# Safe Start: Helping You Land Before You Take Off

Reimagining the experience of searching for safe, trustworthy housing as a
newcomer in Canada.

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# 1.Reflection

## 1.1 Methodology

This project followed a human-centered, iterative design methodology grounded in empathy, lived experience, and visual storytelling. My aim was not just to create a housing tool, but to deeply understand the emotional and practical challenges newcomers face when searching for a place to live in Canada. I began by exploring the issue through academic research, housing equity reports, and digital inclusion studies from sources like the Canadian Centre for Housing Rights, Homeless Hub, and AMSSA.

To ground my design in real experiences, I conducted informal interviews with newcomers, including individuals and couples on work permits. They shared stories of being ignored on Facebook Marketplace, getting ghosted by landlords, facing language barriers, and feeling rushed into unsafe or overpriced rentals. These conversations exposed a shared feeling of being unprotected and unseen in their early housing experiences.

Based on these insights, I created a central narrative around *Naomi*, a real person I interviewed, whose story deeply shaped the direction of this project. Naomi's experience, as a newcomer navigating housing stress, financial constraints, and emotional exhaustion, embodies many of the fears, frustrations, and hopes shared by others I spoke to. Her lived reality became the foundation for my storytelling. Using AI-generated visuals, I mapped out Naomi's actual "before" journey and then imagined what it could look like with a platform like *Safe Start*. These side-by-side storyboards and mock-ups were used to communicate not only the design features, but also the emotional and social impact of a better housing experience built around care, trust, and inclusion.

Throughout the project, I gathered feedback not only from users but also from my classmates, instructor, and peers. This feedback loop pushed me to clarify core features, address challenges, and ensure the design felt emotionally supportive, realistic, and inclusive. All design decisions were continuously informed by both primary and secondary research, ensuring that each feature, from language toggles to cultural match filters, addressed documented gaps in the current system.

This methodology allowed me to design not just an app, but an experience, one that begins with empathy, adapts with feedback, and ends with human-centered care.


## 1.2 Choices Justification

At every stage of this project, my decisions were guided by a commitment to empathy, representation, and real-world relevance. I didn't want to just design a tool — I wanted to design trust for people starting over in unfamiliar territory. The design challenge originally began with a broad focus on the newcomer experience in Canada, but I chose to narrow it to housing because of its urgency and emotional weight. Through interviews, secondary research, and lived

experiences, I realized housing insecurity is often the first and most defining barrier newcomers face.

I chose to center the story around Naomi, Naomi's journey reflected the emotional highs and lows I encountered during research and using her as a narrative anchor allowed me to humanize the systems I was critiquing. The storyboard visuals I created contrasted her "before" experience, chaotic, unfiltered, and unsafe , with a reimagined "after" that felt guided, supported, and dignified. This contrast helped explain why Safe Start matters, not just functionally, but emotionally.

Rather than improving existing platforms like Kijiji, Facebook Marketplace, or Rentals.ca, I intentionally designed something new. These platforms center landlords and listings, but Safe Start reframes the entire housing search around belonging, safety, and care. This shift influenced every aspect of the app, from its interface tone to its community-based features. Each feature was designed in direct response to pain points uncovered through research: Women-Only, Verified Host, Cultural Match, and Language Toggle options were created to support personal safety and comfort. The Housing Buddy feature added lived-experience mentorship and emotional reassurance. Tools like the Arrival Checklist, in-app chat, and multilingual interface ensured digital inclusion. Finally, community feedback and "Pay It Forward" mechanisms were added to build trust and long-term sustainability.

## 1.3 Learning Reflections

This project challenged me to think beyond digital design and consider the emotional realities of the people I was designing for. From the very beginning, I knew I did not just want to create an app, I wanted to build a sense of *safety* and *trust* for people like Naomi, who are starting over in an unfamiliar place.

One of the most powerful things I learned was the impact of narrative storytelling. Showing Naomi's journey, from confusion and anxiety to clarity and confidence, helped others connect deeply with the problem and solution. The "before and after" visuals didn't just illustrate features; they humanized the experience and brought the pain points to life.

Testing the prototype, even in its AI-generated form, was a turning point. My classmates and professor gave thoughtful feedback that pushed me to consider the *real-world implementation* of features like the Housing Buddy program. Questions like: "How do you recruit buddies?" and "What incentivizes them to stay active?" forced me to think through logistics, scalability, and community impact, it also prompted me to refine backend components like outreach, screening, and community incentives. These conversations pushed me to think more deeply about the social infrastructure needed to support Safe Start, not just the interface. I learned that good design is not just about usability, it's about systems, sustainability, and earned trust.

Finally, I learned how meaningful design becomes when it's rooted in lived experiences. Safe Start is not perfect, but it is a starting point. It's a response to what I heard in interviews and observed in research: that newcomers do not just need a place, they need a pathway. They need to feel seen, supported, and safe. And that is the kind of design I want to keep building.

# 2. Design Challenge

[Re]imagining the experience of searching for safe, trustworthy housing as a newcomer in Canada.

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# 3. Interview Transcripts

## 3.1 Interview 1 – Tunde & Amaka

*Newly arrived Nigerian couple in Mississauga (no kids), work permit holders*

**Ola:**
Thanks for sitting with me, honestly. I just want to get a sense of your first few weeks here. Can you walk me through what happened when you landed in Canada?

**Tunde:**
Yeah, sure. We got here about... maybe nine months ago now. I came on a work permit; I had a logistics job lined up in Mississauga. Amaka came with me on an open permit. We didn't really have anyone here, so we were just figuring things out as we went.

**Amaka:**
It was rough. I won't lie. We booked an Airbnb for 10 days before coming, thinking, "That should be enough time to find a place." But... it really wasn't.

**Ola:**
What did you expect? Like, before arriving?

**Tunde:**
Honestly, we thought having the job offer would make it easy. We assumed landlords would see that and feel more comfortable renting to us. But it was like, the minute we said we were new or didn't have credit history, doors just closed.

**Amaka:**
Exactly. Some people would just stop replying to mid-convo. One guy even said, "We don't rent to people who just arrived." That was the whole message.

**Ola:**
So how did you start searching?

**Amaka:**
Facebook Marketplace, Rentals.ca, Kijiji. Then a bunch of Telegram and WhatsApp groups Nigerians here recommended. We were on our phones constantly.

**Tunde:**
But everything felt like a dead end. Either the place was fake, or the price was way too high. Or they wanted six months' rent upfront, which is crazy.

**Ola:**
Can you talk about any specific red flags?

**Tunde:**
Yeah, there was this one listing that seemed decent. The guy sent nice pictures, said it was move-in ready. Then he asked us to e-transfer $2,500 before viewing. That was our first real "ok this is shady" moment.

**Amaka:**
And when we asked for a video call or even just more photos, he vanished. Blocked us. Then we realized those same photos were from a listing in Vancouver, not even in Ontario.

**Ola:**
Wow. That must've been stressful.

**Amaka:**
It was. Especially because the Airbnb days were running out. I wasn't sleeping properly. It felt like we were going to end up homeless in a new country.

**Ola:**
What finally worked? Like, how did you end up finding somewhere?

**Tunde:**
Telegram. A Nigerian woman posted about her basement unit, nothing fancy, just a small place in Brampton. No laundry, barely any sunlight. But she didn't ask for a credit report or anything. She said she understood what it's like to arrive and have nobody.

**Amaka:**
We moved in within three days. It was overpriced for what it was, but at least we had peace of mind. And she was kind.

**Ola:**
Looking back, what do you wish had existed to make things easier?

**Amaka:**
Something, anything, Like, verified listings from landlords who understand our situation.

**Tunde:**
Yeah, and maybe a way to ask for help. Like someone local who can go see the place or give advice. And honestly, I think employers need to do more. It's not enough to give someone a job offers and then leave them to figure out housing alone.

**Ola:**
That makes sense. Thanks again, really appreciate how open you both were.

## 3.2 Interview 2 – Chuka & Linda

*Nigerian couple with kids (ages 4 & 7), newly arrived in Hamilton, work permit holder (Linda)*

**Ola:**
Thank you both for doing this. So, let's start from the beginning. What was your situation when you landed in Canada?

**Linda:**
We landed in Hamilton about six months ago. I came in on a work permit as a nurse. Chuka came with me, and we brought our two children, one's four, the other just turned seven.

**Chuka:**
We were supposed to stay with family friends for the first month or so, but literally a week before our flight, they told us they couldn't host us anymore. So, we scrambled and booked a motel for a few nights. That's how everything started.

**Ola:**
What was the housing search like with kids involved?

**Linda:**
So much harder than we expected. We were using Facebook, WhatsApp groups, Rentals.ca, anything. But most places were basement units or really cramped apartments, and as soon as we said we had kids, the energy would change.

**Chuka:**
They wouldn't say "no kids," but they'd say things like "we prefer quiet tenants," or "suitable for one professional." We got the message.

**Ola:**
That must've been disheartening. How did it affect you emotionally?

**Linda:**
It made me feel like I was failing my kids. They couldn't start school until we had a lease, and every day we were in that motel, I felt more and more defeated.

**Chuka:**
It was hard for both of us. But especially for Linda. I mean, she was starting a new job, trying to register the kids in school, and at the same time, we were unsure where we'd even be sleeping the next week.

**Ola:**
Were there any places that felt unsafe or just… off?

**Chuka:**
Yeah, we went to view this one basement in the east end. There was mold in the bathroom, and the ceiling was so low I had to bend my neck. But the landlord still wanted six months' rent upfront, and that was non-negotiable.

**Linda:**
We walked away, but it ate into our time. That whole process, checking listings, commuting for viewings, getting rejected, it just wore us down.

**Ola:**
So how did you finally find a place?

**Linda:**
Through a co-worker. She heard about a unit upstairs in a house. The landlord was more open, probably because we were referred directly. It was $2,300 a month, which was way beyond our budget, but we had no choice. The kids needed stability.

**Chuka:**
That was all our savings gone in one month. First and last rent, moving costs, groceries. It was brutal.

**Ola:**
What do you wish was in place to help families like yours?

**Linda:**
Some kind of platform where you could search for listings that are family friendly. Include things like: Is it near a good school? Is the landlord willing to work with newcomers? That would've made a huge difference.

**Chuka:**
And employers should provide relocation support. Even a list of trusted landlords would help. Right now, everyone's just relying on random Facebook comments or WhatsApp strangers.

## 3.3 Interview 3 – Naomi

*Single Ghanaian woman, closed work permit, recently arrived in Brampton.*

**Ola:**
Thanks again for sitting down with me. Can you walk me through what it was like when you first landed in Ontario?

**Naomi:**
Yeah. So, I came from Accra about four months ago. I had gotten a retail job in Brampton, so I came here on a closed work permit. I didn't know anyone, no family, no friends. It was just me.

**Ola:**
And where did you stay when you arrived?

**Naomi:**
I had booked an Airbnb for a week. That was my plan, get here, rest for a couple of days, and then find a place before the week was up. I thought I could sort it quickly, but I really underestimated how difficult it would be.

**Ola:**
Where did you start looking for places?

**Naomi:**
Facebook Marketplace, mostly. A bit of Kijiji. I also joined some Ghanaian WhatsApp groups after asking around. But most of the listings were sketchy or from men renting out shared rooms, and it didn't feel right to me. I didn't feel safe even messaging some of them.

**Ola:**
What kinds of challenges came up?

**Naomi:**
So many. Most landlords didn't reply once they heard I was new. The ones that did either asked for multiple months of rent upfront, or they just gave vague info. One guy told me I could rent a room but didn't mention that I'd be sharing a kitchen and bathroom with two other men.

**Ola:**
Did you end up staying there?

**Naomi:**
For two nights. That's it. I just couldn't. I didn't feel comfortable at all, I couldn't even sleep properly. I left and didn't get my deposit back. That was $1000 gone. It was either my safety or my money, and I chose safety.

**Ola:**
What was going through your mind at that time?

**Naomi:**
Honestly? I felt stupid. I kept asking myself, why did I come here alone? I felt scared, and kind of ashamed that I didn't have a better plan. I was constantly anxious. I started texting my cousin in Ghana before and after every viewing, just so someone would know where I was.

**Ola:**
Did your employer offer any support when it came to finding housing?

**Naomi:**

No, not at all. They gave me the job offer, a location, and that was it. I figured maybe they'd send a relocation guide or something, but nothing. Not even a list of areas to consider or avoid. It was like, "See you on your first day."

**Ola:**

So where did you end up finding a stable place?

**Naomi:**

A woman I met at church. She's also Ghanaian. After I shared my situation with her, she offered me a room in her house. It's not ideal, it's just one room, but I feel safe there, and that's honestly the most important thing for me right now.

**Ola:**

How are you feeling now?

**Naomi:**

More stable, but not settled. I still feel like I'm in survival mode. I'm grateful for where I am now, but I wouldn't want someone else to go through what I went through.

# 4. Empathy Maps

## 4.1. Empathy Map – Tunde & Amaka (Nigerian Couple, No Kids, Mississauga)

| Category | Details |
|---|---|
| SAY | - "We thought the job offer would make things easier."<br>- "He asked for $2,500 before we could even see the place."<br>- "No one was responding to us."<br>- "We didn't know what was legal or not. We just wanted to feel safe."<br>- "That woman from Telegram just got it, she didn't ask for credit reports." |
| DO | - Scanned Facebook, Rentals.ca, and Telegram groups daily for listings.<br>- Contacted multiple landlords, many of whom never responded.<br>- Attempted to verify one listing through video call; when the landlord disappeared, they flagged it as a scam.<br>- Took a basement unit offered by a Nigerian woman from Telegram without vetting the lease , just for peace of mind.<br>- Relied more on community platforms than formal agencies or websites. |
| FEEL | - Constant anxiety as Airbnb days ran out.<br>- Panic over losing money or falling into a scam.<br>- Embarrassed by being ghosted or ignored after revealing newcomer status.<br>- Grateful for the cultural familiarity and trust they found through a fellow Nigerian landlord.<br>- Defeated, despite "doing everything right" on paper. |

| THINK | - "We came legally and have a job. Why is housing still out of reach?"<br>- "Do we need to fake documents just to get a place?"<br>- "Safety is more important than price or size."<br>- "Is this how it's going to be in every part of this system?"<br>- "We can't afford to wait and be picky. We just need something now." |
|---|---|
| NEEDS | - A trusted, centralized housing tool tailored to newcomers that filters for landlord openness, visa status, and safety.<br>- Legal support or basic lease guidance for first timers.<br>- A local contact or digital "peer check" option to vet listings before payments.<br>- Cultural community networks backed by official support. |
| INSIGHTS | - Even with legal status and a job, new arrivals are treated as high-risk tenants due to lack of local credit or history, which can erase their sense of dignity.<br>- Community-based referrals feel safer than "official" sites because they provide both housing and social trust.<br>- When safety and time are at stake, newcomers will trade legal certainty and quality for emotional security. |

## 4.2.  Empathy Map – Chuka & Linda (Nigerian Couple, 2 Kids, Hamilton)

| Category | Details |
|---|---|
| SAY | - "They didn't say 'no kids,' but we knew what they meant."<br>- "We couldn't enroll our kids in school without a lease."<br>- "We used up all our savings in one month ,just to lock down the place."<br>- "We saw so many basements , damp, dark, and totally unsuitable for children."<br>- "My job started before we found somewhere to live." |
| DO | - Scoured Facebook, WhatsApp groups, and rentals platforms together late into the night.<br>- Visited multiple units ,mostly basements , many of which were unsuitable or overpriced.<br>- Stayed in a motel after a family friend backed out last-minute.<br>- Took a high-cost upstairs unit via a coworkers' referral, despite affordability concerns.<br>- Prioritized school district proximity and lease paperwork just to get the kids enrolled. |
| FEEL | - Constant emotional exhaustion, especially from balancing housing search with parenting and new job obligations.<br>- Frustration and guilt about subjecting their children to an unstable environment.<br>- Resentment toward systems (landlords, employers, schools) that had no flexibility or support.<br>- Momentary relief when someone finally treated them with basic decency. |
| THINK | - "Our kids don't deserve to live like this."<br>- "If we don't find something soon, we may need to send the children back home."<br>- "Why are we treated like a burden when we're here legally?" |

| | |
|---|---|
| | - "We can't make a long-term plan if we're constantly in crisis mode."<br>- "I shouldn't have to beg someone to accept my family." |
| **NEEDS** | - Family-first housing filters (e.g., non-basement units, school access, safe neighborhoods).<br>- Temporary housing or relocation partnerships through employers.<br>- A centralized process that links housing with school registration and settlement services.<br>- Legal education and rights info that addresses power dynamics between families and landlords. |
| **INSIGHTS** | - Families with children face silent but firm barriers in housing due to coded language or landlord biases.<br>- The stress of securing housing is amplified when it delays schooling, destabilizes parenting, or drains savings.<br>- Referrals from coworkers or cultural networks often yield safer, more respectful landlord interactions than public platforms. |

## 4.3. Empathy Map – Naomi (Single Ghanaian Woman, Brampton)

| Category | Details |
|---|---|
| **SAY** | - "I left after two nights , I couldn't stay there with four men."<br>- "I didn't get my $1000 back, but I had to go."<br>- "My employer didn't help with anything — not even advice."<br>- "I was constantly texting my cousin back home so someone knew where I was."<br>- "I only felt safe once I found that aunty from church." |
| **DO** | - Arrived and stayed at an Airbnb for 7 days while searching.<br>- Browsed Facebook, Kijiji, and joined African WhatsApp groups.<br>- Attended multiple in-person viewings, often alone.<br>- Paid for a shared unit without realizing it would be with two men, then left immediately.<br>- Ultimately found a safe room through a church connection. |
| **FEEL** | - Isolated and scared, with no idea whom to trust.<br>- Ashamed for not being more prepared, even though systems failed her.<br>- Constantly on edge during viewings and in shared spaces.<br>- Grateful but unsettled after finally finding shelter through community support.<br>- Like she was navigating a maze alone with no map. |
| **THINK** | - "What if something goes wrong and no one knows where I am?"<br>- "Why didn't they prepare me for any of this?"<br>- "I need to stay safe first. Everything else comes second."<br>- "Am I the only one going through this?"<br>- "How do people do this without support?" |
| **NEEDS** | - Women-only verified housing listings with reviews and clear living arrangements.<br>- A "safety-first" housing platform with verified landlord identities and walkthroughs.<br>- Newcomer guides provided by employers or immigration bodies, covering |

| | |
|---|---|
| | housing scams, rights, and what to expect.<br>- Peer-to-peer networks or buddy systems for support, especially for solo female arrivals. |
| **INSIGHTS** | - Single female newcomers experience the housing search as a personal safety crisis, not just a logistical challenge.<br>- Trust in institutions is low; real connection and cultural familiarity offer the only sense of security.<br>- Without safeguards, many are forced into unsafe arrangements or lose money simply to avoid harm.<br>- The absence of structured guidance means people rely entirely on informal networks to survive — not thrive. |

# 5. POV's

Tunde and Amaka need a way to find safe, trustworthy housing without Canadian credit history because landlords often reject newcomers regardless of their legal status or employment, making them feel invisible and desperate.

Chuka and Linda need a way to find affordable, family-appropriate housing quickly because their children's schooling and overall stability depend on having a legal lease, yet most landlords exclude families through indirect language and biased preferences.

Naomi needs a way to find safe, trustworthy housing in a new country
because most existing platforms are not built for people like her, they are confusing, impersonal, and leave her feeling vulnerable.

# 6. HMW'S WITH MORPH CHART

## 6.1. Chosen POV Statement (Naomi)

Naomi needs a way to find safe, trustworthy housing in a new country
because most existing platforms are not built for people like her, they are confusing, impersonal, and leave her feeling vulnerable.

## 6.2. 5 "How Might We" (HMW) Statements

These targeted Naomi's core pain points:

1. **How might we help single newcomers verify the safety and legitimacy of rental listings before committing financially or physically?**
2. **How might we design a trusted, housing network that centers emotional safety and community support?**

3. **How might we reduce Naomi's dependence on informal or unmoderated groups by connecting her with safer, verified sources early in her arrival?**
4. **How might we create a digital buddy system where trusted locals can help newcomers assess housing risks and red flags?**
5. **How might we integrate employer onboarding with housing safety education for solo female newcomers like Naomi?**

## 6.3. Themes and Insights

| Theme | Insight |
|---|---|
| **1. Lack of Trustworthy Housing Options** | Newcomers struggle to distinguish safe housing from scams or exploitative arrangements, leading them to depend on unverified sources or make rushed decisions out of fear, not confidence |
| **2. Emotional Trade-offs (Safety over Quality)** | All three interviewees sacrificed ideal living conditions for emotional safety. When facing high risk and little time, they chose what *felt* safe over what *looked* ideal. |
| **3. Absence of Employer or Government Support** | Employers and immigration systems provide little to no support with housing, despite being the gatekeepers to a newcomer's legal arrival. This forces individuals to navigate survival logistics alone. |

| HMW Statement | Core Function | Idea 1 | Idea 2 | Idea 3 | Idea 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| HMW help newcomers verify listings before committing? | Listing Verification | Crowdsourced peer reviews | Verified landlord profiles | Video walkthroughs required | AI scam detection tool |
| HMW design a trusted, housing network? | Platform | Filter for listings | App with trust badges | Partnership with organisation | Invite-only community with reviews |
| HMW reduce dependence on informal networks? | Safer Digital Platform | Curated listings with ID checks | Government-backed newcomer site | Housing dashboard from employers | Onboarding housing toolkit |
| HMW create a digital buddy system | Peer Support | Volunteer housing buddy program | Real-time chat with local mentors | Booking walkthroughs with peers | Feedback-based trust scoring |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| for listing support? | | | | | |
| HMW integrate housing support into employment onboarding? | Employer Integration | Mandatory housing info session | <span style="color:red">Starter pack for housing + rights</span> | Relocation assistant via HR portal | Partnerships with verified landlords |

## 6.4. Reimagined Experience: "Safe Start: Helping You Land Before You Take Off."

Imagine a digital platform built for newcomers arriving on work permits, where safety, trust, and inclusion come first. **Safe Start** is a verified housing ecosystem designed to make the transition into Canadian life feel less like survival, and more like arrival.

Before they even board their flight, newcomers like Naomi receive a **Starter Pack** from their employer, a simple, empowering guide that outlines their tenant rights, red flags to avoid, and how to prepare for a safe rental search. Once in Canada, they log into the Safe Start platform where every listing has a **Verified Landlord Profile**, complete with ID checks, background reviews, and trust badges that highlight "Women-Recommended," "Family-Friendly," or "Newcomer-Approved" hosts.

Using built-in filters, users like Tunde & Amaka can sort for **couple-friendly units near transit**, while Linda can easily discover **family-safe rentals in school catchment areas**. Naomi can confidently select **women-only listings**, knowing they've been vetted by other female newcomers like her.

But the experience does not stop at digital trust. Through the **Housing Buddy Program**, newcomers can connect with local volunteers, sometimes fellow immigrants who have "been there", who offer support with viewings, lease translation, or even just a reassuring presence. The platform's **curated listings model**, like Uber or Airbnb, means every home listed has gone through a verification pipeline that dramatically lowers risk.

And at the heart of the experience are **community-generated trust badges**: visual signals of safety and solidarity. Naomi sees that 12 women recommend her potential landlord. Tunde leaves a "responsive host" badge after a positive experience. Linda gives her landlord a "kid-friendly" mark to help the next newcomer.

With Safe Start, housing becomes more than a transaction, it becomes a bridge to stability, community, and dignity. It reimagines those first stressful weeks in Canada as a supported journey where nobody must choose between safety and shelter ever again.

# 7. Prototypes

## 7.1 Naomi's Journey
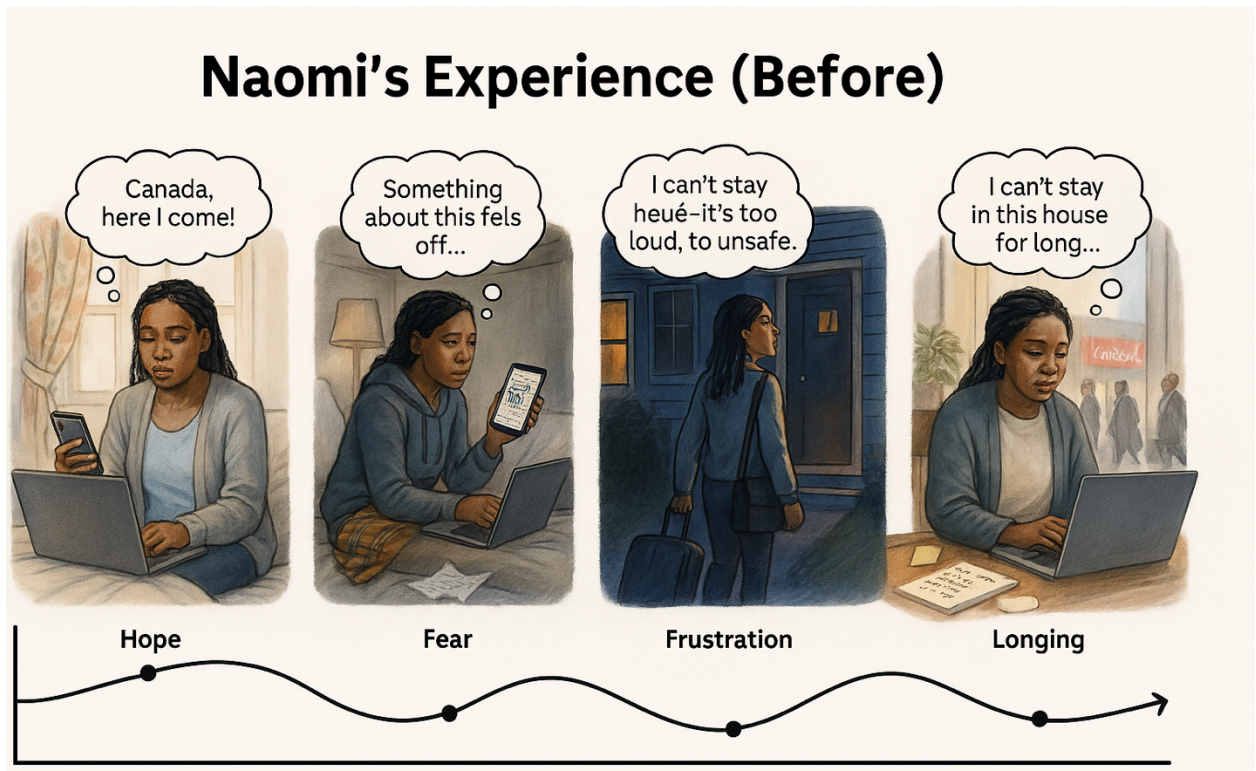


## 7.2 Naomi's Current Scenario(Storyboard)

Naomi arrives at Pearson Airport with a suitcase in one hand and cautious optimism in the other. Before leaving home, she had booked a one-week stay at an Airbnb to give herself time to find long-term housing — a temporary plan she hoped would be enough.



Inside her small Airbnb room, Naomi spends hours searching for places online. Every listing feels suspicious, blurry photos, unclear pricing, and strange grammar. She begins to doubt whether it's even possible to find a safe and honest place on her own.



Naomi visits one of the listings that looked decent online. But the moment she steps in, she realizes it's nothing like what was promised. The place is dim, dirty, and unsettling — and the man at the door only heightens her discomfort. She turns away, feeling unsafe.

*With time ticking and her Airbnb stay about to end, Naomi lowers her expectations. She visits another unit, already skeptical. The outside is run-down, but she tells herself she just needs "somewhere for now."*

*Inside, Naomi stays standing — unwilling to settle in. The room is grimy. She doesn't feel welcome or secure. This wasn't what she imagined when she thought of starting over.*



*Since arriving, Naomi had been attending a local church and slowly building a quiet connection with one of the women there. They'd shared small talk and warm greetings each week. One day, Naomi finally confided in her about her situation. Without hesitation, the woman offered Naomi a spare room in her home. Naomi accepted, deeply grateful for the kindness — but she still feels like a guest, not quite home yet.*

*That night, Naomi lies awake in the borrowed room. Her suitcase is still half-zipped, her phone dimly lighting the sheets. She scrolls through the same unreliable listings, her heart heavy. Though she's grateful for the temporary roof over her head, nothing about this feels like a real beginning.* "There has to be a better way to start over," *she thinks*.

## 7.3 Naomi's Reimagined Experience



*Naomi sits at a desktop computer, carefully reviewing the onboarding documents sent by her new employer in Brampton. Included is a digital **Starter Pack** with a clean, welcoming design, and , a QR code for a housing resource called **Safe Start**. She scans it with her phone. The site loads instantly.*
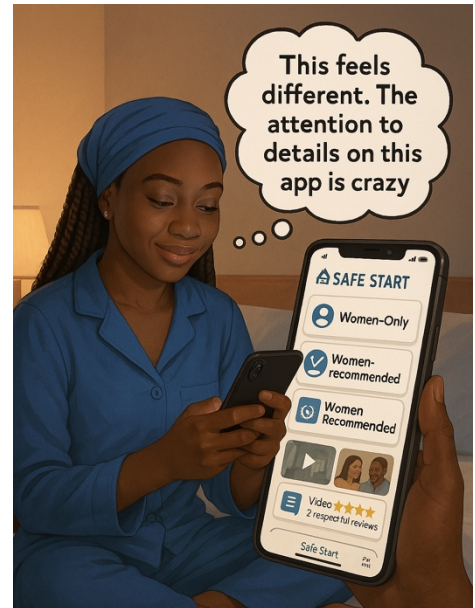


*Later that evening, Naomi sits on her bed in cozy nightwear, browsing the Safe Start app. The interface feels warm. She scrolls through listing filters like **Women-Only**, **Trusted Host**, and **Language Match**, all clearly explained.*
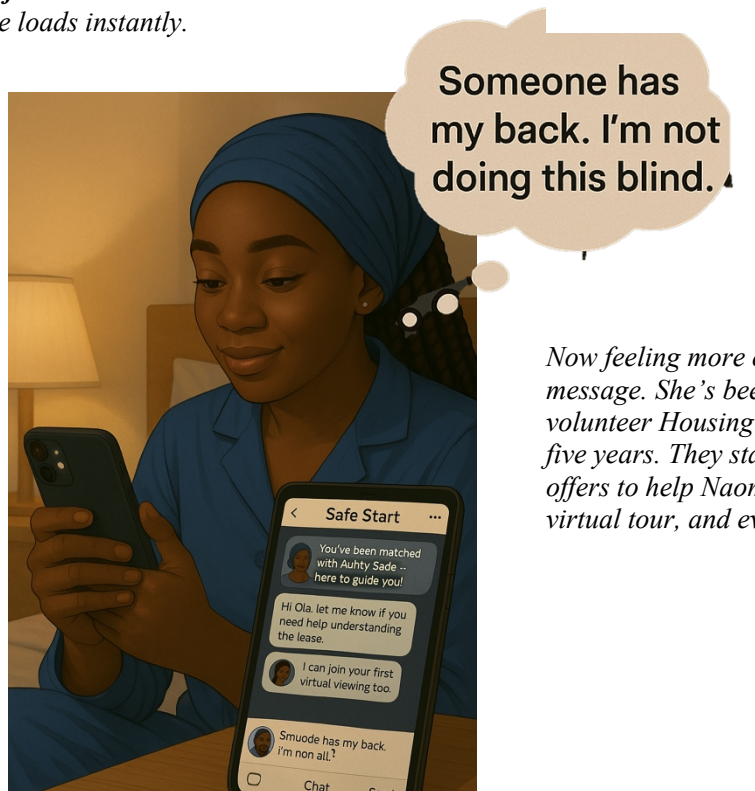


*Now feeling more confident, Naomi checks a new message. She's been matched with **Aunty Sade**, a volunteer Housing Buddy who has lived in Brampton for five years. They start chatting immediately. Aunty Sade offers to help Naomi understand her lease, schedule a virtual tour, and even answer cultural questions.*

*Naomi joins a virtual housing tour with Aunty Sade and a potential host. The experience feels nothing like the sketchy DMs she encountered on Facebook. There's transparency, warmth, and real communication.*



*Back at the airport, Naomi smiles as she checks her Safe Start **Arrival Checklist**. Every box is ticked: lease signed, documents uploaded, room confirmed. She knows exactly where she's going and who's expecting her**.***
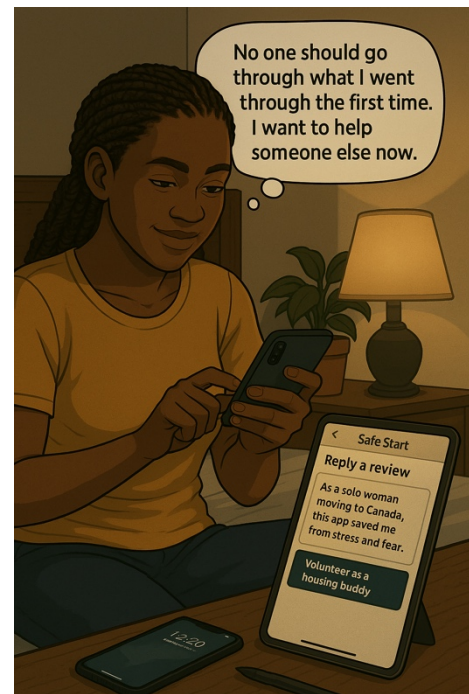


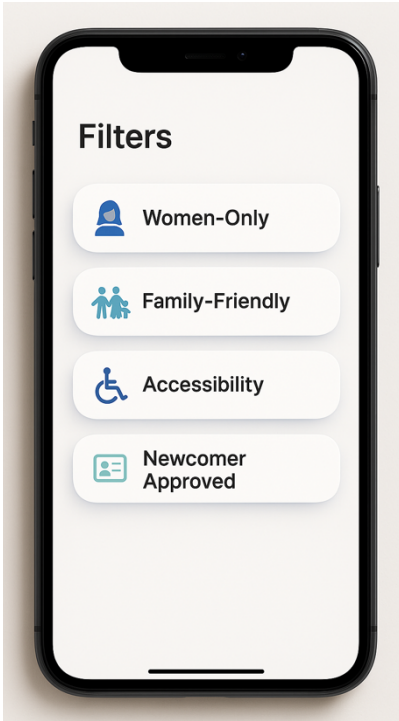*Now settled, Naomi writes a heartfelt review for her host and signs up as a future Housing Buddy. She remembers what it felt like to be lost, confused, and overwhelmed — and now, she wants to be that comfort for someone else.*
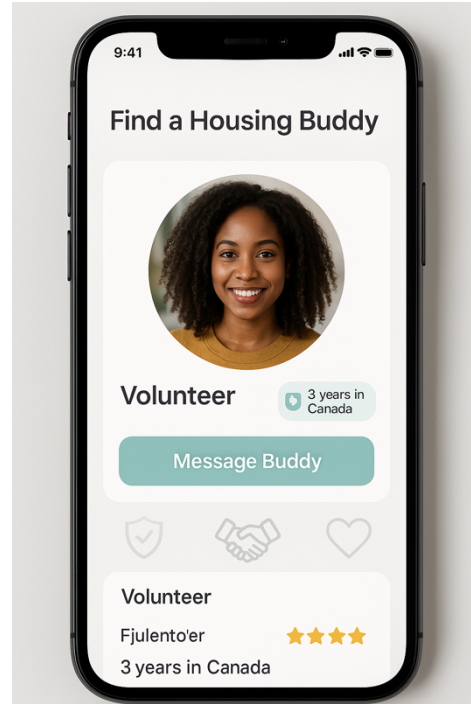
## 7.4 Safe Start: Key Features



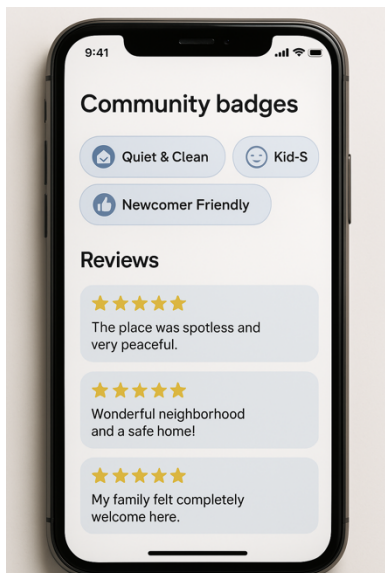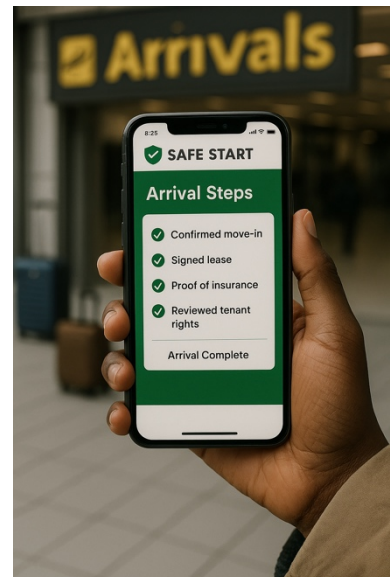Language Accessibility
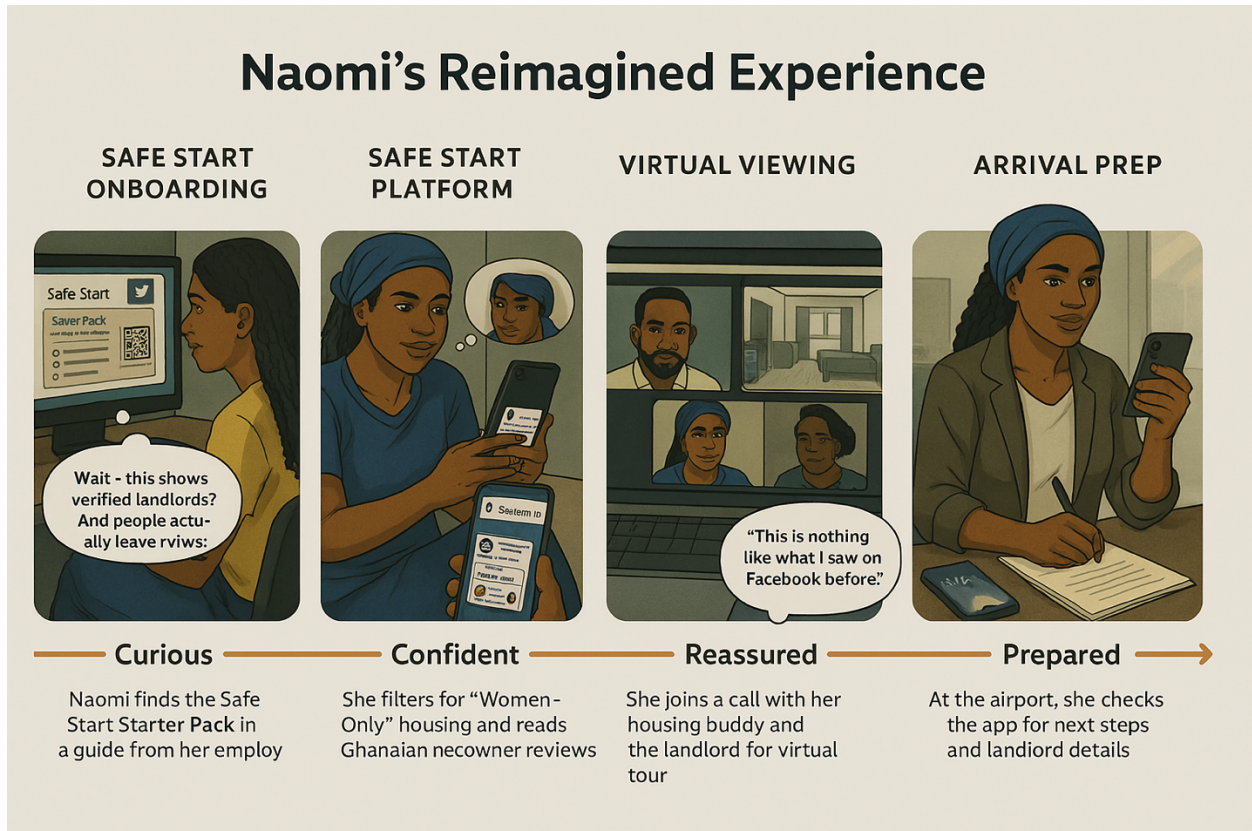


Verified Landlord Profiles
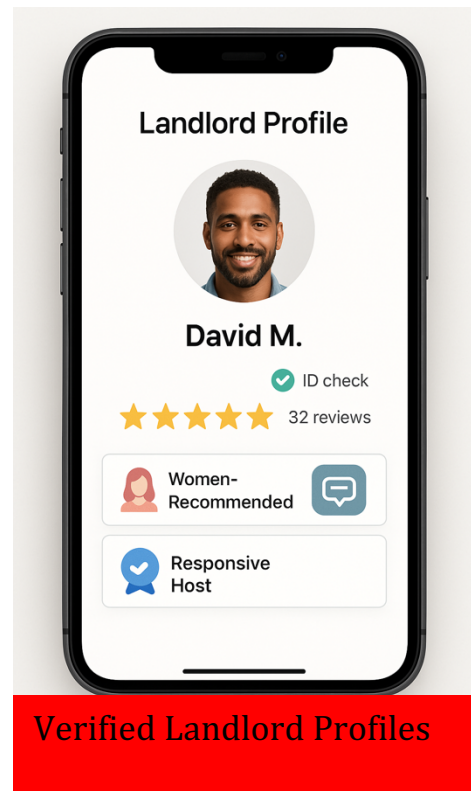
Personalized Housing Filters



Find a Housing Buddy



Community Trust Badge and Reviews



Arrival Checklist

## 7.5 Context: The Current Housing Search Landscape for Newcomers

Following a market analysis of mainstream housing platforms like **Kijiji**, **Facebook Marketplace** several patterns emerged:

- These platforms cater to *general* users, offering broad housing searches without consideration for the unique vulnerabilities and needs of newcomers on work permits.
- Listings are often unverified, scam-prone, or overwhelming in volume, lacking meaningful support or personalization.
- Cultural, accessibility, and safety filters are nonexistent or generic.
- There is no structured onboarding or emotional guidance for individuals unfamiliar with the Canadian housing landscape.

## 7.6 Safe Start's Unique Value Proposition

Safe Start is the first mobile housing platform in Canada designed specifically for the unique lived experiences of newcomers on work permits. It goes beyond just providing listings, it creates a *soft landing* for people navigating a new country, housing system, and social landscape.

## 7.7 What Sets Safe Start Apart

| Feature | Safe Start | Kijiji / Facebook Marketplace |
|---|---|---|
| **Newcomer-Centered Onboarding** | Personalized onboarding flow that tailors housing suggestions to the user's cultural, safety, and family needs | No onboarding: user is dropped into generic listings |
| **Trust & Safety Filters** | Filters like: Verified Host, Women-Only, Newcomer Approved, LGBTQ+ Friendly, Accessible | Basic filters (price, location); no trust-based or protection-specific filters |
| **Scam Protection & Verified Listings** | Listings labeled "Newcomer Approved" and "Trusted Host" with additional verification layers | High risk of fake or misleading ads; users are often left to figure out safety alone |
| **Housing Buddy Support** | Built-in peer support system connecting users to someone who's been through the process (e.g., "Aunty Sade") | No community or support built into the platform |
| **Culturally Responsive UX** | Language toggles (English, Arabic, Yoruba, French, Mandarin); respectful filters (e.g., "Cultural Match," "Quiet Home") | English-only interfaces; no UX tailored for cultural accessibility |
| **Inclusive Accessibility** | No-Stairs, Elevator Access, Visual Tags for Disabilities or Quiet Homes | Little to no accessibility-specific UI or filters |
| | | |

Facebook Marketplace
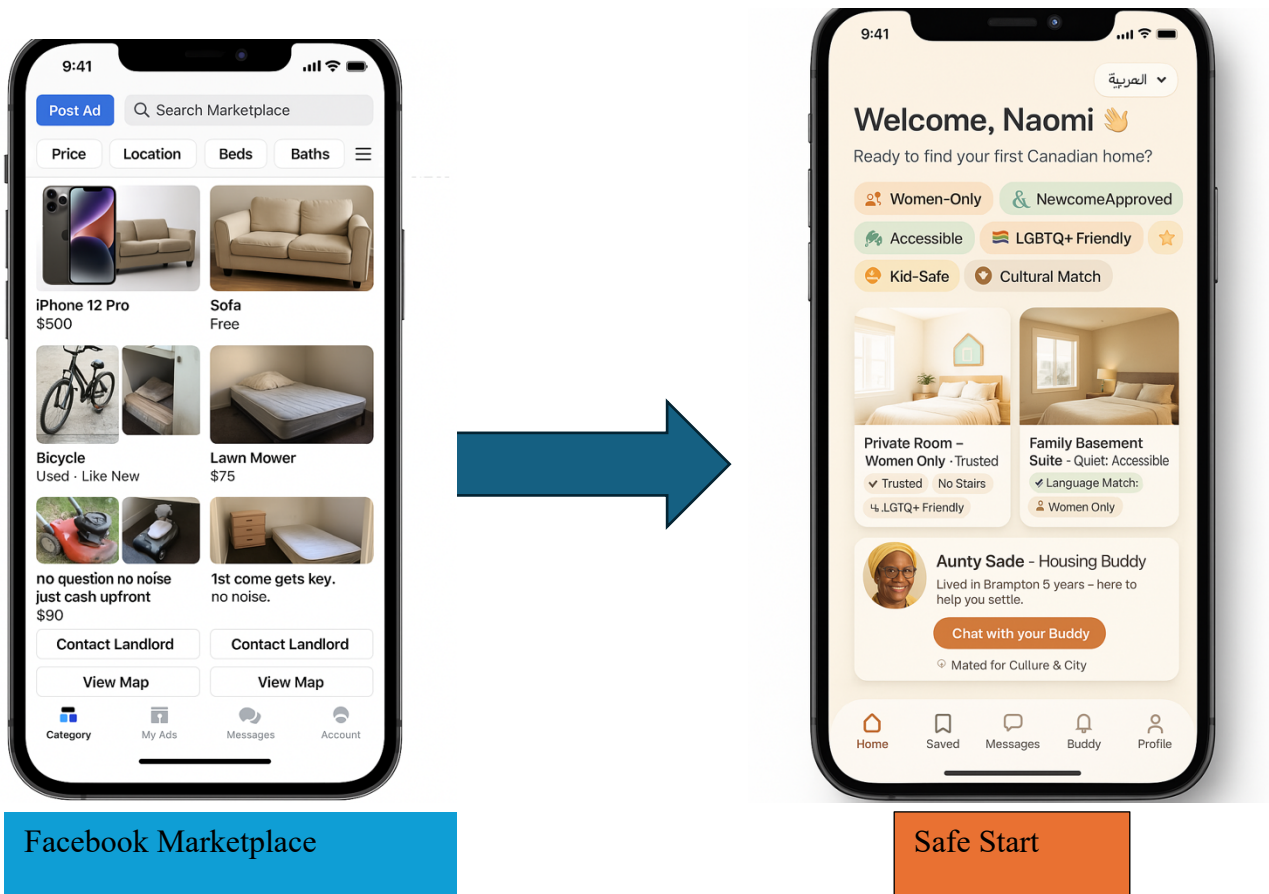
Safe Start

# 8. Feedback from prototype testing

## 8.1 User Testing & Feedback – *Safe Start* Storyboard & AI Prototypes

For user testing, I used a **story-driven approach** to present the *Safe Start* concept. Instead of a clickable app prototype, I created a **realistic, image-based storyboard** that followed Naomi's contrasting housing experiences:

1.  Her **current reality**: stressful, unsafe, and unfiltered
2.  Her **reimagined journey** with Safe Start: guided, safe, and emotionally supported.

This storytelling method allowed users to **emotionally connect** with Naomi's struggles and clearly visualize how each feature of the app was designed to solve a real pain point.

## 8.2 Who Was Involved

I conducted quick usability testing and feedback interviews with 4participants, including:

- 2 couples on work permits
- 2 International student

## 8.3 What I Showed Them

- AI-generated images of Naomi's journey, from housing rejection to awkward Airbnb stays and finally to her Housing Buddy connection.
- Phone mock-ups of the Safe Start key features: Filtered Listing, Trust Badges & Reviews, Housing Buddy Program, Language Toggle, Arrival Checklist
- A side-by-side visual comparison between generic platforms (e.g., Kijiji, Rentals.ca) and Safe Start's human-centered design
- A breakdown of Safe Start's unique selling proposition vs. existing tools
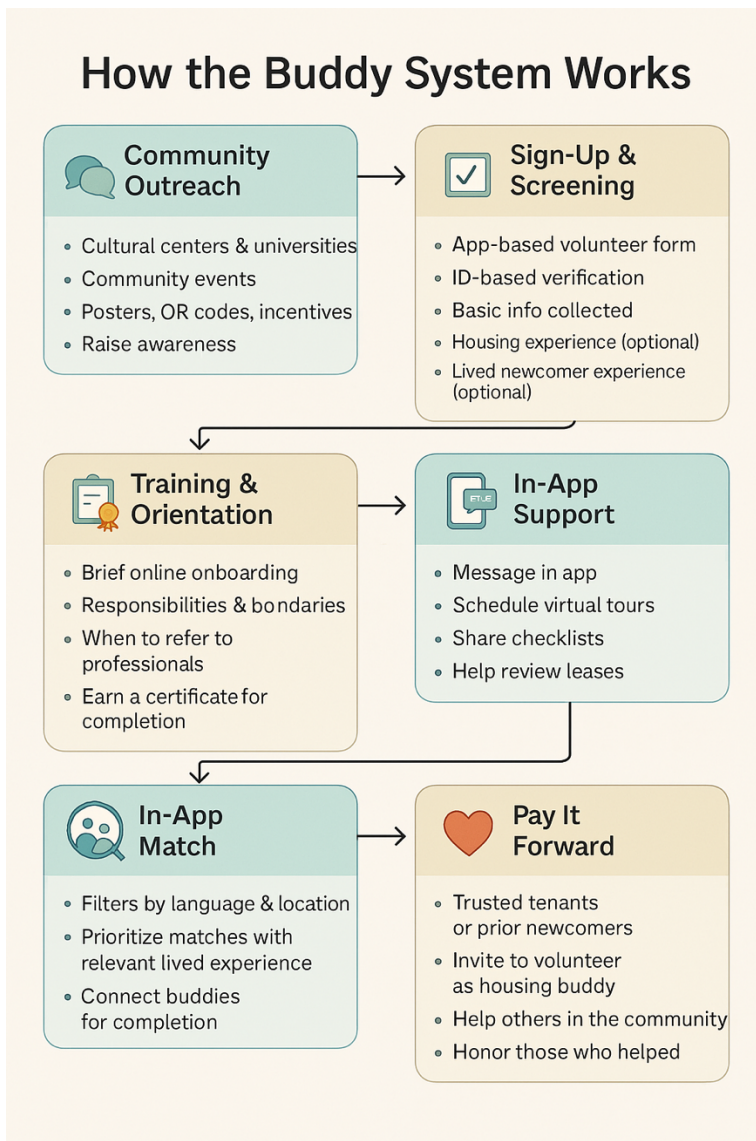
## 8.4 What Resonated with Users

- **The Storytelling Format:** Testers said Naomi's story made the problem real and emotional, not abstract.
    *"I've felt that exact feeling Naomi had outside Tim Hortons. This app gets it."*
- **AI Visuals:** Realistic images made the prototype feel more tangible.
    *"Even though this isn't a real app yet, I can actually picture myself using it."*
- **Filters and Language Options:** These stood out as game-changers, especially for those who had experienced confusion and bias on traditional platforms.

- **The Housing Buddy Feature:** This was the most loved idea, seen as *empathy in action*.
  *"That's what I wish existed when I landed in Canada."*

## 8.5 What I Learned and What I would Improve.

- Showing the "before" and "after" was key to helping testers understand what made Safe Start different and necessary.
- ***"The filters are amazing. I've never seen anything like that."***
    - o  Users loved: the inclusive, emotion-aware filters like "Women-Only," "Cultural Match," and "Newcomer Approved."
    - o  Another person *said,* **"Even just seeing Yoruba as a language option, that hit home for me."**
- The Housing Buddy was not just a feature, when users saw *Aunty Sade* pop up on screen, their entire tone shifted. They were not just scrolling through rooms; they saw a person who had their back. One tester said, **"That alone would make me use this app."**
- ***"I didn't even realize I needed a 'Women-Only' or 'Cultural Match' filter until I saw it here."*** This line came up more than once. People were surprised by how *seen* they felt just from reading the filters, especially those who had never found this kind of language on other platforms.
- ***"I've used Facebook Marketplace and Kijiji; this is the first time I've seen something designed for someone like me."*** This feedback was the *core validation*.

## 8.6 How Safe Start Scouts and Onboards Housing Buddies

Before the peer-to-peer "pay-it-forward" model can grow organically on Safe Start, we need a trusted first layer of Housing Buddies, like Aunty Sade, who are already familiar with the housing landscape in cities like Toronto, Brampton, or Mississauga. During class feedback, I was asked: *"How do you actually find and incentivize people like that?"* This pushed me to think beyond idealism and create a scalable, yet respectful strategy rooted in community trust and intentional outreach.

### How the Buddy System Works

**Community Outreach**
- Cultural centers & universities
- Community events
- Posters, OR codes, incentives
- Raise awareness

**Sign-Up & Screening**
- App-based volunteer form
- ID-based verification
- Basic info collected
- Housing experience (optional)
- Lived newcomer experience (optional)

**Training & Orientation**
- Brief online onboarding
- Responsibilities & bondaries
- When to refer to professionals
- Earn a certificate for completion

**In-App Support**
- Message in app
- Schedule virtual tours
- Share checklists
- Help review leases

**In-App Match**
- Filters by language & location
- Prioritize matches with relevant lived experience
- Connect buddies for completion

**Pay It Forward**
- Trusted tenants or prior newcomers
- Invite to volunteer as housing buddy
- Help others in the community
- Honor those who helped

Here is the proposed process:

1.      **Field-Driven Community Recruitment (Not Random DMs)** Rather than blasting app messages or cold calls, Safe Start partners with settlement agencies, local religious spaces, cultural associations, and newcomer hubs, places where long-settled immigrants are already active. These institutions help us identify women, parents, or retirees who already play informal "guiding" roles in their community and may be open to offering gentle guidance to newcomers. Think aunties, uncles, or peer mentors who already enjoy helping.

2.      **Incentives Rooted in Meaning and Value** Most people would not sign up just for points or badges. So Safe Start offers meaningful incentives that respect their time:
o A small monthly honorarium or gift card for those actively matched with newcomers.
o Optional recognition within the app (e.g., "Top Buddy in Brampton")
o    Access to exclusive community events or workshops, such as networking mixers, wellness sessions, or cultural potlucks, hosted by Safe Start partners.

3. **Simple, Flexible Commitment**
   Buddies can choose their availability, e.g., "1 chat per month" or "Available for virtual tours only." This avoids burnout and makes it easier for working adults to participate.
   The platform also provides onboarding support, such as a quick explainer video and tips on setting boundaries, helping without overpromising, and using the app's built-in communication tools.



How the Housing Buddy Program Works

4. **Respect-First Recruitment**
   All outreach is in-person first (via community liaisons or events), followed by opt-in digital registration. We avoid spamming or "bombarding" users with messages. Participation is always invited, never expected.
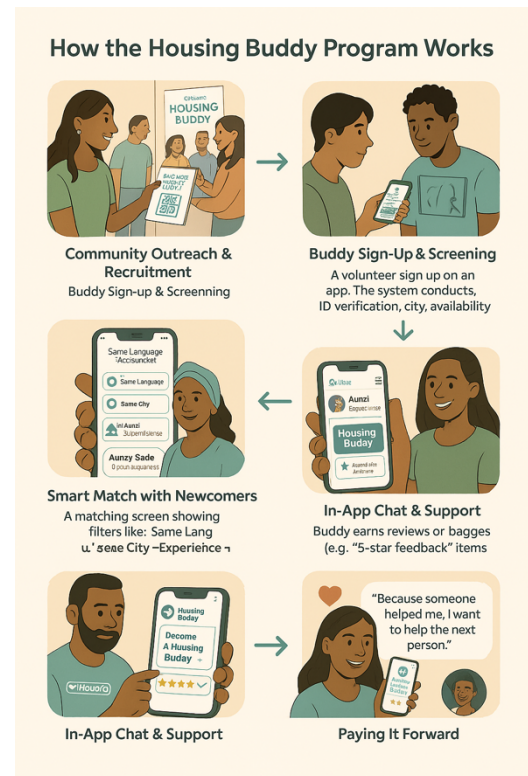
# 9. Evidence & Justification for Prototype Development

The Safe Start platform was developed in response to well-documented housing barriers faced by newcomers to Canada, especially those on work permits. Studies show that newcomers often experience discrimination, language barriers, and information asymmetry when navigating rental systems. Many rely on informal platforms like Kijiji or Facebook Marketplace, which offer little to no verification, cultural safety, or multilingual support, increasing the risk of exploitation, misinformation, and emotional distress. Research also highlights that inclusive digital design, particularly tools that account for lived experiences (e.g., disability, gender safety, cultural fit), can significantly improve housing security and trust among migrants and underserved populations. Safe Start's features, such as language toggles, housing buddies, filter listing, and verified hosts are grounded in this research and designed to create a more dignified, trauma-informed housing search experience.

## 9.1 Key Sources

### Prevalence of Fake Rental Listings

1. **Better Business Bureau (BBB) Study on Rental Scams**
   A comprehensive study by the BBB highlights that over 5 million individuals have fallen victim to rental scams, with 43% encountering fraudulent listings online. Common tactics include scammers copying legitimate property photos and descriptions to create fake ads,

leading unsuspecting renters to pay deposits for non-existent properties. This underscores the critical need for platforms that offer verified listings and safeguard against such deceptive practices.

Read the full study

## Disparity Between Advertised and Actual Rental Conditions

2.   **"Sorry, It's Rented": Discrimination Audit by the Canadian Centre for Housing Rights (CCHR)**
This 2022 audit reveals that newcomers often face discriminatory practices in the rental market, including being shown substandard units that differ significantly from advertised listings. The study found that both male and female newcomers experienced increased discrimination, especially when accents suggested a racialized background. Such experiences contribute to feelings of deception and mistrust among newcomers seeking housing.
Access the audit report

## Rise in Rental Scams amidst Housing Crises

3.   **Rental Scams on the Rise Across Canada**
A 2022 report highlights a 15% increase in rental scams across Canada, attributed to soaring rent prices and heightened competition for housing. Scammers exploit this demand by posting fake listings and pressuring potential tenants into making quick decisions without proper verification. This environment particularly endangers newcomers unfamiliar with the local rental landscape.
Read the article

4.   **How to Spot a Rental Scam in Canada | Scotiabank**
This article outlines common rental scam tactics, such as fake listings and pressure to send deposits before viewing properties, and offers advice on how to protect oneself.
Read the article

5.   **Is This A Rental Scam? Here's How To Tell | Moving2Canada**
Moving2Canada discusses various rental scams targeting newcomers, including phantom rentals and hijacked listings, and provides tips to identify and avoid them.
Read the guide

## Housing Discrimination Reports

6.   **Shut Out: Discrimination in the Rental Housing Market**
Commissioned by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), this 2023 study examines barriers to tenancy access and maintenance, focusing on the impacts of discrimination in Ontario and Québec's rental markets.
Download the report (PDF)

7.  **Housing Discrimination in Canada: The State of Knowledge**
    This comprehensive review assesses research findings on housing discrimination in Canada, highlighting systemic issues affecting newcomers and marginalized groups.
    [Access the report (PDF)](#)