



COWICHAN WOMEN AGAINST VIOLENCE SOCIETY

COUNSELLING SOMENOS TRANSITION HOUSE VICTIM SERVICES HORIZONS PRE-EMPLOYMENT

Transitional Housing Needs for Women Leaving Abusive Relationships in the Cowichan

Valley Status of Women Canada study “Better support for transition houses and shelters serving women and children affected by violence against women”

Introduction

Domestic violence is of significant concern in the Cowichan region. Although it is difficult to get statistical information, the Cowichan Valley has a higher than provincial average of reported domestic violence cases. Crown Counsel reports ‘charge approval’ of approximately 20-25% of all domestic violence cases. Domestic violence is also a risk factor in child protection cases.

These figures only reflect domestic violence situations that are reported. The majority of domestic violence incidences go unreported and undetected. Fewer than 10% of assaults, both domestic and sexual, are reported and fewer than 10% of those result in convictions. With a small likelihood of successful outcomes, it is no wonder women fail to report violence. And when they do, they are often retraumatized by the police and court proceedings.

Leaving abusive relationships is a complex process, made more so when there are limited affordable housing options, and when exacerbated by various vulnerabilities including poverty, lack of education, history of substance use, mental health issues, recent immigration, language barriers, and children and pets. Women of First Nations descent face additional complex cultural challenges.

Without affordable and safe housing options, women are forced to stay in or return to abusive relationships or to live in precarious and unsafe circumstances. With vacancy rates for all rentals at less than one percent, affordable housing is essentially absent in the Cowichan Valley. Most rents are beyond the means of poor women.

The Cowichan Valley

The boundaries of the [Cowichan Valley Regional District \(CVRD\)](#) extend from the top of the Malahat to Ladysmith and from Lake Cowichan and Shawnigan Lake to the ocean-side communities Chemainus. The area covers 373,000 hectares with a population of **83,739** (2016 Census). Just over 55% of the population (**46,383 people**) live in the municipalities of Duncan, North Cowichan, Ladysmith and Lake Cowichan. The Aboriginal population represents approximately 11% of the total population of the CVRD.

Changes in community demographics, combined with rapidly increasing housing prices and the lack of affordable rentals, has led to a situation of increasing homelessness or risk of homelessness in the Valley. Point in time counts in 2017 identified 17 women as absolutely homeless and another 40 that were at risk of homelessness or precariously housed.

Services Available for Women Leaving Abusive Relationships

There are limited services available for women leaving abusive relationships. The only organization that focuses exclusively on these issues is Cowichan Women Against Violence (CWAV) Society.

CWAV is critically concerned with the needs of women (and children) who are in abusive relationships. The Society’s main purpose is to provide shelter and services for women and children impacted by physical or sexual abuse or violence. Services include community-based victim services; Somenos Transition House, an emergency shelter for women with and without children at immediate risk; longer-term counselling for women and children; a number of support groups for women, youth and children; and, a pre-employment



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program for women whose trauma has created barriers to employment. Since 2017, CWAV has provided a program for men who have used violence and want to learn healthy ways of being in relationship.

Somenos provides shelter for up to 30 days. After their 30 day stay, women (and their children) are supposed to move on. Because of difficulties securing housing, women's stays are routinely averaging closer to 45 days with some high-risk families staying up to six months. Annually, Somenos House provides shelter to approximately 100 women and 50 children.

As the amount of available housing has decreased and become more expensive, Somenos has seen a dramatic increase in the number of nights when the house is full (36 nights in the July to September quarter, including 17 nights over capacity). In June 2018, the house was full 22 days including 11 that were over-capacity.

Since 2016, BC Housing has funded a Homelessness Prevention program. This program allows CWAV to assist women attain sustainable housing by providing rental subsidies of up to \$450 per month for 9 to 12 months. Approximately 30 women-lead families receive assistance each year. Having housing has had a profound and positive impact for these women. Many have secured employment, some have returned to school, some have been able to get their children back from government care and most have kept their housing.

Housing Needs for Women Leaving Violence

One of the barriers women leaving violent relationships face is a sudden change in their economic status, going from a situation of good (or good enough) housing and income to a situation of very limited choices due to poverty. A 2009 housing needs assessment commissioned by Cowichan Women Against Violence (CWAV) Society looked at the need for Second Stage Housing for women leaving abusive relationships after they had spent time at Somenos House.

Second stage is transitional housing that provides stability for a limited period, usually 6 to 24 months. During this time, women deal with the trauma they have experienced as well as the financial and legal issues associated with leaving an abusive relationship before transitioning into permanent/market housing. Most women leaving abuse need to rent at income assistance levels something that is designed into second stage housing projects.

CWAV Society determined that 50 units of second stage housing are needed in the Cowichan Valley to meet the needs of women leaving abuse. CWAV Society has proposed a project of 20-40 second stage units to BC Housing. In addition, the Society has proposed a 15-bed low-barrier transition house to meet the needs of women that are homeless and dealing with trauma, addictions and mental health issues.

For the first time in decades, the provincial and federal governments have made developing housing for women experiencing violence a priority. However, even with immediate approval, new housing will take three to five years to build. The available funding anticipates a 15-year period to build the projected housing. In the meantime, women remain at high risk due to the lack of available and affordable housing.

Respectfully submitted by email to:

Kenza Gamassi, Clerk of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women

Tel: 613-995-6119

E-mail: FEWO@parl.gc.ca

Cc: Alistair McGregor, MP Cowichan-Malahat-Langford Alistair.MacGregor.C1A@parl.gc.ca