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Issues brief: Nonprofits serving vulnerable communities in Ontario are increasingly under attack

Introduction

Ontario's ongoing affordability crisis coupled with a lack of robust and well-resourced care infrastructure is leaving Ontarians with nowhere to turn. [Working poverty](#) has become the most pervasive form of poverty in the province, and [homelessness is surging](#), especially [chronic homelessness](#). Public policy and investments that address root causes of poverty are not increasing with needs.

As poverty becomes more visible in public and communal spaces - libraries, transit systems, and parks, for example - hostility against people experiencing homelessness and/or mental health and addictions challenges is also significantly increasing. Fuelled by "othering" narratives that have become part and parcel of Ontario's polarizing climate and mis/disinformation campaigns, vulnerable communities across the province are being stigmatized and dehumanized.

As an attempt to "erase poverty" and "clean up the neighbourhoods," coordinated attacks are being launched against nonprofits who serve people experiencing homelessness and/or mental health and addictions challenges. Shelters, drop-in-networks, supportive housing groups, and nonprofits providing support to those impacted by HIV/AIDS, for example, are being penalized for meeting their missions. These attacks are not isolated incidents, but rather systematic as they appear across the province. Provincial public policy is creating an environment for concerning municipal actions and civil lawsuits against nonprofits.

Provincial legislation is creating an environment for anti-poverty rhetoric and actions

Over the past two years, legislation that criminalizes and penalizes people for experiencing homelessness and/or mental health and addictions challenges has passed quickly, and without meaningful consultation. At times legislation has also over-reached into nonprofit operations.

Key legislations passed:

- [Bill 223 Safer Streets, Stronger Communities Act, 2024](#) forced the closure of ten supervised consumption sites. The Act prohibits the establishment and operation of a supervised consumption site at a location that is less than 200

metres from certain types of schools, private schools, child care centres, EarlyON child and family centres, and such other premises as may be prescribed by the regulations.

- [Bill 6, Safer Municipalities Act, 2025](#) criminalizes people experiencing homelessness and those living in poverty. It prohibits the consumption of illegal substances in public places, and penalizes people for living in encampments. A person convicted of an offence can be fined up to \$10,000 or be sent to prison for up to six months.
- [Bill 10, Protect Ontario Through Safer Streets and Stronger Communities Act, 2025, over-reaches](#) into the operations of nonprofits, positioning them as enforcers rather than care providers. It also allows private landlords to be more selective of who they lease to, including nonprofits serving vulnerable populations which may be perceived as higher risk. Under this Act, nonprofits that provide housing services as landlords (e.g. supportive housing, transitional housing, deeply affordable housing) are required to take reasonable measures to prevent illegal drug activities by tenants and others on their premises. They can be fined and their directors can be held liable if illegal drug activities take place on their properties.

Municipal-driven actions are shifting the blame onto nonprofits

At the municipal level, several cities are introducing, amending, and/or rigorously implementing bylaws, and/or introducing clauses in funding agreements to hinder nonprofits from providing specific programs and services. Often these actions are outcomes of a city council strategy to “relocate” people experiencing homelessness from its downtown to city outskirts. The underlying notion is that if nonprofits serving vulnerable communities disappear, so will the people they serve.

Key municipal actions:

- In June 2025, the [City of Oshawa](#) amended a zoning bylaw to prohibit new social services and/or existing sites (defined as food banks, soup kitchens, drop-in services, counselling services, public access to personal hygiene facilities, organizations that collect or hand out clothing and household materials) from opening within 800 metres of another existing service.
- In June 2025, the [City of Orillia abruptly removed](#) a public bench downtown and ticketed service vehicles providing daily essential support.
- In December 2025, the [London City Council](#) directed city staff to prepare a draft Good Neighbor Clause that would require shelters to maintain sites and site

perimeters in clean and safe conditions, create a Good Neighbor Plan with timelines and standards for response, maintain a site-specific security plan, and develop a complaint process.

- In January 2026, the Mayor of [Cobourg](#) made public remarks referring to people experiencing homelessness and mental health and addictions challenges as “criminals” and expressed his determination to get such criminal activities out of the downtown core. He also called for a complete and total review of Northumberland County social services.

Anti-poverty public policy is driving lawsuits against nonprofits

Public opposition, otherwise known as NIMBYism ([Not In My Backyard](#)) against shelters, affordable and supportive housing projects, and social service hubs in neighbourhoods is not a new phenomenon, especially as local neighbourhoods become gentrified. People fear that such services will negatively affect local quality of life for other residents, thwart small businesses, and drive down the value of properties.

However, what is new and unprecedented over the past year is the coordinated launch of lawsuits against nonprofit organizations who provide lifesaving services to vulnerable populations. A growing number of civil suits are being filed by neighbourhood groups and condominium boards, alleging nuisance and negligence in nonprofits meeting their obligations as property owners or lessors. Allegations in the lawsuits range from nonprofits permitting illegal, illicit, disruptive, interfering, and egregious conduct, and not taking responsibility for safety concerns from residents in the area, to nonprofits not maintaining and upkeeping their properties.

Publicly available examples (not an exhaustive list):

- In 2023, a neighbourhood group called the Niagara Neighbours for Community Safety (NNCS), [initiated a legal challenge](#) against the City of Toronto and St. Felix Centre over the operation of a 24-hour emergency shelter in the area.
- In April 2025, neighbourhood group Northcrest Neighbours for Fair Process (NNFP) [filed legal actions](#) against the Mayor of Peterborough’s decision to expedite Brock Mission’s planned six-storey 52-unit transitional housing complex adjacent to Cameron House, a women’s shelter also operated by Brock Mission.
- In July 2025, [Brampton’s City council passed a motion](#) requesting the city solicitor issue a letter to warn Regeneration Outreach Community and its landlord, Grace United Church, to address health and safety issues on their property or face further legal action.

- In October 2025, a condominium board in Toronto [filed a \\$2.3 million lawsuit](#) against its next-door neighbour Sanctuary Ministries, a church and drop-in centre.
- In October 2025, community group New Toronto Initiative [filed a lawsuit against](#) the City of Toronto and its local councillor for \$1 million in damages over the plan to build a homeless shelter for seniors.

Impact of legal attacks on nonprofits

What is missing from the public domain are stories of how active lawsuits and threats of them impact nonprofits, their staff and volunteers, and the communities they serve.

Nonprofit leaders are navigating unplanned and costly legal challenges, and are being confronted with the impossible choice of either following the organization's mission and equity commitments or protecting the organization against legal attacks. These lawsuits also take scarce resources away from vital services, as organizations are forced to reallocate time, energy, and money away from mission driven work to respond. Some remedies suggested to organizations by elected officials or local residents, such as hiring private on-site security, deterring loitering, cleaning up and removing illegal substances on the premises every day, and extending service hours, cannot be achieved without additional financial and human resources, especially as investments lose pace with need.

Nonprofits are being intimidated and harassed by some neighbourhood groups with tactics targeting their elected officials, funders, landlords, board members, staff and volunteers, and supportive community members. Both in-person and online harassment of nonprofit staff and volunteers has been reported. The legal attacks appear coordinated and connected in nature because they consist of similar if not the same strategies in each case.

Collectively, the provincial policy landscape, municipal actions, and external lawsuits against nonprofits pose significant dangers.

Harmful narratives shaping our social and political landscapes

The "othering" narrative surrounding vulnerable populations is surging at a time when there is increased backlash to all equity-driven movements. Anti-immigration, anti-trans, anti-refugee, anti-Indigenous, anti-Black, anti-addictions, and anti-poverty sentiments are on the rise, and consequently, some Ontarians are turning against the nonprofits serving them. This narrative emboldens a portion of the general public to take more aggressive actions.

Fear of people experiencing homelessness and/or mental health and addictions challenges is often rooted in mis/disinformation. Contrary to the harmful and false belief that they are dangerous criminals, and contribute to neighbourhoods becoming unsafe, they are [five times](#) more likely to be the victims of crimes (including violent crimes) than people with housing.

It is this narrative that creates and reinforces the vicious cycle of public policy that criminalizes vulnerable populations and nonprofits who serve them, and leads to more municipal actions to clean up neighbourhoods, and lawsuits against nonprofits.

Whose space is it anyway?

Visible poverty in public spaces and attempts to “clean it up” across the province is sparking a debate on public space.

Nonprofits are already facing increased challenges finding affordable, appropriate, and accessible space due to gentrification, increased rent costs, inadequate operational funding, and lack of financing options. The current environment is further compounding this. Due to [Bill 10](#), private landlords are either threatening to, or are evicting nonprofits or refusing to lease new spaces or renew existing leases. Due to [Bill 223](#), complete nonprofit services have been shut down. Municipal actions and bylaw changes limit where nonprofits are allowed to exist or if they can exist at all. Without access to affordable, appropriate, and accessible spaces, nonprofits cannot deliver essential programs and services.

Public opposition against nonprofits serving vulnerable populations is often rooted in the notion that social service organizations are the reason for visible homelessness, public illegal substance use, noise, litter, and potential negative interactions between clients and other residents in neighbourhoods. In reality, social service organizations are often rooted in their neighbourhoods, and operate where there is unmet need. Many nonprofits have been offering the same programs and services for decades with no issues, but are now facing an increase in demand without the needed level of investment. This increase in demand is driven by changes in the broader system, such as the rise in housing crisis, higher cost of living, lower income supports, worsening opioid crisis and more.

Many people experiencing homelessness and accessing social services have also lived in their same neighbourhood for long periods of time. For example in Toronto, [70 per cent](#) of the people experiencing homelessness access shelters and services in the

same neighbourhoods they were previously housed in. Pushing people out of the areas they know and are familiar with creates a false, temporary illusion of safety. This also begs the question: who gets to decide who has access to public spaces, and who gets to stay or leave neighbourhoods?

Building a careFULL Ontario

The move towards criminalizing and penalizing measures and lawsuits is costly, ineffective, and a waste of resources. It just does not work. What Ontario needs is a well-resourced and robust care infrastructure, where people have access to adequate basic needs because public policy responses and investments address the root causes of poverty. The best path forward is that of expansion, rather than the shrinking of care infrastructure.

This is not a conclusion. This is an ongoing story about the devolution of care infrastructure in Ontario.

For more information:

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