



Beyond Tents

Rethinking Encampments Through A Right to Housing Lens

A RESOURCE PACKET FOR CANADIAN MUNICIPALITIES

The Shift: An Introduction

Thank you for joining us for the Beyond Tents webinar. We're pleased to share this resource package to support your work in responding to encampments and advancing the right to housing in your community.

The Shift is an international organization that works with governments, industry leaders, civil society, and people with lived experience to realize the human right to housing. Founded by the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, Leilani Farha, The Shift has become a global leader in helping cities move from emergency responses to long-term, rights-based housing strategies that are effective, equitable, and actionable.

In Canada, we've supported city leaders and staff from Toronto to Yellowknife. Internationally, we've worked in over 20 countries to align housing systems with the human rights framework, influencing laws, policies, and practices to enable systems change that produces better outcomes for people in need.

We know that encampments present real challenges for cities—balancing safety, community concerns, and the limits of available housing. But we also know that cities have powerful tools at their disposal to lead transformative change. When governments approach encampments through a human rights lens, it opens the door to new strategies: ones that build trust, foster dignity, and support real, sustainable pathways out of homelessness.

We hope this is just the beginning of the conversation.

Sincerely,

Leilani Farha

On behalf of The Shift

Let's Connect!

What's Included in this Packet?

If you're interested in taking a human rights approach to homelessness, this packet will help you take the next step.

What you will find:

- **What is the right to housing?** – pg. 4
- **Why the right to housing?** – pg. 5
- **Encampments are a human rights issue** – pg. 6
- **What this means for local governments** – pg. 7
- **Decision-making roadmap to respond to encampments** – pg. 8
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What is the Right to Housing—and What Does it Mean for Encampments?

What Is the Right to Housing

The right to housing means more than just having 4 walls and a roof—it's a fundamental human right and means that everyone has the right to live in peace, security and with dignity.

Canada has recognized housing as a human right in both international law (**The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights**) and domestic legislation (**The National Housing Strategy Act, 2019**), which recognizes the right to housing as Canada's housing policy.

The right to housing is...

- **About protecting home**
- **A tool** that provides governments with a clear framework to guide government decisions and prioritize resources
- **Solution-oriented**; helps avoid ad hoc, crisis-driven responses and brings consistency, fairness and long-term planning

Municipalities play a vital role in shaping housing conditions, preventing homelessness, and addressing encampments.



Why the Right to Housing?

A human rights approach is the best approach—it's grounded in dignity, puts people first, and is focused on practical, lasting solutions for everyone.

A Practical Framework for Action

A rights-based approach helps cities move from reactive, crisis-based responses to coordinated, proactive solutions.

Cost-effective

Preventing and solving homelessness is cheaper and more sustainable than managing its consequences.

Critical to Achieving Strategic Goals

Access to housing is essential to achieving local priorities: public health, safety, equity, climate resilience, economic growth, inclusion, and sustainability.

The Cornerstone of Well-being

Housing is a precondition for accessing health, education, work, food, equality, safety and dignity.



Encampments Are a Human Rights Issue

Encampments are a symptom of a large housing and homelessness crisis that is affecting countries across the globe. They are a visible and undeniable indicator of systemic gaps in our housing systems—not a failure of individuals. Successfully addressing homeless encampments can only be done when governments first recognize homelessness as a human rights crisis.

Responding to encampments using a human rights lens means that government approaches must shift away from relying on law enforcement and policies that criminalize homelessness towards sustainable, innovative and human-centered approaches that aim to solve homelessness on a priority basis. It also means doing whatever it takes and is necessary to ensure access to the right to housing for everyone, regardless of their personal circumstances.

A Human Rights-Based Response Looks like.....

- Committing to the right to housing in local ordinances, declarations, and charters.
- Reviewing and reforming laws and policies that criminalize homelessness.
- Exploring all alternatives to evicting encampments.
- Embedding lived experience representation in housing / homelessness strategy and policy design
- Engaging encampment residents as rights-holders and experts in their own lives.
- Ensuring encampments are addressed in a manner that is grounded in dignity and care.
- Using city powers and resources to build pathways to permanent housing.

What This Means for Local Governments

Cities are not powerless, and they don't have to wait for senior governments to act. Local governments have tools at their disposal and, where they lack resources, **they have the unique ability to be nimble, act swiftly, and be more innovative than other levels of government**. They can also be **trailblazers** for other communities by leading in sustainable solutions to address homelessness and protect human rights.

Cities can lead by:

- **Adopting human rights**-based housing strategies
- **Creating engagement processes** that centre those with lived experience
- **Reframing encampment response** from a public order issue to a human rights issue



Decision-Making Roadmap: Visualizing A Rights-Based Response to Encampments

On the following page, you will find a decision-making roadmap.

This roadmap is a visual guide to help cities navigate encampment responses through a human rights lens, centering dignity and participation at every step.

*This roadmap is NOT a directive or how-to guide for closing encampments. Its purpose is to help visualize what a human rights-based approach should look like—starting from the identification of an encampment to the possibility of closure *only* when all conditions necessary to uphold encampment residents' human rights are fully met.*

It's important to remember that every community is different, and meaningful engagement with encampment residents is essential to co-create sustainable, rights-based responses that reflect the specific context and needs of each community.



Visualizing A Rights-Based Response to Encampments

Encampment Identified



Engage Community Outreach Teams

- Reach out to outreach workers who support unhoused or vulnerable populations.
- Ask about the encampment: Who is living there? How long has it existed? Are any residents in contact with housing or health services? Are there residents with specific support needs?
- Invite outreach team members to join site visits and support relationship-building with residents.



Engage Encampment Residents (Ongoing)

- Initiate respectful, trust-building outreach with residents.
- Identify urgent needs (e.g., food, footwear, transportation, health care).
- Learn how the encampment operates (e.g., is it community-governed? Are there informal leaders?).
- Listen actively and document concerns and needs.



Assess Basic Needs and Conditions

- Are there sufficient sanitation services, access to water, safety, and proper waste management, etc?
- Identify gaps in basic supports or infrastructure.
- Can you assess what percentage of residents will need a high level of support in transitioning to housing versus those who do not?



Initiate Participatory Planning with Residents

- Work with residents who want to move indoors to understand their needs and timelines.
- Engage with those facing barriers to relocation to identify what's preventing the transition (e.g., separation from pets or community, substance use, trauma, lack of trust in services).
- Ask residents what would need to change for them to consider moving indoors.



Explore Housing Pathways

- Identify viable, individualized housing options (e.g., supportive housing, permanent housing, vacant public/private units).
- Scan the local area for vacant units and determine what's needed to bring them online.
- Engage landlords or housing providers who may offer low-barrier options.
- Examine whether appropriate supports are in place to help residents transition and stay housed.

Decision Point: Remain or Transition

Evaluate whether the conditions exist to support a dignified and voluntary transition to housing.



If Transition is Possible

(All residents have secure, acceptable housing options):



Prepare for Dignified Closure

- Do not involve law enforcement.
- Assign a transition team that includes trusted outreach workers.
- Consult with residents on the closure approach and timeline.
- Protect residents' property by ensuring personal belongings are safely stored, transported, or returned.



Support the Transition & Ensure Follow-up

- Continue housing and case management supports post-move.
- Monitor outcomes: Are residents still housed? Are additional supports needed?



If Transition is NOT Possible

(Adequate housing options do not exist or do not meet residents' needs):

- Continue outreach and engagement.
- Improve access to sanitation, health care, and safety.
- Take steps to protect dignity and uphold human rights while longer-term housing options are developed.
- Explore and secure appropriate housing pathways.

Human Rights Lens Scorecard: Municipal Encampment Strategy Review

Instructions

For each section, answer the questions by selecting “Yes” or “No”. At the end of each section, total your points. Then, sum all the section totals to evaluate how aligned your current strategy is with a human rights-based approach.

Scoring:

Yes = 1 point | No = 0 points

Section 1: Meaningful Engagement

Section 2: Access to Basic Needs in Encampments

Section 3: Encampment Conditions & Safety

Section 4: Access to Housing

Section 5: Relocation & Alternatives

Section 6: Encampment Closures

Section 7: Dignity & Respect

Section 8: Non-discrimination

Section 9: Intergovernmental Cooperation

Section 10: Transparency & Accountability

1. Meaningful Engagement

Have encampment residents been engaged early in the decision-making process (before decisions have been made)?	Y/N
Is engagement ongoing (not a one-time conversation)?	Y/N
Are residents given meaningful opportunities to shape policies or plans that affect them (does their input count)?	Y/N
Are outreach workers or organizations trusted by residents part of the process?	Y/N
Has communication been consistent and transparent?	Y/N
Are encampment residents given clear and accessible information prior to engagement?	Y/N
Do they have the resources they need to enable participation (i.e., legal representation) to help them properly weigh different options presented and make their own suggestions?	Y/N
Are decisions about encampments and housing options communicated clearly to residents and the public?	Y/N
Is there a way for residents to appeal or review decisions made about them?	Y/N

Total (out of 9): ____ / 9

Meaningful Engagement of Indigenous Peoples

Are Indigenous peoples given free, prior and informed consent on matters affecting their communities with respect to housing?	Y/N
For Indigenous communities residing in encampments, have residents been given the opportunity to select their own representatives to participate in decision-making?	Y/N
Have Indigenous communities been provided with the support and resources necessary to maintain and develop their own Indigenous-making procedures and institutions?	Y/N
Are Indigenous peoples given the opportunity to play an active role in housing programs and decisions that affect them and their communities?	Y/N
Has decision-making power and resources, wherever possible, been transferred to Indigenous peoples so they can make decisions to address their housing needs in their own culturally appropriate ways?	Y/N

Total (out of 5): ____ / 5

2. Access to Basic Needs in Encampments

Is clean water accessible daily?	Y/N
Are there adequate sanitation facilities nearby (e.g. toilets, handwashing)?	Y/N
Is food available in ways that are dignified and safe?	Y/N
Is healthcare access, on-site social support and harm reduction services available and appropriate to the population?	Y/N
Are fire safety supports and personal safety measures in place and accessible to residents?	Y/N
Are there waste management systems in place?	Y/N
Is effective rodent and pest control regularly provided and maintained?	Y/N

Total (out of 7): ____ / 7

3. Encampment Conditions & Safety

Have residents identified any safety concerns and been supported in addressing them?	Y/N
Is the city supporting and resourcing community-led approaches to safety within encampments, as alternatives to policing or enforcement?	Y/N
Are emergency services (e.g. fire, ambulance) responding without criminalizing residents?	Y/N
Are people's personal belongings and property treated with care?	Y/N
Are trusting relationships being built between encampment residents, city staff, emergency services, health care providers, outreach workers and other support services?	Y/N
Is there an encampment safety protocol that has been developed in collaboration with the above actors?	Y/N
Are encampment residents provided with training in safety procedures, including with respect to potentially hazardous equipment and materials?	Y/N
Are there Indigenous led-supports for Indigenous communities living in encampments?	Y/N

Total (out of 8): ___ / 8

4. Access to Housing

Are residents being offered permanent and secure housing options acceptable to them?	Y/N
Is housing tailored to individual needs (e.g., pets, partners, harm reduction)?	Y/N
Are housing supports provided post-transition (after leaving the encampment)?	Y/N
Is there a process for tracking if residents stay housed after transition?	Y/N

Total (out of 4): ___ / 4

5. Relocation & Alternatives

Has the city explored <u>all</u> alternatives to relocation or eviction?	Y/N
Have residents identified alternatives they would be willing to consider?	Y/N
Have alternatives to closure been implemented or seriously assessed?	Y/N

Total (out of 3): ___ / 3

6. Encampment Closures

Has law enforcement been excluded from the closure process?	Y/N
Were residents consulted on the closure timeline and process?	Y/N
Did all residents freely accept housing alternatives before encampment closure was considered?	Y/N
Have personal belongings been safely stored or transferred?	Y/N
Was the closure conducted with dignity and transparency?	Y/N

Total (out of 5): ___ / 5

7. Dignity & Respect

Are all interactions with residents respectful and non-punitive?	Y/N
Are services designed with resident input to support dignity?	Y/N
Are cultural safety and trauma-informed practices prioritized?	Y/N

Total (out of 3): ___ / 3

8. Non-Discrimination

Is the city working to identify the policies or strategies (housing-related or not) that have disproportionate impacts on encampment residents?	Y/N
Have steps been taken to address these disparities in strategy or practice?	Y/N

Total (out of 2): ___ / 2

9. Inter-governmental Cooperation

Is the city coordinating with other levels of government to meet human rights obligations?	Y/N
Are provincial/federal housing resources or land being used towards the aim of protecting, respecting and fulfilling the rights of encampment residents?	Y/N
Has the City sought available federal funding or actively advocated for adequate federal resources?	Y/N

Total (out of 3): ___ / 3

10. Transparency & Accountability

Is there a monitoring body at the city level responsible for ensuring the city is adhering to its human rights obligations (i.e., Ombuds office, Housing Advisory Table, Lived Expert Council, etc.)?

Y/N

Total (out of 1): ____ / 1

Final Score: ____ / 50

How to interpret your score:

- **45–50:** Strong alignment with a human rights-based approach.
- **35–44:** On the path — some areas need improvement.
- **25–34:** Partial alignment — major gaps exist.
- **0–24:** High risk of rights violations — urgent change needed.

Invitation to Collaborate

At The Shift, we know that cities play a critical role in realizing the human right to housing — and that shifting toward rights-based approaches takes time, creativity, and collaboration.

If your city is interested in improving its response to encampments or aligning more closely with a human rights approach, we're here to support you.

Whether you're just getting started, refining your strategy, or working through complex challenges, we can work alongside you to:

- Assess and strengthen your encampment response
- Develop rights-based housing and homelessness strategies
- Conduct right to housing training for city staff
- Facilitate meaningful engagement with people living in encampments
- Support inter-governmental coordination and systems change

✉ **Contact our Canada Project Manager, Latonya Ludford to discuss how we can collaborate:**

Latonya@maketheshift.org | www.maketheshift.org





Resources

The following resources offer insight into a human rights approach to homeless encampments and provide practical tools, promising practices, and emerging lessons for governments.

Homeless Encampments: Municipal Engagement Guidance

- A guide intended to support municipalities in engaging homeless encampments in a constructive and peaceful manner
- <https://make-the-shift.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/NWG-HE-Guidance-w-list.pdf>

A National Protocol for Homeless Encampments in Canada

- This landmark document, developed by the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, is the first rights-based tool designed to assist governments in addressing homeless encampments. Since its release, it has been widely adopted in Canada by civil society organizations and government bodies, including the Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, which references it in its systemic review of encampments.
- The Protocol outlines eight human rights-based principles for responding to encampments, emphasizing dignity, participation, and the right to adequate housing as foundational to any government strategy.
- <https://make-the-shift.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/A-National-Protocol-for-Homeless-Encampments-in-Canada.pdf>