

Ottawa

## Indigenous families given new lease on life as pandemic opens up housing options

Agencies like Ottawa's Wabano Centre given more flexibility to offer housing help

[Omar Dabaghi-Pacheco](#) · CBC News · Posted: May 24, 2020 4:00 AM ET | Last Updated: May 26

After fleeing an abusive household, Mary Jean Hookimaw and her four young children recently moved into a renovated three-bedroom apartment with help from the Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health. 2:22

Last fall, Mary Jean Hookimaw decided to leave what she describes as a violent household.

She soon discovered being a single mother in Ottawa with four young children and nowhere to stay can be a frightening predicament.

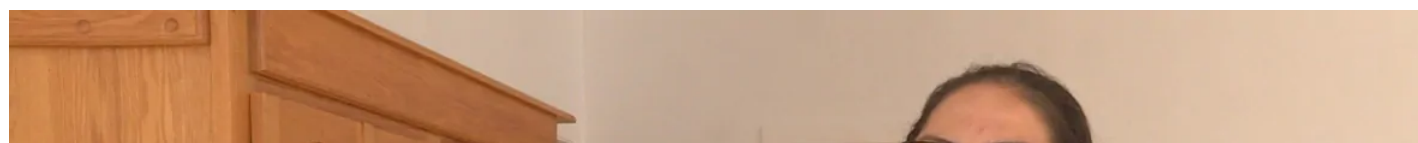
"Push comes to shove, we got out of there," Hookimaw said. "And that's how I ended up at my friend's house while waiting for shelter."

But with the city's women's shelters full, that wait lasted months. Stuck in a small space with another single mother and seven children in all, Hookimaw feared overstaying her welcome.

- [No place safe to go: Calls for more long-term women's shelters in Canada](#)

"[I was] overwhelmed, stressed — a lot of emotions arose, anger being the big part of it," she recalled.

"I had to show my children the strength that I had, but for me personally, I was breaking down. I didn't know where to turn to, I didn't know where to go, I didn't want to ask for help."





'I'm happier now,' Mary Jean Hookimaw said about her newly renovated three-bedroom home. (Omar Dabaghi-Pachco/CBC)

## 500 on Wabano's waiting list

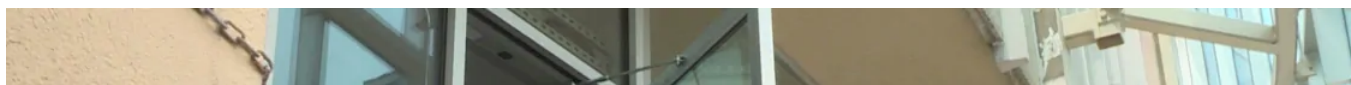
Hookimaw became one of nearly 500 people on a waiting list for housing help from Ottawa's Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health.

Tina Slauenwhite, Wabano's housing director, said with a lack of affordable housing options, many within Ottawa's Indigenous community find themselves "couch surfing" with friends — not homeless as far as funding agencies are concerned, but on the verge.

- [City declares housing emergency](#)
- [City mulls hotel purchase to house homeless during pandemic and beyond](#)

People in those circumstances don't typically qualify for housing subsidies and allowances, Slauenwhite said.

"It is a pretty common situation in our community," she said. "You have children, and you're choosing between putting a roof over their head or putting groceries and food in your stomachs."





Ottawa's Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health has been given more leeway to disburse some of the housing aid at its disposal. (Omar Dabaghi-Pacheco/CBC)

## Aid agencies granted greater leeway

Ironically, Hookimaw's break finally arrived with the pandemic.

As government agencies scrambled to cut red tape and find safe places for people to isolate, aid agencies like Wabano were suddenly granted far greater flexibility in determining who qualifies for help.

That means families like Hookimaw's don't have to reach the point where they're staying in shelters or sleeping on the street before they're granted desperately needed housing aid.

The family recently moved into a renovated three-bedroom apartment. Her funding runs out next March, but Hookimaw said all she ever needed was a boost to help her get through the darkest period.

"That's all I needed in order to get back on my feet," she said. "I'm OK, I'm OK as a parent. With the storm that was over us, it was hard to see that. Everything I was beating myself up for, it's gone. I'm happier now."

## Corrections

- A previous version of this story misspelled Tina Slauenwhite's name. It has been corrected.  
*May 26, 2020 11:31 AM ET*



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