships, 49% of agencies were currently not meeting their goals of preventing and reducing family homelessness. Respondents identified that enhanced collaborations, strategic approaches and protocols would enhance early detection, prevention, diversion and service delivery to families experiencing housing crises and homelessness. (See [Appendix C](#) for a copy of the Service Provider Survey).

AN ONGOING SCARCITY OF AFFORDABLE AND APPROPRIATE HOUSING PLACES WOMEN-LED FAMILIES IN A HIGHER RISK OF HOMELESSNESS.



# A COMMUNITY PLAN TO PREVENT AND REDUCE WOMEN-LED FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

Over a three-year period, local community partners – including a lived experience group – worked to create a robust prevention and diversion response system for women-led families at risk of or already experiencing homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin. As the recipient of a Women and Gender Equity Canada grant, the YWCA STE provided leadership and backbone support, alongside the advisory group, consisting of multiple organizations. These organizations met monthly beginning in July 2021 and established several sub-committees to enhance the workflow of service and support options. The Women and Family Housing Stability Advisory Group (WFHSAG) functioned with a high level of networking and collaboration to make decisions that would accelerate the systemic change needed to address the gendered issues of women-led family homelessness and housing instability. The Advisory Group's dedication and hard work was instrumental in creating the community plan.

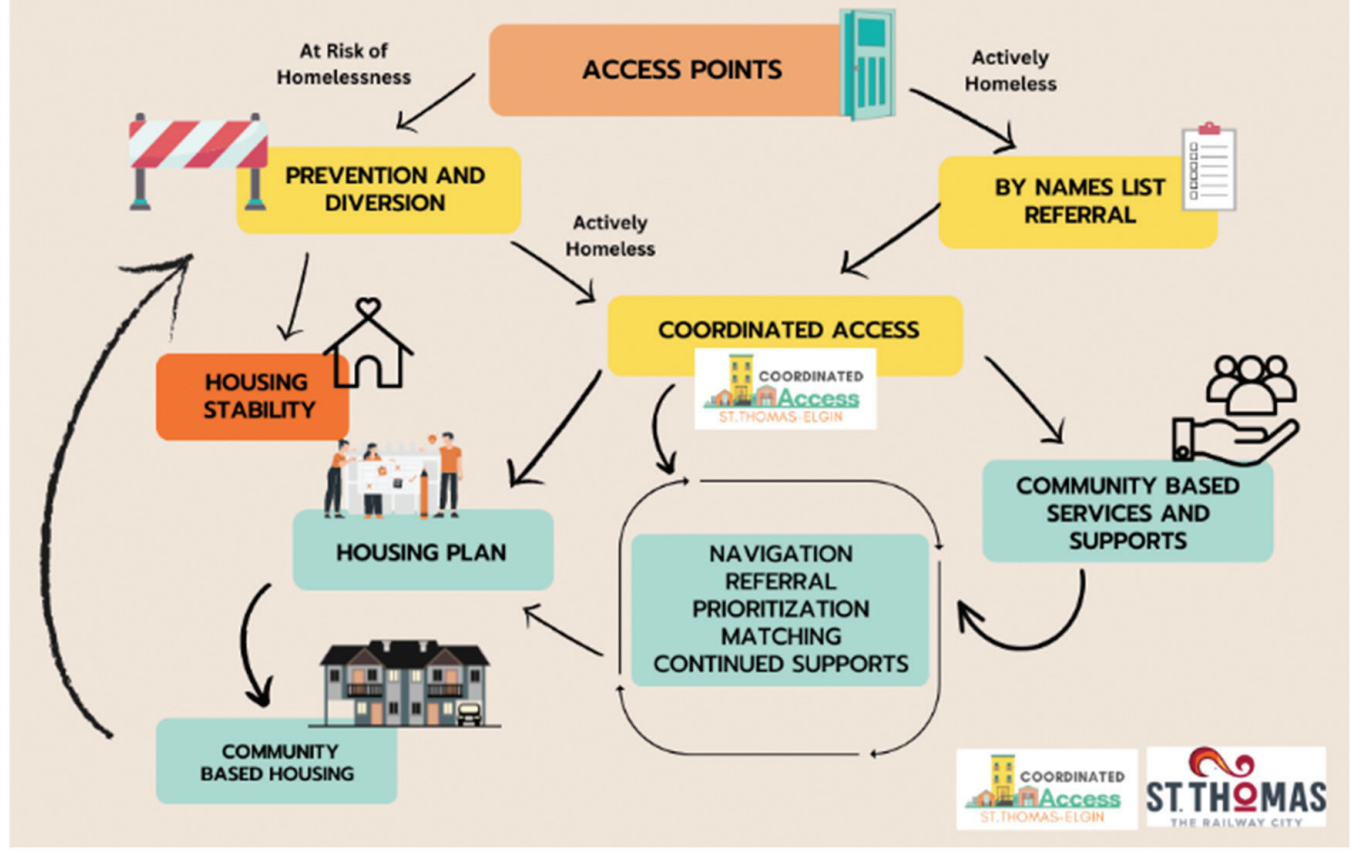
From July 2021 to August 2023 the Women and Family Housing Stability Advisory Group and the Lived and Living Experience sub-group engaged in courageous conversations, strategic thinking, and creative innovation to create a community plan that was grounded in evidence and reflected local realities. The following 3 priorities were established to strengthen efforts to prevent and reduce homelessness for women-led families:

## ***Priority 1: Development of a Service Model that included Homelessness Prevention, Shelter Diversion and Coordinated Access initiatives for women-led families***

The identification of access points that women-led families may naturally use to gain services and supports focused on a “no wrong door” approach within St. Thomas-Elgin. To ensure consistency in services and practices, WFHSAG identified a common safety, housing and support needs pre-screen and assessment processes to ensure that women-led families were connected with the available finite resources. Training was provided for all community partners on prevention and diversion strategies to optimize the opportunity for housing focused problem solving, housing location assistance and determining what resources may be necessary to assist each family to avoid and/or reduce the experience of homelessness. For households that did not have pre-existing connections with service providers, the YWCA STE provided access to the Poverty Intervention and Family Coordinator during business hours. After business hours, referrals would be initiated to Violence Against Women Services Elgin County (VAWSEC) or, when required, the emergency response services. The following graphic demonstrates the St. Thomas-Elgin Housing system Map.

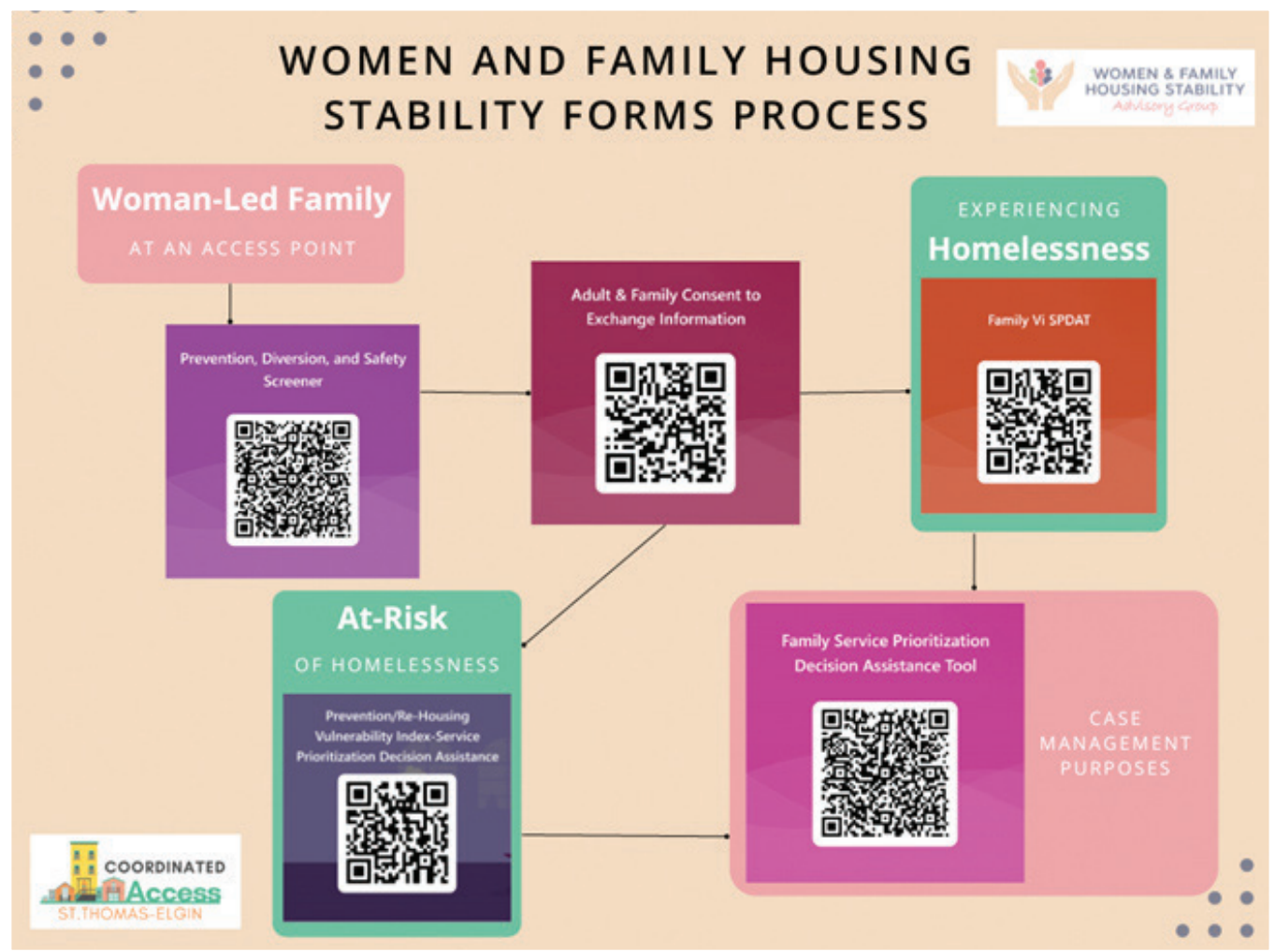
# St. Thomas Elgin Housing System Map

Homelessness Support



When prevention and diversion proved unsuccessful, or if a women-led family connected with the service model was already experiencing active homelessness, the WFHSAG successfully articulated solutions to ensure that there were referring options to rapidly transition/re-house and provide safety net(s) for the family. Respite accommodations were identified and were meant to be time limited. When matching a family to a respite accommodation, support staff prioritizes a family-centered approach, ensuring that all family members would remain together, and that they were safe. When re-locating a family to temporary or more permanent housing options, supports worked to provide transportation, promote food security, and increase access to community housing stability resources when available and appropriate. The following temporary accommodations could be accessed as needed: hotel nights, placement within the YWCA STE Family Transitional Home, or the Rural Elgin Shelter.

This coordinated service model initiated the use of the valid processes (system navigation strategies and warm transfers, family-centred case conferencing tables, safety screening, consent and data sharing agreements, etc.) and tools (such as the Family SPDAT for households experiencing homelessness, the Prevention-Rehousing VI-SPDAT for households at risk of homelessness, etc.). For those women that needed specialized, higher intensity re-housing programming, Coordinated Access processes were activated to prioritize, match and refer women-led families to the most appropriate housing program dedicated to housing stability and homelessness proofing.



Recognizing the connection between violence and homelessness for women and their families, a focus on safety and trauma responsive supports were amplified in the Service Model to Prevent and Reduce Women-Led Family Homelessness in St. Thomas-Elgin. If, upon entry to the service system, the woman identified that her current situation was the direct result of experiencing Gender-Based Violence (GBV) or Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), a direct referral was initiated to St. Thomas-Elgin Second Stage Housing or Violence Against Women Services Elgin County (VAWSEC). These community partners have the expertise and the specialized supports to effectively provide services to women with these experiences. YWCA STE remained connected to share data and resources.





The Women and Family Housing Stability Advisory Group compiled a list of community resources that could aid in enhancing housing stability for women-led families. This list of Housing Stability Resources provided a positive impact on physical and mental health through connections to homelessness reduction services and housing supports. Housing Stability Resources improve access to basic needs (i.e., food, health services, and financial assistance). The Women and Family Housing Stability Advisory Group along with the sub-group of lived and living experience women, also played a vital role in updating the Community Connections St. Thomas-Elgin Guide in 2023, providing recommendations, edits, and feedback with a gender and family-centered lens.

## ***Priority 2: Advocacy, Awareness & Education***

WFHSAG partners worked diligently throughout this project to advocate for systematic change to prevent and reduce women-led family homelessness in St. Thomas and Elgin County. By ensuring that policy makers and community leaders understood the root causes of women-led family homelessness and promoting the mission that every woman in our community has an inherent right to safe and affordable housing, the WFHSAG accomplished many successes in its efforts for equity, justice and enhanced supports for women-led families, including:

- Amplifying the voices of women with lived and living experience.
- The commitment of two emergency units from Fresh Start Support Services.
- Short-term funding to support the YWCA STE staff position, Poverty Interventions and Family Coordinator.
- The YWCA Family Supportive Transitional Home (one year pilot project).
- The dedication of 50% occupancy of women and women-led families within the upcoming build of the YWCA STE's Project Tiny Hope of 40-units.
- The Central Community Health Centre's commitment to support women-led families in getting connected to family doctors via a coordinated process.
- Enhanced collaboration between the homelessness response sector and the Violence Against Women sector to ensure that women-led families fleeing violence get referred to the trauma responsive supports available locally via VAWSEC.
- Maximizing the impact of available prevention, diversion and housing start-up funding available via Next Steps Grant (YWCA), National Emergency Survivor Support (NESS) Fund (YWCA), New Beginnings Loan Fund (YWCA/Second Stage), Family Rent Back (YWCA), and the Housing Stability Financial Assistance (HSFA by City of St. Thomas-Social Services).
- Increased awareness of and access to both the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB) and the Portable Housing Benefit, administered by City of St. Thomas – Social Services as well as The Passport Program administered by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.
- The optimization of a donation of transportation support and food security funds to support women-led families accessing the service model.

- Enhanced social media presence by YWCA STE on GPV, IPV, Women’s Rights, Women and Family Homelessness and topics related to housing and stability. These social media posts and platforms are shared with WFHSAG members.
- Enhanced training and professional development opportunities via such opportunities as:
  - Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) training
  - Excellence in Housing Based Case Management
  - The Art and Science of Homelessness Prevention & Shelter Diversion
- Organizational in-services have also taken place from: Changing Ways, and Violence Against Women Services Elgin County (VAWSEC), Tracy Flaherty-Willmott (OrgCode Consulting Inc.), and Marie Morrison (Director, Built for Zero Canada, Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness).
- The Elgin Alliance to End Violence Committee (EAEV) invited WFHSAG Member to attend an orientation session on the ‘Be Safer’ app in the Fall of 2023.
- Family and Children Services of St. Thomas-Elgin has committed to inviting community partners to ongoing informational and training sessions on such topics as trauma informed care, safety and gender-based violence responses.

### ***Priority 3: Improving Housing Stock and Resource Development***

Recognizing that the only solution to housing precarity and homelessness involves increasing the availability of affordable and appropriate housing options, partners identified additional family-centred pathways and housing solutions to meet the local need. Through the advocacy of the WFHSAG, the St. Thomas-Elgin community worked on three additional housing options for women-led families.

- YWCA Family Transitional Home: Starting in September 2023, a 3-bedroom unit is being used for temporary respite for a maximum of 3 months. The YWCA staff provided wrap-around supports to the household.
- Fresh Start House of Homes will provide two designated units within a three-story dwelling with communal space. These emergency housing units will be available for women-led families referred through the STE’s Coordinated Access process for emergency support for up to 3 months.
- The YWCA STE’s Project Tiny Hope is proceeding with building 40 tiny homes in 2024-25, with a commitment of 50% of these tiny homes dedicated to women and women-led families. The Tiny Hope community will provide stable housing with personalized supports to build life stabilization as the foundation to build upon other goals such as economic security, wellness, and community connectedness.

WHAT IS SOMETHING YOU  
HAVE LEARNED FROM THE  
LIVED EXPERIENCE GROUP?

Our collective voice and  
ideas can & will affect  
positive change!

## MEASURING IMPACT AND OUTCOMES OF THE COMMUNITY PLAN

In investigating the outcomes of the enhanced service delivery model for women-led families experiencing housing crises and homelessness, YWCA STE provided de-identified information on 24 households (which included 42 children) that had been served between September 2023-February 2024. Most of these households (81%) were in City of St. Thomas and the remaining households were located in Port Bruce area, Dutton area, Port Stanley area and Staffordville. Of these 24 women-led families, 3 or 13% were experiencing homelessness (couch surfing or sheltered homelessness) at the point of connecting with the local system of care and one household surpassed the Canadian definition of chronic homelessness with 12 consecutive months of homelessness. The remaining 21 households (87%) were at risk of experiencing homelessness with most of these women-led families living in market rent units. For 63% of these households, this risk of homelessness was a first-time occurrence. Unfortunately, for 37% of the households, housing crises and/or homelessness was a recurring concern. On average, women-led families received 69 days of prevention and/or diversion supports from the enhanced service model. At the time of writing this final report, the 3 households experiencing sheltered or hidden homelessness were still experiencing homelessness in the community.

The average age of the women supported by the service model was 30.8 years old, with ages ranging from 21 to 42 years of age. Sixty-seven percent were under the age of 30. It is important to note that 5 of these women met the definition of transition aged youth (24 years of age or younger) and therefore these families would benefit from supports dedicated to a positive youth development approach to service. Two of the women were currently pregnant at the time of their Coordinated Access assessment. 38% of the women-led families were involved with the child welfare system. Only 2 of the 24 women (8%) identified as Indigenous. Ten of the households were added to the community's By Name List and 10 were assisted with the YWCA Family Rent Bank.

In understanding the risk of homelessness for households still housed at the point of contact, Prevention-Re-Housing VI-SPDAT surveys were completed. For the 5 households that completed the PR-VI-SPDAT, 3 households were at high risk of entering the homelessness response system if financial and support services were not provided. In keeping with evidence informed practices, all 3 of these households were indeed prioritized for financial and support services to maintain their current housing or relocate to other appropriate housing options. An additional 5 households received a VI-SPDAT pre-screen, two of these households were identified as benefiting from high intensity of supports and 3 were identified as benefiting from low to moderate intensity of supports to increase housing stability.

Twenty-one of the 24 women-led households (88%) were matched and referred to case management supports delivered by YWCA, Fresh Start, City of St. Thomas Social Services, West Elgin Community Health Centre, Family and Children Services, Canadian Mental Health Association Thames Valley Addiction and Mental Health Services or The INN St. Thomas-Elgin. The most common service delivered to the women-led families was system navigation supports.



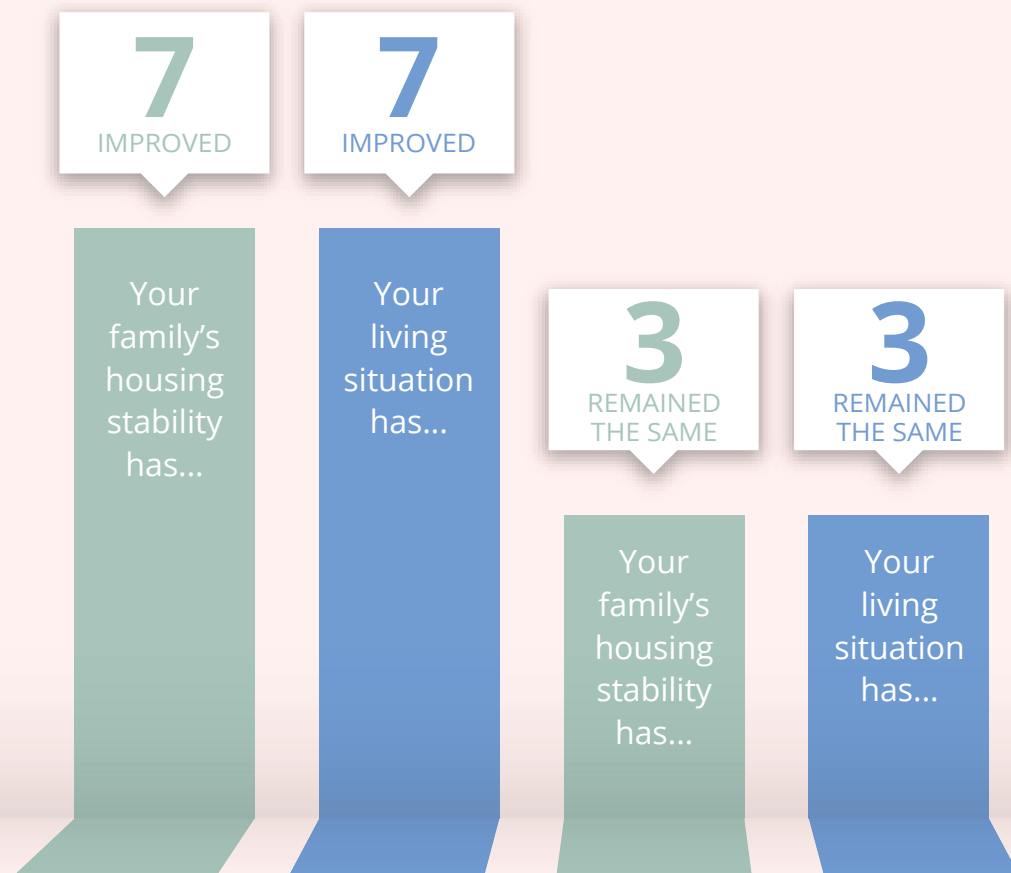
## BEYOND THE NUMBERS - FEEDBACK FROM WOMEN-LED HOUSEHOLDS SUPPORTED BY THE COMMUNITY PLAN

Beyond the quantitative analysis of the 24 households served and supported during the initial months of the Community Plan, the WFHSAG also wanted to gather insights on the impacts of the revised service model as well as the enhanced financial and housing supports in the lives of women and their families. To gather these insights, a post-participation survey was distributed to households served. Ten households responded to this survey request (See [Appendix D](#) for a copy of this Post-Participation Survey). The below sections describe the impacts experienced by households supported by this Community Plan:

### Impacts on Housing Realities

The service model, and the additional tools and evidence informed approaches adopted by the WFHSAG partners have certainly had a positive impact on the households served with 70% of all respondents identifying that both their housing stability and living situations have improved.

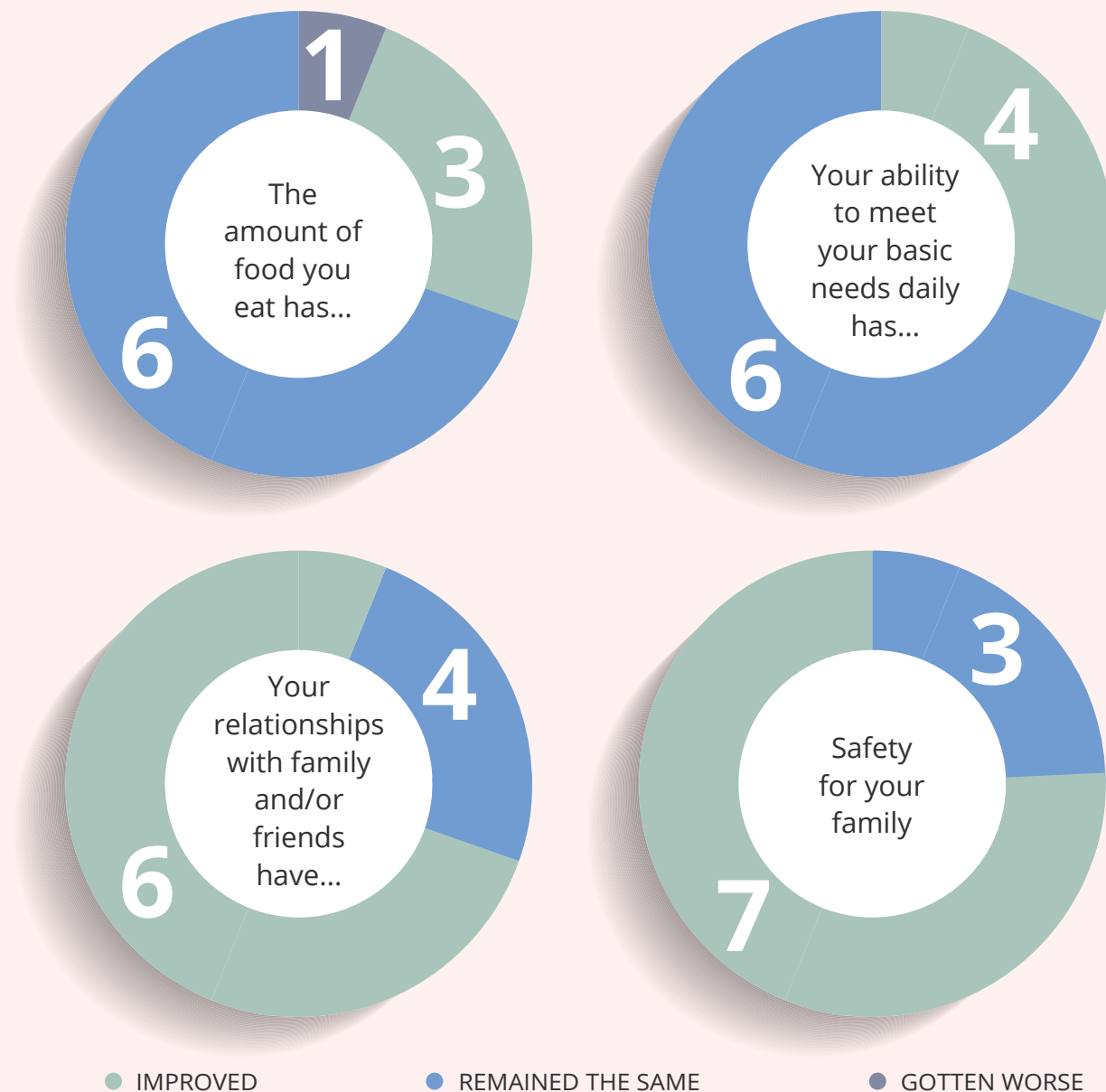
### SINCE RECEIVING SUPPORT...



## Impacts on Ability to Meet Basic Needs and Maintain Safety

Food security continues to be an ongoing issue for women-led households even after they are supported by the system of care with only 30% of women identifying that the amount of food they eat has improved while 60% say it has remained the same and 10% identified that the amount of food they eat has gotten worse since receiving service. The ability to meet their basic needs improved for 40% of the women-led households and remained the same for 60% of respondents after receiving services. In contrast, 70% of women-led families identified that safety had improved and 60% identified that their relationships with family and friends had improved since receiving family-centered service in St. Thomas-Elgin.

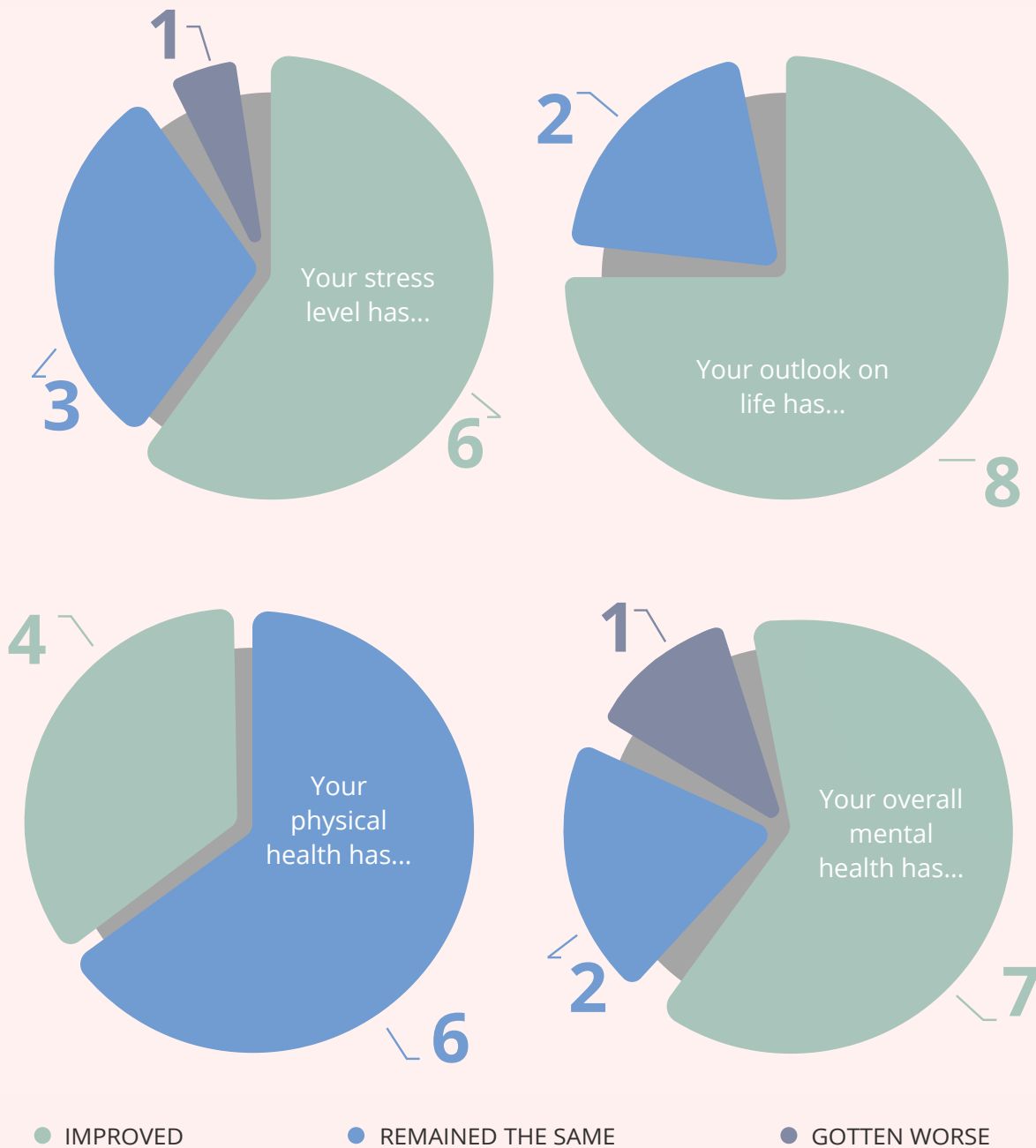
### SINCE RECEIVING SERVICE...



## Health & Wellness Impacts

In exploring the changes in the household's health and wellness, 60% of respondents identified that their stress levels had improved, 80% identified that their outlook on life had improved and 70% identified that their mental health had improved since they had received support by the new service model. Enhancements to physical health were identified by 40% of the respondents while 60% identified that their physical health had remained the same.

### SINCE RECEIVING SUPPORT...

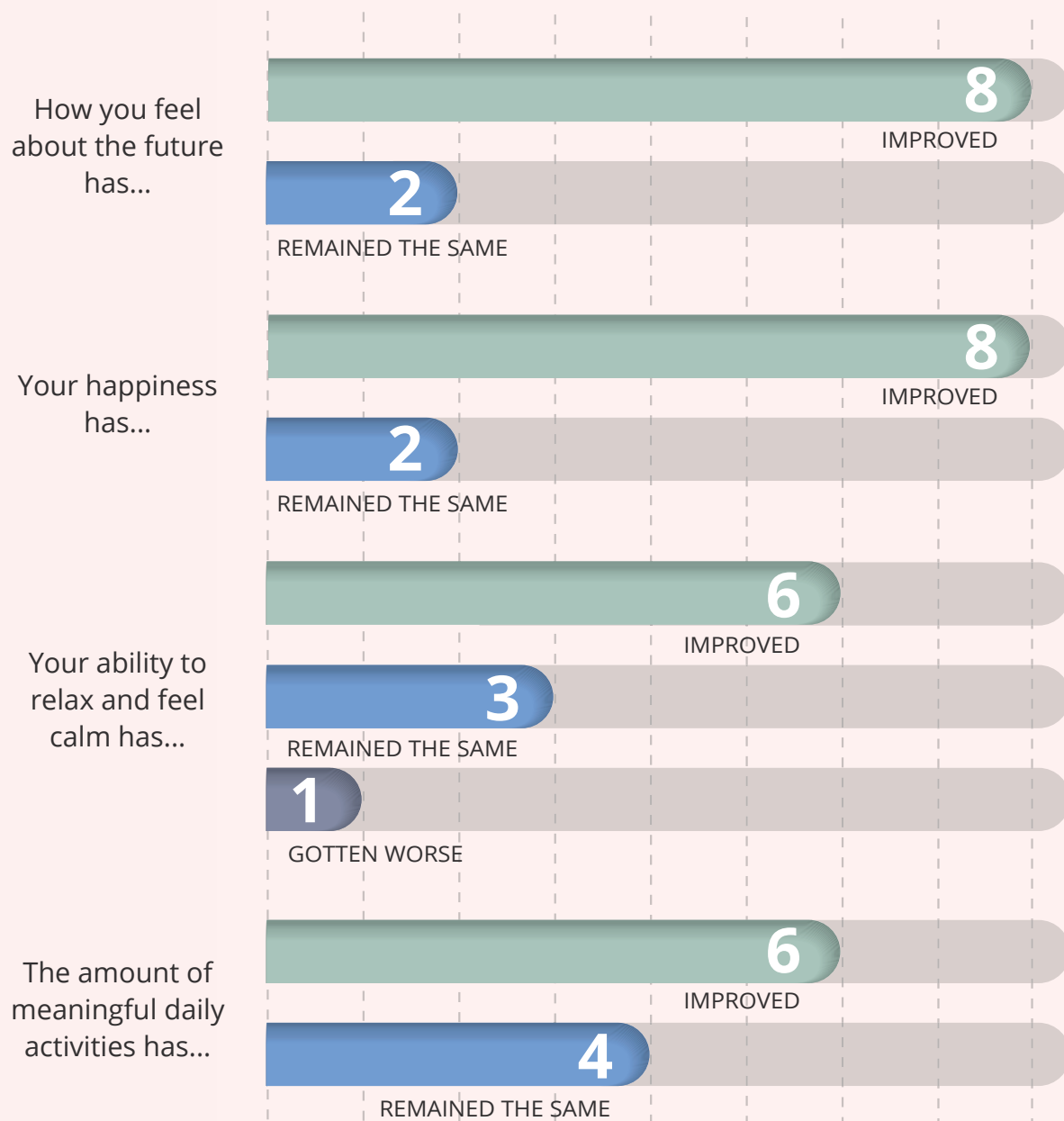




## Impacts on Hopefulness and Happiness

When reflecting on revisions to hopefulness and happiness indicators since receiving supports through the new women-led family homelessness response system in St. Thomas-Elgin, 80% of respondents identified that how they feel about the future and their happiness has improved. Sixty percent of respondents identified that their ability to relax/feel calm and their involvement in meaningful daily activities had improved since receiving support.

### SINCE RECEIVING SUPPORT...



## CONCLUSION

This multi-year Women And Gender Equity (WAGE) initiative provided community partners and women with lived and living experience to collaborate in the quest to understand local homelessness through gender-based and trauma informed lens. It also provided the opportunity to co-design a community action plan that fostered system-level enhancements and the incorporation of evidence informed practices and tools. Such a focus on enhanced service pathways, coupled with increased housing solutions and efforts to advance advocacy and education will continue to prevent and reduce homelessness for women-led families in St. Thomas-Elgin in the future. A commitment to this action-oriented collaborative Community Plan by local partners will continue to positively impact women-led families experiencing housing instability and homelessness. Together with ongoing poverty reduction efforts, families in St. Thomas-Elgin will be served well by the local system of care.

OrgCode would like to express our gratitude to all the service delivery partners, government departments and women of lived and living experience that elevated their voices and their courage to find creative solutions to prevent and end women-led family homelessness locally. We commend the local commitment to review and update the Community Plan regularly as St. Thomas-Elgin continues its work towards making housing instability and homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring for women and their families.



# APPENDICES



APPENDIX A



APPENDIX B



APPENDIX C



APPENDIX D



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