

REVITALIZING LEGACY TOWERS KEY TO GTA HOUSING AFFORDABILITY CRISIS *New United Way report finds that high-rise renters face affordability, suitability issues*

November 18, 2021 – Decent, secure and affordable housing is a fundamental right. But in the GTA, that right is under threat due to a persistent affordable housing crisis that is deepening social and economic inequities across the region. A new report released by United Way Greater Toronto, in partnership with the University of Toronto’s Neighborhood Change Research Partnership and the Tower Renewal Partnership, finds that aging high-rise rental towers – long one of the most affordable housing options in the region – demand attention.

Aging and deteriorating and increasingly unaffordable, purpose-built pre-1985 “legacy” rental towers pose health and safety concerns for residents. Many of these residents are low-income and racialized households who are already struggling to pay the rent. “Legacy” rental towers can play a crucial role in helping to resolve our region’s affordable housing crisis – but only if investments support the ongoing affordability, viability and vitality of tower communities.

Key findings from [*Vertical Legacy: The case for revitalizing the GTA’s aging rental tower communities*](#):

The need for housing that is safe, suitable, and affordable is high for renter households across the GTA.

- Between 1980 and 2015, the real average wage of high-rise renters increased by only 5%, compared to 41% for homeowners
- Only 52% of Toronto and Peel Region high-rise renters, and 40% of York Region high-rise renters are paying rent deemed affordable (less than 30% of before-tax income)

Despite deterioration and unsuitable conditions, purpose-built “legacy” rental towers are sought after in part because of their affordability.

- High-rise renters pay 13% less rent than average market rents in the GTA
- 10% of GTA high-rise rental tower units need major structural repairs
- 22% of high-rise rental tower households do not have enough bedrooms for the size and makeup of their residents

Housing inequities mirror broader structural inequalities in the GTA.

- 49% of GTA high-rise renter households are low income
- 56% of GTA purpose-built “legacy” rental towers are located in low-income neighbourhoods, an increase of 40% over 35 years
- In the GTA, racialized renter households are most likely to live in high-rise rental towers. 47% of racialized renter households are likely to live in high-rise rental towers, compared to 38% of white renter households. The renter households with the highest probability of living in a high-rise rental tower are Black (55%), Filipino (53%), and South Asian (48%) renter households.

This report explores the challenges to maintaining rental affordability in a market where demand is outpacing supply. The solutions cannot be addressed by any one sector alone: government, community service organizations, and private and philanthropic sectors must all take action, and must do so in consultation with community leaders, and residents with lived experience of housing discrimination and insecurity.

Building on progress made over the past decade, this report offers recommendations for all sectors to help low-income rental tower residents make rent and access eviction protection, encourage tower owners to maintain good repair and affordability, and strengthen social infrastructure, services and opportunities for the people and neighbourhoods that call these towers home.

Read the report at unitedwaygt.org/research-and-reports.

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Quotes from *Vertical Legacy* report partners:

Daniele Zanotti, President & CEO, United Way Greater Toronto: “This report builds on United Way’s body of research on poverty, geography and equity, from *Vertical Poverty* to *The Opportunity Equation*. Focusing on the opportunities and challenges posed by legacy towers in the context of our urgent affordable housing crisis, it also draws on socio-demographic data that reveals just who is most impacted if we don’t invest in the viability and affordability of these tower communities for the next generation. The GTA’s legacy rental towers are more than roofs over heads -- they are places where diverse communities grow, healthy lives are made, and social bonds are strengthened. To do that, we need them to be home to robust, culturally relevant social services that are driven by the needs of residents. This report is a call to action for all sectors to come together to keep rental towers affordable and livable.”

David Hulchanski, Professor, Neighbourhood Change Research Partnership, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto: “The interconnected disadvantages of individual poverty, geographic concentration of low-income households, and the racialized nature of poverty in the GTA revealed in this report highlight the need for an urgent community response. We need both a neighbourhood-level response to the growing income and racial segregation in tower communities as well as significant government support for the environmental and structural renewal of this hugely significant legacy of approximately 2,100 rental apartment towers housing over 200,000 households.”

Graeme Stewart, Director, Tower Renewal Partnership: “As we look for ways to expand affordable housing supply, it is critical that we also preserve the housing we have. Legacy towers are home to hundreds of thousands throughout the GTA, and represent the bulk of our purpose-built rental housing. They were created with the help of public support to provide good quality affordable homes to those of all incomes and have helped Canada welcome the world. But these aging buildings are at risk. More than ensuring this housing stays standing, it is time for it to be modernized to meet the health, resilience and climate challenges of our collective future. The retrofit of this housing has started with landmark pilot projects. It is now time to invest in community, government and private partnerships so this crucial renewal picks up speed and happens at scale.”

About United Way Greater Toronto: As the largest non-government funder of community services in the GTA, United Way Greater Toronto reinforces a crucial community safety net. United Way's network of agencies and initiatives in neighbourhoods across Peel, Toronto and York Region works to ensure that everyone has access to the programs and services they need to thrive today. Mobilizing the network and other community support, United Way tackles #UNIGNORABLE issues linked to poverty. United Way's work is rooted in ground-breaking research, strategic leadership, local advocacy and cross-sectoral partnerships committed to building lasting solutions to the GTA's greatest challenges. unitedwaygt.org

Media contact: Deena Douara, Communications Manager | United Way Greater Toronto 416-777-1157 (office) or 416-574-4971 (cell) | ddouara@uwgt.org