



Canadian Network of Women's  
Shelters & Transition Houses

Réseau canadien des maisons  
d'hébergement pour femmes

***EXAMINING THE USE OF  
WEB-BASED APPLICATIONS & TOOLS  
TO RESPOND TO  
VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN***

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***FOR THE  
CANADIAN NETWORK OF WOMEN'S SHELTERS  
& TRANSITION HOUSES***

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Appendix A – Survey Question Results (see attached)

## Foreword

In 2010, the Canadian Network of Women's Shelters & Transition Houses (The Network) received a small grant from the Canadian Women's Foundation - Violence Prevention Fund to enhance the Network's efforts in consulting with sheltering organizations across Canada to explore the use of newer resources and practices, such as web-based applications, by both women in crisis and practitioners. The objective was to explore the current usage of web-based applications, sites and e-support programs by members of the Network's 14 provincial/territorial and aboriginal sheltering organizations, and to collect and analyze related feedback on shelter staff and client experience including perceived gaps and needs for future consideration. The following report summarizes the Network findings.

### 1.0 Introduction

The Canadian Network of Women's Shelters & Transition Houses / Réseau canadien des maisons d'hébergement is an emerging national network united to end violence against women. The founding members of the Network are Canada's 14 provincial/territorial, regional and aboriginal sheltering organizations, who have a collective membership of over 350 emergency and second stage shelters for abused women and their children in Canada.

The Network is undertaking a three year project to facilitate the national exchange of innovative, promising and model shelter practices across Canada and to make new advances in the development of high quality services for women experiencing abuse. As part of this work, a consultation with representatives of the Network's fourteen sheltering organizations was conducted between July and November 2010 to explore the use of newer resources and practices, such as web-based applications and e-support by both women in crisis and practitioners.

Through the responses of these fourteen sheltering organizations across Canada, the activity level, method and depth of usage of existing web-based sites by shelter staff were determined and the information and comments gathered also contributed to the identification of perceived gaps, and expectations for effective sites in the future.

## 1.1 Participants

### Alberta

The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters is the umbrella organization for 43 on reserve and off reserve agencies that provide services to domestic violence survivors. Of these, six shelters are on reserve and operate under a different funding and organizational structure to the remaining 37 agencies. The largest shelter is located in Edmonton, the provincial capital. The Edmonton Women's Shelter has 60 beds – four beds are funded by an immigrant organization, not funded by the province. The smallest shelter, Pastew House, located on reserve in Cree territory has eight beds. Intake priority at the shelters (in order) is for abused women with children, abused women without children, women who are victims of sexual assault and women in crisis requiring emergency accommodation. Up to 80% of the women in the shelters are of Aboriginal descent (in Northern Alberta), with an average of 50% of shelter users of Aboriginal descent.

### British Columbia

The British Columbia Society of Transition Houses is the overarching body for the shelter system in British Columbia. There are three types of shelter programs in the province – transition houses, a safe home program and second or third stage housing. Transition houses are open 24/7 and provide short-term temporary housing for up to thirty days. The Safe Home program operates in smaller communities where a transition home is not viable. Second and third stage housing provides house for between six months to five years for women who have left a transition home and need ongoing supports. There are 63 transition houses, 40 second and third stage and 26 safe home programs across the province.

### Saskatchewan

The Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan is a membership based organization comprised of 18 transition and interval houses and second stage housing in the province. Four shelters in the province are First Nations Women's Shelters (one of which is jointly funded by the province and through Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.)

### Manitoba

The Manitoba Association of Women's Shelters represents nine provincial shelters and eight affiliate members who work in the field of family violence, including second stage and women's resource centres. There are ten provincially funded shelters in Manitoba.

## **Ontario**

The Ontario Association of Interval and Transitional Houses represents the shelter system in the province of Ontario. The system comprises of 100 first stage emergency shelters partially funded by the Ontario Government. Membership is made up of first stage emergency shelters for abused women and their children, second stage housing programs and community-based women's service organizations.

## **Québec (2)**

There are two shelter associations in Quebec- Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale and Fédération de ressources d'hébergement pour femmes violentées et en difficulté du Québec. There are 106 domestic violence shelters throughout the province.

## **National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence**

NACAFV's mandate is to "initiate, design and deliver culturally appropriate programs and services to address family violence and to support shelters and family violence prevention centres, determine the needs of First Nations communities with respect to family violence" and to provide support to service providers.

## **New Brunswick**

The New Brunswick Coalition of Transition Houses ceased operations in 2006 after losing its federal funding of nineteen years. Volunteers have tried to keep information flowing to shelters in the province since 2006. There are thirteen transition houses in New Brunswick. One of the largest houses in the province, in St. Stephen, has 15 beds (serving a population of approx 25,000 population) .

## **Newfoundland and Labrador**

The Transition House Association of Newfoundland and Labrador (THANL) supports the shelter system in Newfoundland by facilitating networking between the Executive Directors of women's shelters. THANL supports the ten provincially funded transition houses in Newfoundland. Many of the shelters are in rural or isolated areas and range from 22 bed capacity (Iris Kirby House in St. John's) to an eight bed capacity shelter (Kirkina House in Rigolet.)

## **Nova Scotia**

The Nova Scotia Transition Homes Association provides assistance to its 12 member organizations (a total of 150 beds) across the province. These include two Mik'maq First Nations shelters which are funded by the Department of Indian Affairs.

## **Prince Edward Island**

The Transition House Association in Prince Edward Island represents Anderson House, the only provincial emergency shelter for abused women and children staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Other services include an outreach service in Queens County, second stage housing and a confidential crisis and support phone line.

## **Yukon Territory**

The Yukon Territory provincial shelter system consists of three transition houses – two smaller shelters and a larger one located in the territorial capital of Whitehorse. The largest shelter, Yukon Transition House is comprised of 15 beds and five second stage housing apartments, for women exiting the shelter. Two other shelters are located at Watson’s Lake and Dawson (Dawson City Women’s Shelter.)

## **Northwest Territories**

The Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) in Yellowknife is the recipient of funding to support capacity development of the five shelters in the territory. The YWCA assists the shelter system through organizing meetings, developing joint policy and procedure manuals, problem solving and government lobbying. Shelter users in the territory are predominantly Aboriginal, Metis or Inuit. The YWCA in Yellowknife is involved in a three year project to assist women in eleven isolated communities without permanent RCMP detachments to develop safety options. The YWCA shelter in Yellowknife operates a 12 bed VAW shelter, emergency and transitional housing for families facing homelessness. The shelter system in the Northwest Territory also assists many women from Nunavut – as shelters in the territory are often closer and cheaper to access. There is no formal association in the Northwest Territories. There are five “family violence” shelters in the Northwest Territories.

## **2.0 The Research**

Seven specific questions were posed to each of the fourteen regional representatives of sheltering organizations across Canada. In addition to these questions, participants were also encouraged to provide general comments about their members’ use of web- based applications and their recommendations with regard to their members’ needs for this technology in the future.

The use of new technology by sheltering organizations for the purpose of serving clients through e-counseling was also explored through the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to describe their members’ experience with this method of service delivery to date, their opinions about the value of such a service, and what they believed was required to offer this as a credible, effective service to clients.

Responses were received via email in July 2010, summarized and recorded in the attached table. Follow-up telephone conversations were also made by Network staff in November and December 2010

with a sample of the fourteen members to ensure that original comments had been recorded correctly and to ensure that any further information could be added if required.

### Questions asked of the representatives of the Network's member organizations:

1. Please describe the level of impact that the loss of the current web-based national site might have on the members of your regional organization.
2. How many of the member shelters of your organization use the current national web site as their web host?
3. Does your regional organization have its own site?
4. How many of your member shelters link themselves to the current national web site?
5. Are your members using the current national web site in other ways?
6. Did your members find the current national web site's directory (map) helpful and why or why not?
7. Have any of your members been involved in e- counseling and if so, could you comment on that experience for them and if they were not involved, could you explain why?

## 3.0 Data

### 3.1 Question #1 re: the perceived level of impact on shelters if a national website did not exist:

A range of answers was received from Network members and these did not seem to be affected by geographic factors or size of association, membership etc. Six respondents said that the impact would be minimal, two responded that the effect would be moderate, and six others rated the impact as highly problematic for their members.

Comments around the issue of impact on shelters included:

- Information was used by both clients and staff and was found to be valuable especially the safety planning resource, and the ability to locate other shelters across Canada was also appreciated. (10)
- Other sources for locating shelters were also used by a few, sometimes in conjunction with the web site and sometimes instead of it. (5) The lack of reliability of the web site's information was the most common reason for the abandonment of the site by shelter staff.
- Some shelters in one part of the country were still unaware of the existence of a national web site for shelters.
- Those who felt that their members would be adversely affected the most by the loss of the web site, noted that the high cost and expertise required by member shelters to host their own websites prohibited them from doing so.
- Other ways that member shelters used the current national web site included posting and accessing other resources for abused women and making referrals to those seeking information

by telephone and email.

### **3.2 Question #2 re: the number of member shelters using the national website as their only web site:**

Only three jurisdictions reported a “high” or “all” members using the national web site as their sole source of internet information for their shelters. The majority of respondents described this as “few” or ranging up to five in one jurisdiction, with some of these reporting that this number dropped over time as dissatisfaction with the quality of information available grew amongst member shelters.

Comments:

- Some shelters removed themselves over the concern that the map showing their location was a safety risk.
- Some smaller, more isolated shelters felt that this option was most beneficial due to the shortage of resources available for this.

### **3.3 Question #3 re: the number of regional sheltering organizations who host their own web site:**

Ten of the Network’s regional representatives reported that their organizations maintain their own websites, and at least half of those link to the current national site, while four associations do not have a web site of their own and at least two reported that they rely on the current national web site for this purpose.

### **3.4 Question #4 re: the number of member shelters which link themselves to the national web site:**

The responses to this question appeared to be tied to the previous question ie. where shelters across Canada were using the national site as their website, linking of shelters was described as “high” by respondents (exact numbers were not given in most cases). In five jurisdictions, a range of 35% to “all” shelters, was how respondents described how many shelters in their jurisdictions had links to the national web site. One respondent replied that the national site’s website appears on all the publicity materials distributed by her association.

In the remaining nine jurisdictions, “none” to “minimal” was the response given, with several respondents commenting that use of the national site in this way had been higher in the past but many shelters had chosen to discontinue their association when their confidence in the site began to deteriorate.

Comments:

- Recommended by provincial organization that each of its members be linked.
- “35% of shelters who do not have their own web sites are linked.”
- Do not have own website, refer to national site.

### **3.5 Question #5 re: other ways in which member shelters and their regional associations have used the national web site:**

The majority of those who used the national website responded that most often, they and their member shelters used the site to locate other shelters across Canada. A smaller number also used the site for accessing resources such as safety planning information. Referrals to the site were also made by some Network members when the identity of a caller or someone emailing for information, was unknown.

One participant said they refer women to the site if they prefer to search on their own time and they also encourage new staff members to explore the site to familiarize themselves with “what is going on in the rest of the country”

#### Comments:

- “members were using the site for out of province information.... but have found the information out of date and have moved away from using it”
- “found the website very useful in many ways- safety plan an example of this”
- “member shelters use (the site) to find other shelters..... and also for its resources (ex. safety planning)
- “many use it for safety resources and other resources. Appreciated the many languages on the site.”
- used “as a resource for women calling outside of the region to find a shelter”

### **3.6 Question #6 re: what do members of the Network feel about the value of the current national web site’s directory ie. the map for locating shelters?**

Responses to this inquiry were quite mixed; issues for most were around the security risk the map might pose for shelters and their residents and others complained about the incorrect information attached to the site. Others felt the map was an asset to the site. One jurisdiction had a map on its own website and others suggested that a national page linking to each jurisdiction’s websites would be preferable to a map on a national site.

Two respondents commented on the value of the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence’s publication “Transition Houses and Shelters for Abused Women in Canada” as a resource for finding shelters and one suggested that this resource should be linked to a national site offering this type of information. Another suggested that each shelter have its own website and those all be linked together.

#### Comments:

- “a link to the regional page would not replace the... map adequately..... is user friendly”
- “some shelters asked that they be removed from the site because they felt the mapping made their shelter too easy to find”
- “prefer to handle contact information due to problems with update frequency”

### 3.7 Question #7 re: e-counseling experience by shelter members:

There seemed to be considerable uncertainty from respondents regarding the involvement of their member shelters with the e-counseling project. This is not too surprising given that one shelter contact described their staff's involvement dating back to seven or eight years ago.

It appears that at least eleven of the Network's regional representatives believe that none of their member shelters were ever involved in the project, while in two jurisdictions "all or most" shelters received e-counseling training but nothing further. In another jurisdiction, two shelters were initially involved with one shelter testing out the technology involved but no further involvement, and the other is believed to be offering e-counseling from its location.

Comments:

- Important service to offer especially in rural areas.
- Have an interest in e-counseling but did not receive training.
- Received training but no materials and links to the software.
- None are involved.... and probably haven't heard of it.

### 3.8 General comments made by members of the Network in the survey re: the value of a national web site for clients and those providing service to them:

- "Shelternet had so much promise- it was the delivery that was difficult and inconsistent"
- "staff and clients described the site as user friendly and well designed, especially the map..."
- "it is important to know that there is a tool at the national level that women can use to locate a shelter anywhere in the country" that has "clear information for women and links to local shelters..... a client focused site"
- "with funds frozen in (our jurisdiction), this will be extremely hard to replace"
- "in partnership with Shelternet, we made sure that there was a staff person trained at each shelter that regularly updates and maintains the web sites. It is a very simple template and you don't need more than word processing skills."
- "this would be a huge loss to us,.....they had the resources that we didn't"
- "technology is paramount today. Shelters here do not have the resources to utilize all the advanced technology and we lag behind other agencies"
- "Shelternet hadn't been able to establish a real linkage with Quebec shelters and associations"
- "our members were using them but have found the information on it is out of date and so have moved away from using it..... Many have stopped because it has not been kept up to date well"
- "internet access is not always available in homes in remote communities but computers can be accessed in some safe community spaces too"
- "what was the true value of Shelternet? Could that money be put to better use?"

## 4.0 Conclusions

It would appear that Network members and their member shelters had quite a diverse range of

experiences both with the introduction of the national web site in each part of the country, and the ongoing support and operation of it in each jurisdiction. The information gathered here suggests that most members of the Canadian Network of Women's Shelters and Transition Houses believe that an effective, easily accessible national website could be a valuable resource for regional organizations, their member shelters and for women seeking help.

The biggest difficulty for respondents with the current site appears to be the fact that the site was not well maintained over time; that changes requested by members were not made and therefore the site's information could not be relied upon. The greatest value of the site for some regions of Canada was the fact that individual shelters did not have to fund their own websites to take advantage of the increased use of the internet by the public in search of reliable information.

For a national web site to be valuable to women seeking information about abuse and the services available to them, the site must be user friendly and offer current and accurate information. While most regional associations' offices now maintain their own web sites, several respondents expressed an appreciation for a national resource that could link all shelters, providing once again that the information offered there was current and accurate. Similar expectations were expressed by direct service providers for any internet information service to be deemed useful to them and the women they served.

Effective websites can facilitate a safe, constant and easy communication mechanism for shelters and their clients. Such a service can reduce isolation for women in crisis and shelters who serve them, and can foster increased communication amongst all accessing web sites.

To be successful, a nation wide website for shelters would:

- Require long term and stable funding to ensure that the quality of the information provided was maintained over time.
- Require on-going support by qualified staff of the site itself and of those organizations contributing information to it, would be needed if the site is to be relied upon by those accessing it.

## **5.0 Recommendations**

To provide the service expected at such a site, long term and stable funding would be required to ensure that the quality of the information provided was maintained over time. On-going support by qualified staff of the site itself and of those organizations contributing information to it, would be needed if the site is to be relied upon by those accessing it.

While the reputation of the current national web site has been hurt by the diminished quality of its service over the past year, it would seem logical to rebuild using this "known" entity given its history with the general public and service providers over the past eleven years and the considerable resources that have been invested in the present site.

Aspects of the establishment and operation of the site that have garnered praise over the years have included the user friendliness of the site, the inclusion of several languages, the breadth of valuable information provided, the directory (map) that allows users to locate shelters across Canada, and the potential of an e-counseling service.

Designed as a site to “connect abused women to shelters” in Canada, the current national site did deliver this service for a number of years, providing reliable information in an easily accessible way to those seeking support through the internet. The provision of information through one national web site allowed service providers to use their limited resources in other ways, while still being part of the movement towards the use of new technology.

The most frequent criticism leveled at the current web site is that the site has become unreliable to those using it as a web site for themselves and as a source of information for those seeking help. The site has been “down,” requests for updates and corrections to information posted have been ignored, and support for contributing agencies has ended. Frustration with the lack of perceived interest and capacity to maintain the credibility of the site has driven some earlier supporters away and diminished the confidence of others who were committed to the value of the site as a national information source.

With the explosion of the access to personal computers and the safety and confidentiality that this can offer women seeking help, service providers continue to be encouraged by the potential of an internet based counseling service offered by a national website and its partners. For those women living in remote or isolated communities, the support and information gathered in this way could have a huge impact on their ability to develop their self confidence and to access services when that becomes appropriate.

As Canadian women who are living with violent partners grow more and more technically savvy, offering an information and support site on the internet seems like a “natural” progression in the delivery of credible and accessible service to them. A useful resource for women using the computer needs to offer information and support in an easily accessible, easily understandable way. Such a web site could provide both passive and interactive services to women who may be isolated geographically or psychologically.

Mounting evidence shows that public web information provided to women, such as how to access shelter and on line risk assessment and safety planning can increase women’s security and safety. A well-recognized and effective shelter-focused website could help increase the level of safety for at risk women and their children across Canada.

In spite of all the difficulties associated with the current operation of the existing national web site, many members of the Network felt that the reestablishment and restoration of the current site could still offer value to service providers and to women seeking information about abuse and the services available to victims in Canada.

## APPENDIX A

(See attached table of survey question results)