

UNITED WAY  
**WOMEN  
UNITED**

# 2023 Annual Report



**United Way**  
Greater Toronto

WORKING WITH  
COMMUNITIES IN  
PEEL, TORONTO &  
YORK REGION





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# Thanks For Standing With Us



As we celebrate the 15th anniversary of Women United, we would like to acknowledge you—the community of vibrant, empathetic and generous leaders who share a vision for a bright future for all women across the GTA. These past few years have been extremely challenging for so many women and through this strange period of overlapping crises, you have stood with us. Thank you.

Like all anniversaries, this is an opportunity to reflect on all we have accomplished as we continue to show up for women and their families across Peel, Toronto and York Region. Our support has strengthened wraparound supports for women and families; coordinated care between agencies; and ensured that targeted programming reaches women from equity-deserving groups. Together, we have changed lives.

And we know that there is more work ahead. We have seen record numbers connected to gender-based and intimate partner violence, resulting in the City of Toronto and the Regions of Peel and York all declaring it an epidemic. It is a sobering reminder that there is much more work to be done and that so many of the issues women face are interconnected. This includes unemployment, food insecurity, being precariously housed or facing homelessness.

At United Way, we know solutions to support women long term need to be multipronged: it's important we provide on the ground services in community to address immediate needs and systems change through service coordination and advocacy efforts to influence public policy. Because of your commitment to Women United, we were able to lay some of the groundwork for systemic change, addressing the root causes of inequities women in the GTA experience.

Together, you have built on a legacy of giving that uplifts and inspires others to get involved. Thank you for enabling this crucial work and for standing with community as we collectively build a stronger future for women in the GTA.

Sincerely,

Alison James and Christine Lonsdale  
Co-Chairs, Women United

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# 15 years of uplifting women

For the past 15 years, engaged and determined women have come together to rally support across their networks and inspire others to uplift women experiencing poverty. First launched as Women Gaining Ground in 2008, and now known as Women United, this initiative has raised more than \$16 million, and many of the original visionaries have remained connected through the years. To mark Women United's 15th anniversary, we asked some long-time donors about their involvement.



## Why give through Women United?



*Doris Stamml:* I joined this group years ago because its mission resonated with me: women helping women get out of poverty. And it resonates deeply still, because the need to support women and their families continues. For me, being part of Women United continues to be the best way to empower women in our community who are facing barriers to build strong, secure futures. When we help women, we help their families, and as a result the entire community is stronger. We trust United Way to ensure that the money raised goes to great programs, and we know that we are making a difference. I love that I am in such good company.

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## Why is contributing to Women United so important right now?



**Martine Irman:** I continue to support Women United because the pandemic exposed and exacerbated the issues many women are facing in our community. The need to help is greater, and that's more reason to give. Helping focus on women in need is part of our social responsibility as women and I believe giving as a group is even more impactful than individually.



**Godyne Sibay:** The pandemic disproportionately affected women and lower-income families, while natural disasters and civil unrest have brought many newcomers to our communities. Even with the impact that United Way has had, the demand has not abated. Our communities, composed of people from around the world, are filled with untapped potential. Time and again, history has told us that when you make women successful, the whole community rises with them.



**Heather Mason-Wood:** There are so many women who are struggling to raise their children and provide food and shelter while also sometimes dealing with abuse or mental health challenges—and the pandemic led to an increase in need. Mental health issues have increased, food and housing supports are inadequate, and many women and their families are in crisis. I believe it is incumbent on those of us who can afford to help to do so. I hope that the women who benefit from the support know that Women United members truly care about every one of them. We hope they can use the support to move forward with their lives.

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## What kind of impact do you hope you're having?



**Jennifer Witzel:** I believe the Women United initiatives provide the right level of support and encouragement to help women overcome difficult situations and improve their circumstances for themselves and their families. It is very gratifying to hear how those programs have supported women, and the real stories of the personal growth and expansion of the possibilities for young women is a joy to witness.



**Laura Isidean:** Contributing to Women United is very important to me because when you lift women up, everyone benefits—women, their families and our communities. I trust that I am supporting women with opportunities for a better life, where they can find safety, resilience and financial independence. For my community and the GTA as a whole, I hope for a level playing field, where everyone has an equal opportunity to be successful and happy.

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# Helping Women Thrive



We know that more than **330,000** women in Peel, Toronto and York Region are living on low incomes in a region that is increasingly unaffordable. With the bulk of COVID-19 financial supports like CERB ending in 2021, we have already begun to see an uptick in the national poverty rate and anticipate this number will go up. Contributing factors include precarious employment, unaffordable housing, expensive childcare and a lack of coordination across social assistance programs that leave women and their children in poverty.

At United Way Greater Toronto, our approach includes recognizing the intersecting identities of women and gender diverse people navigating access to services and opportunities.

“This past year continued to be a crisis of housing that deeply impacts survivors of gender-based violence. Although the Clinic does not do representation at landlord-tenant tribunals, we do find ourselves often trying to support survivors who are facing housing and multiple intersecting systemic issues which can be insurmountable without support. An example: a client who is non-English speaking needed the wrap-around services of the Clinic for language access, immigration and family law intersection. Fleeing spousal violence and with five children, she was faced with losing her housing, withdrawal of sponsorship by the ex-partner, and no child support or other income. The Clinic did advocacy to gain income support, and at the same time advocated with the landlord and arranged to pay the backlog of rent through the Clinic’s own fundraising. We supported the client around her legal issues related to immigration and family law. This is just one example of many such situations where we are the conduit for change and for access to social support and justice systems for survivors, at the intersection where marginalization, language barriers, overlapping legal needs, and mental health issues come to meet.”

—A client story from Barbra Schlifer Clinic

# Your Impact



The pandemic provided countless opportunities for us to acquire new knowledge and new ways of collaborating with our partners to better support women, particularly those from Indigenous, Black and other equity deserving groups.

**Together, we're building trust through our words and actions. Here's what you made possible this past year:**

**47,894**

Survivors received support to live free from violence or to reduce the risk of violence

**34,643**

Survivors accessed immediate safety supports, including risk assessment, safety planning, and technology supports to increase safety and reduce the risk of violence

**26,142**

Survivors gained stability through connections to housing, education, employment, settlement, legal, financial, and/or other wrap-around supports that foster stability

**25,415**

Survivors and witnesses of gender-based, intimate partner and family violence have been connected to mental well-being and counselling supports to assist in the healing process related to the trauma they experienced

**15,944**

Information sessions and workshops were delivered in the community to raise awareness, interrupt, and prevent gender-based, intimate partner and family violence



# Creating a safe space for women to succeed

A United Way-supported women's employment organization helped Jenifer land the job of her dreams



In the spring of 2023, Jenifer got some very good news. She'd been working at the legislative library at Queen's Park for about a year and was offered a permanent position. She was over the moon.

"I think I just slept for days afterwards, I could relax a bit," she says, laughing. "I was like, 'OK. Now I can budget because I know this is how the money's coming in. I know that we've got this covered and I don't have to worry.'"

At the time, Jenifer was in her 40s. She hadn't worked in a long time and wanted to figure out how to get back into the labour market. A friend recommended her to Times Change, a women's employment agency in Toronto. She decided to start by volunteering as the point-of-contact for the United Way-funded Digital Training Centre.

The Digital Training Centre is one of more than 100 programs designed for women that United Way funds across Peel, Toronto and York Region. It connects women who are underemployed or precariously employed to computer and digital training so they can secure in-demand, well-paying jobs.

During the pandemic, she and her husband were evicted from their apartment without any warning. They managed to find a new place to

live, but their rent suddenly went up by \$500.

"I'd been planning on getting back to work anyway but now I really had to do it," says Jenifer. "The first thing I did after we signed this lease was reach out to Times Change."

She signed up for one of the programs she once supported as a volunteer. It was great to be around so many friendly people, but it was intimidating too. She still wasn't sure how'd she'd fit in today's labour market.

"I'm in my 50s. I am a chubby lady. I'm neurodiverse. I thought, 'There's no place for me in this world'," she says. "But Lydia, my counsellor, told me to just keep looking. That she had my back. We'd do this together."

They worked on planning a career path for Jenifer based on her education and past experience. They updated her resume and did hours of interview prep. And it paid off. Jenifer got the job at the legislative library.

"It was such a sense of relief," she says. "Like, this is my future. This place is the place I will be."

Today, Jenifer is thriving in her job. It's the start of a new career for her, one that offers her fulfilment and security. She knows she wouldn't have been there without the support of United Way.



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# How We Supported Women



At United Way, we know it's important to address the issues facing women at the micro, mezzo and macro levels. On the micro level, we provide on the ground services in community to address immediate needs. At the mezzo level, we collaborate with local government and community partners to improve service coordination and at the macro level, we influence policy change through advocacy initiatives. Here are examples of how you made this approach possible:



## Services in Community

We fund the Bridge to Employment for Women program delivered by **MIAG Centre for Diverse Women & Families** which is designed to prepare racialized women, many of whom live on a low income and face other barriers, for the job market. The program takes a holistic approach to career development and **includes employment skills enhancement and capacity building training; a three month co-op work placement; networking events every three months; and one-to-one mentoring as needed.** Wrap-around services, including mental well-being supports, parenting programs and healthy programs are also provided.



**At North York Women's Shelter**, we fund the Trauma Counselling and Therapy Program which supports women, trans and non-binary folks and their children who have experienced violence. A high proportion of those accessing this program are Indigenous, racialized and members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community. A clinic team including social workers, creative art therapists and case managers, provide **trauma-informed care to address and break the cycle of violence**.

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### Service Coordination

We are not only a funder, but also a partner and advocate in community. Working across sectors, we develop best practices, establish networks and build capacity. For example, our involvement in the **Peel Community Safety and Well-being Plan** brings together services and supports to address violence, mental health and substance dependency, and systemic discrimination. This is critical as Peel was a national COVID-19 hotspot and we know how the pandemic impacted people who were already experiencing violence or substance dependency, for instance. In addition, we co-facilitate **Community Collaboration Tables** in partnership with the City of Toronto, bringing together agencies, local government, community groups and others in neighbourhoods throughout Toronto. As always, we continue to find **local solutions and joint responses to issues such as gender-based, intimate partner and family violence, food insecurity, homelessness and settlement**.

Another example of coordinating care during the pandemic is the **United Way Greater Toronto's South Asian Community Advisory Council** which played a vital role in identifying South Asian community needs and helping us direct funding to new organizations and community-led programs that address culturally relevant needs and services. **Gender-based, intimate partner and family violence** is a key focus area for this group. In November 2022, they hosted Empowering Women: Pathways to Equality and Well-being, a virtual panel discussion on the **disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on South Asian women**. Other issues discussed were **barriers to food security, affordable housing, inclusive employment and financial independence**.

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### Advocacy and Systems Work

One of the most effective ways we work on longer-term solutions is through our advocacy work to bring about systemic equities for women. For example, we partnered with the City of Toronto's Shelter, Support & Housing Administration Division to develop the COVID-19 Interim Shelter Recovery Strategy, which identified ways to minimize the spread of COVID-19 and increase housing solutions.

Another example of influencing systemic change is through increasing our investments in culturally tailored programs and in the infrastructure of organizations led by Indigenous, Black, and other equity-deserving groups. Examples of this include our Community Program Grants and Reconciliation & Equity Organizational Infrastructure Grants.

We also invest in advocacy and systems change initiatives led by community agencies. For example, we support the Advocacy Program run by the Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic. Staff at the Clinic participate in public policy discussions, present in courts to challenge unjust laws, and engage in media relations as a progressive voice on issues related to violence against women. We also support the Advocacy and Systemic Change Program run by YWCA Toronto which works with clients and other stakeholders to identify the root causes and systemic barriers that hold women and girls back from reaching their full potential. Through collective action this initiative increases public awareness and advocates for policy and social change to advance equality for women.

# Thank You

We have been building this community together for 15 years, and what a community it is. An impressive roster of vibrant, empathetic and generous leaders who share a vision for a bright future for all women—and have the determination to see it through.

Your support is helping build a better region for women by allowing us to provide long-term solutions to inequities that women face.

We are so grateful for your sustained investment and continued support and look forward to continuing to connect women to opportunities.

Thank you for standing with us and supporting women in the GTA.











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