

Executive Summary

Transitioning to a Life Free from Violence

Second Stage Shelters in Canada



**WOMEN'S
SHELTERS
CANADA**

Shelters and
Transition Houses
United to End Violence
Against Women



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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 shelters.

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.

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Executive Summary



Women's Shelters Canada (WSC) connects and engages with violence against women (VAW) shelters and transition houses¹ across the country. As part of the continuum of services to support survivors, VAW shelters² and second stage shelters are integral to ending violence against women.

Second stage shelters are a form of transitional housing for survivors of domestic violence (DV) and intimate partner violence (IPV). Due to their shorter-term nature, many VAW shelters have established second stage shelters to provide extended services to women and children in need of additional time and support to heal from their trauma, who are facing barriers in finding permanent housing, and who may be at high risk of danger post-separation.³ Second stage shelters can consist of apartment units in one facility with some common areas, or they can be "scattered sites" (i.e. units in different buildings). In addition to providing safety, second stage 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. Even less is known about the supports provided by second stage shelters. 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 individual VAW and second stage 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.⁴ 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. Of the 124 known second stage shelters across the country, 69% (n=85) participated in the survey.

This report provides information on: physical structure, age, and security features of second stage shelters; their size (number of units/apartments), 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 shorter-term VAW shelters are presented in a separate report.⁵

Summary of Results

Second stage shelters play a vital role in helping survivors of domestic violence transition to independent lives free from violence. Survey results demonstrate that second stage shelters are an essential component of wrap-around supports, providing much-needed stability, programming, and services to women and children survivors of DV. In the context of the affordable housing crisis in Canada, second stage shelters bridge the housing gap by providing women more time to heal from trauma, access supportive counsellors, and develop community, while also offering protection for survivors who are at a heightened risk of violence. They support women in rebuilding lives free from violence for themselves and their children, which helps to end the cycle of violence.⁶

In addition to providing safe and affordable transitional housing, second stage shelters 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 counselling, child-specific programming, safety planning, parenting classes, outreach services, help finding housing, 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 second stage shelters. They are unable to provide competitive salaries, which, coupled with burnout, leads to high turnover among staff. Some second stage shelters do not receive any operational funding and rely on fundraising to meet their operating costs, with some not meeting their costs even with fundraising. This places additional strain on small teams that are already stretched thin. There is a significant shortage of second stage shelters in rural, remote, and Northern regions and on First Nations reserves – leaving women fleeing violence in these communities with fewer supports.

Key Findings

The key findings⁷ of this report are:

- 1. In addition to providing safety, second stage 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.**
- 2. Second stage shelters strive to be as inclusive and barrier-free as possible. However, capacity and funding issues make this challenging.**
 - a) Second stage shelters are serving a broad group of women fleeing violence. Almost one-third (31%) of respondents reported that they served women escaping different forms

of violence and abuse in addition to intimate partner violence.

- b) Only one-quarter (25%) of second stage shelters reported that all shelter services were “generally accessible” for women who use a wheelchair or other mobility device; 21% were “somewhat” accessible and over half (54%) were “difficult to access.”
- c) While 67% of second stage shelters reported having served Indigenous women, only 11% were “often” able to offer culturally appropriate programs.
- d) 67% of respondents that had served women with complex mental health concerns and 67% that had served women with substance use concerns reported that it was a “major challenge” for their shelter.
- e) One-quarter (24%) of second stage shelters reported that they had served trans, gender fluid, or intersex individuals fleeing violence. Among this group, 58% indicated that they could “always” and 42% said that they could “sometimes” accommodate them.
- f) Only 15% of second stage shelters reported that providing culturally appropriate supports and services was “not an issue.” For 35%, it was a “major challenge” and for 49%, a “minor issue.”

3. Second stage shelter workers are the experts in their field and provide direct support to survivors. However, recruiting and maintaining quality staff is a challenge facing many second stage shelters across the country.

- a) Second stage shelters reported an average (mean) of four workers per shelter. Over one-third (39%) of respondents reported having no full-time workers.
- b) 41% of respondents indicated that staff turnover and burnout were a “major challenge” for their second stage shelters.
- c) More than half (55%) of respondents identified low pay and benefits as a “major challenge” facing their shelters. Maintaining high-quality staff is difficult when the salaries and wages are not comparable to those in similar fields.
- d) Of the 456 reported workers, 20% were precariously employed as casual and relief workers.

4. Second stage shelters are dealing with aging buildings in need of repair.

- a) The average (mean) age of facilities was 39 years old (built in 1979-1980), demonstrating that a number of shelters are aging.
- b) The majority (69%) of second stage shelters need some form of repairs and renovations, with almost half (48%) unable to afford them.

5. Second stage shelters are struggling with a lack of funding despite having to engage in increasingly complex service delivery.

- a) 80% of second stage shelters indicated that insufficient funding was a “major challenge” facing their shelter, while only 4% of respondents said it was “not an issue.”

- b) The majority (63%) of second stage shelters could NOT meet their operating expenses without fundraising and 14% could not meet their operating expenses even with fundraising.
 - c) Almost half (47%) of second stage shelters indicated that they did not receive funding from their main funder to do prevention and awareness work.
 - d) The vast majority of second stage shelters (90%) do not have fundraisers on staff, often leaving overburdened frontline staff to take on fundraising responsibilities just to keep the doors open.
- b) There is a significant lack of Indigenous second stage shelters both on and off First Nations reserves. Investments are needed to ensure that Indigenous women fleeing violence have access to second stage housing as part of the continuum of addressing VAW. 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, calling for Canada to “fund and provide equal, equitable, and culturally appropriate shelter services and programming for First Nations shelters.”

Recommendations

The role of second stage 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 second stage shelters in Canada must be increased to respond to (a) the need for transitional housing with VAW-specific supports and (b) the fact that far too many rural, remote, Northern, and Indigenous communities do not have second stage shelters at all.

- a) Inuit women are particularly underserved. For example, Nunavut is the only province or territory in Canada that does not have any second stage shelters. We support Nunavut VAW shelters in advocating for second stage shelters in their territory.

2. Sustainable, core operational funding for all second stage shelters is required,⁸ 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 at least one staff person on-site 24/7 should be included as part of core funding.
- c) Funding is needed to support second stage shelters in developing, upgrading, and retrofitting fully accessible apartment units so that all women fleeing violence can access second stage shelters.
- 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 second stage shelters to ensure that Indigenous women have access to culturally appropriate supports during their stay.
- f) More resources and training are needed for second stage 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 second stage shelter buildings.

3. 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. A 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.

- ¹ 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.
- ² VAW shelters provide short-term shelter to women in crisis. Length of stay can be days, weeks, or months, depending on the shelter.
- ³ Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS). (2017). "A Safe Path Home: Solving homelessness and domestic violence in Alberta." Available online at <https://acws.ca/collaborate-document/2854/view>; Baker, C. K., Nolon, P. H., & Oliphant, H. (2009). "A descriptive analysis of transitional housing programs for survivors of intimate partner violence in the United States." *Violence Against Women*, 15(4), 460-481; Clark D., Wood, L., & Sullivan, C. (2018a). "Examining the needs and experiences of domestic violence survivors in transitional housing." *Journal of Family Violence*, 1-12; Clark, D., Wood, L., & Sullivan, C. (2018b, June). "Technical report: exploring domestic violence survivors need for transitional housing." Available online at <https://safehousingpartnerships.org/sites/default/files/2018-06/Clark-Wood-Sullivan-Transitional%20housing%20Technical%20Report-6-2018.pdf>; Novac, S., Brown, J., & Bourbonnais, C. (2009). "Transitional Housing Models in Canada: Options and Outcomes." In Hulchanski, D., Campsie, P., Chau, S., Hwang, S., & Paradis, E. (eds.) *Finding Home: Policy Options for Addressing Homelessness in Canada* (e-book), Chapter 1.1. Toronto: Cities Centre, University of Toronto. Available online at <https://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/11-transitional-housing-models-canada-options-and-outcomes>; Tanguy, A., Cousineau, M., & Fedida, G. (2017, September). "Impact des services en maison d'hébergement de deuxième étape : rapport de recherche." Montreal, QC. Available online at <http://www.alliance2e.org/files/rechercheimpactfinal.pdf>.
- ⁴ Mixed shelters house both a short-term VAW shelter and longer-term second stage shelter in the same building under one administration.
- ⁵ Maki, K. (2019). "More than a Bed: A National Profile of VAW Shelters and Transition Houses." Ottawa, ON: Women's Shelters Canada. Available online at <https://endvaw.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/More-Than-a-Bed-Final-Report.pdf>.
- ⁶ Clark et al. (2018a, 2018b); Correia, A. & Melbin, A. (2005). "Transitional housing services for victims of domestic violence." Washington, DC: U.S. Housing Committee of the National Task Force to End Sexual and Domestic Violence; Mekolichick, J., Davis, J., & Choulnard, J. (2008). "Transitional Supportive Housing in a Rural Location: A Preliminary Case Study and Lessons Learned." *Journal of Applied Social Science*, 2(1), 36-46; Wendt, S. & Baker, J. (2013). "Aboriginal women's perceptions and experiences of a family violence transitional accommodation service." *Australian Social Work*, 66(4), 511-527; Canadian Housing and Mortgage Corporation. (1997). "A Place to Go: An Evaluation of the Next Step Program for Second Stage Housing in Canada." Available online at http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2018/schl-cmhc/nh15/NH15-191-1997-eng.pdf; BC Housing. (2012). "Understanding Women's Second Stage Housing Programs in BC." Available online at <https://www.bchousing.org/library/vulnerable-distinct/understanding-womens-second-stage-housing-programs-bc&sortType=sortByDate>.
- ⁷ Note that these percentages are a subset of the data. Response numbers are indicated in the text in the relevant sections of the report.
- ⁸ As of 2019, second stage shelters in Saskatchewan and Newfoundland and Labrador do not receive provincial government funding.

