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Homeless Women Identify Gaps in Downtown Services

A report released today by homeless and underhoused women in downtown Toronto focuses on the numerous barriers women face, and highlights their solutions for making health and social services more inclusive.

The *Count Us In!* report describes how services in Toronto and Ontario can be more inclusive, and focuses on the promotion of the health and well-being of marginalized groups. The report is a collaborative effort between The Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse, Ontario Women's Health Network, Toronto Christian Resource Centre and Toronto Public Health.

The report summarizes the findings of 11 focus groups with 58 women who are homeless or underhoused in downtown east Toronto, on health and social services that women use. As one participant said, "This is an opportunity for the service providers to step back and take a good look at what is needed."

Key recommendations in the report include the need to:

- Train health and social service providers to listen to and respect the people they serve.
- Make information and resources accessible to women of diverse backgrounds.
- Create safe spaces where discrimination is challenged and actively resisted.
- Set up more detox centres and harm reduction programs for women.
- Open more shelters for women and families.
- Make health and social services accountable to the people they serve.
- Change policies that are detrimental to women's health and introduce policies that will give women more options.

The report, funded by the Wellesley Institute, includes the *Count Us In!* Charter for Offering Services to Women. The practical and easy to implement Charter is based on the voices of these women and addresses how women want to be treated when they use services. The report also delivers a policy action agenda that the women recommended to all levels of government to address the need for decent living standards for everyone.

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