

Committee on the Status of Women Brief
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Barriers of Access in Shelters and Transitional Housing for Survivors of Human Trafficking

Summary:

The following brief outlines some of the barriers of access that survivors of human trafficking must navigate when seeking housing support services. This brief strongly recommends that survivors of human trafficking be conceptualized as distinct from survivors of domestic violence, and that instead of addressing the housing needs of survivors of human trafficking through a domestic violence/ violence against women model, that housing supports be catered directly to the unique and multifaceted experiences of survivors of human trafficking.

Introduction:

In the Halton Region, a geographical area comprised of Oakville, Burlington, Milton, Georgetown, and Acton, there are minimal housing supports available for women and children who have experienced domestic violence. In fact, there is only one shelter, Halton's Women's Place, that is specifically for women and their children seeking refuge from domestic violence. As the only women's only shelter in the Halton region, many of the women seeking housing support services are not survivors of domestic violence, but are survivors of human trafficking. Survivors of human trafficking face distinct barriers when accessing housing supports. The trauma that a survivor of human trafficking has been through is different than that of a survivor of domestic violence. For this reason, the housing needs of survivors of human trafficking are divergent from the needs of survivors of domestic violence. Currently, one of the most glaring gaps in housing support services and shelter models is that many service models homogenize survivors of human trafficking and survivors of domestic violence and ultimately fail to fully address the distinct needs of both groups. The following Brief outlines some of the barriers that are unique to survivors of human trafficking when accessing housing support services.

Barriers:

1. One of the first barriers survivors of human trafficking must navigate when attempting to access housing support is that often, they do not meet the VAW shelter requirements to be considered eligible for housing. The criteria for accommodation at domestic violence shelters does not always accurately reflect the experiences of survivors of human trafficking. Many survivors of human trafficking will not show

signs of physical abuse, as traffickers will be reluctant to “damage their merchandise.” Moreover, many housings supports/shelters require proof of co-habitation, it is very un-likely a survivor of Human Trafficking will be able to provide this, as traffickers are careful not to create a paper trail that connects them to the women they exploit, like a co-signed lease agreement, or mail.

2. The divergent experiences of survivors of human trafficking and survivors of domestic violence means that within VAW shelters, different support is offered to different people. Survivors of human trafficking require more leniency when it comes to shelter rules, such as curfew, or chores. For many survivors, entering a highly regimented and controlled space can be triggering for them, as they have just exited a similar situation where their daily routines and mobility were completely controlled by their trafficker. This “special treatment” does not go un-noticed amongst the women residing in a shelter, and can contribute to a hostile living space for all survivors.
3. Many VAW shelters have strong anti-sex work policies. These policies not only create another barrier of access for survivors of human trafficking whom may be partaking in survival sex work, but also work to stigmatize survivors of human trafficking. Frequently, these anti-sex work policies are veiled as a “no recruitment policy”, although understandable, no recruitment policies gloss over the possibility that some women within the shelter may be choosing to partake in autonomous sex work, and may need to rely on the information or connections of another autonomous sex worker within the shelter. These polices contribute to a highly policed environment that encourages panoptic surveillance of survivors of human trafficking. These polices also ignore the nuances of experiences that survivors of human trafficking have. Many survivors of human trafficking will have recruited for their trafficker as a means of self-preservation and survival. By black listing a woman who has been accused of trafficking herself, shelters alienate some of the most vulnerable of survivors.
4. The conflation of domestic violence with the violence specific to human trafficking works to undermine the distinct trauma survivors of human trafficking must navigate. Yes, there are many similarities between domestic violence and human trafficking, in that both survivors will have experiences of manipulation, physical abuse, financial control etc, however survivors of human trafficking experience higher degree of sexual trauma than most survivors of domestic violence. For this reason, survivors of human trafficking need to be able to access a housing model that incorporates and operates with trauma informed support and best practices. Within VAW shelters, because of the volume of clients and lack of available resources, this framework is often absent.
5. Due to the lack of human trafficking specific housing resources available to survivors of human trafficking, VAW shelters are catering to both populations. Catering to both demographics is troublesome in that it fosters a hierarchy of victimhood and priority within the space of the shelter.

6. Black, Indigenous, and Women of colour who are also survivors of human trafficking are less likely to access VAW shelters and resources as they do not feel their experiences and distinct needs are reflected in the service model. Housing support models and shelters need to operate from an intersectional foundation to better address the needs of Black, Indigenous, and Women of Colour survivors of human trafficking. This experience is especially exacerbated in the Halton region, as the demographic is largely white.

Recommendations:

Survivors of domestic violence and intimate partner violence

1. The most common reason for turning women and children away from shelters is that they are at full capacity. However, in a snapshot in Canada in 2014, Beattie and Hutchens found that 30% of VAW beds were unoccupied. A provincial centralized intake would help ensure that more women who need shelter would be able to access these unoccupied beds, and increase efficiency of the system overall. Of course, there would also need to be a transportation plan as well in order to ensure that those women who have to travel for shelter can do so safely.
2. While women who access shelters may be safe while residing there, once they move on, there is no guarantee that they will not again experience abuse. This again speaks to the importance of transitional support and other organizations such as sexual assault centres to provide aftercare and ongoing support until such a time as they are able to make the permanent change to safe housing. According to the Women's Shelters Canada, lack of affordable housing causes women to return to their abusers. Shelters without access to affordable housing to which the women can transition do little to solve long-term safety issues.

“However, conceptualizing the reduction of violence as the main outcome variable is questionable since women have little control over being the recipient of violence. They may leave to go to a shelter and may remain safe while in residence, but once they leave, it is the responsibility of the abuser to stop the violence. Given that women have little control of this, using violence reduction as an outcome seems rather like blaming the victim.” (Tutty et al. 2008)

Survivors of Human Trafficking

1. We recommend that survivors of human trafficking have access to housing supports that are specially designed for them and their unique needs. Trying to fit the experiences of survivors of human trafficking in with the experiences of survivors of domestic violence is an act of homogenization that does both populations a disservice. VAW shelters are strained for resources without stretching themselves to address the multifaceted needs of survivors of human trafficking.

2. We recommend that any housing support models that service survivors of human trafficking be trauma informed and operate from an intersectional foundation. Harm-reduction models are the most promising for addressing the needs of survivors of human trafficking as they offer the leniency and continuum of care that survivors of human trafficking require. Housing support models with strict regulations and conditions are an ill fit for survivors of human trafficking. Housing support models need to function on the conception that a survivor of human trafficking is rarely on a linear healing path, and that they will require their supports to be cyclical in nature. Survivors need to be able to enter and exit the program safely, and without fear of repercussion. They need to experience a sex positive space, where they are not criminalized nor stigmatized for whatever choices they make regarding their bodies. Survivors need to be able to access housing supports that empower them and foster their autonomy.

Conclusion:

Currently, the needs of many survivors of human trafficking are not being adequately addressed by the existing housing supports available for women who have experienced domestic violence. Survivors of human trafficking need to start being conceptualized as their own distinct group of survivors, who have unique needs that are divergent from the needs of survivors of domestic violence. Housing support models need to be designed specifically for survivors of human trafficking.

References

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