

BRIDGING POLICY & ORGANIZING: HOUSING LEADERSHIP SCHOOLS

HOUSING ADVOCACY

RESEARCH PACKET

MAY 2021

Advocacy can play an important role in working towards reducing and preventing homelessness, properly maintaining our city's rental units and addressing the affordable housing crisis

Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa
endhomelessnessottawa.ca

Ottawa ACORN
Uniting communities for justice | acorncanada.org

Acknowledgements

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OTTAWA COMMUNITY FOUNDATION
invested for good

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Special thanks to all the tenants, community members, and agency staff who took the time to participate in the accompanying presentations and workshops, and who contributed their expertise to this conversation.

Finally, thanks to the thousands of citizens across the city who are organizing to ensure Ottawa remains safe and affordable for everyone. We hope that this toolkit will be a useful resource going forward. to further equip advocates in their work to protect the right to housing.

Lead Organizers, Researchers, Authors and Editors:

Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa

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Executive Summary

In January 2020, Ottawa City Council passed a motion declaring an affordable housing and homelessness crisis and emergency. Homelessness in Ottawa has continued increasing across almost all demographics in recent years, with increases in overnight emergency shelter use, family homelessness, and the number of applicants on the social housing waiting list.

Moreover, without real rent control measures in place there is no incentive in the system for landlords to do repairs for long term tenants. As such, often the most affordable units are in the worst state of repair. Without access to adequate housing that is affordable, households are forced to make hard choices between paying for groceries, medication, a bus pass, and paying rent.

Advocacy can play an important role in working towards reducing and preventing homelessness, properly maintaining our city's rental units and addressing the affordable housing crisis

Housing advocacy can occur at many levels and take several different forms.

For example, individuals or groups can advocate at the:

Individual Level



Community Level



Systems Level



A variety of advocacy tools are available including petitioning, phone calls or writing letters to decision makers, community meetings, media coverage, town halls and direct actions. These tools can be used to advocate for individual tenants to improve living conditions, and to strengthen communities by promoting policies that enable the creation and maintenance of affordable and livable housing. We provide an overview of the housing crisis, tips and pointers for different approaches to advocacy, as well as a list of freely available resources, to help develop the knowledge, skills, and network needed to engage in these advocacy activities.

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Context & Scope

Advocacy can be defined as "a collective effort to bring about changes to political priorities, funding levels, legislation, regulations or policies."

It is estimated that at least 235,000 people experience homelessness each year in Canada, and that 35,000 Canadians are homeless on a given night. Moreover, more than 171,360 Ontario households are waiting for a home they can afford, according to the Waiting List Survey Report by the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association. In Ottawa, homelessness has continued to increase across almost all demographics in recent years, and Ottawa City Council unanimously passed a motion in January 2020 declaring an affordable housing and homelessness crisis and emergency in Ottawa.

Advocacy is an important tool for addressing inequity and disparities. Recognizing that addressing the homelessness crisis should be a priority in Ottawa, the Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa (ATEHO) is partnering with the local Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (Ottawa ACORN to cultivate new community leadership on housing-related issues by implementing housing leadership schools to improve participants' skills and knowledge in the areas of housing policy, advocacy, and law.

Key housing and homelessness numbers in Ottawa:

- 8,088 unique individuals accessed a shelter in 2019, a 1.7% increase over the previous year
- Families continue to be a driver of increased shelter use, accounting for a 10.1% increase over 2018
- There are approximately 13,000 households on the social housing waiting list, with wait times lasting as long as 10 years
- Individuals were diverted 1,612 times from emergency shelters in 2018
- 31% of all unique shelter users and 51% of families living in shelters are newcomers
- Approximately 30% of the shelter population is Indigenous
- Approximately 8.5% of shelter users are youth
- From 2005 – 2015, market rents rose by 26 percent, while area median income (AMI) increased by 4 percent.
- 42 percent of renters spend more than 30% of their income on rent and utilities, while 20 percent of renters spend more than half of their income on rent and utilities.
- ACORN's 2017 survey of low income tenants found that 82.4% of respondents identified repairs needed in their unit, 32.1% of tenants surveyed have experienced a lack of heat in their homes in winter, and 40% of respondents reported cockroaches in their building.

Housing Advocacy Tools

At the Individual Level

Self-advocacy is important for tenants to be able to access services they're entitled to but not receiving, however, it can be easy to ignore one person. Often issues experienced by individuals are emblematic of a bigger problem and collective action is required to address systemic issues. Nonetheless, self-advocacy can lead to improved living conditions for individual tenants currently residing in unsafe and unhealthy housing. Self-advocacy can help ensure that landlords comply with city by-laws regulating property maintenance and occupancy standards.



File a work order for repairs/maintenance with your landlord.
Section 20 of the Residential Tenancies Act imposes the duty to maintain and repair housing units and residential rental properties on the landlord. You can contact your landlord or agent by phone, by email, or in person and ask for the problem to be fixed. As of Aug 31st, 2021 the City of Ottawa has in effect a new by-law that requires all landlords to have a process to receive and follow up with tenant requests, timelines for repairs, as well as instructions for tenants that will contain information on your rights. This new by-law was introduced as a result of community organizing by ACORN members who, as individuals, were failing to get repairs but worked collectively to create greater protections for tenants overall.

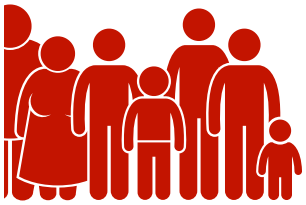


Contact Property Standards at the City of Ottawa
by calling 3-1-1, which can inspect buildings, properties, and housing units when there is a complaint concerning the interior or exterior condition and the safety of residents. If you have notified your landlord of an issue that remains unresolved, you can escalate the issue by contacting the City. The City of Ottawa helps ensure and enforce compliance with by-laws regulating maintenance and occupancy standards. If a property standards officer inspects your unit and finds violations, they can order the landlord to address the problem.



Contact the Landlord and Tenant Board
for application forms, tenant and landlord issues, and information about the rights and responsibilities of landlords and tenants under the Residential Tenancies Act. The Board is responsible for resolving disputes between residential landlords and tenants. For issues regarding repairs and maintenance, you may file a T6 within 1 year of when the problem happened. If the board member rules in your favour they may order the landlord to do the work before a specific date or you may be eligible for a rent abatement (reduction in your rent), compensation for expenses/repairs you did yourself or they may offer another resolution.

Housing Advocacy Tools



At the Community & Systems Levels



Advocacy at the community level can be used to resolve collective issues being experienced by tenants of a particular building and/or landlord. Systems level advocacy can be used to influence systemic policy change in order to help improve housing conditions, develop affordable housing, and prevent homelessness, among other things. In order for the community to be able to make change on the issues they care about, they first have to be organized. Here are a few of the first steps you can take to get organized with your neighbours.



Make phone calls or canvas the neighbourhood
to ask people to take action by signing a petition or attending a community meeting.



Build a list of supporters you can reach out to
when you need support for a campaign or you want to turn people out for an event or meeting. To create your list, simply start a petition on the issue you want to see changed. Building a list of signatures on your petition will strengthen the campaign as it can be used to show decision makers how much people care about the issue



Organize a meeting
with others interested in this issue and invite the people who signed your petition.

Now that you have your group it's time to brainstorm solutions and create a plan to make change happen. For more information on housing policy solutions please see our Housing Policy Research Package.


Policy Alternatives

The following section will discuss Ottawa's current trajectory around housing and homelessness policy, and will conclude with further prospective policy alternatives.

It appears that greater regulation of long-term rental housing has increased over the past few years, with a number of municipalities revamping outdated policies in favour of protecting and maintaining affordable rental housing stocks as Canada's housing crisis deepens. Trending policies include inclusionary zoning, landlord registration regimes, anti displacement policies, renoviction bylaws, and educational campaigns for tenants, as championed by ACORN Canada.

Given this, the following section will unpack the following policy options:

- Inclusionary Zoning: To ensure all new builds set aside 25-35% units for affordable housing citywide in perpetuity
- Landlord Registration By-law: To ensure quality rental housing stock.
- Anti Displacement Policy & Renoviction Bylaw: To protect tenants from renovictions and the trend towards replacing older building with luxury rentals.
- Educational Campaigns: To ensure tenants are aware of their rights.

Each of these policies will be discussed in detail below, both in the context of how Ottawa operates within those policy tools and how Ottawa could benefit from the adoption of those actions.

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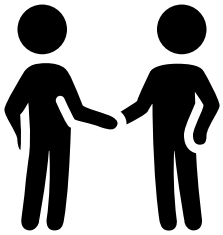
Housing Advocacy Tools

Community or systems advocacy often involves contacting government representatives at the municipal (city councillor), provincial (MPP), or federal (MP) level. As a group you can consider:



Calling or writing to decision makers
in support of homelessness prevention and the need for more affordable and livable housing in your community. The more people who take action the stronger we are!

Meet with government representatives
to explain the issue, ask for their support and to champion the solution identified by the community.





Use social media
to share messages on homelessness and housing.

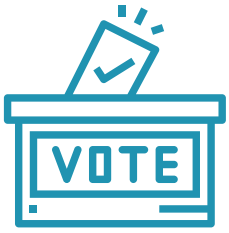
Call the press
to get more attention on the issue. Write a one-page press release explaining the problem and what the group wants to see done to address it. After emailing the press release call reporters you've seen cover stories on housing and main studio lines.





Organize a town hall or take direct action
to demonstrate the number of people who care about this issue to decision makers. Events or rallies are also a good way to get media coverage of the issue.

Be informed
and know where government representatives and candidates stand on homelessness and housing issues. Make an informed vote.



Pointers for Housing Advocacy

At the Individual Level



When requesting a repair of any kind,
it is best to put your request in writing and keep a copy, so that you have evidence to show that you have notified your landlord or agent about the problem. Ensure you include dates and times of requests.



Get your Landlord or whoever receives the notice on behalf of the Landlord to acknowledge receipt.
Under the new Rental Housing Property Management By-law, tenants are entitled to receive written receipts of service requests within 30 days of filing a work order. Tenants must request a receipt at the time of filing.

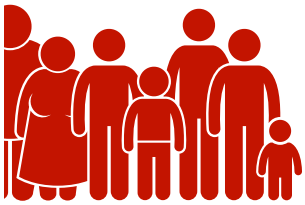


Ensure that you take note of the service request number
when you ask for a city property standards officer to inspect your unit so that you can follow up and track your request with the City.



Always seek legal advice prior to submitting an application
to the Landlord Tenant Board from organizations like Community Legal Services, Housing Help and Action Housing.

Pointers for Housing Advocacy



At the Community & Systems Levels



Effective advocacy is goal-oriented, well-planned and engages a lot of people. Here are a few pointers to get you started.

Step One

Define your goal.
What is the core problem that needs to be solved? How could it be improved?

Step Two

Identify the decision-makers.
Which government jurisdiction is responsible for the issue (municipal, provincial, or federal)? Within this jurisdiction, who is responsible for the issue, i.e. what department does this issue fall under? What kind of landlord do you have ie. social housing provider, co-op, corporate? Does your building have a board or stakeholders they're accountable to? Who is the owner of the building and/or property management company?

Step Three

Understand how government works.
Learning about legislative, regulatory, and management processes will help you identify opportunities to move your issue forward and discuss them with decision-makers.

Step Four

Design your key asks
These are the specific actions you're asking to be taken. Are there any current opportunities in the policy process to advance your asks? Can you create your own opportunity

Step Five

Develop and implement your advocacy plan.
How will you achieve your goal? A coordinated, consistent, and constant advocacy strategy is usually most effective.

Pointers for Housing Advocacy



Pointers for Outreach

Develop a script
so that you have a prepared framework to help you have productive conversations. By preparing a script you can ensure that you can have great discussions that are focused on important issues.

Prepare responses
for potential questions or areas of concerns

Have a direct ask
- for example, “can you sign our petition?” is stronger than “would you maybe consider signing our petition sometime?”

Be open, approachable, and confident
in your body language, but not overly assertive or aggressive.

Stay positive.
Be OK with a no! Also remember that there are three kinds of NOs, so “Not now” does not equal “Not ever”! –

- Not now - “I can’t make that meeting time” or “I’m too busy right now”
- Not that - “It’s difficult for me to come to meetings”
- Not ever - “I’m not interested”

Pointers for Housing Advocacy



Pointers for Organizing a Meeting

Decide on your meeting purpose, outcome, and process:
Make sure you can clearly describe why you're holding the meeting (your purpose), what you want to cover in the meeting (your outcomes), and how you're going to do it (your process or agenda).

Set a date, time, and location
that is appropriate for the people you want to attend. Take into consideration what time do people get off work, childcare, proximity to transit, and accessibility when making a decision.

Set a goal for attendance
and use different tools for inviting people to the meeting i.e. emails, phone calls, canvassing, Facebook events etc.

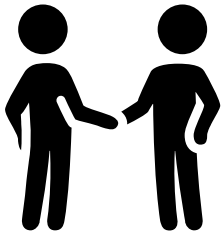
When developing your agenda,
set time limits on items and assign a timekeeper at the beginning of the meeting.

Delegate
parts of the agenda to a number of people.

Recognize and welcome new people.

Delegate research and other tasks at the meeting,
get commitments from everyone to do something before the next campaign event. People don't like meeting for the sake of meeting so always be sure to plan next steps to further your goals.

Pointers for Housing Advocacy



Pointers for contacting decision makers and your elected representative

You can find out who your city councillor is here:
https://ottawa.ca/en/city-hall/mayor-and-city-councillors

You can find out who your Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP) is here:
https://www.ola.org/en/members

You can find out who your Member of Parliament (MP) is here:
https://www.ourcommons.ca/members/en

Be prepared when calling or writing to your elected representative to:

- give context (what the campaign is, and who you are),
- make a connection (describe why you care about this issue– what's the issue you or your community is facing?)
- and make an ask (i.e. 'Will you support the campaign for inclusionary zoning?)



Pointers for social media

Think about what social media platforms to utilize
(ie. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.)

Make it as interactive as possible
(ex. Encourage comments, include links, ask people to share)

You can encourage your audience to tag decision makers or use common hashtags

Include visuals
like photos, videos, and infographics

Pointers for Housing Advocacy



Pointers for contacting the press

Contact a range of media outlets -
for ex, TV, radio, print, blogs etc.Following up individually with reporters will generally get more response than a large email blast.

Your press release should include

- a catchy title that grabs the media's attention,
- context for why this housing issue is important,
- a quote that they can use in their story
- and how to set up an interview

Stick to your key messages
when speaking with media.

Prepare yourself for potential questions and counterarguments ahead of time

Just repeat your key messages
if a reporter asks a question you don't know the answer to.

Try to repeat your key ask/action
through the interview as much as possible.

For more pointers on community advocacy check out the ACORN Canada Training Site at https://sites.google.com/view/acorntraining/home.

Additional Resources

Ottawa ACORN

ACORN Canada is an independent, local and national organization of low and moderate income families that advocates for social and economic justice.

404 McArthur Avenue unit A
Ottawa, ON K1K 1G8
Tel: 613-746-5999 ext 2
E-mail: ottawa@acorncanada.org
Website: www.acorncanada.org

Property Standards at the City of OttawaProvides

The Property Standards Inspection ensures and enforces compliance with city by-laws regulating maintenance and occupancy standards. It inspects buildings and properties where there is a complaint concerning the interior or exterior condition and the safety of residents.

Tel: 3-1-1

Landlord and Tenant Board

Provides information about the Residential Tenancies Act, which sets the rules that regulate most residential rental and housing units in Ontario. Resolves disputes between landlords and tenants. You can contact the board for application forms and for general information about tenants and landlord issues. Does not provide legal advice.

255 Albert Street, 4th Floor
Ottawa, ON K1P 6A9
Tel: 1-888-332-3234
E-mail (for application inquiries only): EA-ltb@ontario.ca
Website: www.ltb.gov.on.ca

Housing Help

A one-stop, drop-in service offered to all residents of Ottawa who have housing problems or questions.

309 Cooper Street, Suite 502
Ottawa, ON K2P 0G2
Tel: 613-563-4532
E-mail: info@housinghelp.on.ca
Website: www.housinghelp.on.ca

Community Legal Services

A legal clinic that provides free legal services for persons of low income who are living in Ottawa.

1 Nicholas Street, Suite 422
Ottawa, ON K1N 7B7
Tel: 613-241-7008
Website: https://www.clsottawa.ca/

Action Housing

A non-profit charitable organization devoted to assisting low-income individuals and families to find and maintain safe, affordable, and adequate rental housing units.

261 Montreal Road, Unit 200
Ottawa, ON K1L 8C7
Tel: 613-562-8219
E-mail: info@action-logement.ca
Website: www.action-logement.ca

Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa

A coalition of community service providers working together to end homelessness in Ottawa. Inform your conversations and advocacy engagement using the Alliance's advocacy toolkit (including Policy Briefs and One-Pagers) and reports.

Website: www.endhomelessnessottawa.ca

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