

Promising Responses to Women's Housing Needs

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Women who are recovering from abusive situations face challenges in accessing safe and affordable housing in Canada. Women's VAW shelters and transition houses have been developing practices to respond to women's housing needs. The practices have emerged in four themes: helping women to navigate the challenges in accessing longer-term housing, lowering barriers to accessing shelter, offering more supportive second stage housing units, and advocating for women's housing needs.¹

NAVIGATING ACCESS TO HOUSING

Women who are recovering from trauma can find it very stressful and time-consuming to find housing. Expert support in securing housing is a valuable resource for women at a time when it is increasingly hard to access long-term housing due to rapidly rising private housing costs, stagnating social assistance supports, and growing wait lists for social housing.

LIAISING WITH THE PRIVATE HOUSING MARKET

[YWCA NWT](#) has a unique program that helps women navigate barriers to approval and financing of private market apartments in a special negotiation with the leading landlord in Yellowknife, who single-handedly owns 90% of the private market. [Women's Habitat's](#) Home Sweet Home program in Toronto is focused on working with private landlords to rent units to women and their dependents who are fleeing violence. The housing worker helps guide women through the challenges of first and last month's rent and credit histories, and serves as a liaison with the landlords. Through that program, over 120 women were housed in 2016.

PROVIDING HOUSING OUTREACH SUPPORT

[Haven Society](#) has offered a similar outreach program since 2009, which helps women who have left the transition house access safe and affordable housing. The program includes renter's education, advocacy, and limited financial supports intended to address barriers to housing such as start-up kits, security deposits, furniture, access to Rental Assistance subsidies for market rental housing, access to second stage housing units, and relationship building with local landlords and Property Management Companies.

[Mountain Rose](#) Women's Shelter offers a Housing Support Coordinator with up to two years of support, understanding that women need not only an affordable house but also the material basics such as furniture and kitchen supplies. The Coordinator helps supply necessary items that have been donated and stored in a C-can.



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LOWERING BARRIERS TO ACCESSING VAW SHELTERS AND TRANSITION HOUSES

Low-barrier and trauma-informed housing is an important trend in the VAW sector which can apply to any stage of shelter and any shelter programming. A low-barrier approach recognizes the negative safety impact of turning away a woman and her children if she is under the influence of substances. Shelters and transition houses that implement low-barrier approach use a nonjudgmental, trauma-informed lens, and design practices in ways that foster a sense of safety for women.

MINIMIZING RESTRICTIONS AND HURDLES IN SHELTERS

For example, [Odyssey House](#) in Alberta now offers a centralized intake, which minimizes the number of times a woman needs to tell her story of abuse. The Client Care Manager becomes a single trusted point of contact who liaises with other service providers on her behalf. [Juniper House](#) in Nova Scotia is designing their new second stage shelter so that the physical space increases safety and can facilitate minimal rules and restrictions on women.

PET-FRIENDLY SHELTER DESIGN

Pet sheltering is another element of barrier reduction highlighted by [Elizabeth Fry Society](#) in BC. Their 15-year program was inspired by research showing that women in abusive relationships choose to stay to protect their pets rather than leaving their pets behind in abusive households. Pets can also play an important role in stress management and mental health. Elizabeth Fry has pet specific rooms, mobile kennels, aquariums, cat carriers, etc., along with outside kennels and runs for larger animals. Two pet-free rooms and allergy-resistant surfaces keep the shelter comfortable for people with sensitivities to animals.

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INCREASING THE BENEFITS OF SECOND STAGE SHELTERS

Second stage shelters meet urgent medium-term housing needs for women who are leaving first stage shelters and transition houses. However, there is a shortage of both units and operational funding for second stage units. Two promising practice themes worth sharing are increasing second stage units and integrating supportive services across first and second stages.

INTEGRATING SUPPORTIVE SERVICES ACROSS HOUSING STAGES

Maison Flora Tristan is the only shelter in Quebec to offer first and second stage shelter under one roof. Over a year ago, they decided to focus on better integrating supportive services between the two stages. [Maison Flora Tristan](#) now offers a complete continuum of services for women who are victims of intimate partner violence, whether they are accessing emergency or second stage shelter or non-residential support. Since implementing these changes, they have documented greater team cohesion, more mutual assistance between first and second stage residents, and smoother transitions to autonomy for the women they support.

Similarly, [Odyssey House](#) in Alberta offers a form of integration through a centralized client care manager. When the second stage shelter first opened over a year ago, women worked with a program manager, an outreach worker, and a family support worker; this was not effective as women found it challenging to constantly re-tell their stories to new faces. The central intake process was introduced in 2016 as a more trauma-informed approach. The client care manager helps build a relationship of trust with each woman and ensures flexible service delivery, referrals, and recommendations to women staying in both second and first-stage shelters.

BUILDING MORE SECOND STAGE HOUSING SPACE

Shelters considering creating new second-stage units may wish to connect with other organizations who have undertaken similar projects, and may also refer to the [Building Dignity](#) website on physical design for VAW shelter buildings.

[Juniper House](#) has been collaborating with public housing in Nova Scotia, but as vacancy rates decrease, there is a need for another model for longer-term supportive housing. They are currently planning a new lower-barrier second stage shelter that will accommodate women with complex needs, providing Housing First programming as well as a hub model of service.

[Nova House](#) recently opened the first joint emergency/second stage shelter in Manitoba, which is also the first rural second stage shelter, in a LEED certified building. Upon completion, the ownership of building title was handed over to Manitoba Housing, which was a co-funder of the build and which owns and manages all women's shelter buildings in Manitoba.

[Willow House](#) in Newfoundland bought existing units and turned them into second stage housing to meet the complex needs of clients from their first stage shelter. Residents may stay in the second stage unit for up to one year. They are also building a new first-stage building.

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ADVOCATING FOR WOMEN'S HOUSING NEEDS

It is a good practice for shelters and transition houses to engage in advocacy to increase the accessibility of appropriate housing for women. Shelters play a valuable role in articulating women's needs through engagement with fellow not-for-profits, private business, and public policymakers to stimulate collaboration and change.

RECONCILING HOUSING FIRST MODELS WITH WOMEN'S NEEDS

[Anova](#) in London has hired a consultant to develop a Housing First Readiness framework through a feminist, anti-oppressive lens in order to help the VAW sector balance the needs of women with the need to align with Housing First funding streams. The final project will outline a path that takes into account staffing requirements, staff core competencies, training, job descriptions, and organization policy and practices tailored to the unique needs of women who have experienced violence and/or abuse.

BUILDING VAW-INFORMED HOUSING COALITIONS AND WORKING GROUPS

For several years, [Mountain Rose](#) Women's Shelter has been active in ARCH2, the Alberta Rural Coalition on Housing and Homelessness. The coalition provides a conduit for problem solving the challenges of housing affordability and homelessness in rural Alberta. [Women's Habitat](#) is active in the Toronto VAW Housing Working Group, which addresses the needs of women in an increasingly unaffordable housing market. [Elizabeth Fry Society](#) in Prince George has been on the BC Non-Profit Housing Association board for six years, working to increase affordable, available, and safe housing. COP participants such as [Odyssey House](#) in Grande Prairie also speak out at the municipal level about women's housing needs, and [Maison Flora Tristan](#) is a member of the [Alliance des maisons de deuxième étape](#) in Québec, which addresses second stage housing.

At Women's Shelters Canada (WSC), our long-term objective is to bring about systemic change that will allow for greater and better housing options and outcomes for women fleeing violence. With this perspective, we have developed 11 recommendations to inform a National Housing Strategy to ensure that it reflects an intersectional gender-based analysis of housing needs.

¹In 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. The housing practices highlighted here came out of the Housing Community of Practice. Thank you to all participants.

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