



Government of Yukon rapid response to homelessness

March 2023 to September 2024



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Premier's message



This government continues to take action to respond to homelessness and support people by building more housing, providing housing that includes wraparound support services and investing in prevention strategies that help reduce the number of people entering into homelessness. With the leadership and support of our partners, collectively, we are helping people across every point along the housing continuum.

In January 2023, I was sworn into office and my first commitment to Yukoners was to improve quality of life with a focus on tackling the housing pressures faced across the territory. To that end, I am pleased to present a slate of new actions and commitments and to also provide a review of Government of Yukon efforts to improve the lives of those precariously housed and those entering or facing homelessness.

We know that since the pandemic, inflation and affordability issues have increased pressures not only on housing but on the overall cost of living. Our territory is also faced with substance use challenges, which is why last year we released the Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy¹. Despite significant investments in housing and supports, the demand for social housing and supports is increasing faster than new supply.

Driving lasting and positive change in the housing sector requires a multi-year approach and ongoing commitment across government and agencies, with integrated contributions from partners and communities. And while significant work lies ahead, it is important to reflect on the work done to date which gives hope for the future. With a reflection on the past, we renew our commitment to working collectively to reduce housing inequality and provide supportive programs and services that benefit all Yukoners.

Premier Ranj Pillai
Minister responsible for Yukon Housing Corporation

¹ https://yukon.ca/sites/yukon.ca/files/hss/hss-substance-use-health-emergency-strategy-2023_0.pdf

Minister's message



The Rapid Response to Homelessness Report highlights the Yukon government's commitment to addressing homelessness in the territory.

The past few years have underscored the urgent need for innovative, compassionate action to address homelessness in the Yukon. While there continues to be much work to do, we have made progress through collaborative, multi-sectoral efforts that prioritize the dignity and wellbeing of all.

Our response emphasizes prevention, immediate intervention, and long-term pathways out of homelessness. By working with Yukon First Nations, local governments, non-government organizations, and community stakeholders, we are developing person-centred services informed by community voices and expert insights.

Across government, we are working to improve access to suitable, adequate and affordable housing and housing with services. Our continued commitment to supporting Yukoners is demonstrated through the signed memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the Department of Health and Social Services and the Yukon Housing Corporation. This MOU defines clear roles and responsibilities, enhances collaboration, and improves coordination to ensure Yukoners have access to quality, affordable, and safe housing.

We are dedicated to empowering residents to achieve stability and independence through the integration of health and social support within comprehensive housing solutions. Our efforts to address the multifaceted and interconnected challenges contributing to homelessness include the facilitation of food programs, the provision of mental health support, and strategic responses to the Substance Use Health Emergency.

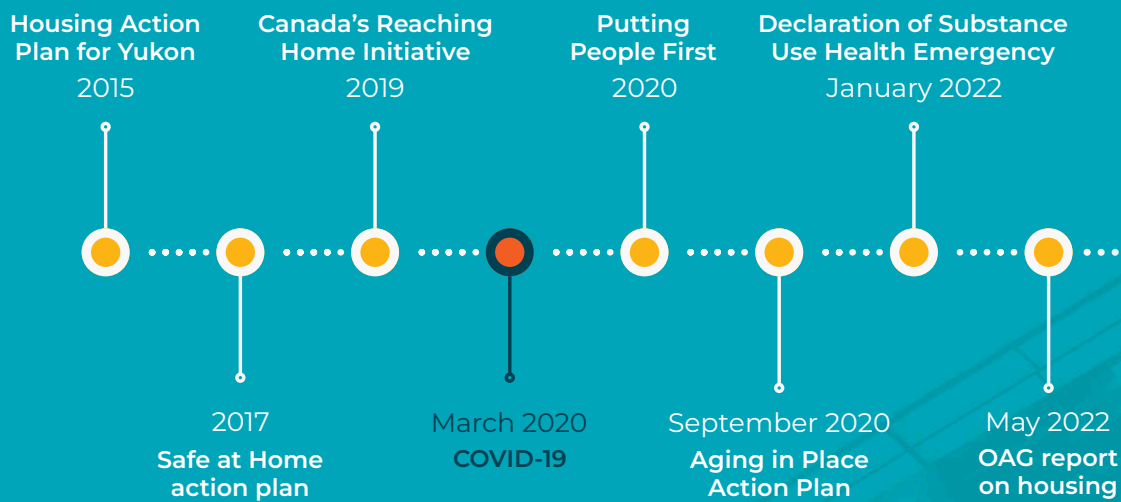
These combined efforts reflect our dedication to fostering a Yukon where all residents have access to safe, supportive, and affordable housing. This report also highlights the ongoing work needed for sustainable solutions and adaptability.

I am grateful to our partners, frontline workers, and community leaders who share in this mission. Together, we are laying the foundation for safer, more stable futures. As we continue this essential work, our resolve is clear: ensuring every Yukoner has a place to call home and the support to thrive.

Hon. Tracy-Anne McPhee
Minister of Health and Social Services



Key strategies and events guiding Yukon government's rapid response to homelessness



The development of the Housing Action Plan for Yukon and the Safe at Home action plan in 2015 and 2017, respectively, brought community partners together to enhance system coordination and improve housing outcomes for Yukoners experiencing vulnerabilities. Canada's Reaching Home Initiative, launched in 2019, emphasized the need for system-level change through the implementation of coordinated access – an

approach that streamlines access to services for individuals experiencing homelessness. The Safe at Home action plan then guided the implementation of coordinated access in the territory. Key drivers of change included the launch of the By-Name List in Whitehorse and the creation of the Coordinated Housing Access Team (CHAT). These efforts propelled significant progress as housing and service providers across

**Mandate
commitment**
March 2023

**Downtown Whitehorse
Safety Response Action Plan**
December 2023

August 2023
**Substance Use Health
Emergency Strategy**

January 2024
Creating Home

the housing sector were encouraged to work together to streamline access to services for improved client-focused outcomes. Despite this progress, challenges persisted around clear lines of accountability; and waning buy-in coupled with limited capacity which strained coordination efforts. In 2020, a comprehensive review of the Yukon government's health and social services and programs found that duplication and overlap of housing services continued.

Additionally, housing providers did not have a common understanding of the full continuum of housing and support needs, making it difficult to know where to invest resources for the best outcomes. Similar findings were echoed in the Office of the Auditor General (OAG) of Canada's 2022 report on Yukon housing.

1. The why behind this work

The territory was making significant strides in addressing homelessness when COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic in March 2020. Four years later, the effects of the pandemic continue to be seen and felt by Yukoners, particularly individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

An increasingly toxic drug supply during the pandemic resulted in a dramatic increase in overdose-related deaths and substance use-related harms. This prompted the Yukon government to declare a Substance Use Health Emergency in early 2022. Loneliness, mental health issues and surging substance use-related harms meant that the provision of affordable housing alone was becoming insufficient to address the complex and evolving needs of Yukoners.

During the pandemic, the Yukon also experienced demographic shifts and economic factors affecting the housing landscape. Migration patterns within the country were affected, with individuals relocating to less populated, more rural areas such as the Yukon. The territory's population increased to an estimated 45,169² in 2023 (Figure 1).

With a population increase of nine per cent since 2019, the territory's population is projected to keep growing, placing increased pressure on both the housing market and health and social services system³.

Since late 2020, the vacancy rate in Whitehorse has remained below three per cent, which is considered to be the minimum required vacancy rate for a well-functioning rental market (Figure 2). Compared to 2019, the 2023 median rent in Whitehorse for units in buildings with three or more rental units increased 25 per cent⁴.

As more Yukoners are unable to meet their housing needs in the private market, there will be increased pressure on subsidized housing programs and emergency shelter beds. In a recent survey of Yukon Housing Corporation clients on the waitlist for the Rent-Geared-to-Income program, one third of respondents had been previously homeless, and another 17 per cent were currently homeless. The latest Point-in-Time Count⁵, conducted on April 18, 2023, found at least 197 people were experiencing homelessness in Whitehorse. This figure was 151 when the previous Point-in-Time Count was conducted in 2021.

² <https://yukon.ca/sites/yukon.ca/files/ybs/fin-population-report-q2-2023r.pdf>

³ <https://yukon.ca/sites/yukon.ca/files/ybs/fin-population-projections-2024-2045.pdf>

⁴ <https://yukon.ca/sites/yukon.ca/files/ybs/fin-yukon-rent-survey-october-2023.pdf>

⁵ A Point-in-Time Count is a community-level measure of sheltered and unsheltered homelessness. It is a coordinated approach to gathering data which aims to count or enumerate the number of people experiencing homelessness on a single night. Source: https://yapc.ca/assets/files/2023_PiT_Count_Report_Web.pdf

FIGURE 1 Yukon population estimates, 2019 to 2023²

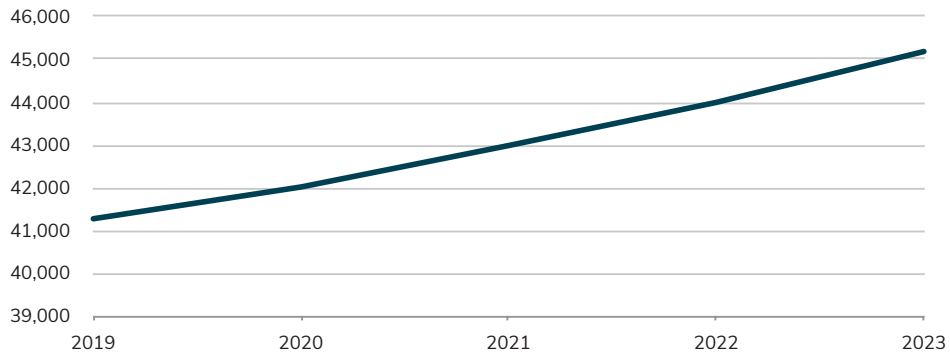
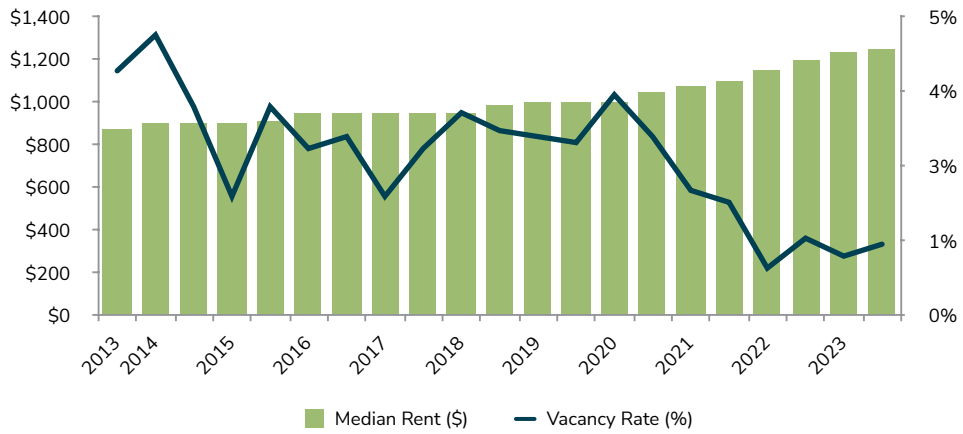
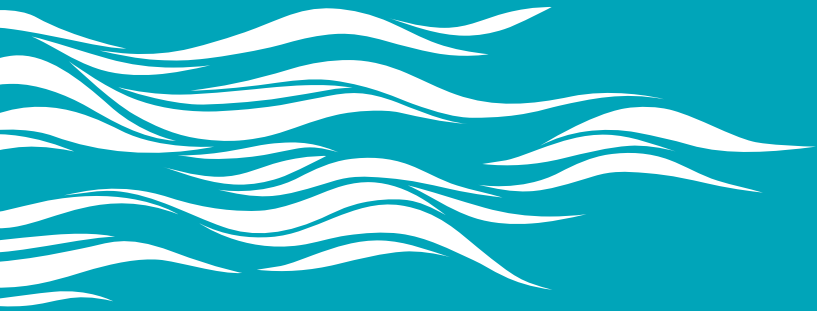


FIGURE 2 Whitehorse median rent and vacancy rate, units in buildings with 3+ rental units²





OAG report on Yukon housing

A May 2022 report from Canada's Office of the Auditor General (OAG) found that Yukon Housing Corporation (YHC) and the Department of Health and Social Services (HSS) did not provide Yukoners in greatest need with adequate and affordable housing, including those who are homeless. The gaps observed included:

- incomplete identification of housing needs;
- a long and growing waitlist for housing;
- problems in managing housing stock; and
- ineffective coordination and cooperation between HSS, YHC and housing partners.

Nine recommendations were included in the Auditor General's report. As a first step, HSS and YHC signed a memorandum of understanding with the aim of defining roles and responsibilities, increasing collaboration and improving coordination of work. Subsequent to this, a work plan was released in December 2022.



2. The goals of this report

The mandate letters released in March 2023 positioned the Yukon government to develop a strategy to rapidly respond to the increasing needs of those experiencing and at risk of homelessness. However, on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic, opioid crisis and with the rising cost of living, the Yukon government shifted from the development of a strategy to deploying immediate actions, based on the framework outlined in Figure 3. The coordination of this multi-sectoral response involved government departments, partnerships with First Nations governments and non-governmental organizations.

This report presents an opportunity for the Yukon government to:

1. take account of the actions completed and underway since March 2023;
2. use the lessons learned to inform the future; and
3. chart a new path forward with community partners.



FIGURE 3 Yukon government's rapid response to homelessness



3. Our approach to rapidly respond to homelessness



Developing Yukoner-centred services

Housing needs assessments alongside community engagement initiatives such as the Housing Summits and lived experience forums help providers establish a clear picture of Yukoners' unique needs, enabling the sector to prioritize targeted solutions. Regular program evaluations and policy reviews ensure the Yukon government's programming is in lockstep with Yukoners' needs.

Key actions since March 2023

Community engagement

- **2024 Housing Summit:** co-hosted by the City of Whitehorse and Yukon Housing Corporation, the event focused on "Building Homes: innovative solution for stronger communities". Attended by 140 participants, this event provided a forum to discuss housing issues such as affordability, land development and short-term rentals.
- **Lived experience forums (2):** Yukon government participation in the forums led by Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition in collaboration with Voices Influencing Change, Blood Ties Four Directions Centre and the Safe at Home Society. The forums provided a supportive environment for people with lived experience to come together to share their stories and provide recommendations and solutions on how to best address housing and services challenges.
- **Creating Home partner engagement (2):** Led by Yukon Housing Corporation, the workshops were an opportunity for partners to inform the implementation of the corporation's new five-year strategic plan.

Research and evaluation

- **Reports on 405 Alexander (Whitehorse Emergency Shelter):**
 - *A Path Forward*, by House of Wolf & Associates, addressed safety and community perspectives.
 - *The Whitehorse Emergency Shelter Evaluation*, by Vink Consulting, assessed whether the needs of the community were met, measured outcomes generated and evaluated program cost-effectiveness.
- **Housing needs assessments:**
 - Yukon Housing Corporation developed a comprehensive standard approach to assess housing needs which will support a shared understanding of housing needs across the continuum and inform decision-making.
 - The Department of Health and Social Services is complementing this work with a specific analysis of housing with services needs in Whitehorse to provide a better understanding of current HSS clients' needs, and possible solutions to fill identified gaps.



- **Impact of COVID-19 on women's housing, livelihoods and wellbeing:**
 - The research examined the pandemic's impact on women in the Yukon, focusing on housing, jobs, caregiving and overall wellbeing. Findings indicated that women, especially those in unstable jobs relied heavily on public services (shelters, rent subsidies, etc.) during that time. Job losses and increased caregiving responsibilities contributed to housing instability for many.





Rapid response to homelessness

Preventing pathways into homelessness

Where we live and how we live are major determinants of health and wellbeing. Removing barriers to land development, increasing access to safe, affordable housing options and improving housing stability through enhanced transition planning and programming can help reduce the number of people entering homelessness and improve housing and wellness outcomes.

Key actions since March 2023

Investment in affordable housing

(see Figure 4)

- **Construction of YHC builds:** 18 new units brought online to support Yukon Housing Corporation's Rent-Geared-to-Income and staff housing programs. Ten additional units of supportive housing slated for completion in November 2024.
- **New affordable housing:** 239 additional units completed or in development across the housing continuum through Yukon government-supported projects.

Removing barriers to housing supply

- **Developer Build Loan program:** revised by Yukon Housing Corporation to provide development opportunities for projects such as the Northern Community Land Trust Society.

New rental assistance program

- **Canada-Yukon Housing Benefit:** new gender-based violence stream developed by Yukon Housing Corporation to help Yukoners access housing so they do not need to return to an unsafe situation due to housing costs.

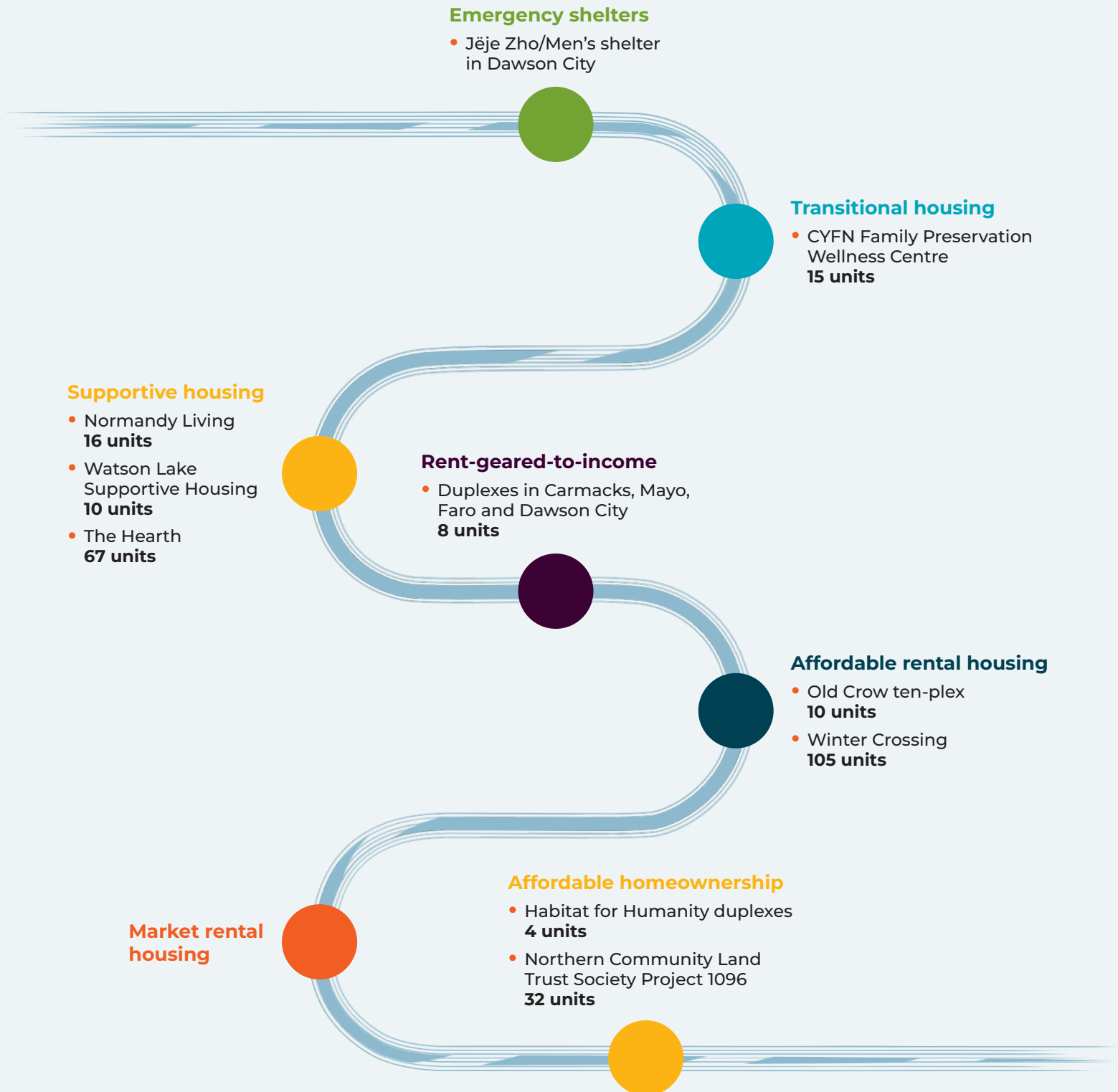
Transition planning

- **Yukon community corrections:** new outreach position within the Department of Justice to support people from the corrections system or those on bail/probation to transition back to communities – including helping people make plans for housing or connecting them to available supports.

New health and substance use services

- **Land-based healing:** Yukon First Nations Land-based Healing Fund, funded by the Government of Yukon and administered by the Council of Yukon First Nations, launched to enhance healing and wellness by connecting to traditional practices on the land.
- **Managed alcohol program:** new residential Managed Alcohol Program (MAP) developed and scheduled to come online in November 2024 – a key harm reduction component of the Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy.

FIGURE 4 **New affordable housing projects led or supported by the Yukon government in 2023-24**





Rapid response to homelessness

Addressing acute needs

The Yukon government adapted to the emerging needs of those experiencing and at risk of homelessness with a multifaceted approach—which included drop-in spaces, housing outreach, food programs and supervised consumption sites. Together, these initiatives created a comprehensive safety net that helped address the urgent housing and support needs of those experiencing homelessness.

Key actions since March 2023

Drop-in spaces and shelters

- **Jëje Zho in Dawson City:** Yukon government funding support provided to the men’s shelter, which opened its doors in July 2023.
- **Whitehorse warming centre:** six-week pilot project in the Jim Smith Building ran from March 18 to May 1, 2024, welcoming more than 1,200 visitors who could access supplies and services and connect with support workers. Planned re-opening of the warming centre for winter 2025.

Food programs

- **Decentralized food services:** Yukon government funding provided in February 2024 to support drop-in services at the Temporary Housing Program on 4th Avenue for lunch and dinner, run by the Safe at Home Society and a takeaway evening meal program for families, run by the Council of Yukon First Nations.
- **Expanded healthy meals program:** Blood Ties Four Directions Centre kitchen facilities upgraded, enabling the provision of both lunch and dinner services seven days a week.

Housing outreach

- **Mobile crisis response team (Car 867):** a collaboration between the Government of Yukon and the Yukon RCMP “M” Division in response to the need for specialized mental health crisis intervention.
- **Backpack project:** launched in November 2023, the “Support is Here for You” initiative provides personal care items and community support to individuals experiencing substance use issues.
- **Moccasin mobile:** launched in early 2024 and operated by the Council of Yukon First Nations, the outreach service helps remove barriers for street-involved persons accessing various support services by meeting individuals where and when they need support.
- **Library outreach worker:** new position created at the Whitehorse library to assist with support and service connections.

Supervised consumption

- **Supervised consumption site in Whitehorse:** hours extended to seven days a week from 10:30 am to 9:30 pm as part of the Downtown Whitehorse Safety Response Action Plan.

Downtown Whitehorse Safety Response Action Plan

Safety, health and wellbeing concerns raised by downtown residents in 2023 prompted the Yukon government to develop an immediate action plan. Following several meetings, engagements and educational sessions involving government departments, organizations, businesses and the community, the Downtown Whitehorse Safety Response Action Plan was released on December 21, 2023. The plan is a roadmap to enhance the safety, health and overall wellbeing of downtown Whitehorse. It is a living document, focused on immediate and long-term solutions, such as increasing housing security, expanding support services and improving public safety measures.

The plan involves collaboration with community partners, Yukon First Nations and local businesses to address challenges related to homelessness, substance use and community safety, ensuring a coordinated and sustainable approach to create a vibrant, inclusive and safe downtown for all.

The Downtown Whitehorse Safety Response Action Plan document provides a clear overview of the steps taken, current initiatives and future goals, ensuring a comprehensive approach to enhancing downtown Whitehorse's safety and wellbeing.

Alexander Street – supportive housing programming

This winter, the Safe at Home Society will operate a supportive housing program at 408 Alexander Street. The intent of this program is to provide supportive housing for vulnerable, unhoused Yukoners who require supports including guest management and life skills development. Staff will be onsite 24/7 to provide services.

Coroner's inquest

October 31, 2023, the Chief Coroner announced an investigation into the deaths of four individuals who were accessing services at the Whitehorse Emergency Shelter at the time of their deaths. All recommendations from the April 2024 Coroner's inquest report are currently being implemented as part of the Downtown Whitehorse Safety Response Action Plan.



Rapid response to homelessness

Promoting pathways out of homelessness

Diversity in affordable housing options that meet Yukoners' unique needs and levels of readiness will help ensure everyone has a safe place to call home. While emergency shelter beds provide stability and safety, they can also serve as an entry point to more permanent supportive housing options. Housing stability allows Yukoners to focus on other areas of their life, providing them increased life opportunities.

Key actions since March 2023

Transitional housing

- **Temporary Housing Project:** funding provided to Safe at Home Society in early 2023 for the provision of 20 temporary supportive housing units at 4051 4th Avenue, the former Coast High Country Inn site. Funding was extended until March 2024, helping 30 individuals maintain their tenancy throughout the winter months.
- **Council of Yukon First Nations Family Preservation Wellness Centre:** Yukon Housing Corporation's Housing Initiatives Fund partially supported this 15-unit complex, which will provide a safe place to call home for First Nations women and children who are survivors of violence and provide culturally appropriate supports and services.

Supportive housing

- **Watson Lake supportive housing complex:** construction began in August 2023. The complex will provide permanent, supportive housing for up to 10 people who are experiencing or are at risk of homelessness in Watson Lake.
- **408 Alexander:** renovations completed to the YHC building and funding provided to Safe at Home Society to operate the 17-unit building and implement a supportive housing program serving low-to-moderate acuity needs in Whitehorse.
- **The Hearth:** \$12.9 million committed to the Safe at Home Society's 67-unit permanent supportive housing project, slated to open in 2026.

Rent-gear-to-income housing

- **Rent-gear-to-income unit allocation:** a new tenant allocation model for Whitehorse was implemented early 2023 and is currently under review to ensure it is meeting client needs. The new model includes 20 per cent of units designated for Yukoners on the By-Name List⁶. A further 20 per cent of units are designated for victims of violence, and those with medical and mobility needs.

⁶ The By-Name List is a single, shared list of people experiencing homelessness and can help connect those individuals to available housing and supports. Source: <https://safeathomeyukon.ca/services/the-by-name-list>.



4. Identifying lessons learned

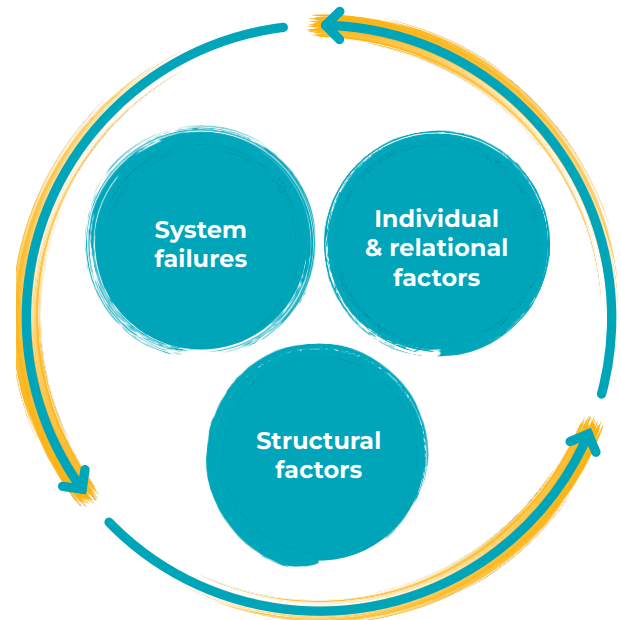
Homelessness is a complex issue requiring a multi-sectoral approach – everyone has a unique role to play. The Yukon government’s response to homelessness in the past year has been largely crisis oriented. While necessary to meet the community’s acute needs, focus is increasingly shifting to more preventative initiatives that address root causes of homelessness (Figure 5).

The launch of Yukon Housing Corporation’s new strategic plan, *Creating Home*, marks the beginning of this shift. One that will see the Yukon government reaching beyond a traditional landlord role to address a broader range of factors impacting housing and wellness outcomes. Enhanced supports such as the Department of Education’s Working UP initiative are key to stable housing and positive outcomes.

Safe, stable housing allows us to put down roots in a community. Connection to community also helps individuals, particularly those experiencing homelessness, feel empowered. Moving from a service-centred housing delivery system to one that is more Yukoner-centred will see the Yukon government enhancing engagement with the community and people with lived and living experience of homelessness.

This will be complemented by the ongoing work of the Department of Health and Social Services, in partnership with Yukon First Nations governments and health system partners, to address the recommendations from the 2020 *Putting People First* report and lay the foundation for a health and social services system change.

FIGURE 5 Causes of homelessness



What is the Working UP program?

The Department of Education’s Working UP program provides financial support to help Yukoners increase workplace skills and experience, get workplace support and explore options for self-employment.



**Boreal
Commons**
11 TARAHNE WAY

5. Charting a new path forward with community partners

The flexibility with which the Yukon government and community partners actioned solutions to address the acute housing and homelessness needs in the past year required significant coordination across sectors and between all levels of government.

Within the Yukon government, collaboration across departments remains critical to holistically address homelessness. Enhanced coordination specifically between Yukon Housing Corporation and the Department of Health and Social Services continues to be a key priority. This includes annual public progress updates on the joint work plan to address the Auditor General of Canada's 2022 recommendations and regular meetings to advance this work at the Assistant Deputy Minister Steering Committee table. These mechanisms ensure that the department and corporation are accountable for their work on this priority.

Looking to wider community initiatives, the Yukon government continues to strengthen its relationship with federal partners to support territorial efforts and Reaching Home Initiative. In the coming months, the Reaching Home Community Advisory Board (CAB) will:

1. Work to update the 2017 Safe at Home Action Plan; and
2. Release a comprehensive Community Response Plan for the Yukon.

The Community Response Plan will present community partners with an opportunity to review the implementation of coordinated access to date and determine how best to allocate resources from Reaching Home to strengthen current approaches.

Complementing this work is the federal Action Research on Chronic Homelessness (ARCH) initiative that is seeking to identify measures beyond the Reaching Home program that can support communities in eliminating chronic homelessness. Selected as one of eight ARCH sites across Canada, the main objectives of the Whitehorse ARCH project are to:

- Identify and document persistent barriers to preventing and reducing chronic homelessness in Whitehorse; and
- Strengthen collaboration amongst community partners to create greater alignment in their work to house the unhoused.

We look forward to participating in the development of the Yukon's new approach to reduce and prevent homelessness. Our territory is at an important juncture as we continue to make significant strides in improving community safety and wellbeing through the Downtown Whitehorse Safety Response Action Plan and Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy.

Maintaining and building on this momentum will require a united effort. It is only through the combined investments in housing, community safety and reducing individual and community harm that we will be successful in creating healthy homes and communities for all Yukoners.

