

ADVOCACY POSITION STATEMENT

November 2023

WUSA ADVOCACY POSITION STATEMENT:

Off-Campus Housing

ISSUE: Ensuring access to affordable, accessible, quality, safe, diverse, and sustainable off-campus housing options for undergraduate students attending the University of Waterloo.

RESPONSIBLE AUTHORITY:

The following stakeholders are tasked with the presented recommendations:

- Government of Ontario
- Local & Regional Government(s)
- Government of Canada
- The University of Waterloo

DETAILS/SUMMARY:

The University of Waterloo (along with its affiliated colleges) provides space for just under 6,800 students to live in residence on main campus with accommodations dedicated for undergraduate students, graduate students, exchange students, and based on programs or years of study.

At the time of the development of this stance, most on-campus housing is dedicated to first-year students, with the university guaranteeing accommodations for incoming students.

The City of Waterloo accounts for 42% of the purpose-built student accommodations in Canada with 17,567 beds; “a number which will only continue to grow” (*Revington & August 2019*). The dominance of this type of housing in the city puts it in a unique situation as compared to other Canadian cities with universities. In recent years undergraduate students have overwhelmingly expressed the difficulty they have experienced in securing safe, affordable, and quality housing near all the University of Waterloo’s campuses.

Unfortunately, due to the current housing crisis, students have had to make sacrifices such as securing housing in undesirable conditions or reluctantly accepting to pay exorbitant rent prices. Many students reside in off-campus housing, where they may encounter various challenges such as unfair rental practices, substandard living conditions, or improper handling of security deposits. Knowing their rights equips students to confidently address these issues and protect their well-being.

The housing issues students face can be further broken down into three (3) main

domains:

- 1. Affordability**
- 2. Awareness of Tenant Rights**
- 3. Securing Housing**

Whether specified in legislation, programs, or initiatives on the Federal, Provincial, and Municipal levels, governments may offer supports or commentary on housing related matters to assistance obtaining housing, housing construction, and housing availability. However, dedicated housing supports specific to students are rare.

IMPACT / ANALYSIS:

1. Affordability

For post-secondary students already navigating the cost of education, housing stands as another substantial financial burden. As stated in the Student Housing Report released by the Town and Gown Committee from the City of Waterloo: RTA Rent Increase guidelines do not apply to vacant units and units occupied for 1st time after November 2018. Likewise, local institution enrolment continues to grow which generates more pressure on an already low supplied quality housing market. The most recent examination of average rental price per month in Waterloo indicated a massive increase. From the 2023 Town and Gown Student Accommodations survey data average rent prices per month are on a steady increase (in 2014 \$601.17, in 2016 \$594.68, in 2023 \$950.38). Note that the 2023 cost included utilities and internet. Additionally, according to the Student Accommodations Report, the Price of Housing reported that 55.40% of students said, the price of housing was 'extremely important', 29.01% said is 'very important', and '11.96%' said was 'moderately important' out of 3,554 full responses

The City of Waterloo Town and Gown Student Accommodations Survey (2023) found that almost 46% of respondents were "significantly impacted" by the cost of accommodations. Affordable housing options help alleviate the financial burden, making education more accessible to a broader range of students, including those from low-income backgrounds. When students do not have to constantly worry about the affordability of housing, they can focus on their studies and campus involvement without the distraction of financial stress. This stability positively impacts their mental well-being and academic performance, leading to higher retention and graduation rates.

Housing affordability is not a standalone issue with students who study at the University, it has increasingly become the main concern for many other schools affiliated with the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA). As seen in the 2020 OUSA Housing, Transit, & Community Development policy paper, "housing affordability was a concern raised in consultations conducted with students at the University of Waterloo, Queen's University, Western University, and Wilfrid Laurier University".

Students are counting on respective organizations and stakeholders to advocate for more affordable housing, as seen in the 2023 Representative Survey Platform Affordability Report, where 43.24% of respondents shared this belief (second highest was increasing OSAP grants, followed by increasing access to open educational resources then affordable food options on campus). In the same survey, 21% of students indicated that securing housing in undesirable conditions was a sacrifice they have made to afford the cost of their post-secondary education. Additionally, students noted that due to the increase cost for housing, mental health support/services (29.70%) and physical health support/services (21.80%) have the highest percentage of students indicating that they cannot afford these costs each term.

Besides responses demonstrating how students felt they had 'no choice,' the cost of housing was a deciding factor for many students when signing a lease with an illegal clause. Many responses mention pricing, cost, or budget as a heavy influence on their housing search and their decision to sign a lease.

2. Tenant Rights

Being aware of housing rights fosters responsible decision-making when selecting accommodations. With proper knowledge, students can discern between legitimate housing offers and potential scams or exploitative arrangements. This helps to prevent financial losses and ensures that students find suitable and secure living spaces during their academic journey.

An important supplement to education is access to reliable and affordable legal advice or support. A concerning finding shared in our research was that many students are not aware of their rights as tenants. In WUSA's 2021 Housing Report, 15% of students said the Ontario Standard Lease was used with them, though most Waterloo housing is covered under the Residential Tenancies Act. Additionally, 70% of those leases also had additional (illegal) clauses added that most students did not know were illegal.

Additionally, according to WUSA's 2021 Housing Report: Many students (43%) experience 1-2 maintenance issues per term and only 10% of respondents never have a major issue per term. Common issues include lack of heating or ventilation systems, poor water quality, and weathering of doors and/or windows. In addition, students indicated they are not likely to report these issues to the proper municipal authorities. This can be attributed to students being unaware of who the appropriate municipal authorities are to direct their immediate concerns and challenges.

3. Securing Housing

In a March 2023 Representative Survey Platform, 48% of 320 respondents said that 'securing housing is a significant stressor.'

The current global housing affordability crisis has unfolded through rapidly growing university and college enrolments and the ongoing push for universities to develop their global relations and rankings. The ongoing university enrollment expansion carried with it a goal of inclusion and social mobility. However, although student status is assumed as a full-time occupation, many students are pushed towards a “hustle economy” that leads to juggling multiple complex responsibilities. With increasing enrollments and limited housing supply, coupled with the complex responsibilities of part-time jobs, studies, and financial stress, students struggle to secure housing.

As a result, students are often at odd with housing experiences either securing housing through on-campus residences, market housing near universities, or living far from campuses. These housing circumstances often leave students vulnerable to housing experiences with discriminatory practices of landlords, or possible exploitation which increases students struggles to secure housing that is of quality and is affordable. To circumvent these struggles, students cope by working extra hours with possible part-time employment, innovative strategies in finding places to live, attempts to overcome predatory practices, or engage in long commute times to and from their post-secondary institution to secure housing.

Securing safe housing is fundamental to a positive student experience as it directly impacts various aspects of a student's academic journey and overall well-being. A stable and secure living environment provides the necessary foundation for students to focus on their studies, engage in extracurricular activities, and fully immerse into the university experience. To list some barriers that exist for students who are securing housing range from the constant dependable on co-op locations every other term, availability of units within the ideal catchment area for students, national housing crisis, lingering COVID-19 impacts (original purposes of housing switching during this time), increased competition for unit availability from local institutional enrolment growth and students from satellite campuses residing in the area.

Data within the Town and Gown Student Accommodation survey indicated that in the Region as of 2023 there is a potential deficiency of nearly 5000 beds for students. There is consistent commentary over the past couple of years of data collection supporting this point. The ability to secure housing is a concern for the majority of undergraduate students surveyed across the University of Waterloo. In November of 2021, WUSA published the “Return to Campus” report, which stated that of students who had not secured housing, 48.30% indicated they would consider remaining enrolled in in-person courses but only attend in-person courses, when necessary, a further 41.86% said they would consider remaining enrolled in in-person courses but not attending in-person components while 22.19% of students would consider taking time off from school. Note this information was from an explicit time where students were flipping back and forth between online and in-person classes, the lessons behind these statements stand when the difficulty of securing housing becomes too daunting.

POSITION / RECOMMENDATION(S):

The Waterloo Undergraduate Student's Association supports initiatives that encourage:

- all relevant decision-making bodies and stakeholders to ensure and prioritize affordable, accessible, quality, safe, diverse, and sustainable housing options to students attending the University of Waterloo.
- collaboration with local governments and community stakeholders to collect data to identify specific areas of concern for students living in off-campus housing.
- providing resources, direction, and supports to students living in accommodations that do not meet legal, otherwise reasonable conditions or looking to secure housing.
- commitment to working with various levels of government, and community stakeholders, to actively address student housing issues through programs and initiatives that improve the overall quality of life experienced by students in the communities where they reside.
- robust financial commitments from various levels of government, developers, and the University of Waterloo to collaboratively establish affordable housing opportunities, ensuring equitable, accessible, and sustainable living conditions for students attending the university.

The Waterloo Undergraduate Student's Association opposes initiatives involving:

- rental increases exceeding standard Ontario guidelines set by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing.
- landlords exploiting the unfamiliarity of students (and international students, in particular) with tenants' rights to sidestep the Residential Tenancies Act, or otherwise intimidating student tenants.

ATTACHMENT(S) AND REFERENCES:

- [UW Residence Page](#)
- [WUSA Housing Report \(May 2021\)](#)
- [OUSA Accessibility Report \(2020\)](#)
- [WUSA Return to Campus Report \(Dec 2021\)](#)
- [Representative Survey Platform 3 – Affordability Report \(Feb 2023\)](#)
- [City of Waterloo Town and Gown Student Accommodations Report \(2023\)](#)

Revington, Nick & August, Martine, "Making A Market for Itself: The Emergent Financialization of Student Housing in Canada," *EPA: Economy and Space*, (2019):1-22

Sotomayor, L., Tarhan, D., Vieta, M., McCartney, S., & Mas, A. (2022). When students are house-poor: Urban universities, student marginality, and the hidden curriculum of student housing. *Science Direct*, Volume 124 (May 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2022.103572>

DEFINITIONS:

"**Residential Tenancies Act**" means the Ontario law that governs tenancy agreements, rental units, and residential properties – but which excludes any residence that is operated by a post-secondary institution (whether the housing is on or off campus).

"**On-campus housing**" means housing operated by a post-secondary institution for students that is located within the boundaries of one of the post-secondary institutions' campuses.

"**Off-campus housing**" means an apartment or house located offsite of and otherwise not managed by the University of Waterloo or its affiliates.

"**Student housing**" means housing that has been designed to specifically meet the unique needs of post-secondary students.

"**Market rental housing**" means housing where the rent amount is generally similar to the rent of other units in the private (non-subsidized) housing market.

"**Affordable housing**" means housing where the cost is 30 percent or less of a household's gross income.

USEFUL LINKS:

- [WUSA Advocacy Page](#)
- [WUSA Student Supports](#)
- [University of Waterloo Off-Campus Housing Page](#)
- [Government of Ontario \(Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing\)](#)
- [Government of Canada \(Housing\)](#)