

# SHELTER VOICES

## CRISIS WITHIN CRISIS

*Shelter Voices 2024 is the tenth national survey of shelters and transition houses (THs) serving women and children affected by violence.<sup>1</sup> This issue of Shelter Voices was designed to contribute to a better understanding of the housing crisis and its impact on shelters/THs, including individuals working in these spaces and survivors accessing supports.*

funded by



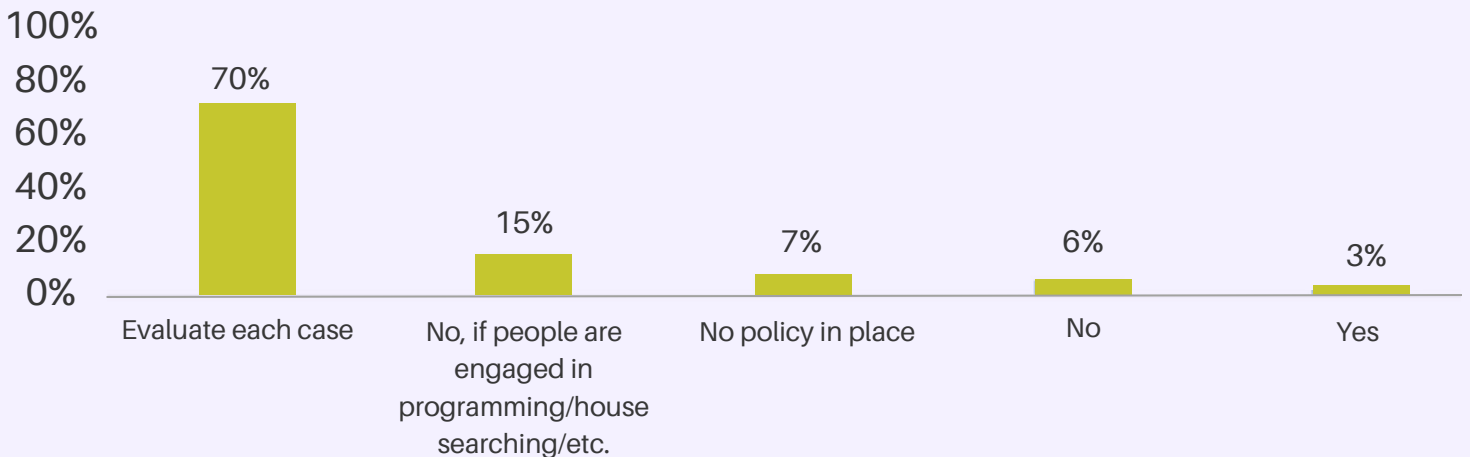
The national housing crisis is affecting people in Canada as rental prices increase, affordable housing options become more limited, and purchasing housing seems inconceivable to many. According to Statistics Canada, 71% of Canada’s population live in acceptable housing,<sup>2</sup> but this drops to just 53% when looking at those who rent.<sup>3</sup> We are seeing rates of homelessness, housing poverty, and demand for social services all increase as everyday Canadians struggle to make ends meet. For those attempting to leave and heal from violence, the housing crisis creates barriers to escape, recovery, and a secure future.

### Capacity and Length of Stay

Among violence against women (VAW) shelter/TH survey respondents, 99.5% (n=215) felt that their community was facing a housing crisis, with 97% (n=213) indicating that over the preceding 12 months it had become harder to support survivors to find housing. Of those operating emergency shelters, 94% (n=174) saw survivors remain longer, while 83% (n=60) of those operating second stage housing also saw longer stays. For emergency shelters, most frequently this was one to three months longer than in the previous year, while for second stage it was four months to one year longer. With survivors remaining longer in shelter, there is a backlog in the system that has prevented new individuals from accessing a bed or a unit, and therefore safety.

Many shelters/THs have length-of-stay policies limiting how long a survivor can stay in shelter. While these are active policies, few organizations are rigidly enforcing them. As shown in Figure 1, 93% of respondents indicated that they have a length-of-stay policy, yet only 3% are abiding by these timelines. The majority (70%) indicated that they evaluate each case as it arises, with an additional 15% allowing survivors to remain if they engage in employment and housing searches and/or shelter programming. Shelters are doing what they can to provide survivors space even when they are at capacity,

**Figure 1: Enforcement of Length-of-Stay Policy (n=210)**





*Length of stay at our TH is one year. Most of our clients stay around two years. I have observed an increase in the number of inquiries for a space from women staying in shelters and transition houses, from social workers, and support workers."*

*- Respondent at a second stage shelter*

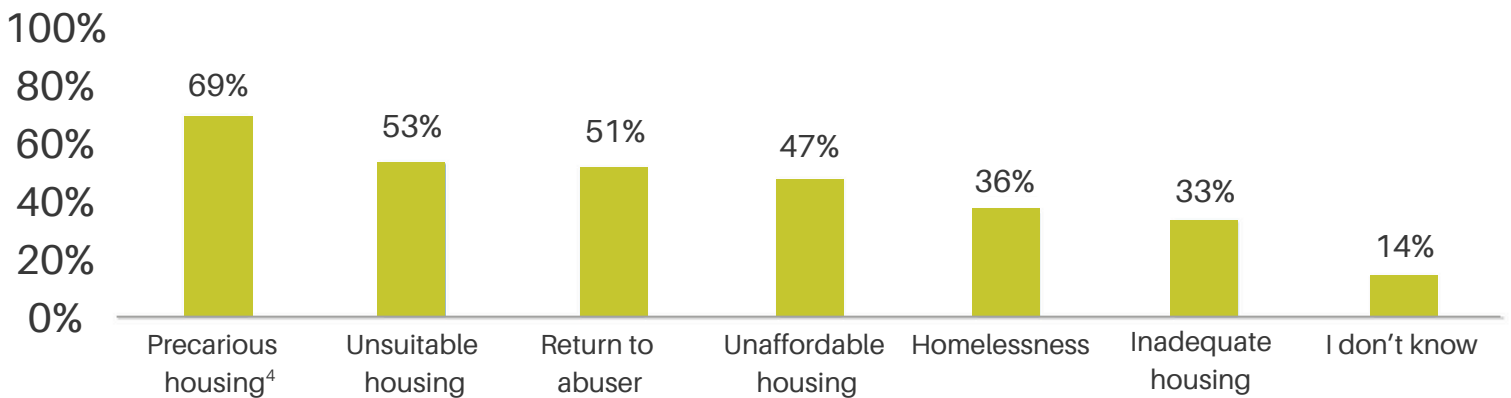
*"Resources are extremely limited and it pushes clients into precarious housing situations or into lengthy stays in shelters. Clients are often staying for long periods of time within various shelters in the community, hotel overflow programs, or encampments, and continue this pattern in a cyclical nature because they cannot obtain safe and affordable housing."*

*- Respondent at an urban shelter*



While having access to a VAW shelter/TH space can be an important step to healing from violence, having affordable, suitable, and adequate housing is essential. As shown in Figure 2, compared to last year more survivors are leaving shelter for housing that does not meet their needs, is not safe, is unaffordable, and/or often contributes to cycling back into a VAW shelter.

**Figure 2: More Survivors are Leaving Shelter for (n=216):**



*The housing crisis has been one of the biggest barriers in providing care to our clients. They sometimes get frustrated and want to go back to their abuser or a friend's because they are not finding housing."*

*- Respondent at an emergency shelter*

### Homelessness

Shelters also reported that more women experiencing homelessness are seeking support from their organizations than in the past (92%, n=215). While some organizations have the capacity and mandate to work with those who are unhoused but not survivors of domestic violence/intimate partner violence (DV/IPV), many are already struggling to provide services and shelter to those experiencing violence. This speaks to the need for more shelter spaces for not only those fleeing violence, but also those experiencing homelessness. In our study of labour issues,<sup>5</sup> we heard that community resources like mental health and addictions supports, homelessness organizations, food banks, and health care have become dangerously over-subscribed. Because of increased demand for all these supports, shelters are taking on more of these roles internally, which is further pushing them beyond their capacity.



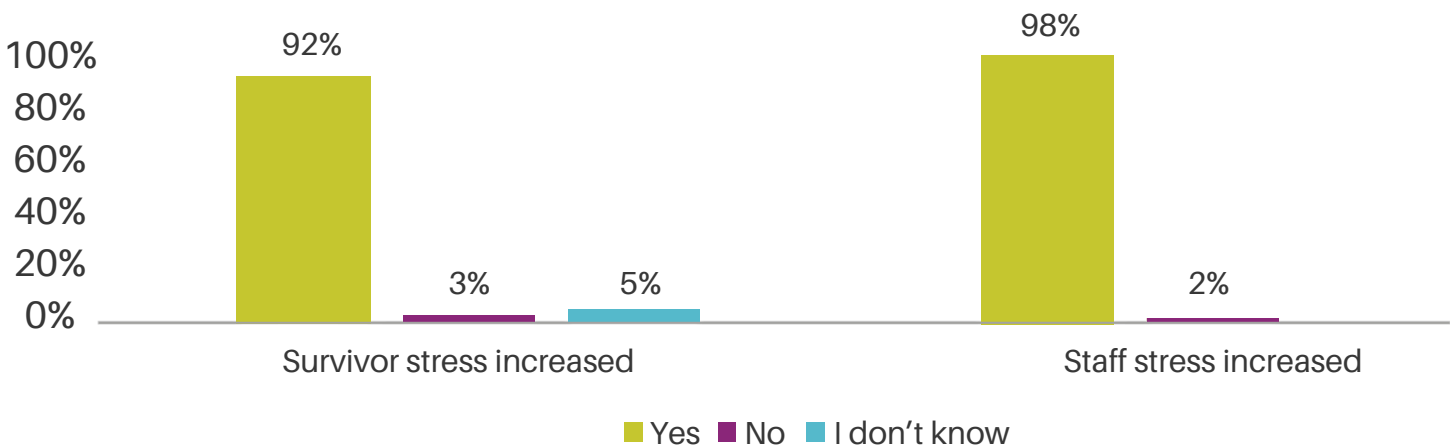
*Our mandate is sheltering women and children who are leaving DV/IPV. It is challenging when people are calling due to homelessness and they do not meet our mandate, especially when other resources are so limited. We find this especially true for families. Where else can they go? We definitely have to extend stays regularly."*

*- Respondent at an emergency/second stage shelter organization*

### Well-Being

Respondents (n=216) specifically indicated that the housing crisis is contributing to individuals staying in or staying longer in violence (86%), becoming homeless (76%), and staying in shelter longer (88%). When survivors are faced with such decisions as returning to an abuser, becoming homeless, or entering untenable housing situations, their stress escalates, and their well-being suffers. As shown in Figure 3, 92% of respondents had seen survivors' stress increase due to the housing crisis.

**Figure 3: Survivor and Staff Stress Due to Housing Crisis (n=215)**





The housing crisis is also having an impact on the well-being and stress of VAW shelter workers. People who work in shelters expect to help and support survivors, yet with higher incidence rates of violence, increasing demands for services, and few accessible housing options, those who do this work are increasingly being forced to turn families in need away. This act of saying no goes against the ethics of those doing shelter work and is impacting the well-being of workers.<sup>6</sup> This atmosphere, alongside low pay, is contributing to high rates of burnout and difficulty retaining workers.



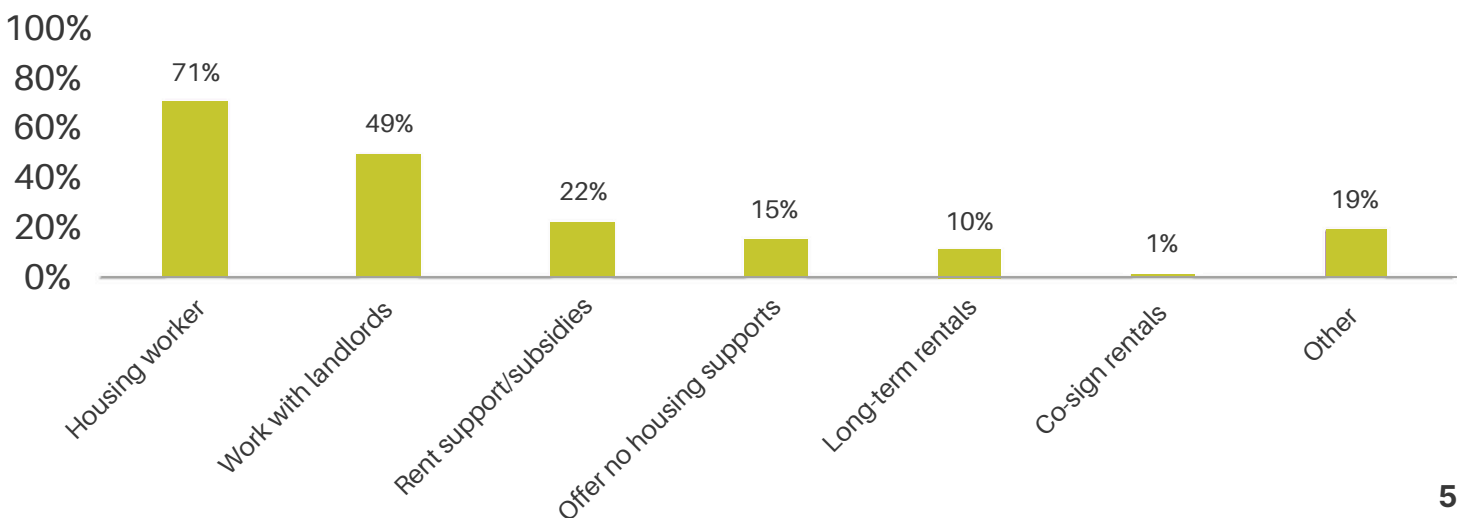
*Length of stay is around five to six months, therefore new residents are refused. This adds stress to women and children who need to leave, and therefore increases the level of danger and risks for femicide. Workers also feel more of a sense of helplessness. Constantly refusing women adds to their burnout, and to leaving their professions.”*

- Respondent at an emergency shelter

### Supports and Advocacy

Despite all the challenges, organizations offer a range of supports to help people find housing and advocate for more housing options for survivors. Figure 4 shows the many ways that shelters support survivors with housing. A primary means of doing this is by employing a housing worker to work with survivors and landlords, but shelters/THs also offer rental subsidies, work with and refer to other community programs, and provide funds for housing costs like energy bills, damage deposits, and furniture and homewares expenses. Much of this work includes individualized advocacy, including intervening with landlords and writing support letters.

**Figure 4: Programming Offered to Find and Access Housing (n=216)**



Beyond the programming offered to survivors, there have been expansions in the number of both VAW units/beds and affordable housing options across the country. Despite the development of more accommodations, these are still limited and remain inadequate. New social or affordable housing was noted by 46% (n=215) of respondents, while new VAW shelter units or beds were seen by 33% (n=215). Among new VAW units or beds, 33 individuals indicated that these were new emergency spaces, 48 had seen second stage developments, and seven saw third stage units developed.

We asked if organizations had applied for or received funds at the federal or regional (province/territory/municipality) level to address the housing crisis, their responses showed that many had not attempted to access these funds or had been unsuccessful in their attempts. For those who had applied, a number of different federal and regional funds were mentioned. While a wide range of funds being referenced is positive, it also points to a patchwork of funding to address a systemic issue, rather than having cohesive national or regional strategies.



*This current situation demands an immediate effective government response. Shelters are doing the best we can but the demand for space is extremely high.”*

*– Respondent at an emergency shelter*

When asked about the Canada Housing Benefit for Survivors of Gender-Based Violence,<sup>7</sup> 46% said it was available in their region and/or they could offer support to access this fund (42%, n=216). This is potentially an important resource for those fleeing violence, but it was noted that the amount of funding is not enough to cover the high costs of rent.

While the housing landscape can feel bleak, particularly for survivors and those supporting survivors, organizations are actively advocating for solutions to the crisis. We heard about their work engaging with politicians and government departments at all levels, sitting on committees or being part of networks, and participating in regional events. Many mentioned their involvement with their provincial/territorial shelter association, as these are strong advocates for affordable housing.

Organizations are responding to the housing crisis and the demand for shelter services by working to expand the number of units and/or shelters across the country. This is critical for addressing immediate needs, but as this respondent stated, “...this will not address the continued barrier of lack of affordable or sustainable housing for women and children. This crisis continues to put a spotlight on the lack of available housing and the barriers for marginalized folks. Because of this, we will only continue to see our femicide numbers increase.”

1 The survey received responses from 216 violence against women (VAW) shelter organizations representing 381 shelters/THs, including emergency, second stage, and mixed shelters. This included responses from every province and territory, urban and rural areas, and Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit) shelters.

2 Acceptable housing is a term established by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and will be used throughout this report. This term includes adequacy (not requiring any major repairs), suitability (has enough bedrooms for the size and composition of resident households), and affordability (shelter costs are less than 30% of total before-tax household income).

3 Statistics Canada. (2024) *Housing Needs*. <https://www160.statcan.gc.ca/prosperity-prosperite/housing-logement-eng.htm>.

4 Precarious housing includes staying with friends or family, couch surfing, and trading work for rent.

5 Hoogendam, R. and Maki, K. (2023). *Feminist Brain Drain: Labour Issues and Worker Wellness in the VAW Shelter Sector*. Ottawa, ON: Women's Shelters Canada.

6 Reynolds, V. (2014) *Centering ethics in group supervision: Fostering cultures of critique & structuring safety*. The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work. No. 1, 1-13.

7 The Canada Housing Benefit for Survivors of Gender-Based Violence is an enhancement to the existing Canada Housing Benefit. The enhancement offers financial aid, including rental subsidies and housing allowances, to survivors of gender-based violence. These agreements were signed with the provinces/territories beginning in 2023 and finishing in mid-2024, making this a relatively new funding pool.