

Island Crisis Care Society is a registered non-profit society that helps people in crisis to stabilize and then find the support, resources, and services they need to recover and be well. We work in cooperation with Provincial and Federal agencies, community groups, and faith-based organizations to develop housing options and programs that respect the needs of individuals with multiple challenges or concurrent disorders.

Samaritan House is the only homeless shelter for women in the mid Vancouver Island and we operate out of a 100-year-old building with many stairs and barriers for the clients we serve. We also provide supportive housing at Samaritan House and coordinate and provide transitional housing and rent subsidies to help break cycles of homelessness that many clients experience. Since we added these additional housing options back in 2013, through a pilot project with BC Housing, we have seen how beneficial it is to have the option to move women from one type of housing to another according to their needs. We have found that the positive relationships that are built with staff mean that it is easier for the client to transition to more supports when they are needed, and it doesn't feel as much like failure.

Hundreds of women are facing challenges in our communities. The lack of affordable housing is a huge issue in our area because the prices of properties have sky-rocketed and many landlords are choosing to sell and cash in, which leaves the tenants with nowhere to go. We are hearing from women who have lived in their rental units for up to 15 years and now must move with little to no possibility of finding a place. Landlords with vacancies can charge extortionate rates as there is so little available.

I spoke to the Status of Women Committee back in June 2017 and unfortunately not much has changed since I spoke of our challenges back then. In fact, things have become much worse. Nanaimo has the largest Tent City in BC and approximately 40% of the people living there are women and many of them are very vulnerable. We still put as many women as we can on mats on the floor in the hallways of Samaritan House but in the day time they must leave as there is simply no space for them. Our building is overcrowded; we don't even have a lounge area for the women to sit or meet privately with support staff.

The areas of greatest concern are: access for women with disabilities; adequate support for women with the mental disorders and substance use disorders; and an ability to provide a therapeutic environment for clients. Eight women sleeping in a dormitory with bunk beds is not helpful when one might be experiencing psychosis; another might be high from drugs and another a senior lady with mobility issues who has never been in a shelter before.

Part of the challenge we face is that we are not recognized as a shelter for women escaping domestic abuse but of course many, if not most of our women have experienced violence and trauma in their lives. Often the funding that is available is specifically for shelters for women and children who are escaping domestic violence – this is often a popular cause for the public to get behind. However, the women we serve are often the very same women who have

spiralled down and are now in even more need of support. Their children may have been removed from their care or grown up and the cycle of trauma continues.

When women come to our door with children, we are unable to take them for a variety of reasons. The plans for our new shelter have a place for families to be safe and yet separate from the others in the shelter.

We continue to see older women who are facing homelessness for the first time in their lives. When you live on a small pension it is difficult to find a place to rent that is affordable. When we are unable to take them in at their time of need they must find an alternative, which may be living in their vehicle, if they have one, or sleeping in a tent. After they have been living on the street and have lost their possessions and most of their hope, it is so much more difficult to find and maintain housing. For them to have the best success in finding and maintaining housing they would preferably be housed within a month. An outreach worker supports the women at the beginning to ensure that they have what they need to maintain their housing.

We have been waiting for funding to expand Samaritan House for 5 years. There have been opportunities provincially for capital affordable housing projects but not for shelters. An investment in affordable housing is imperative but just as important is a safe environment where the women can be helped to move through the challenges they face. Empowering them to be the women they were meant to be.

I would like to close with comments from two clients, whose videos can be seen on our website www.islandcrisiscaresociety.ca

Melissa: "The house is a place of refuge for all sorts of women. People have to start saying, "there's a problem here; a people problem" Take time, get the assistance you need and then you can go forward...Heal your body, heal your heart and then go out"

Christine: "Many just come from a place of trauma and it manifests itself in many ways. Trauma comes from not a very good place and manifests itself in depression, addiction and instability."