



A Home Is More Than Four Walls

By Margaret Eskins
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Dedicated Advocacy Resource Support

When someone has experienced homelessness, the damage is rarely limited to not having a place to sleep. Homelessness can disrupt health, education, employment, relationships, confidence, routines and a person's sense of belonging. Every day can become about finding the next meal, the next safe place to sleep or the next way to survive. We cannot always solve homelessness with a key to an apartment. A person may need time to rebuild the foundations that make independent housing possible. That is what the DARS farmhouse model is designed to do. The farmhouse is not a shelter, and it is not intended to be a permanent destination. It is a place of transition where individuals can experience stability while working toward the next chapter of their lives. That distinction matters.

The Agricultural Lens Changes the Conversation

There is something powerful about waking up when the rooster crows — and waking up with a purpose. Agriculture creates natural opportunities for routine, responsibility and meaningful work. At our farmhouse, that includes caring for the land, gardening, food production, property maintenance and livestock care. Caring for animals is a responsibility that cannot simply be postponed. Livestock need food, water, clean spaces, observation and consistent care. They depend on people. For someone rebuilding their life, that responsibility can be incredibly meaningful. It creates routine, accountability and connection. It creates an opportunity to contribute to something outside oneself. But the agricultural component is about much more than learning how to grow vegetables or care for livestock. It is about rebuilding confidence, being trusted with responsibility and seeing the tangible result of your effort. Our residents learn that they can contribute. It reconnects people with the basic rhythms of life — waking up, having breakfast, caring for animals, working in the garden, maintaining the property, going to work or school, preparing a meal and being part of a community. Those things may sound ordinary, but for someone emerging from homelessness, they can be transformative.

We Need to Rethink What Land Can Do

If we are serious about addressing homelessness, we also need to rethink how we use land. The farmhouse is one model. It is definitely not the only model. Across Ontario, there are opportunities to explore the thoughtful conversion of underused or abandoned properties into transitional and supportive housing. These could include underutilized Greenbelt, agricultural and rural properties. Where appropriate and permitted, we should also consider expropriated airport lands, abandoned or vacant houses, surplus public properties, unused institutional lands and small parcels of land that are currently sitting vacant. There is also enormous potential in small-scale housing, including tiny homes placed on appropriately serviced plots of land that are not currently being used. We should be asking a different question about land. Instead of simply asking, "What is this property zoned for today?" we should also ask, "What community need could this land help us address?" Obviously, these ideas must be approached responsibly. Environmental protections, municipal planning requirements, servicing, transportation, accessibility, safety and community consultation all matter. But we should not allow the complexity of planning to become an excuse for doing nothing. If a vacant house can become a home, why shouldn't we explore it? If an abandoned property can be restored, why shouldn't we consider it? If a small unused parcel can appropriately accommodate several tiny homes with the right supports, why shouldn't we investigate it? If land that has already been disturbed or repurposed can provide an opportunity for transitional housing, why shouldn't we have that conversation? We need more options, not fewer. We need to think outside the box.

Unconventional Land Options Are Part of the Solution

We need to stop thinking about housing solutions only in terms of traditional urban buildings. Our communities need a continuum of housing options, and transitional housing should be one part of that continuum. A restored farmhouse provides something that conventional emergency accommodation often cannot: space, quiet, nature, privacy, responsibility and community. Agricultural, Greenbelt and rural properties should not simply be viewed as land surrounding our communities. With thoughtful planning and appropriate safeguards, suitable properties and existing structures can become part of a broader social infrastructure that helps people reconnect with themselves and their communities. We are not talking about abandoning people in a rural setting. Quite the opposite. This type of model must include transportation, case management, health supports, education, employment connections, life-skills development and strong relationships with community partners. In our case, the farmhouse is the environment. The wraparound supports and opportunities are what make the transition possible.

Housing Comes First — But Housing Alone Is Not Enough

At DARS, we believe safe and secure housing is fundamental. A person cannot easily focus on employment when they do not know where they will sleep at night. It is difficult to succeed in school when survival is consuming every waking hour. It is difficult to manage health when there is nowhere safe or hygienic to recover. It is nearly impossible to rebuild relationships when life is organized around crisis. However, once someone has a safe place to live, we have an opportunity to ask a different question: What comes next? That is where transitional housing must become more than a bed. It must become a bridge — to good health, education, employment, financial stability, family and community, and ultimately to permanent, safe and secure housing.

We Need to Measure Success Differently

Too often, homelessness programs are judged by how many people are served rather than how many people successfully transition out of homelessness. I believe we need to ask better questions. Did the person obtain permanent housing? Did their health improve? Did they reconnect with education? Did they find meaningful employment? Did they develop financial stability? Did they build relationships and community connections? Did they develop the skills and confidence to maintain their own housing? Those are the outcomes that matter. A successful transitional housing program should not create dependency on the program. It should create independence beyond the program.

We Cannot Afford to Keep Doing Only What We Have Always Done

The homelessness crisis is telling us that the old approaches are not enough. Emergency shelters are necessary. Warming centres are necessary. Food programs and outreach are necessary. Most importantly, we need to invest in what happens after survival. People need places where they can heal, learn, work, contribute and prepare for permanent housing. That is why the DARS farmhouse matters. It represents a different way of thinking about homelessness. Instead of asking, "Where can we put this person tonight?" we should also be asking, "What environment will give this person the best chance of succeeding tomorrow?" Sometimes the answer is a conventional apartment or supportive housing. Sometimes it may be a farmhouse in the Greenbelt where someone can wake up, step outside, care for livestock, work with their hands, participate in a community and begin to imagine a future again.

We Should Replicate What Works

I believe Ontario needs to invest in more innovative transitional housing models. Not every community will have a farmhouse. Not every community will use agriculture. But every community can look at its unused assets differently. Perhaps it is a vacant house, a neglected property or a surplus parcel of land. It could be an underused building or an appropriate tiny-home site. These should all be part of the conversation. We need municipalities, governments, housing providers, agricultural organizations, employers, educators, health providers, landowners and community organizations to work together. We need to stop treating homelessness as an individual failure and start recognizing it as a community challenge that requires community solutions. Most importantly, we need to recognize that people who have experienced homelessness are not defined by homelessness. They are parents, workers, children, spouses and neighbours. Just like us, they are people with talents, dreams, skills and potential. Our job is not simply to give them a place to stay. Our job is to create the conditions where they can move forward. At DARS, we have seen what can happen when someone is given stability, responsibility, support and a genuine opportunity to participate in community. The farmhouse is not the finish line. It is the bridge. If we are serious about ending homelessness, we need to build more bridges — bridges that lead people toward health, education, employment, belonging and, most importantly, a safe and secure place they can finally call home. We should be willing to look at every piece of land, every abandoned building and every underused community asset through a new lens. Not simply, "What can we build here?" but, "Whose life could change if we put this land to work?" That is the conversation we need to have. And we need to have it now.



One of the most important responsibilities

By John Meloche
Municipal Candidate for Ward 2 in in Pickering
One of the most important responsibilities of municipal government is also one of the least glamorous: taking care of the infrastructure taxpayers have already paid for. Roads, sidewalks, culverts, storm sewers, catch basins, bridges and public facilities all have a lifecycle. We can maintain them while they are still in reasonable condition, rehabilitate them before they fail, or wait until deterioration becomes so serious that full replacement is required.

Those choices do not cost taxpayers the same amount of money. Pickering's own 2025 Asset Management Plan makes the challenge clear. It reports that 51 per cent of the City's road-corridor assets, measured by replacement value, are rated poor or very poor. Collector roads have an average Pavement Condition Index of 54, while local roads average 48 — both classified as "Needs Improvement." Approximately 60 per cent of local roads are rated poor or worse. The financial consequences matter just as much as the condition ratings. The City's modelling estimates that proactively maintaining and rehabilitating roads could potentially avoid approximately \$5.6 million annually compared with allowing those roads to deteriorate until replacement becomes necessary. That is an important lesson in fiscal responsibility. Maintenance is not simply an expense. It is a cost we either manage today or risk paying much more for tomorrow. Sometimes refusing to spend a dollar at the right time creates a much larger bill later. To be fair, Pickering is investing significant money in infrastructure renewal. The City's approved 2026 Capital Budget totals approximately \$73.2 million, with nearly \$48.7 million classified as infrastructure renewal. That includes \$5.25 million for road rehabilitation, along with major investments in culverts, stormwater systems, erosion protection, municipal buildings and other aging infrastructure. So the argument should not be that Pickering has no infrastructure plan. It does. The more important question is whether the pace of investment matches the condition of the assets. Stormwater infrastructure is another example. Residents rarely think about catch basins, storm sewers, culverts, channels and stormwater ponds until something stops working. Yet failures can contribute to standing water, flooding, erosion, property damage and expensive emergency repairs. Pickering is funding stormwater projects, including pond cleanouts, culvert replacement and restoration work. At the same time, the City's Asset Management Plan acknowledges that budget limitations have contributed to deferred maintenance and delayed stormwater upgrades. That tension deserves serious attention. The Asset Management Plan estimates that Pickering requires approximately \$61.7 million annually for sustainable capital renewal while sustainable funding going forward is estimated at roughly \$28.8 million — leaving an annual infrastructure funding gap of approximately \$32.8 million.

We cannot simply pretend that gap does not exist. Pushing necessary work into the future is not fiscal conservatism. It can simply mean passing a larger invoice to the next taxpayer.

My approach is straightforward: maintenance first. Council should use real condition data, prioritize infrastructure according to risk, extend the useful life of assets taxpayers already own, aggressively pursue available outside funding and ensure that growth pays its appropriate share of growth-related infrastructure. Residents should also be able to clearly see what is being repaired, why it is a priority, and what delaying that work could ultimately cost. Pickering is going to keep growing, and growth will require new infrastructure. But growth cannot come at the expense of properly maintaining what generations of taxpayers have already built. Responsible government is not always about announcing the next big project. Sometimes it is about having the discipline to protect what we already own.

VOTE

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