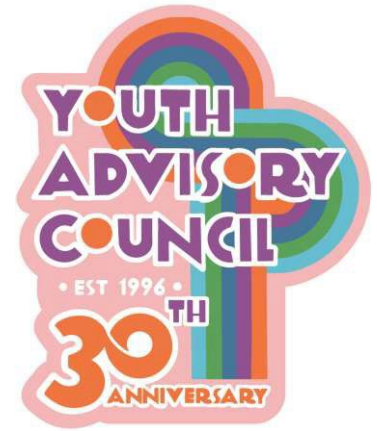


Advancing Accessible Housing: Recommendations from Holland Bloorview's Youth Advisory Council



Informants

On May 23, 2026, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital's (Holland Bloorview) Youth Engagement Strategy (YES) hosted the Youth Summit: Pathways to Partnership. The Youth Summit brought together current and former Youth Advisory Council (YAC) members and staff working in the field of youth engagement for educational workshops, community building and to celebrate YAC's 30th year. Holland Bloorview's YAC members are current and former clients of the hospital between the ages of 14- 29 and have varied personal backgrounds and experiences of disability, acquired injuries and neurodevelopmental differences. The accessible housing recommendations were gathered through round table discussions facilitated by the YAC executive committee members - all youth in peer nominated leadership positions on the council. The data from each table discussion was collated and below is YAC's contribution to The National Housing Council's review panel examining the lack of accessible housing in Canada.

Key messages

- Living with a disability is expensive, we should not have to pay more to live in accessible housing that meets our needs and wants.
- Include people with disabilities in policy making, design, and leadership decisions.
- Accessible housing needs to be co-located near necessary services, particularly transportation, healthcare, employment, and education.
- Improve social supports so that housing is affordable (i.e. financially accessible) for people with disabilities.
- Disabled lives are varied (intersectionality, different family structures, caregiver presence), and our housing needs to adapt and reflect these realities and enable us to make choices.

Question 1: What is your vision for accessible housing in Canada and why?

Accessibility as the norm, not an after-thought

- All housing should be accessible as a standard rather than an after-thought
- There are people who need accessible housing now, and people who will need it in the future (e.g. older adults, people who may acquire illness or injury) - start planning for accessible homes before you need them
- Just like fire alarms and detectors are standards within homes, basic accessibility should be too. Examples - ramps, grab bars for toilets and showers
- Developers should include a portion of all new condo and apartment builds to be accessible units as a requirement for approving permits
- Condo / apartment amenities also must have accessibility built in (e.g. laundry rooms, fitness rooms, party rooms, pools, etc. all need to be accessible to residents with disabilities)

Affordability is key for accessibility

- Accessible housing isn't accessible if it is not affordable, accessible housing rent should be geared to income.
- The money you make shouldn't affect your ability to obtain accessible housing (no income caps to be eligible for acceptance to accessible housing programs). The Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) does not cover much of anything - it is not a livable income, and not enough for market rent housing let alone enough to afford accessible housing or retrofitting a home for accessibility needs
- Current costs of rent and mortgages are expensive and causes people to decide whether they should prioritize rent or other necessities such as groceries or medication
- Currently, accessibility renovations and retrofits require out of pocket spending, making them nearly impossible for people with disabilities (or their families) to do. The price you have to pay to make your own home accessible is unmanageable.
- All housing should have minimum accessibility as a requirement in the building plans.

Defining what is "accessible"

- We need consults from people with lived experiences to influence decisions on housing. It's important to educate the developers that are building and designing the homes
- Limit stairs where a ramp or elevator can be used; increase access points with no stairs to entrance doors. Increase availability of ramps and elevators
- Spacious bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchens for mobility with devices, and places to store and clean equipment (e.g. space for wheelchairs and electric scooters in garage or mudrooms). The current spaces do not account for the space needed for it to truly be accessible.
- Homes that can be flexibly adapted to meet the accessibility requirements of a person as they age reduces the need for modifications to the structure or being forced to move to a more accessible property
- "Accessible" does not mean the same thing across jurisdictions. Accessibility requirements and standards for the built environment and housing should be harmonized across Canada.

More options

- Our vision is one where there are more choices and, the preferences of people requiring accessible housing is valued - people can choose where they live (area, type of home) and can easily find homes with the type of accessibility and independent living supports needed
- Most accessible housing is assumed to be permanent, long-term housing. However, there is need for different types of housing to be accessible - accessible student rentals for those that want to access a dynamic student experience, or shelters and hostels.
- Accessible housing that is actually available to move in to (no waitlists) and has optional attendant care onsite.

(Co-)Located housing and community-based supports

- Accessible housing should include proximity to a community built around the needs of those within the housing structure. Accessible housing should be available in multiple locations - urban, rural so that people have choice and feel integrated into the community.
- Location needs to be in areas with services close by. Examples - hospitals and healthcare, education, banks, groceries, laundry, fitness gyms, childcare, employment services, and accessible transportation that gets people there and back.
- Oftentimes, people with disabilities have (or may want to have) families of their own. We envision a future of accessible housing that is flexible and spacious enough for people with disabilities to live with and care for their own family.
- Create communities where an attendant can also have their own apartment / condo and be co-located near those they are working for - this rent should also be geared to income as they are being paid through government funded programs (e.g. Direct Funding in Ontario)

Question 2: How does the lack of accessible housing affect people living in Canada?

Stuck with difficult choices

- Day-to-day difficulties getting to and from places, the services that are needed. People with disabilities do not have nearly the same amount of real choices about where to live, so it takes longer times to travel to all the places they need to be.
- If there is no available (or affordable) accessible housing, this increases the risk of homelessness.
- Many shelters are not accessible which truly limits those in crisis.
- Choosing to stay in an inaccessible home has health risks and dangers (e.g. falls, not being able access a bathroom, requiring a caregiver's support to enter/exit the home because of stairs or inaccessible doors)
- Choosing to move to an accessible home, but not having proper services nearby means a huge burden to coordinate and travel long distances - in time, energy, and money
- When a person with a disability has a partner or family who also has a disability, there is no guarantee they can receive attendant services in the same Supported Independent Living Unit building. This creates a burden that is directly related to lack of accessible housing options.

People with disabilities may be forced to live apart from a partner or family simply because they need accessible housing.

- People with disabilities may want (or need) to take care of parents as they age, but how can they do this when they can't find appropriate housing that allows them to even take care of themselves?

Limiting our futures

- Not living in accessible housing has hindered growth and freedom. There is no opportunity for independence in adult years with current financial supports and the cost of living.
- Not having access to accessible housing alters a person's goals and plans, delaying certain achievements like moving out of the family home, going off to school, or moving in with a partner.
- A lot of assumptions that those living with disabilities want to (or will) live with roommates. How can we make our space comfortable? How can we express ourselves in our most authentic ways, without being forced to live in a shared space.
- Future planning is difficult - with long waitlists or high-costs, plans for "the future" are made decades in advance. Hard to be flexible or to adapt these plans to having kids, a family, a partner. So people may need to decide early on to go without these important and meaningful life possibilities.

Emotional and psychological distress

- The lack of accessible housing affects socialization and mental health of Canadians with disabilities. It leads to isolation, a further lack of disability awareness, which in turn raises rates of homelessness
- Deprives individuals of independence, which affects sense of self-worth and mental-health
- Increases anxiety and uncertainty about moving out of the current home - even if the current home is inaccessible.
- With housing you can build your identity, and without housing, a basic need, you can't build the life/identity that you want. You have goals without the basic necessities to achieve them and that leaves you feeling helpless. The question of "will it change, will it be like this forever?" weighs at the back of our minds.

Stress of feeling unable to change anything for ourselves.

- Cannot help but compare to peers without disabilities. Getting a home is hard enough for young people, but to get an accessible home is much more difficult. When we aren't reaching life milestones (e.g. moving out of the family home, living in Residence) like our peers, we can't help but feel we are behind.
- Having to uproot your life because your accessibility needs change and they cannot be accommodated where you live means that you may risk being far away from your friends, family, or community.
- Having so few choices for accessible housing means living in designated accessible buildings - it is "othering", stigmatizing, and increases internalized ableism

Finances/supports strains relations

- People with disabilities are more likely to stay at home with family members because they don't have the financial resources to sustain independent living (e.g. rent, groceries, medications, equipment, clothes and personal necessities). With disability income supports, they may not have the ability to set aside money for transportation, bills, etc.
- Aging parents / siblings may not have the ability to indefinitely care for people with disabilities creating an increasing demand for accessible housing as people with disabilities move out of the family home.
- Having to live with other people (family or roommates) when you do not want to but cannot afford to live independently because there isn't anywhere accessible to move to, the renovations to make your own home accessible are too expensive or supports you would need to live independently are not co-located or readily available.
- The difficulty finding/accessing accessible housing can make people feel they are a burden to their families or partners by staying in the inaccessible home
- The (inaccessible) infrastructure works against you - you need more people, more supports (e.g. equipment) to aid you to navigate an inaccessible space, and this can be costly

Lack of trust in the system

- A lot of buildings have accessibility issues, and not enough progress has been made to make sure they are fully accessible to meet the real needs of people with disabilities. We need evolving standards and enforcement of accessibility standards.
- There are long waitlists for publicly funded accessible housing - where do people with disabilities live in the meantime? Unsafe / inaccessible homes or having to live long term in hospitals and nursing homes - not good for long-term physical, mental, or social health

Question 3: What system-wide gaps, and what government actions and inactions, are getting in the way of Canada's progress on the right to housing and the rights of persons with disabilities?

Inadequate income and financial support programs

- Income from ODSP and other financial supports are not realistic to meet the material needs of people with disabilities; for example, the poverty line is above what ODSP provides. It restricts the possibility for many disabled people to save money for future housing

Inadequate accessibility standards

- What the legal standards say is accessible may not actually be functionally accessible for people with disabilities. Accessibility standards should include the needs of children and youth; housing accessibility should be able to be adapted to meet their changing needs as they grow-up.
- Not enough consideration for retrofitting/renovating the current and past public works that continue to present barriers for Canadians with disabilities. Adding a ramp or door opener is a band-aid measure.

Underlying ableism

- Eligibility criteria for government support accessible housing carry an underlying tone of ableism, many face challenges of "not being disabled enough" to qualify for accessible housing. If there was adequate accessible housing, both in the public and private sector, all individuals who could benefit from accessible housing would be able to access it.
- Ableist attitudes and cultural biases can impact where accessible housing is located and how much accessible housing is built.
- Lots of stigma and biases about invisible disabilities and mental health conditions. People with invisible disabilities also require adaptations to their homes to maximize independence, safety and to meet their needs.
- Accessing accessible housing programs involves so much documentation to "prove" disability, especially invisible ones or episodic ones. There is a substantial cost to this (financial, time, emotional burnout, travelling, mental energy to coordinate), and not everyone can "pay" it.

Under-representation of disabled voices in decision-making

- There continues to be a lack of people with disabilities in government or politics
- People with disabilities need to be included in decision making conversations, not only consultations
- Living with disability gives you a different lens, it helps you relate differently to the subject (of accessible housing) and brings forward lived experience that is valuable. Focus on people with disabilities leading the conversations and working in the environment to connect to the community that wants and needs change to accessible housing in Canada.

Fragmented system

- Reduce / omit differences between provinces and territories, make it possible for Canadians with disabilities to choose where they want to go to school, to work, to live. This is only possible if accessible housing exists everywhere in Canada and can be accessed even if you are not a current resident of that community.
- Accessible housing across the country also requires that healthcare and social supports programs be readily available to accept you in your new location. Long waitlists make people with disabilities question if it is worth the risk of not having supports to even try to move to a place of choice.
- Organizations pivoting to AI and technology (e.g. chat bots or email contact forms on websites, voice-automated phone trees) for efficiency can make things inaccessible. Sometimes, we need a person to help explain information, or to navigate grey zones. Staff should be available to provide information, support and answer questions.
- Affordable housing is usually built in vacant space without proper services, jobs, transit (health and employment support) nearby. Consider investing in rebuilding to improve accessible housing options in communities with good infrastructure.

Lacking inclusive mindset

- Accessibility is constantly seen as an afterthought rather than an up-front, main priority
- Housing is generally viewed from a business standpoint (profit, investment, revenue-generating) rather than a right.

- Really need a big-picture view of housing that is accessible for anyone - not just disability, but newcomers, people experiencing homelessness, etc.

Lacking leadership and accountability

- Need the government to create a plan that measures and publicly reports progress on improvements to accessible housing that is responsive to the needs of Canadians with disabilities
- Accessible housing options do not reflect the current numbers and needs of Canadians with accessible housing needs. Expectations, social and societal inclusion, and the Rights of persons with disabilities have evolved over time, policies, services, and options need to evolve as well to enable individuals to live a life of choice and dignity.

Question 4: What actions and solutions should governments and communities lead to make better progress on the right to accessible housing for people with disabilities in Canada?

Redefine what is accessible housing

- Stop thinking of it as just for people with disabilities, accessible housing benefits all Canadians
- Housing needs to be considered a right for all Canadians
- Homes need to be adaptable for changing accessibility needs
- Accessible housing should be co-located with essential services

Leadership by and with people with disabilities

- Include Canadians with disabilities in conversations and decisions about accessible housing planning
- Provide updates on a regular basis in a variety of formats to inform Canadians of progress
- Ensure individuals with accessible housing needs are represented in government and working on this issue

Related (re)investment in social services

- Widely available accessible employment opportunities, healthcare, and education will reduce barriers experienced by people with disabilities. If access to opportunities and support services is easier, more people with disabilities will have greater financial ability to access the housing market.

Improve navigation of services

- Create more programs that teach individuals how to access accessible housing. Make it easy to understand processes, have staff available to act as service navigators.
- Resources must be written in plain language and available in varied formats. Resources must be available in multiple languages, not only English and French.
- Tailor supports differently to different communities (e.g. newcomers, specific disabilities, cultural backgrounds). Do not group individuals with accessible housing needs based on diagnosis.

Making more accessible homes

- Incentivise people to adapt their homes proactively (e.g. tax breaks)
- For homes that are sufficiently "accessible", prioritize the sale of these homes to people with disabilities - consider having government buy them to re-sell to accessible housing corporations.
- Incentivize developers to include (or add more) accessible units to housing projects
- Develop home maintenance help programs that coordinates volunteers to mow lawns, shovel snow, rake lawns, etc. for people with disabilities (consider: highschoolers in local communities in exchange for community service hours)

Policy approach

- Compare with other countries who are doing better in terms of accessible infrastructure and learn from them
- Use evaluation data to continually revise current policies and programming.