



Committee on the Status of Women Brief

November 7, 2018

Prepared by: A. Deschamps, Program Supervisor of Transitional Housing

YWCA Hamilton – Transitional Housing

75 MacNab Street South, Hamilton, ON

Barriers of Access to Shelters and Transition Houses for Marginalized and Homeless Survivors of Violence

About Us:

The YWCA Hamilton's Transitional Living Program provides a low-barrier program that also functions as safe, affordable, temporary housing for women with living experiences of poverty, homelessness and violence. The program is a 65 bed residence for women, that provides case management support, goal planning, skills building, supportive counselling and crisis intervention.

Phoenix Place is a five unit Second Stage Housing program that supports women and their children with support after fleeing family violence. Phoenix Place supports families as they secure safe and affordable permanent housing options. Our Transitional Support Worker is available throughout the week to assist with risk assessment & safety planning, goal setting, legal advocacy, support in liaising with child welfare and various referrals.

Summary:

The following brief explores barriers of access for specific populations of women experiencing violence within our communities. The YWCA Hamilton supports a number of marginalized women not successfully served through traditional Violence Against Women (VAW) shelter models. Many of the women served through our Transitional Living Program struggle with significant trauma related mental health and substance use struggles, with accompanying behaviours that existing VAW shelter models are not equipped to support. The women's sector struggles to adequately support this population due to the limited or lack of funding to expand capacity and to hire specialized staff and/or invest in an increase in training. Furthermore, there is a lack of comprehensive coordination amongst mental health and substance use services working from a trauma informed/harm reduction lens. Marginalized with co-occurring mental health and substance use concerns are often restricted from various shelter options, resulting in compounding trauma of ongoing street involvement and entrenchment within cycles of abuse. This brief recommends that *the needs of marginalized women fleeing violence be highlighted and prioritized*. It discusses the importance of examining screening practices which increase barriers to marginalized women in accessing the VAW shelter stream; for whom often become misidentified as "homeless" which then exacerbates the level risk and violence faced by homeless women within our community.

Barriers and Gaps in Service:

1. Homeless women affected by violence, often face increased risk within abusive relationships. Lack of trust and accessibility found within formalized social services - inclusive of VAW services - often prevent women from accessing support when safety is a concern. Due to their own negative experiences with law enforcement, they are less likely to turn to the justice system for support. This leaves marginalized women increasingly vulnerable to the likelihood of extreme physical violence or death at the hands of their partners.
2. Due to subsidized housing guidelines that require women to be 'co-habiting' with the abusive partner, along with a fixed address - many women who are homeless and fleeing abuse do not meet the eligibility criteria for Special Priority Status which would enable them to secure stable, safe and affordable housing.
3. Homeless women also experiencing significant mental health and substance use struggles are more vulnerable to entering into relationships which are abusive, as well as at increased risk of sexual exploitation and sex trafficking. Particularly overrepresented in these number are FNMI (First Nations, Métis, Inuit), racialized and LGBTQ+ community members.
4. Complex trauma experiences of women, often beginning in childhood, leave the social service sector poorly equipped to support the level of trauma-based behaviours presented by women having lived years of abuse. Lack of specialized training for staff due to underfunding, results in staff working to support needs beyond the scope of their training. Close quarters communal living in institutionalized settings often exacerbate and trigger women's trauma responses.
5. When calling crisis lines, women who identify as abused **and** homeless, often get streamed through the homeless sector. Preventing them from accessing the appropriate trauma informed supports, which are mainly allocated to VAW shelter services.
6. Federal government funding is primarily allocated to support and fund VAW shelter and support services. Many Transitional Living programs and homeless services are inadequately funded, though are supporting a large proportion of women also experiencing abuse, but deemed unsuitable for VAW shelter systems. These services survive on project-based funding and grants, operate on limited budgets and have little capacity for expanding services to meet the needs they are supporting.
7. Marginalized women accessing traditional VAW shelter systems are also at increased risk for lateral violence and conflict within shelter due to challenges in adapting to communal living environments. If successful in accessing this service, many are inevitably stigmatized and/or discharged from the program due to inability to integrate with other residents, and assumptions around their behaviours as unsafe or unsuitable, particularly in shelters where there are children.

8. Traditional VAW shelter models often have program policies that present difficulty for women who have been street involved for many years, particularly around curfews, overnight policies, substance use and anti sex work stances. Many of the ways women have adapted to keep themselves safe when living on the street are penalized, and result in discharge due to violation of expectations.
9. Traditional housing solutions for individuals rebuilding their lives after violence, who also have a history of street involvement, do not account for the complex social ties implicit within street culture. This often leaves individuals feeling socially isolated when singularly housed and leave them vulnerable to re-entry to street life or jeopardizing their housing when allowing others to reside with them.
10. Racialized and Indigenous women are not appropriately represented or supported within traditional shelter environments, often experiencing micro aggressions and institutional violence, in addition to their complex and layered experiences of trauma and oppression
11. An overrepresentation of child welfare involvement and child apprehension for women experiencing violence / complex mental health & addiction concerns; and the aftermath of resulting grief and trauma related to this experience.

Recommendations:

1. Multidisciplinary tasks force devoted to developing and meeting the needs of homeless women not successfully served due to trauma related mental health and substance struggles. Representation from various agencies supporting women experiencing violence, mental health and addiction who work in tandem, from an intersectional and gendered harm reduction lens to support women in their journey from streets to housing.
2. Changes to housing legislation that prevent homeless women experiencing abuse from obtaining Special Priority status. Enable services working with these women to provide verification of abuse that will be accepted in application for regional subsidized housing cohorts.
3. Increased access to supports for sex workers and advocacy for sex worker rights at a community level. Access to community, safety, sexual health resources and knowledge of rights to increase women's ability to protect themselves from sexual exploitation and trafficking.
4. Increased funding and accessibility to intersectional complex trauma training / information, for staff across women's sectors
5. Increased training and capacity within the VAW shelter sector to work from an intersectional perspective that meet the needs of women experiencing abuse, as well as mental health, addiction and homelessness.
6. Increased funding for low barrier trauma informed transitional housing options, to address situations where Housing First models do not have capacity to meet the complex needs within the community or do not appropriately serve this population.

7. Specialized women's shelters for individuals experiencing abuse, as well significant mental health, addiction and trauma.
8. Co-housing models for individuals who do not adapt well within singular dwelling environments.
9. Increased research and supports to explore the link between women's experience of violence, child welfare apprehension and exacerbated mental health presentations later in life.

Conclusion:

There are many gaps that exist for marginalized women within our communities who are also experiencing intimate partner violence. In contrast to the importance and inherent worth that is given to the average survivor of domestic violence; women experiencing acute mental health, addiction, poverty and homelessness are often devalued and deprioritized within our systems. Providing the same right and access to safety for these women when fleeing violence, requires that we examine our beliefs and values held about our societies most marginalized members, as well as how this affects and informs services and policies at all levels.

Recommendations further informed by evidence based research:

Canadian Women's Foundation. (2011). **Report on Violence Against Women, Mental Health and Substance Use** via https://www.canadianwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/PDF-VP-Resources-BCSTH-CWF-Report_Final_2011_-Mental-Health_Substance-use.pdf

Lois Didyck, YWCA, Heather Stewart, CNWSTH (2016). **Open Doors Project -Trauma Informed Practices and VAW Shelters.** <http://opendoorsproject.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/KNOWLEDGE-HUB-Literature-Review-FINAL.pdf>

Mary Elizabeth Vaccaro (2018). **[in]visible: Single Women's Experiences of Chronic Homelessness in Hamilton.** <http://homelesshub.ca/blog/in-visible-womens-experiences-homelessness>

Robin Mason, Ph.D. Brenda Toner Ph. (2012). **Making Connections: When Domestic Violence, Mental Health and Substance Use Co-Occur**

Sara Mayo, Carol Cowan. (2011) **Not to Be Forgotten: Homeless Women in Hamilton.** <http://www.sprc.hamilton.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Not-to-Be-Forgotten-Homeless-Women-in-Hamilton-Summary-Report-May-2011.pdf>