

Summary Report on Women's Shelters Canada's Housing Community of Practice Gathering

In June 2017, the Housing Community of Practice brought together 11 participants from 7 provinces and 1 territory to share their knowledge of housing context, exchange promising practices, and draft a vision for strategic housing priorities for Women's Shelters Canada.

Canadian Housing Conditions and the Implications for Women Fleeing Violence

Structural conditions of private housing markets, public housing investment and the liaison relationships between VAW shelters and transition houses and their provincial and territorial funders makes a big difference in abilities of our sector to support women in gaining independence from their abusers.

Discussions with Housing Community of Practice workers from 7 provinces and 1 territory showed that certain housing trends are common across Canada:

- Rapidly increasing rental costs
- Social assistance supports that fall behind real costs
- Shortages of public and social housing
- Inadequate funding for second-stage housing

Critical Needs in Manitoba and NWT

There were certain hotspots for which participants gave their housing context a significantly lower rating overall after hearing discussions of housing conditions across Canada. Manitoba was identified as having critically aging public housing stocks, lowered staffing in the Family Violence Prevention Program that funds VAW shelters, and challenging public policies around housing for women. The Northwest Territories was also identified as having inadequate public housing, private market housing in a state of virtual monopoly by a single owner, and difficulty establishing effective communication with territorial funding bodies.

Brighter Spots Still Face Challenges

In general, VAW sector efforts are feeling more fruitful in provinces like Alberta, Ontario and BC, government liaison relationships are strong, and there is a strong, well-funded VAW shelter or transition house association. Alberta VAW shelters have received a much-needed funding infusion recently under the new government. BC transition houses are funded through BC Housing, with specialized VAW-aware housing liaisons, which facilitates coordination with other housing services. Ontario is seeing increased consultation and coordination at the provincial level, but struggles with inadequate social housing and an impossibly out-of-reach private sector. These relatively "have" provinces are bearing the brunt of the rising private market housing and rental costs that are affecting all of Canada.

Quebec has a different housing context than other provinces, and our participant assessed it highly overall. They were given high ratings for their relatively functional public and private housing sectors but is struggling with under-funding for second-stage housing.

Atlantic Provinces: Mixed Strength and Challenges

Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador self-assessed their housing context as middle-of-the road. Newfoundland noted good relations with public housing workers, but a lack of social housing stock and inadequate subsidies. Nova Scotia mentioned an increase in local collaboration to address hidden homelessness over the past 2-4 years, but invasive intake processes.

Second-Stage Shelters

Across Canada, there is a need for more coordination and more funding for second-stage shelters. Quebec is the only province which has a specialized association for second stage shelters, which is working to address funding shortages and the need for operational funding. All regions noted that second-stage housing is concentrated in urban areas and that it is limited or unavailable in rural areas.

Public Housing

When it comes to VAW and public housing, there are a range of levels of awareness and sensitivity at the government level. All provinces except BC and Quebec rated their public housing situation as inadequate. In Ontario and Nova Scotia, participants were concerned about intrusive questions that are asked of women by provincial housing workers who are not adequately trained in domestic and intimate partner abuse. However, in BC there are two central workers at BC Housing who help, and who understand VAW issues. And in Newfoundland and Labrador, public housing tenant relations officers will meet with women in the shelters.

Practice Exchange Highlights: VAW Sector Steps Into the Breach to Respond to Housing Needs

The VAW Shelter and Transition House sector is responding to the urgent housing needs of women fleeing violence which remain unmet by the private, nonprofit and government sectors.

P/T	City	Shelter Name	First Name	Last Name	Position	Promising Practice
AB	Grande Prairie	Odyssey House	Ebony	Rempel	Executive Director	New Second-Stage service with central intake Client Care Manager
AB	Rocky Mountain House	Mountain Rose Women's Shelter Association	Cindy	Easton	Executive Director	Full-time Housing Support Coordinator and AB Rural Coalition on Housing + Homelessness
BC	Nanaimo	Haven Society	Dawn	Clark	Housing Manager	Housing outreach services expanding to include trauma-informed housing support

BC	Prince George	Prince George & District Elizabeth Fry Housing Society	Kathi	Heim	Executive Director	Low-barrier housing and pet program
MB	Selkirk	Nova House	Anna	Pazdzierski	Executive Director	Outreach program and building second-stage shelter
NL	Corner Brook	Committee on Family Violence	Sandra	Targett	Assistant Administrator	Created second-stage housing units for clients of the shelter
NS	Yarmouth	Juniper House	Lisa	Newell-Bain	Executive Director	Designing a low-barrier 2nd stage shelter
NT	Yellowknife	YWCA NWT	Lyda	Fuller	ED (+ NT member of WSC Advisory Committee)	Culturally informed 1st + 2nd stage housing and special housing facilitation with private market
ON	London	Anova	Shelley	Yeo	Assistant Executive Director	Housing First Readiness framework with anti-oppressive feminist lens
ON	Toronto	Women's Habitat	Silvia	Samsa	Executive Director	Dedicated housing program and Housing Worker
QC	Montreal	Flora Tristan	Chloe	Deraiche	Executive Director	Integration of supports between first and second stage services

Second Stage Sheltering

Several shelters – Odyssey House, Nova House, Committee on Family Violence, Juniper House, YWCA NWT, and Flora Tristan, all offer (or are developing) Second Stage shelters to meet urgent medium-term housing needs for women. This group will continue to be connected as a sub-group of the community of practice. There was particular discussion around linking staff and programming across multiple stages of housing, as developed by Flora Tristan.

Lowering Barriers to Accessing VAW Shelters and Transition Houses

Low-barrier and trauma-informed housing was another important trend within the COP, with shelters Haven Society and Elizabeth Fry Society in BC focusing on these issues, and Juniper House in NS integrating those principles into their second-stage design. Pet sheltering is another element of barrier reduction highlighted by Elizabeth Fry.

Navigating Access to Longer-Term Housing

Shelters specialized in finding ways to help women navigate barriers in public and private housing. YWCA NWT had a unique program that helped women to navigate barriers to approval and financing of their private market apartments, in a special negotiation with the leading landlord in Yellowknife. Women’s Habitat, Haven Society and Mountain Rose all offer workers specializing in outreach housing navigation and advocacy. This expert guidance is a valuable resource at a time when access to public and private markets is so restricted and complicated.

Advocating for Women's Housing Needs

The final key trend in practice exchange is advocacy, networking and work at increasing the accessibility of appropriate housing for women outside of VAW shelters. Shelters play a valuable role in articulating women's needs to civil society peers, private business and public policymakers. Anova is doing some very important work addressing the need for a feminist lens in Housing First approaches to funding and programming. Rocky Mountain House is active in the AB Rural Coalition on Housing and Homelessness. Women's Habitat is active in the Toronto VAW Housing Working Group. Elizabeth Fry Society from Prince George has sat on the BC Non-Profit Housing Association board for 6 years. COP participants also speak out at the municipal level about women's housing needs.

Visions for Strategic Housing Priorities for Women's Shelters Canada

The following visions were brainstormed, categorized, prioritized and wordsmithed live by the housing COP participants, based on two days of focused discussions and 100+ years of collective wisdom and experience.

Reflecting on Housing Principles

- Women have a right to safe, affordable and appropriate housing. This housing must incorporate options for a seamless transition between shelter, second stage, and permanent housing. Support must be integrated, women-centered, feminist, inclusive, and intersectional.

Calling for Housing Resource Equity

- Women Shelters Canada will work collaboratively with Provincial and Territorial Shelter Associations to identify under-resourced geographic and demographic areas and to address critical gaps in the provision of appropriate, safe, and supportive housing for women in Canada.

Building Effective Housing Partnerships

- Women's Shelters Canada will foster and develop cross-sectoral federal partnerships to ensure the National Housing Strategy reflect an intersectional gender-based analysis.

Supporting Leadership in Second-Stage Housing

- Women Shelters Canada will facilitate national knowledge exchange and advocacy by second stage housing leaders. The goal of this group would be to share best practices across all second stage shelters and to inform emerging policy in this area.

Connecting Housing with Social Supports

- Women's Shelters Canada advocate for social supports for women's housing and foster VAW-informed relationships between social housing and social support agencies.