YWCA ST. THOMAS-ELGIN



2025-2026

Annual Report

Empowering women, gender-diverse people, and their families, every day!

Land Acknowledgement

YWCA St. Thomas Elgin rests on the traditional lands of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, Attiwonderonk, and Mississauga peoples, which are covered by the Upper Canada Treaties, specifically Treaty 2 (McKee Treaty, 1790) and Treaty 3 (Between the Lakes Purchase and Collins Purchase, 1792). This area is also covered by the Dish with One Spoon wampum, under which multiple nations came together in peace to care for the land and the resources of the Great Lakes. Today, Elgin County is also bordered by the communities of Munsee-Delaware First Nation, Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, and Oneida Nation of the Thames. We are grateful to work on this land as we strive to build a more equitable and just community.



Our Mission, Vision & Guiding Principles

Our Mission

Providing leadership, advocacy, opportunities, and a voice. Empowering women, gender-diverse people, and their families, every day!

Our Vision

We envision a thriving community where everyone experiences equity, opportunity, and self-determination.

Guiding Principles

- Community-Mindedness
- Equity, Diversity, Inclusion
- Resiliency and Responsiveness
- Respect and Dignity


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Executive Director & Board Chair Message

This past year has been one of meaningful impact, growth, and continued response to urgent community needs. At YWCA St. Thomas-Elgin, we remain committed to providing leadership, advocacy, opportunities, and a voice—empowering women, gender-diverse people, and their families every day.

For over 120 years, our organization has supported individuals and families across St. Thomas and Elgin County. Today, that commitment is more critical than ever as we respond to increasing pressures related to housing instability, poverty, and social inequities.

Across all programs, we remain focused on meeting people where they are—offering inclusive, accessible supports that foster stability, growth, and wellness whether it is adult education, settlement services, swimming lessons or childcare. Our work continues to span the full continuum of support, from immediate needs to long-term empowerment.

Access to safe, affordable housing remains one of the most urgent issues in our community. This year, we continued to strengthen our supportive and transitional housing programs, helping individuals move toward stability and independence.

A key highlight this year has been the continued progress of Project Tiny Hope—an innovative housing initiative aimed at creating 40 affordable tiny homes for 66 residents. This project is a powerful example of what community collaboration can achieve and reflects our deep commitment to addressing homelessness and housing insecurity at its root. In October, we were proud to celebrate the launch of the first 10 homes in partnership with Doug Tarry Homes and Sanctuary Homes. Welcoming our first residents marked a significant and meaningful milestone in bringing this vision to life.

We continue to deliver a wide range of programs that support children, youth, and families across the region. From licensed school-age childcare at multiple locations to youth development and aquatics programs, our services are designed to promote healthy development, confidence, and life skills.

Programs such as life skills training, employment readiness, and youth-focused initiatives help young people build independence and prepare for the future.

At the same time, our childcare and family supports enable parents and caregivers to pursue education and employment opportunities.

This year, we continued to support newcomers to Canada through settlement services, language supports, youth groups and community integration programs. By offering culturally responsive services in multiple languages, we are helping individuals and families build connections, access opportunities, and feel a sense of belonging in Elgin County.

Our commitment to equity and inclusion remains central to all that we do.

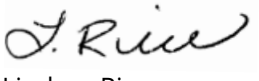
Through poverty interventions, financial empowerment programs, basic skills training, and pre-employment programming, we are supporting individuals on their path to economic independence. These programs are essential in addressing poverty and creating pathways to long-term success.

None of this work would be possible without the dedication of our amazing staff, volunteers, Board of Directors, and community partners. Their compassion, expertise, and commitment ensure that every individual who connects with YWCA St. Thomas-Elgin is met with respect, care, and support.

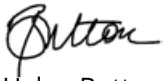
We are also deeply grateful to our funders and donors, whose generosity enables us to grow and adapt our services in response to evolving needs. We're especially thankful for the continued support from our community through initiatives such as Splash into Summer Sponsorships, the Summer Night Social, the Keep a Roof Campaign, and our Women's Day fundraisers.

As we look to the future, the need for our services remains significant—but so does our resolve. We will continue to innovate, collaborate, and advocate to ensure that everyone in our community has access to safety, opportunity, and a sense of belonging.

We will remain a leader in advancing gender equity, supporting families, and building stronger, more inclusive communities every day!



Lindsay Rice,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Helen Button,
BOARD CHAIR

Board Chair



Helen Button

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Managers



Shannon Wagner
Manager of Housing



Valerie Beneteau
Manager of Life Stabilization Programs



Megan Russell
School Age Childcare Manager



Lindsey Barrett
School Age Childcare Manager



Katie Austin
Childcare Manager of Growth and Culture



Nirali Naik
Manager of Settlement Services



Sonia Basu
St. Thomas Elgin Local Immigration Partnership Manager



Nicole McNeil-Nuckowski
Manager of Education & Training



Melissa Kempf
Communications Office Manager



Jason Stamos
Property Manager

School Age Childcare

Community Building Through School Age Childcare

School Age Childcare programs play a vital role in building strong, connected communities for children and families. Guided by our provincial pedagogy for the early years, How Does Learning Happen?, Belonging is one of the four foundations essential to children's learning and well being. When children experience belonging, they feel safe, valued, and connected—conditions that support confidence, healthy development, and positive relationships.

150 children participating in Summer Camps

In the past year, 370 children were registered in our School Age Childcare programs, with an additional approximately 150 children participating in Summer Camps. These programs extend the school day and summer months into welcoming, relationship based environments where children and families form lasting connections.

Belonging and Connection for Children

School Age Childcare programs provide consistent spaces where children build friendships, develop trusting relationships with educators, and feel part of a shared community. Through group play, collaborative activities, and daily routines, children experience inclusion and connection. Families clearly see this impact, with one parent sharing, **"my daughters love going to program. They have made so many friends and have meaningful connections with their educators."**

The Village of Support for Families

Beyond care, School Age Childcare programs create essential networks of support for families. Educators become trusted partners, and programs offer reliability for families balancing work, life transitions, and changing schedules. For families without extended supports, these programs fill a critical gap. From a recent YWCA Childcare survey, 55% of respondents shared that they choose our program because, as one parent explained that they need additional local supports to help meet their family's needs. As the African proverb goes, "it takes a village to raise a child." One family shared, **"we don't have a lot of family nearby, so it helps us fill in gaps, reliably."** Another reflected, **"the leaders in these programs became an extension of our family."**





In honour of Fiona Chapman | *September 19, 1970 – February 3, 2026*

This winter, we lost a cherished member of our School Age Childcare team, Fiona Chapman. Fiona joined YWCA in 2013 as a Before and After School Program Educator at our McGregor site, where families valued her warmth, creativity, and the sense of belonging she created for children. In 2019, until her illness in 2024, she became our Family Registrar and Staffing Coordinator, supporting families through enrollment and helping build our incredible team of Educators. Fiona brought sparkle and charm to all who knew her, and she will be dearly missed.

Building Positive Communities Through GirlSPACE

In 2025, we strengthened our commitment to belonging by offering YWCA GirlSPACE, our first girls focused summer camp in decades. Designed for girls and gender diverse youth aged 7–11, GirlSPACE created a safe, affirming community focused on self esteem, healthy boundaries, body image, and well being. Hosted at our Hiawatha location, this boutique camp offered small group workshops in physical activity, arts and photography, creative journaling, cooking, and embracing differences. The camp was highly reviewed,





370 children were registered in our School Age programs

and many participants have already reregistered, reflecting the strong sense of connection and confidence it fostered. One family shared **"My daughter has a hard time connecting with others her age. She came home happy and giggling each day. She asked if she could spend the whole summer there!".**



Strengthening Community Through Belonging

Across School Age Childcare and summer programs like Camp & GirlSPACE, we create places where children and families feel welcomed, supported, and connected. Rooted in How Does Learning Happen?, our programs do more than provide care—they build inclusive communities, strengthen family supports, and nurture a lasting sense of belonging.Together, we are raising a generation that is confident, compassionate, and ready to shine.

Aquatics & Children's Programs

Children's Programs

Reflecting on the past year, our Children's Recreational Programs were truly a whirlwind of activity and growth. Through our Stay Safe – Home Alone and Babysitting courses, we proudly served a total of 143 participants. A highlight of the year included delivering a private course at Robarts School for the Deaf, providing an opportunity for our facilitators to support skill development and self-esteem in children with hearing impairments. The opportunity to deliver inclusive programming in a specialized setting reinforced our commitment to accessibility and meaningful participation for all children.

Parental feedback further reinforced the value of these programs, with 80% of parents indicating that their child felt included while attending. One participant beautifully captured the spirit of these experiences by sharing, **"My favourite part of the day was getting to meet new people and make a new friend."** Together, this feedback underscores the importance of fostering a sense of belonging and providing opportunities for children to build confidence, independence, and pride in their abilities.

Aquatics Programs

Behind every number there is a story. While statistics help us measure success, the real impact at the pool is found in the stories and experiences we share.



From toddlers taking their first steps in the pool, to youth developing swimming and leadership skills and supporting others, to older adults maintaining wellness and connection through aqua movement. From sponsored swimming reducing barriers for families to join in, milestones like floating independently or gaining water safety awareness become life changing. Each experience reflects the impact of safe, inclusive, and accessible programming.



Small Moments, Lasting Impact

A family visited the pool regularly, and a lifeguard would help their young daughter to borrow a lifejacket each time she came to the pool. Over time, she became more comfortable and confident in the water. One day, she brought in a drawing as a thank you to the Lifeguard - explaining that when she learns to swim on her own, she wants to help others by giving them lifejackets too. This simple moment is a powerful reminder that small acts of support can build confidence, inspire kindness and create a ripple effect that extends far beyond the pool.

Throughout the year, and each summer during National Drowning Prevention week in particular, in partnership with the Elgin County Drowning Prevention Coalition, we bring attention to the importance of water safety education, swimming lessons, supervised swimming opportunities and the key role they play in drowning prevention. We remind folx to swim where the lifeguards are and that lifejackets are for everyone. We promote learning to swim and share water safety messages through proclamations, flag raisings, community events and public education and awareness.

- **900 children, youth, and adults** took part in Swim for Life lessons, lifesaving training, and leadership programs.
- **5,063 swimmers** enjoyed supervised swims at the Aylmer outdoor pool, including 2,811 free admissions during sponsored public swims thanks to community supporters.
- **233 children ages 6-12** passed the Swim to Survive standard, proving essential water safety skills like treading water and swimming to safety.
- **39 youth** completed leadership and certification courses, building skills and confidence for future lifeguard and swim instructor roles.
- Community members contributed **more than 300 volunteer hours** to support programs and local initiatives.

900 children, youth, and adults took part in Swim for Life Programs.



Thank you for supporting 2,811 swimmers during our free public swim days!

2025 SPONSORS

Supportive Housing

For nearly a century, YWCA St. Thomas-Elgin has stood alongside individuals and families facing some of life's most difficult moments, offering not just housing—but stability, dignity, and hope. We are deeply committed to supporting vulnerable youth and adults across our community, guided by the belief that homelessness is not inevitable, and that with the right supports, it can be prevented and ultimately ended.

Through our eight transitional supportive housing programs, we provide more than a place to stay—we create space for people to rebuild. Each resident is supported by a dedicated Housing-Based Case Manager who works alongside them to navigate challenges, set goals, and move toward a more stable future. We recognize that housing is just the beginning, which is why our approach includes wraparound supports such as access to food and essential items, life-skills programming, counselling, system navigation, and opportunities to reconnect with family and community.

Over the past year, 59 individuals found housing through our programs, and 9 were able to take the next step into independent living. These are more than numbers—they represent people who have moved from uncertainty to stability, from surviving to beginning to thrive.

At the same time, the realities of today's housing crisis continue to shape our work. With rising living costs and a vacancy rate of just 1.7%, many individuals are staying longer in our programs, with the average length of stay now at 286 days. Behind this number are stories of perseverance—people working hard every day to overcome barriers in an increasingly challenging housing market.

Despite these pressures, our commitment remains unwavering. We believe in a future where everyone in St. Thomas-Elgin has a safe, affordable place to call home. Every day, we move closer to that vision—one person, one family, one home at a time.

"All the women are amazing and bring their own set of skills. It's truly a sisterhood of ladies helping each other through. The gratitude is abundant for all the little things each day and we are lucky to be here as we start over anew."



59 individuals found housing through our programs, and 9 were able to take the next step into independent living.



"The YWCA is more than just a Women's Residence. It is a safe and secure environment to enrich our lives. This life has taken us all on a journey of sorts. Some are here for a season or five."



Housing Stability

YWCA St. Thomas–Elgin is leading a homelessness reduction initiative funded through the Homelessness Reduction Innovation Fund (HRIF) from February 1, 2026, to January 31, 2027. The initiative strengthens local systems, improves housing stability, and reduces returns to homelessness, particularly among youth. Building on the Youth Homelessness Protocol, it advances supportive, housing-focused approaches while enhancing coordination across the homelessness-serving system in St. Thomas–Elgin.

The project prioritizes individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness, with a focus on youth aged 16–24 who face barriers such as poverty, trauma, health challenges, and system involvement. Using a Housing First approach, participants receive person-centred, trauma-informed supports delivered in-home or in the community, with an emphasis on housing retention, stabilization, and long-term success.

A key component of the initiative is collaboration with community partners, who support referrals, coordinated care planning, and access to services such as health care, income supports, legal assistance, and cultural resources. The program offers low-barrier intake and flexible, intensive case management tailored to individual needs. Guided by equity, inclusion, harm reduction, and respect for lived experience, the initiative also promotes continuous learning and system improvement.

Since launching in February 2026, the project has supported an overall reduction of 18 youth experiencing homelessness or housing instability. Across St. Thomas–Elgin, homelessness has declined to its lowest level since July 2022, with 90 individuals currently experiencing homelessness. During 2025–2026, 167 individuals were successfully housed, including 93 who were chronically homeless. YWCA contributed significantly by supporting housing stability for 59 individuals and families, including 9 who transitioned to independent living, and by supporting 120 youth, 53 of whom were successfully housed. Through coordinated services, prevention efforts, and wraparound supports, YWCA continues to play a critical role in reducing homelessness and sustaining housing stability in the community.





The HRIF project has supported an overall reduction of 18 youth experiencing homelessness and housing instability.

Keep A Roof Over Their Heads

In 2025, our **YWCA Keep A Roof Over Their Heads Campaign** reached an extraordinary milestone, our most successful year to date. Together, with the compassion and generosity of our community, we raised **$90,824**!

This remarkable achievement reflects incredible financial support, and a shared belief that everyone deserves safety, dignity, and a place to call home. To each donor, partner, and advocate who stood with us, thank you so very much. You are truly helping to keep a roof over the heads of women, youth, and families in our community.

At the YWCA, our housing programs are called supportive housing because we offer far more than shelter. Across our residences- including Kains Street Tiny Homes, Horizon House, Unity House, Harmony House, Fairwinds for youth, independent living apartments, the YWCA Women's Residence, and our Women-Led Family Transitional Home- we create spaces where individuals can begin again. Residents are connected to a network of supports that foster stability, build confidence, and open doors to opportunity. Through individualized goal setting, life skills development, and employment readiness support, we walk alongside each person as they rebuild and move toward a more secure and independent future.

Funds raised through this campaign directly support both our supportive housing programs and poverty intervention programs, helping to meet immediate needs while also investing in long-term change. Programs like Map to Independence equip participants with practical tools to manage finances, prepare for employment, navigate complex systems, and strengthen their overall well-being. These are the building blocks of lasting stability, empowering individuals not just to get by, but to truly move forward with confidence and resilience.

Because of you, lives are being transformed. Because of you, hope is being restored. Thank you for helping us keep a roof overhead, and for being part of a community that believes in brighter futures for all.

Together we raised $90,824 for our Housing, and Poverty Intervention Programs.



Breaking the Cycle of Gender Based Violence

Gender-based violence and exploitation remain urgent and complex realities in St. Thomas and Elgin County, rooted in systemic inequities that disproportionately impact women, trans, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse individuals, as well as Indigenous peoples, migrants, and other marginalized communities. At YWCA St. Thomas–Elgin, breaking this cycle requires more than a single intervention—it demands a coordinated, survivor-centred approach that addresses immediate safety while advancing long-term systems change. Through initiatives like the National Emergency Survivor Support (NESS) Fund, we provide critical, rapid-response financial assistance that empowers survivors aged 16 and older to leave unsafe situations, secure stable housing, and begin rebuilding their lives. In 2025, 22 individuals accessed the NESS Fund, receiving tailored supports that met urgent needs while connecting them to ongoing services that foster independence, healing, and long-term well-being. As one participant shared, **"This fund will make a significant difference in helping me prioritize my safety and well-being!"**



The New Beginnings Loan Fund, delivered in partnership with United Way Elgin Middlesex, offers critical support to women taking courageous steps to leave situations of intimate partner violence and rebuild their lives. At a time when safety and stability can feel uncertain, this program provides more than financial assistance—it offers a pathway forward.

Through access to interest-free loans, women are able to overcome immediate financial barriers that might otherwise prevent them from leaving unsafe environments or establishing independence. These funds can be used for essential needs such as securing housing, covering moving expenses, accessing counselling, continuing education, or addressing basic utilities—each one a vital step toward stability and healing.

Grounded in a trauma-informed and client-centered approach, the program recognizes that every woman's journey is unique. Repayment plans are developed collaboratively, ensuring they are realistic, manageable, and supportive of long-term success rather than adding additional stress.

This year, we supported 3 women through the New Beginnings Loan Fund. While small in number, the impact is profound. Each loan represents a woman who was able to take a decisive step toward safety, regain a sense of control, and begin building a future defined not by violence, but by possibility.

Programs like New Beginnings remind us that sometimes, the right support at the right moment can change everything—offering not just relief, but the opportunity for a fresh start grounded in dignity, stability, and hope.

At the same time, we recognize that lasting change depends on addressing the root causes of violence through prevention, collaboration, and community accountability. The establishment of the Anti-Human Trafficking Committee of St. Thomas–Elgin in February 2025 marks a significant step forward in strengthening our region's response to one of the most severe forms of gender-based violence. Bringing together diverse partners, the committee leads the development of a coordinated community action plan focused on prevention, survivor support, awareness, and evidence-informed decision-making. Through regular meetings, shared resources, and collective action the committee is enhancing cross-sector collaboration and ensuring responses remain inclusive and responsive to emerging needs. Together, these efforts reflect YWCA St. Thomas–Elgin's commitment to breaking the cycle of gender-based violence: supporting survivors in moments of crisis while driving the systemic change needed to build a safer, more equitable community for all.

Women's Day

On March 7, over 125 women gathered at St. Thomas Seniors' Centre to celebrate International Women's Day. The day brought opportunities for new connections, learning new skills and inspiration as guests chose from 22 workshops presented by local professionals who shared their expertise. Workshops varied from Guacamole & Salsa with a Spanish Twist by Taco House Co to How to Keep Ourselves Healthy Through Different Stages of Life by Silver Birch Naturopathic and Wellness Clinic, Needle Felting Art by Upside Downie Homestead to An Empowering Candle Ritual for Women by Purely Wicked and so many more.

The day was highlighted by an unforgettable presentation of Indigenous culture, along with lessons and words of wisdom from our guest speaker, Shooting Star Woman of the Bear Clan of Anishinawbe Kwe from Batchawana Bay, and Indigenous Elder-in-Residence at the Wampum Learning Lodge at Western University, Mary Lou Smoke.

In one particularly powerful moment of connection shared among guests, Mary Lou began singing "I AM STRONG, I AM INVINCIBLE, I AM WOMAN," and guests joined in a cappella. The energy of the collective reverberated through the halls and could be felt throughout the remainder of the day.

A special thank you to our 2026 Event Sponsor Elgin Business Resource Centre, our swag bag donor Fanshawe College St. Thomas, our breakfast donors Abby Mae's Gluten-Free Bakery, Cobs Bread St. Thomas, Metcalfe Gardens Retirement Residence and our sweet treat donor Spicer's Bakery. Through the generosity of our sponsors, donors, and participants over $5,200 were raised this year.



Over 125 participants gathered for a day filled with inspiration, creativity and wellness.





PROJECT TINY HOPE



The 2025–2026 year marked a pivotal moment for Project Tiny Hope. What began as a bold response to housing insecurity in St. Thomas–Elgin has grown into a visible and thriving community—built through collaboration, determination, and a shared belief that everyone deserves a safe place to call home.

This year, that vision moved decisively into reality.

Significant progress was made as construction advanced across the Tiny Hope site. Foundations were laid, homes were framed, and essential infrastructure began to take shape—transforming the landscape into a future neighbourhood. Landscape volunteers came together to plant the first trees alongside newly laid sod, making an early step in bringing this space to life.

Project Tiny Hope continues to be powered by the generosity of the community. Throughout the year, donors, sponsors, and funders provided critical financial and in-kind support, allowing construction and planning to move forward. Every contribution—large and small—has played a meaningful role in building these homes. We are deeply grateful for the continued commitment to creating lasting solutions to housing insecurity. Our Furnishing the Future – Adopt a Home campaign has also seen incredible support, with only eight one-bedroom units remaining to be sponsored.

As construction progressed, attention also turned to preparing each unit for residents. Staff and volunteers worked together to furnish and equip the homes, ensuring each space is safe, comfortable, and welcoming. Through thoughtful planning and generous donations, each unit is being prepared with dignity and care—transforming houses into homes. A highlight of the year was a community furniture build, where eight groups came together to construct living room, kitchen, and bedroom furniture. This “building bee” was a powerful reflection of community spirit in action.

On October 1, Project Tiny Hope reached a major milestone as we welcomed our first residents. This moment represents the culmination of years of planning, advocacy, and community effort. More importantly, it marks the beginning of a new chapter for individuals and families moving into a place they can call home. From the very beginning, something special took root. Staff quickly witnessed neighbors building trust, offering support, and forming connections that felt natural and genuine.

On October 1, Project Tiny Hope reached a major milestone as we welcomed our first residents.

What makes Tiny Hope truly unique is that it is more than just housing. With the support of dedicated staff, it has become a place where life skills are nurtured, relationships grow, and everyone is welcomed as part of a caring community. Residents come from a wide range of backgrounds and life experiences, so the support offered has been intentionally flexible and responsive. This has included help with food security, mental health and wellness, guidance around hosting

YWCA ST. THOMAS - ELGIN DOUG TARRY sanctuaryhomes

guests, budgeting and financial literacy, and other essential life skills that foster stability, dignity, and empowerment.

Over time, the community has come alive in beautiful ways—the joyful sounds of children playing, neighbors chatting on porches, friendly greetings exchanged in passing, and a shared sense of pride in each person's space. There is a warmth and belonging that can be felt throughout Tiny Hope.

One resident captured it best when asked what Tiny Hope meant to her. She simply said, **"The name says it all—it's a tiny hope for a better future."**

This progress would not have been possible without the dedication of YWCA St. Thomas–Elgin staff. Across departments, team members contributed their time, expertise, and passion to advance the project while planning the supports residents will need. Their commitment has been instrumental in reaching this critical stage.

As we look ahead to 2026 and additional occupancy, our focus turns to fostering a strong, inclusive community within Tiny Hope. Ongoing supports, partnerships, and community-building efforts will ensure residents have the opportunity to thrive.

Together, we are building more than homes.
We are building hope.





Settlement Services

Connections, change, growth, and meaningful impact - these are everyday experiences within Settlement Services.

With shared hope, courage and determination, from the early days of arrival through continued settlement journeys, we support Newcomers in building their lives in St. Thomas and Elgin County.

Over the past year, responsive, client-centered services were offered to help individuals and families in planning through change, overcoming challenges, and in moving forward towards their goals. Through personalized one-on-one support and engaging group sessions, staff supported clients in navigating unfamiliar systems, understanding their rights and responsibilities, and connecting with essential programs and services in the community. Beyond information and referrals, our approach emphasized creating a welcoming environment where newcomers feel supported, affirmed, and empowered settling into their new home.

Through the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program, adult learners developed essential English language skills for daily life. Clients improved their reading, writing, listening, and speaking abilities, gained knowledge about life in Canada, achieved Canadian Language Benchmarks, and met language requirements for Canadian citizenship. Similarly, English Conversation Circles, delivered in partnership with the local library, provided a welcoming space to connect with others, practice English and build comfort and confidence in speaking English.

In response to strong and growing demand among newcomers for employment-related supports, Settlement Services continued partnerships with local employment services to connect newcomers with job-related information sessions and local employers. Through resume writing and job fair preparation workshops and engagement in community job fairs newcomers were equipped with essential job search skills and improved readiness for the Canadian labour market.

Through Settlement Work in Schools (SWIS), communication between schools, newcomer students and their families was enhanced within local elementary and secondary schools. SWIS staff promoted support for families and students with orientation to school, connections to local services and activities that encourage success in school.

Community connection activities also played a vital role in bringing newcomers together to explore local resources, culture, and services while building



a strong sense of belonging. Events and community activities, often provided in partnership, brought people together, supported relationship and skill-building, and encouraged access to resources and community services. Canada Connects continued to be a highly impactful initiative - matching newcomers with community volunteers to learn from each other, make connections, build networks and contribute to community. Similarly, through Newcomer Youth Group, children and youth joined in different interactive activities, met new friends, and shared their experiences. In smaller and rural communities, where newcomers may face isolation, discrimination, and mental health challenges, these Community Connections programs played a vital role in enhancing settlement, integration, and well-being.

Through our shared journeys and contributions – and alongside newcomers, funders and community partners - we find footing, we feel at home and our community is stronger together.

Some key highlights from the year include:

- More than **270 newcomers were welcomed** within Settlement Services from **over 50 countries of origin, speaking 26 different languages**
- **10 Citizenship Information** Sessions to support citizenship preparation on key topics from Discover Canada.
- Settlement Work in Schools supported students and families at 12 schools.
- Youth and family activities were offered including recreational swimming and water safety, Elgin County Open house, Discover Your Library at St. Thomas Public Library, Creative Makers Lab,



Port Stanley Festival Tour, Newcomer Night at IGNITE Youth Centre, bowling, mini-golf, creative expression and more!



"I'd like to sincerely thank you in the English Conversation Circles. Your support and encouragement have truly helped me improve speaking skills. I now feel more confident and comfortable expressing myself and asking questions. I'm really grateful to be part of such a positive and helpful group."

English Conversation Circle Participant

St. Thomas-Elgin Local Immigration Partnership



In 2025-2026, St.Thomas-Elgin Local Immigration Partnership (STELIP) focused on strengthening relationships, shared responsibility, and community-wide approaches that support welcoming and affirming life across St. Thomas and Elgin County. Working alongside partners across sectors, STELIP supported planning, engagement, and initiatives that recognize newcomers and immigrants as integral to the community.

This work was reflected through several key areas:

Partnership & Shared Direction

- Engaged 30+ Council members representing diverse sectors
- Co-developed a new multi-year Community Plan and Action Plan grounded in the priorities Build, Connect, and Transform
- Expanded representation to include Francophone (RIF) and 2SLGBTQIA+ perspectives

Community Voice & Learning

- Led the 2025 Immigrant Survey, engaging 100+ newcomers and immigrants
- Supported partner learning and reflection on housing, employment, transportation, and access to services

Welcoming Week & Civic Engagement

- Coordinated proclamations and flag raisings with the City of St. Thomas and Elgin County
- Presented a delegation to Elgin County Council and supported a County tour of the museum and administrative building
- Partnered with the St. Thomas Public Library and Settlement Services to host a Community Connections event booth
- Supported bilingual story time and library tours to increase access and inclusion

Sector & Community Engagement

- Hosted the 14th annual Walk With Me, engaging 35+ organizations and 75+ frontline service providers

Economic & Cultural Initiatives

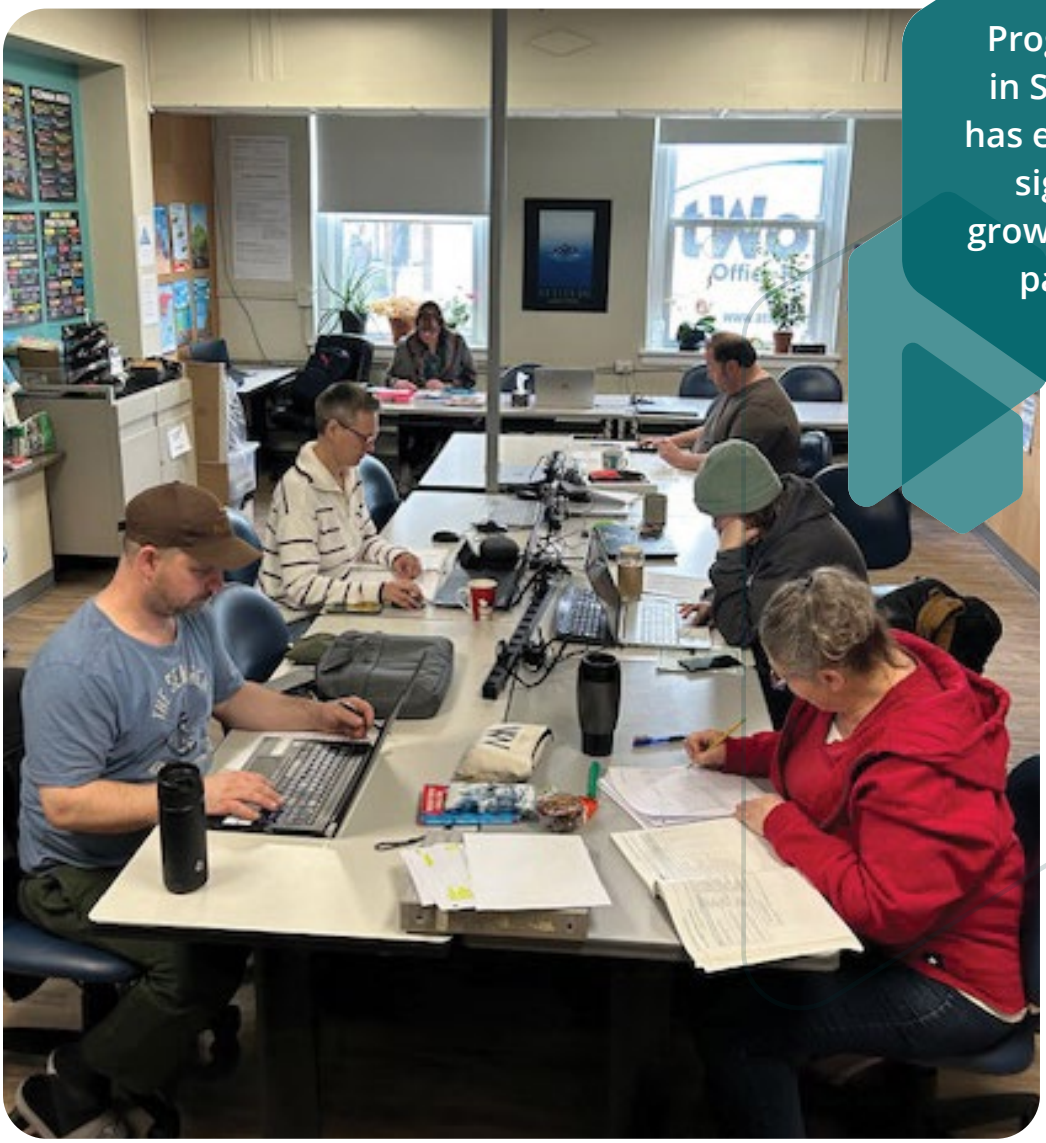
- Delivered the 6th Global Flavours, with 20+ restaurants participating across the County
- Generated 100+ app and passport submissions, highlighting local businesses and cultural diversity



Skills Training & Upgrading

Programming in St. Thomas has experienced significant growth over the past year, driven by increasing community demand for accessible, high-quality Skills Training & Upgrading (STU) opportunities. Building on the success of our existing morning classes in both St. Thomas and Aylmer, a St. Thomas afternoon STU class was launched in November 2025. This expansion has increased our capacity to serve learners and ensures more individuals can access essential upgrading supports at times that align with their schedules.

While our programming supports a wide range of learner goals—including employment readiness, secondary school credit attainment, post-secondary preparation, apprenticeship pathways, and greater independence—the demand for Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) completion continues to grow. More learners are recognizing the OSSD as a key step in opening doors to further education and sustainable employment opportunities. Many of the individuals we serve are navigating complex life circumstances, including those receiving support through Ontario Works and ODSP, highlighting the importance of flexible, responsive programming that meets learners where they are.



Programming in St. Thomas has experienced significant growth over the past year.

Uplift: Empowering Women into Future-Ready Careers

Since its launch in 2021, the Uplift program has supported 936 women across Southern Ontario in building the skills needed to transition into secure, in-demand careers. Funded by the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario and delivered in partnership with YWCA Hamilton, the program is designed to meet the needs of a highly skilled yet underrepresented group—many of whom already hold post-secondary credentials but are seeking new opportunities within the labour market.

Across the region, Uplift has demonstrated exceptional outcomes, achieving a 94.2% program completion rate—significantly exceeding typical post-secondary completion rates. Participants are supported to reskill or upskill in ways that lead to meaningful employment outcomes, with 86% making a career transition, including promotions, lateral moves into manufacturing-focused roles, or entry into entirely new fields. In total, the program has contributed to the creation of 495 new jobs, reflecting both the strength of the training model and the demand for skilled workers in emerging sectors.

Through this initiative, we supported 12 local women in accessing specialized training opportunities. In partnership with McMaster University and the McMaster Manufacturing Research Institute (MMRI), participants completed training in Advanced Manufacturing 4.0 and Project Management. These experiences combined technical knowledge with hands-on, industry-relevant learning, helping participants build both confidence and practical skills.

Beyond the classroom, Uplift has fostered meaningful connections between participants, educators, and industry professionals across Southern Ontario. For many women, the program has opened doors to new career pathways while strengthening networks that continue to support their long-term success.

Uplift has demonstrated exceptional outcomes, achieving a 94.2% program completion rate

"This program has been so wonderful, not just for the knowledge gained but even more by the connections and friendships it has formed. The course has given me practical skills I am currently putting to use in my new job and shows a commitment to continuing education to my employer. I would like to thank the YWCA and McMaster University for providing such a valuable experience to us all."

McMaster University

McMaster Manufacturing Research Institute (MMRI)

Get Gorgeous for Grad

During the last week of April, our Learning Commons was transformed into a magical boutique, made possible by the dedication of 26 volunteers and staff. Participants were welcomed into one-on-one consultations, where they could search for the perfect outfit for their graduation or prom—all free of charge.

This year's program was a tremendous success, with 40 students taking part, resulting in an estimated total savings of $10,000 for participating families. What makes this initiative truly special is witnessing the moment a student steps out in their new outfit, a twinkle in their eye and their head held high, proud of reaching such a meaningful milestone.

With the support of Goodwill – Great Lakes Division, ClothingWorks, and local businesses such as Myrtle and Angry Bear Barber, along with many generous community members, dozens of dresses, suits, shoes, and accessories were collected.

One mother shared, **"Thank you for the opportunity for my daughter to select an amazing dress for grad that we would not have been able to afford otherwise. She is very excited, and we are so thankful."**



40 young people and their families were supported this year.



ClothingWorks Winter Coat Drive & Giveaway

The Winter Coat Drive & Giveaway really showed what's possible when people come together and get things done. With the help of 10 dedicated staff and 25 amazing volunteers—including community members, residents, and folks from RBC - we welcomed 578 visitors and made sure 667 coats and 556 accessories went to individuals and families who needed them most. Seeing more than 175 additional visitors compared to last year highlights both the growing need in our community and the impact of working together with care and purpose.



This event is a great example of how collaboration and innovation aren't just ideas we talk about—they're things we put into action. We're incredibly grateful to partner with **ClothingWorks and Goodwill Industries Ontario Great Lakes** to provide free seasonal clothing to vulnerable populations across Elgin County.



Working together helps us strengthen our connection to the community, improve the services we offer, and expand our ability to respond to real needs in meaningful ways.

Thanks to this shared effort, we were also able to reach more donors, leading to hundreds of generous contributions. The success of the Winter Coat Drive & Giveaway is a reminder of how powerful community-led initiatives can be, and it reinforces our commitment to building stronger, more inclusive support systems.

Life Stabilization Programs

Youth Homelessness Protocol

YWCA St. Thomas–Elgin remains a committed partner in the coordinated effort to reduce and ultimately end youth homelessness across our community. Through ongoing collaboration with local service providers, we actively contribute to the Youth Homelessness Protocol—a shared framework that recognizes the unique experiences and needs of youth compared to adults experiencing homelessness.

Through this protocol, our Housing-Based Case Managers provide individualized, youth-centered support to help young people secure and maintain safe, stable housing while improving their overall well-being. Supports include housing planning, life skills development, mental and physical health connections, community engagement, and pathways to education and employment.



This year, 120 youth were supported through the protocol, including both newly referred individuals and those receiving ongoing case management. Of these, 53 youth were successfully housed. While overall service access decreased slightly, youth remained engaged for longer periods, reflecting more complex needs and a focus on sustained housing stability.

As needs continue to evolve, the program has strengthened its focus on wraparound supports that promote long-term success. Increased emphasis on mental health connections, life skills development, and community integration has helped youth build the tools and confidence needed to maintain housing and pursue their goals.

In addition to housing supports, $8,330 was allocated to provide access to counselling and therapeutic services, ensuring youth receive holistic care that addresses both their housing and emotional well-being.

Through a coordinated, prevention-focused approach—including diversion, family mediation, and system navigation—the Youth Homelessness Protocol continues to provide not just housing solutions, but a foundation for long-term stability and success.

Youth in Transition

The Youth in Transition Program continues to play a vital role in supporting young people as they navigate one of the most challenging and defining periods of their lives—moving from the child welfare system into independent adulthood. Funded by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, the program is grounded in the understanding that this transition is not just about independence, but about building stability, confidence, and a sense of belonging.

At the YWCA, we walk alongside youth aged 16 to 24 as they take these important steps forward. Each young person is supported through individualized, trauma-informed, and strengths-based approaches that recognize both the barriers they have faced and the potential they hold. Through one-on-one and group-based support, youth are guided in areas such as housing, education, employment, life skills, and relationship building—ensuring they are not navigating this journey alone.

Beyond these practical supports, the program creates space for growth and connection. Youth are supported in learning how to manage finances, access health and mental health services, navigate complex systems, and build meaningful relationships within their communities. These are not just skills—they are the building blocks of independence and long-term well-being.

Over the past year, 34 youth were supported through the program, each with their own story and path forward. For many, this support became a turning point. Youth re-engaged with education, secured safe and stable housing, and began to build financial independence. Others found employment, developed essential life skills, and started to rebuild relationships with family.

Perhaps most importantly, many young people began to see themselves differently.

Participants shared increased self-confidence, improved mental wellness, and a stronger sense of direction and purpose. Some experienced reductions in substance use, while others spoke about feeling more capable of managing the responsibilities of adulthood—often for the first time.

These outcomes reflect more than progress—they reflect resilience, growth, and the impact of having consistent, compassionate support during a critical time.

The Youth in Transition Program remains an essential part of our mission, ensuring that young people leaving care are not left to navigate adulthood alone, but are supported as they build safe, stable, and hopeful futures.

Youth Independence Program

The Youth Independence Program continues to create meaningful opportunities for young people to build confidence, stability, and a sense of direction for their future. Designed for youth aged 16 to 24, the program supports participants in developing the foundational life and employment skills needed to move toward independence and meaningful employment.

This year, 17 youth engaged in the program, each bringing their own experiences, challenges, and hopes for the future. Through a combination of one-on-one coaching and group-based learning, participants were supported in exploring pathways into employment sectors such as food service, hospitality, retail, and manufacturing—while also gaining the tools needed to navigate everyday life.

Over the course of a 10-week session, youth participated in interactive workshops that went beyond job readiness. Together, they built skills in communication, developed daily routines, strengthened their mental wellness, and explored what independent living could look like for them. These sessions created space not only for learning, but for connection—where youth could feel heard, supported, and understood.

Throughout the program, participants were encouraged to set personal and professional goals, often taking steps, they had not previously thought possible. As the weeks progressed, growth became visible—not just in resumes or interview skills, but in self-esteem, motivation, and a renewed belief in themselves. Many youth shared that their mental health and overall well-being had improved, highlighting the importance of having consistent support and a sense of belonging.

For many, the Youth Independence Program was more than a training opportunity—it was a turning point. It offered a chance to rebuild confidence, discover strengths, and begin to imagine a future that felt achievable.



These are not just program outcomes—they are stories of young people finding their footing, gaining independence, and moving forward with hope.

"This program has been an amazing adjustment for me. The program facilitator is a fantastic teacher and always has everyone smiling. I enjoy being able to attend the classes and learn about different things from self-respect, trust, and even functions in your home. As well as talking to peers and doing activities in class and creating a positive impact for everyone's day. This class is one of the most important classes I've ever taken as it teaches you how to develop self-confidence and social skills in a positive way rather than a negative one."

Poverty Interventions

Map to Independence

Living in poverty means navigating daily barriers to basic needs such as safe housing, food security, healthcare, and stability—often while facing limited access to opportunities that support long-term change. At YWCA St. Thomas–Elgin, our approach to poverty reduction continues to evolve to better meet these realities. Building on the success of Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World, a multi-week, group-based program that supported participants in examining the impacts of poverty and developing strategies for change, we saw meaningful outcomes through connection, reflection, and goal setting. In the previous program model, participants strengthened peer networks, identified personal pathways forward, and achieved important milestones, including housing stability, entry into employment pathways, and engagement in education and skills development. These results reinforced the importance of combining lived experience, community support, and practical tools to create lasting change.



In response, this work has expanded into Map to Independence—an enhanced, more holistic program designed to move participants from insight to sustained action. While maintaining the strengths of group-based learning, Map to Independence introduces individualized coaching, ongoing system navigation, and structured goal planning to better support long-term stability and independence. The program deepens its focus on addressing systemic barriers and connecting participants to education, employment, housing, and financial resources, while offering continued, wraparound support as they progress. During the 2025–2026 program year, Map to Independence supported 24 participants, with 95% reporting increased social connection and a stronger sense of community, 85% demonstrating improved financial readiness and confidence in managing resources, and 100 referrals made to community services to support housing, employment, education, and well-being. By integrating personalized pathways with community-based support, Map to Independence strengthens our commitment to breaking the cycle of poverty—empowering individuals and families to build sustainable, self-defined futures.

Map to Independence supported 24 participants

"I recently participated in the Map to Independence Program offered by the YWCA.

I found it to be most helpful - especially in budgeting. It was also most enjoyable from a social perspective, as I thoroughly enjoyed the other women & cherish the friendships that were fostered. I highly recommend this program to any woman looking to better themselves, in so many ways!"

Coffee Connections

YWCA Coffee Connections program continues to be a warm and welcoming space where a true sense of community thrives. At the heart of this program is the inspiring vision and generosity of Debbie Hamilton, whose commitment to creating a community where everyone feels a sense of belonging and has opportunities for personal growth and wellness continues to make a meaningful difference. Through the generous support of Debbie Hamilton and Co-operators, this vision has become a reality, enriching lives and building a stronger, more connected community.

Each week, participants gather over coffee, tea, and snacks to build relationships, strengthen life skills, and enjoy a supportive environment. Through engaging activities, participants connect, learn, and grow, often forming friendships beyond the program.

As one participant shared, "This Coffee Connections group gives me something to look forward to each week. But it is so much more than just weekly meet up. It is a place where people come together to feel welcomed, valued and connected. It is a chance for us to gather in a safe and friendly space to share conversation, laughter, our interests, and talents."





Food Security

Access to nutritious food is a basic need—and for many in our community, it is not always guaranteed. As the cost of living continues to rise, particularly the cost of food, more individuals and families are facing difficult choices each day. For those already navigating housing instability or financial hardship, food insecurity adds another layer of stress that can impact both physical health and overall well-being.

At the YWCA, we recognize that true stability begins with meeting these essential needs. This year, we continued to provide a range of food security supports designed to meet both immediate and long-term needs. Participants accessed grocery gift cards, took part in group meal preparation, and built practical skills through budget-conscious shopping education. On-site emergency food supplies were also readily available, offering reassurance during times of urgent need.

Through strengthened community partnerships, we were able to expand both the reach and quality of these supports with donations from Harvest Hands and Cobs Bread. These contributions made a meaningful difference in the day-to-day lives of those we serve.

Maria's Story

When Maria looks back on where she was just a short time ago, the distance between then and now feels almost unimaginable.

Living up north with her husband, life had become increasingly unstable as both struggled with alcoholism. What once may have felt manageable slowly took over, pulling focus away from their responsibilities, their relationship, and their sense of security. Tension grew, conflict became constant, and eventually, they lost their home—entering the shelter system with no clear path forward.

Then came an unimaginable loss.

Overwhelmed by addiction, stress, and despair, Maria's husband died by suicide, leaving her to navigate not only homelessness, but profound grief.

In the midst of that loss, Maria made a difficult but determined decision—to return to St. Thomas, where her children lived. Though she had no permanent place to stay, she found temporary refuge moving from couch to couch, careful not to overstay her welcome. Being close to her children again brought moments of comfort, but the nights were often heavy. Grief, uncertainty, and the weight of rebuilding her life pressed in.

Reaching out for support wasn't easy. Each step, each question invited her to reflect on experiences she would have preferred to leave in the past. Still, she moved forward, guided by a quiet determination and the belief that stability—and something better—was within reach.

That persistence led to a turning point.

With the support of YWCA staff, Maria began to navigate systems that had once felt overwhelming. She received help with applications, appointments, and connections to resources she didn't know existed.

Just as importantly, she began to rebuild a sense of community—small, everyday interactions that grew into meaningful relationships and reminded her she was not alone.

For the first time in a long time, Maria felt supported. And slowly, that support turned into belief.

Today, Maria is celebrating one year of sobriety—a milestone that once felt out of reach. Each day has required strength and commitment, but she has stayed focused on building a healthier, more stable life. She now volunteers at a local community health centre, offering support to others walking paths she understands deeply. Recently, she secured employment, restoring not only her financial independence, but her confidence and sense of purpose.



Maria's journey is one of resilience, loss, and renewal. While challenges remain, the difference today is clear:

There is stability. There is connection. And there is hope and the YWCA.

SUMMER NIGHT Social







It truly was a night to remember, as more than 150 guests, 69 donors, and 10 sponsors came together for an unforgettable evening under the stars at Wildflower Farms. The energy of the Sheridan Band, Adam Blair, and Dan Stewart kept guests entertained throughout the night, while a delicious meal was prepared by Salt & Pepper Meals. Guests mingled and challenged one another with tug-of-war, three-legged races, and a chicken toss, as special moments between friends and colleagues were captured at the Selfie Booth.

Together we raised over $34,000!

Through our Canadian-themed fundraiser, we celebrated the spirit of Canadians—their generosity, adventurousness, and caring nature. As the final year of this event, every ticket purchased, every bid placed, and every moment shared helped change the lives of many.



Special thanks to our Legacy Sponsor, Masco Canada; our Tribute Sponsor, Cole Munro; and our Patron Sponsors, Abode Home Comfort, Belmont Swans, Collier Homes, Debbie Hamilton Co-operators Insurance, Doug Tarry Homes, Royal Containers Ltd, Scotiabank, and Steelway Building Systems. Closing out our fourth year, Summer Night Social raised an incredible $34,067.50.

MASCO
Building home together.

Volunteer Recruitment

Our over 45 volunteers are at the core of our impact, and we are incredibly grateful for everything they contribute throughout the year. Their dedication supports women and families every day - whether they are mentoring newcomers to Canada through Canada Connects, tutoring English language learners, assisting in programs focused on creating safe spaces such as Coffee Connections, building furniture in one of our tiny homes or helping operations run smoothly the moment our visitors walk through reception. Their time, care, and commitment truly make a difference, and our work would not be possible without them.

Each volunteer brings unique strengths and personal experiences to our community. They show up ready to support and lend a helping hand often going above and beyond by supporting fundraising events like Women's Day and Summer Night Social. Their generosity and spirit showcase what Elgin County is made of.

Today we are proud to share we have over 45 dedicated volunteers.





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*Donors marked with * are monthly pledge donors.

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United Way Elgin Middlesex

YWCA Canada

YWCA Hamilton

Thank you to all our sponsors and donors for building a brighter community.

The YWCA St.Thomas-Elgin would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to everyone who donated to us from April 1, 2025 to March 31, 2026.

While every single donation makes a positive and lasting difference, we would like to recognize those who gave donations totaling $100 or more.
We regret any errors or omissions. Thank you all for building a brighter community.

2025-26 Financial Statement

As of March 31, 2026

Revenue and Expenditures

RECEIPTS

Grants	$3,587,400
Program Fees	$1,154,778
Donations and Event Proceeds	$295,879
Residence Rent	$279,689
Unrealized Gain on Investments	$268,670
Investment Income from Non-Restricted Funds	$121,009
Deferred Capital Contributions	$111,980
Investment Income from Restricted Funds	$14,890
TOTAL	**$5,831,277**

EXPENSES

Salaries and Benefits	$3,564,926
Professional Fees and Contracted Services	$377,400
Materials and Supplies	$546,022
Repairs and Maintenance	$198,849
Promotion and Publicity	$25,382
Staff and Volunteer Expenditures	$55,430
Fundraising	$61,209
Office and Administration	$115,467
Service Charges and Bad Debt Expenses	$32,510
Amortization	$116,432
TOTAL	**$5,093,627**
Excess of revenues over expenditures for the year	**$737,650**

Ways to Give

At the heart of everything we do is a deep respect for diversity and a commitment to uplifting people through the programs and services we offer.

Today, the need for our work is greater than ever. Families are seeking safe, supportive housing, individuals are looking to grow their skills, newcomers are building new beginnings, and youth are striving for opportunities that foster confidence, independence, and well-being. Your support helps turn these possibilities into reality. Together, we are creating pathways to brighter futures, and every gift helps move that vision forward. We are truly grateful and committed to using your contribution in the most meaningful and impactful way.







There are many inspiring ways to get involved and support your community:

Become a Monthly Donor – Your ongoing generosity helps create lasting change and provides stability for families across Elgin County.

Leave a Legacy – A gift in your will is a powerful way to make a lasting difference—supporting women and families, opening doors for at-risk youth, championing diversity, and nurturing leadership and wellness in students.

Host a Third-Party Event – Turn your passion into purpose by bringing people together to support a cause close to your heart, whether through a golf tournament, community BBQ, concert, or another creative event.

Make a Gift in Honour – Celebrate life's meaningful moments or honour someone special with a donation that creates positive change in their name.

Give the Gift of Time – By volunteering, you can inspire change firsthand—sharing your talents, connecting with others, and helping build a vibrant, supportive community for all.



YWCA ST. THOMAS-ELGIN

16 Mary Street West | St. Thomas, ON N5P 2S3

ywcaste.ca

Proud Member of United Way Elgin Middlesex

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