

Committee on the Status of Women Brief

November 9, 2018

Victoria Cool Aid Society

101-749 Pandora Avenue, Victoria, BC

Better support for transition houses and shelters serving women and children affected by violence against women.

Summary:

The following brief outlines some of the broad areas of tension in the violence against women services sector and recommendations to address those areas.

Introduction:

The Victoria Cool Aid Society creates opportunities for people who are homeless or living in poverty. We make a difference through housing, health care, support and emergency shelters. Founded in 1968, Cool Aid helps over 12,000 people in the Capital Regional District of Victoria, BC every year. Our vision is that no one is forced to sleep on the street or go hungry; everyone who needs supportive housing gets it; integrated health services to treat illness and promote wellness are available; and integrated services are provided to those with mental health and addictions challenges.

We took the opportunity to listen to the audio of some of the standing committee meetings and read the briefs provided on the website. It is notable that there are common issues across Canada and a National Strategy would go far in helping to address inequity of available services. Six of the more common themes will be addressed in this brief, citing barriers and recommendations.

1. Mandate is too narrow

Submissions relate that addressing gender based violence is complex and requires a multi-sectoral, long term approach. The effects of violence do not end with escape.

We recognize there is valuable expertise in the field and that broadening the mandate to serve the whole woman, over a longer period of time will contribute to greater success in breaking the cycle of violence.

Access to post shelter safe housing and supportive programming for women and children is critical – BC Housing funds both transition houses and emergency shelters for women. Though the issues women face are almost identical, the service agreements do not encourage partnering and collaboration.

Atira Womens Services have successfully bridged support for women with children who use substances to cope. We need more models like this to break the intergenerational cycle. Keep mothers with their children and support them as a family. Fund agencies to develop and implement this model.

2. Barriers of access to women experiencing mental health and substance use issues

By far, the most commonly cited barrier is an inability or unwillingness of Transition Houses to broaden their mandate to provide service to women whose issues of mental health and substance use and are fleeing violence intersect. There are very few safe options to accommodate women who are under the influence and use substances to cope with the effects of violence. .

While there might be some merit in funding specialized shelters, as has been recommended, it would be more cost effective and less stigmatizing to increase capacity of existing Transition Houses and Shelters through training, renovating and policy change. The argument has been made that women who use substances make the environment unsafe for those who don't and their children, yet research shows that

women who don't have to hide their substance use to gain access to service will tend to self-censor and are able to regulate their use. (1) One brief stated that 50% of women accessing or trying to access Transition Houses suffer from addictions. We would respectfully remind funders to support and hold service providers accountable to the knowledge that human rights legislation prohibits service providers from turning women away solely based on their levels of mental wellness and substance use. Fund shelters to hire concurrent disorders counsellors to help lead policy change and support front line staff

3. Cultural safety

It is no secret that indigenous women are over represented in experiencing gender based violence. Indigenous women are killed at 5 times the rate of non-indigenous women. People heal more fully when surrounded by cultural supports. The colonial mentality is too pervasive and we need more space for indigenous knowledge. Recognize that funding Elders is invaluable to healing.

4. Core funding

Expecting shelters to raise half or more of operating dollars is not sustainable. It takes from 3 to 7 years until women are safe and they need a space to build community which is multifaceted and takes time. Shelters on reserve receive 30% less than provincially funded shelters. We need more housing with adequate operating agreements that meet needs such as adequate staffing levels, food, maintenance, staff training, life skills support, children's counselling and trauma counselling.

5. Training

These are vital services and need to be staffed by workers knowledgeable in anti-violence principles. Existing Transition Houses need training for staff to deal with mental health and substance use challenges to learn how to better serve women. Emergency Shelters

need training in Gender Based Violence and Breaking the Cycle of Violence. All training needs to be trauma informed.

Agencies need financial support to train employees in order to accommodate all women rather than build parallel processes.

Thank you for taking the time to review our brief. There is critical work being done across Canada to address gender based violence. With coordination, support for partnerships and strong federal and provincial leadership, together we can make strides in reducing violence toward all women.

Respectfully,
Victoria Cool Aid Society

(1) Reducing Barriers To Support for Women Fleeing Violence. Funded by Status of Women Canada 2011