

# Executive Summary

# More Than A Bed

A National Profile  
of VAW Shelters  
and Transition Houses



**WOMEN'S  
SHELTERS  
CANADA**

Shelters and  
Transition Houses  
United to End Violence  
Against Women



WOMEN'S  
SHELTERS  
CANADA | HÉBERGEMENT  
FEMMES  
CANADA

Women's Shelters Canada (WSC) is based in Ottawa. Bringing together 14 provincial and territorial shelter organizations, we represent a strong, unified voice on the issue of violence against women on the national stage. Through collaboration, knowledge exchange, and adoption of innovative practices, we advance the coordination and implementation of high quality services for women and children accessing VAW shelters and transition houses.

*Women's Shelters Canada acknowledges that the location of our office and the work that we do in Ottawa is on the traditional, unceded territories of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg people.*

Women's Shelters Canada  
85 Albert Street, Suite 1501  
Ottawa ON K1P 6A4  
Phone: 613-680-5119  
Email: [info@endvaw.ca](mailto:info@endvaw.ca)  
Website: [www.endvaw.ca](http://www.endvaw.ca)  
Social Media: @endvawnetwork

© Women's Shelters Canada  
May 2019

*Women's Shelters Canada would like to thank the Department for Women and Gender Equality (WAGE), formerly Status of Women Canada, for providing funding support for this project. The opinions expressed in these documents do not necessarily represent the official policy of WAGE.*

## Acknowledgements

WSC would like to thank the provincial and territorial shelter/transition house associations and academics Holly Johnson and Nadine Wathen, who reviewed this document as well as the national survey on which it is based. We would also like to thank Marika Morris, the DisAbled Women's Network of Canada, Aboriginal Shelters of Ontario, and the National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence for reviewing the survey.

Thank you to Michèle Briand for translating this document into French, LJ Robinson at The Public for the creative and layout, and Sylvie Ouellette and her team at Versatil for their assistance with data cleaning.

Kaitlin Bardswich (Communications and Development Coordinator) and Lise Martin (Executive Director) edited the report and reviewed the French translation.

## About the Author

Krystle Maki, PhD  
Research and Policy Coordinator

## How to Cite this Document

Maki, K. (2019). "More Than a Bed: A National Profile of VAW Shelters and Transition Houses." Ottawa, ON: Women's Shelters Canada.



Government  
of Canada

Gouvernement  
du Canada

# Executive Summary



Women's Shelters Canada (WSC) connects and engages with violence against women (VAW) shelters and transition houses across the country. As part of the continuum of services to support survivors, VAW shelters<sup>1</sup> are integral to ending violence against women.

Since their inception in the early 1970s, the extent of the work carried out by VAW shelters has substantively increased to respond to the needs of women and children fleeing violence. Every year, violence against women results in thousands of women and children living in fear, with many fleeing for their lives. In addition to providing safety, VAW shelters help women rebuild their lives, heal from abuse, develop resiliency, and move towards living violence-free lives.

VAW shelters, feminist scholars, and policymakers have long recognized the need to better understand the scope of services and supports provided to women and children fleeing violence at the national level. Together with shelters, WSC developed a survey with the objective of building a comprehensive national profile of both VAW and second stage shelters. The survey examined the services shelters offer, human resources, prevention work, funding, accessibility, and the challenges faced in all these areas.

The survey was developed in consultation with the provincial and territorial VAW shelter associations, the DisAbled Women's Network of Canada (DAWN Canada), Aboriginal Shelters of Ontario, and the National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence,

as well as with VAW shelter executive directors and staff. Engagement with shelters across the country ensured that the survey captured the regional issues facing this sector. This survey is the first national inquiry of its kind developed by and for the VAW shelter sector.

The online survey, offered in French and English, was officially launched on September 19, 2017, and remained open until March 7, 2018. A link to the survey was sent to 517 VAW, second stage, and mixed shelters. Overall, 401 shelters participated in the survey, a response rate of over 78%, and included responses from every province and territory as well as from rural, remote, Northern, and Indigenous shelters.

This report provides information on: physical structure, age, and security features of VAW shelters; their size (number of beds), length of stay, and capacity; the various groups they serve and their accessibility; their service delivery and programming; labour, salaries, and types of work conducted; and funding and expenses. Where relevant, the report presents a cross-section of data at the regional and population size levels to illustrate differences across the country, as well as between larger and smaller communities. Findings specific to second stage shelters are presented in a separate report.<sup>2</sup>

## Summary of Results

The data clearly show that VAW shelters are providing ever-expanding services without

comparable funding increases. Too many VAW shelters are already operating at capacity, while funding is not keeping up with inflation. VAW shelters are also seeing increasingly complex cases of violence accompanied by trauma-induced substance abuse, severe mental health concerns, and disabilities such as traumatic brain injury.

VAW shelters work with large and diverse populations – women fleeing different forms of violence, women with disabilities, racialized women, LGBTQ+ people, older women, and children. They find creative solutions to keep women safe even when they have no more funded beds available. Capacity challenges are compounded by the lack of safe, affordable, and appropriate housing for women and their children across the country.

And yet, VAW shelters are much more than a bed. In addition to providing a safe space to sleep, they assist and advocate for women and their children in navigating legal systems, immigration services, social services, child protection services, health care, and more. They provide counseling, child-specific programming, safety planning, parenting classes, outreach services, help finding housing, programs for perpetrators, and prevention and awareness programming. Yet survey results demonstrate that prevention and advocacy work – work that can save lives and create societal shifts in attitudes about ending violence against women and girls – are often not funded by government funders.

Funding issues, including underfunding and lack of stability in funding, have significant repercussions on the work of VAW shelters. They are unable to provide competitive salaries, which, coupled with

burnout, leads to high turnover among staff. Many have to fundraise to meet their operating costs, with some not meeting their costs even with fundraising. Consequently, not all VAW shelters can offer the same level of services. Thus, a woman accessing a shelter in a metropolitan area will find different services than if she was in a rural or Northern community.

## Key Findings

The key findings<sup>3</sup> of this report are:

- 1. In addition to providing safety, VAW shelters are helping women rebuild their lives, heal from abuse, develop resiliency, and move towards living violence-free lives. However, the data presented in this report point to a lack of sustainable and adequate resources to do this work, with VAW shelters increasingly being expected to do more with less.**
- 2. Far too often, women and children cannot access VAW shelter services.**
  - a) Four in ten VAW shelters reported operating at capacity “almost always.”
  - b) VAW shelters reported taking in more people than they have funded beds. While the average number of funded beds is 16, the average maximum number of persons shelters can accommodate is 19.
  - c) The majority (74%) of VAW shelters reported providing extensions to women residing in the shelter beyond the provincial/territorial length of stay guidelines, which reduces their capacity to take in new women who are seeking shelter from abuse.

d) The lack of affordable housing is a significant barrier for survivors to move into secure housing, with only 31% of VAW shelters indicating that residents were able to find and acquire affordable housing during their stay at the shelter.

### 3. VAW shelters strive to be as inclusive and barrier-free as possible. However, capacity and funding issues make this challenging.

- a) VAW shelters are increasingly serving a broader group of women fleeing violence. Over one-third (37%) of respondents reported that they served women escaping different forms of violence and abuse in addition to intimate partner violence.
- b) Less than half (47%) of VAW shelters reported that all shelter services were “generally accessible” for women who use a wheelchair or other mobility device; 26% were “somewhat” accessible and 26% were “difficult to access.”
- c) While 80% of VAW shelters reported serving Indigenous women, only 19% were “often” able to offer culturally appropriate programs.
- d) 79% of respondents that had served women with complex mental health concerns and 79% that had served women with substance use concerns reported that it was a “major challenge” for their shelter.
- e) Half (50%) of VAW shelters reported that they had served trans, gender fluid, or intersex individuals fleeing violence. Among this group, 57% indicated that they could “always” and 42% said that they could “sometimes” accommodate them.

f) Only 17% of VAW shelters reported that providing culturally appropriate supports and services was “not an issue.” For 34%, it was a “major challenge” and for 49%, a “minor issue.”

### 4. VAW shelter workers are the experts in their field and provide direct support to survivors. However, maintaining quality full-time, part-time, and casual staff is a challenge facing many VAW shelters across the country.

- a) Over half (55%) of respondents indicated that staff turnover and burnout were a “major challenge” for their VAW shelters.
- b) 61% of respondents identified low pay and benefits as a “major challenge” facing their shelters. It was noted that maintaining high-quality staff is difficult when the salaries and wages are not comparable to those in similar fields.
- c) Of the 5,567 reported workers, almost one-third (32%) were precariously employed as casual and relief workers.

### 5. VAW shelters are dealing with aging buildings in need of repair.

- a) The average (mean) age of facilities was 45 years old (built in 1973-1974), demonstrating that a number of shelters are aging.
- b) 80% of VAW shelters are in need of some form of repairs and renovations, and almost half (46%) are not able to afford them.

## 6. VAW shelters are struggling with a lack of funding despite having to engage in increasingly complex service delivery.

- a) 74% of VAW shelters indicated that insufficient funding was a “major challenge” facing their shelter, while only 5% of respondents said it was “not an issue.”
- b) The majority (64%) of VAW shelters do not receive an annual cost of living increase from their main government funder. One in five indicated that they had NOT received a funding increase in ten years or more.
- c) Supplying basic necessities are a significant challenge for VAW shelters. Half of all VAW shelters reported food (51%) and transportation (52%) costs as a “major challenge.”
- d) The majority (55%) of VAW shelters could NOT meet their operating expenses without fundraising and 10% could not meet their operating expenses even with fundraising.
- e) Almost one-third (32%) of respondents indicated that they did not receive funding from their main funder to do prevention and awareness work.
- f) The majority of shelters (86%) do not have fundraisers on staff, often leaving overburdened frontline staff to take on fundraising responsibilities just to keep the doors open.

## Recommendations

The role of VAW shelters in addressing the pandemic that is violence against women needs to be fully recognized by governments across the country. Women’s Shelters Canada recommends:

1. **The number of shelters in Canada must be increased to respond to a) the fact that turn-away rates are alarmingly high in major cities and that b) far too many women in rural and remote areas simply do not have access to shelter services.**
2. **Sustainable, core operational funding for all VAW shelters is required as are yearly increases in accordance with standard of living costs.**
  - a) Public education, prevention, and awareness work with the general public should be included in core funding as a proactive solution to ending violence against women.
  - b) The capacity to have more than one staff person on-site at any time (double staffing) should be included as part of core funding.
  - c) Funding is needed to support VAW shelters in developing, upgrading, and retrofitting fully accessible spaces so that all women fleeing violence can access shelter facilities and services.
  - d) Increased funding for training is needed to provide workers with adequate knowledge and tools to work with populations with severe mental health and substance use concerns, as well as specific funding for mental health and addictions positions within shelters.



- e) Specific funding must be allocated for Indigenous cultural programming within VAW shelters to ensure that Indigenous women have access to culturally appropriate supports during their stay.
- f) More resources and training are needed for VAW shelter workers to work with the trans, gender fluid, and intersex community as well as women of varying cultural, ethnic, and language backgrounds.
- g) Improved sustainable federal investments are needed to enhance and improve the condition of VAW shelter buildings.

### 3. WSC supports the National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence (NACAFV)'s recommendation to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women on November 19, 2018:

*“Currently, Canada does not provide Indigenous women access to equal, equitable and culturally appropriate protection from domestic violence.”*

*Canada must fund and provide equal, equitable, and culturally appropriate shelter services and programming. This would be for the Indigenous women and their children who are fleeing or at risk of experiencing domestic violence. This means that services and programs must be tailored to the unique geographical, cultural, and historical circumstances of women who are accessing the 40 ISC [Indigenous Services Canada]-funded shelters in Canada.”*

### 4. WSC calls on the federal government to develop and implement a National Action Plan on Violence against Women.

Key findings from this report support the call for a National Action Plan (NAP) on VAW so that regardless of where a woman lives in Canada, she has access to comparable, adequate services. An NAP would ensure a shared understanding of the root causes of VAW as well as coordinated and effective efforts across the federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal levels.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The terms used to describe VAW shelters vary across Canada. For instance, they are referred to as transition houses, safe homes, women's shelters, family violence shelters, VAW emergency shelters, domestic violence shelters, healing lodges, or first stage shelters. For the purposes of this report, VAW shelters will be used.
- <sup>2</sup> Available online at <https://endvaw.ca/wsc-resources>.
- <sup>3</sup> Note that these are a subset of the data. Response numbers are indicated in the text in the relevant sections of the report.



