



BREAKING THE CYCLE OF ABUSE AND CLOSING THE HOUSING GAP

SECOND STAGE SHELTERS IN CANADA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**WOMEN'S
SHELTERS
CANADA**

Shelters and
Transition Houses
United to End Violence
Against Women

Women's Shelters Canada

Women's Shelters Canada (WSC) is based in Ottawa, Ontario. 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.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Second stage shelters are a form of transitional supportive housing for survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) who are at risk of danger post-separation and need additional time and support to heal from their trauma and rebuild their lives. Many are affiliated or connected to violence against women (VAW) emergency shelters and were created out of an identified need for safe and affordable longer-term housing with accompanying provisions for IPV survivors. Second stage shelters offer wrap-around support and afford survivors additional time and space to heal, develop independence, establish long-term goals, build community and networks of support, access programming, and transition to a life free from violence.

There are over 124 second stage shelters in Canada,¹ yet there is a significant lack of research and knowledge about these organizations. With the support of research funding from the Canada Housing and Mortgage Corporation (CMHC), Women's Shelters Canada (WSC) embarked on a pan-Canadian mixed methods study on second stage shelters. The purpose of this study was to fill the research and policy gap and highlight the work of second stage shelters for survivors of violence. This study is the first of its kind in Canada. It addresses knowledge gaps in the spectrum of supports for IPV survivors and explores how second stage shelters break the cycle of abuse and close the housing gap.

This study situates violence against women at the centre of its inquiry into second stage shelters; this has shaped all aspects of the research design, questions, and analysis, as well as the approach to interviews and collaboration with participating second stage shelters. The project centres the lived experiences of survivors and is community-driven, collaborative, participatory, and action-oriented, with an overarching goal of creating impactful social change.²

This study builds on the foundational knowledge of WSC's 2019 survey report, "Transitioning to a

Life Free from Violence: Second Stage Shelters in Canada."³ The current study consists of four key parts: an extensive literature review, a national survey, interviews with survivors and executive directors, and two focus groups. The survey received 97 responses – a 72% response rate – from every province and territory except Nunavut, where there are currently no second stage shelters. Seventeen interviews were conducted with five executive directors, six current residents, and six former residents of second stage shelters in British Columbia, the Yukon, Ontario, Quebec, and Newfoundland and Labrador. The final stage of the research consisted of two focus groups held in Ottawa on February 21, 2020. Participants were split into two groups of eight to discuss preliminary research findings, knowledge mobilization, and advocacy strategies, bringing their unique regional experiences and insights to the discussion.

These data sources combined to provide powerful insights into how second stage shelters help survivors meet their individual goals, the wrap-around supports they offer, how they are structured, funding challenges, service delivery limitations, bricks and mortar, safety and security, staffing, and programming. Each section

of the report weaves together survey, interview, and focus group data to provide a rich, in-depth account of these shelters' life-saving work.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Second stage shelters are an integral aspect of the continuum of supports for IPV survivors, providing them with the time and space to heal, plan for the future, and achieve independence. Many second stage shelters operate from a feminist, trauma-informed, and survivor-centred philosophy. Survivors interviewed for this study shared that time, space, staff, programs, and the community and support networks they developed during their stay were integral to becoming self-sufficient and leading violence-free lives. For some survivors, it was the first time in their lives that they had felt safe and at "home," while others said that staying at the second stage shelter "saved their lives."

We cannot deny the affordable housing crisis in Canada and the barriers it creates for survivors to leave their abusers. For this reason, housing supports are a vital aspect of the programming many second stage shelters offer. These supports include helping residents look for housing, tenancy education, advocacy with landlords, and financial assistance.

While establishing housing is a crucial aspect of women rebuilding their lives and gaining independence, the results of this study demonstrate that housing is just one benefit of second stage shelters. Establishing safety, health and wellbeing, and economic independence, and developing an understanding of abuse to break the cycle of violence are also important goals for survivors. Second stage shelter wrap-around supports are available to survivors long after they have moved into permanent housing, as many shelters offer follow-up supports to ensure the success of graduated residents.

Frontline workers at second stage shelters are pivotal in assisting survivors to identify their short and long-term goals, develop self-care strategies, work on healthy relationships, and acquire new life skills. Programming and counselling are at the core of this transformative work. The number and types of programs vary from shelter to shelter, but the majority offer individual and group counselling, programs for children, and life skills programs. Children's programming is essential to the health and wellbeing of the family unit. Many second stage shelters provide legal and court support, but few have a legal support worker on-site. Legal supports are greatly needed by survivors to assist them with navigating family law, divorce, custody, and access visits, which for some can drag out for years following a separation.

The lack of sustainable funding for second stage shelters significantly impacts their ability to provide all the necessary programs and supports to keep survivors safe and moving towards independence. Many second stage shelters across Canada rely on fundraising to meet their operating costs. Second stage shelters in Newfoundland and Labrador, Saskatchewan, and Ontario do not receive any sustainable provincial government funding. This has a particular impact on staffing as funding limitations restrict the number of staff that second stage shelters can hire. Overall, more staff are needed, especially specialized workers for children's programming, legal support, and housing support.

KEY FINDINGS

- 1. Second stage shelters are a unique type of transitional housing. They provide specialized wrap-around supports for IPV survivors, including expertise in gender-based violence, survivor-centred programming, counselling, housing-related support, and safety planning.**

- a. Support continues after residents have moved out; the majority (85%) of survey respondents indicated that former residents continue to access supports, services, and programs.

2. There are different models of second stage shelters in Canada, based on local needs, availability of resources, funding, and capacity of VAW organizations. Among the survey respondents:

- a. The majority (75%) were affiliated with a VAW emergency shelter.
- b. Over three-quarters (80%) were stand-alone buildings.
- c. The majority (82%) reported that their apartment units were self-contained (i.e. residents do not share a unit with anyone else).
- d. The majority (83%) owned their buildings, with 29% having a forgivable loan with CMHC.

3. Service providers and current and former residents of second stage shelters emphasized the importance of having time and space to pause and plan for the next steps. This enables survivors to identify and achieve their short and long-term goals, acquire housing, begin the healing process, and live violence-free lives.

- a. The additional time afforded in second stage helps women avoid homelessness and secure permanent housing. Survey respondents indicated that 76% of women leaving their shelter had secured permanent housing within the past year (n=64).

4. Survivors identified building community and networks of support as critical aspects of their healing journey. Living

independently but within a community of women with shared experiences helped women break the silence around abuse, feel less alone, and build new friendships.

5. Second stage shelters are integral to the continuum of supports for women and children fleeing violence. Yet, comprehensive and sustainable funding to do this life-saving work is a major challenge facing second stage shelters:

- a. While 71% of survey respondents received some form of provincial or territorial funding, it was often inconsistent and partial funding that did not cover the operational budget (e.g. staff salaries).
- b. Second stage shelters in Newfoundland and Labrador, Saskatchewan, and Ontario do not receive any sustainable provincial government funding. Only two provinces (Quebec and Alberta) get recurring core funding from their provincial governments.
- c. On-reserve First Nations shelters are at a particular disadvantage as the per-diem funding for Indigenous women in emergency shelters does not apply to second stage shelters.
- d. There is a pressing need for additional funding for legal support workers, additional children's programming, and to support and house women with precarious immigration status.
- e. Second stage shelters are more than bricks and mortar. There is an urgent need for new builds to have programming dollars attached.
- f. Service providers recognize the value of feedback and evaluation from survivors on the usefulness of their programs and services. However, evaluation fatigue, inconsistent evaluation models, and ineffective assessments from government funders do not help second stage shelters

improve their programs or services for survivors and create additional work and strain on already overburdened teams.

6. Frontline workers in second stage shelters are experts in gender-based violence and offer programs, counselling, and support for current and former residents. However, recruiting and maintaining quality staff is a challenge:

- a. The majority (88%) of survey respondents employ staff on-site.
- b. Second stage shelters reported an average of four full-time, two part-time, and five casual workers per shelter.
- c. The main types of workers are support workers, child and youth workers, administration/property assistants, executive directors, program supervisors, and administration/finance workers.
- d. Housing workers/advocates were identified as an important staff position in second stage shelters, yet only 26% had the means to employ one.
- e. Many second stage shelters rely on fundraising to cover workers' salaries.
- f. Low salaries have resulted in high turnover and loss of staff.

stalked, and abused by their former partners long after the relationship has ended.⁴

- b. Research has demonstrated that separation is a significant risk factor for femicide and that "women are at the greatest risk of lethal violence within the first several months following their separation."⁵
- c. Second stage shelters provide safe and affordable housing with wrap-around IPV supports for women and children fleeing violence, thereby reducing the risk of future abuse, trauma, and femicide. Not investing in second stage housing as part of the continuum of supports for IPV survivors could result in the loss of women's lives.

2. The number of second stage shelters in rural, remote, and northern communities must be increased.

- a. There are limited second stage shelters in these regions due to the critical affordable housing shortage; additional costs to build in the North; fewer opportunities to partner with housing organizations; and barriers to local fundraising.

3. The number of second stage shelters in Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) communities must be increased across the country.

- a. Considering that Indigenous women and girls face higher rates of IPV and femicide in rural, remote and northern areas⁶ alongside fewer supports, there needs to be an increase in Indigenous second stage shelters in these areas in particular.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The number of second stage shelters for IPV survivors must be increased across Canada to prevent violence, abuse, and femicide:

- a. Abuse does not end following a separation. Many survivors continue to be harassed,

4. Sustainable, core operational funding for all second stage shelters is required, as are yearly increases in accordance with standard of living costs. This core recurrent funding must include:

- a. Funding to maintain quality staff with competitive salaries. This includes professional development and training opportunities.
- b. Programming dollars. Second stage shelters are more than bricks and mortar and provide specialized IPV supports for survivors of violence. Funding for new builds should have programming dollars attached to ensure that programming can be delivered consistently.
- c. Funding for ongoing repairs and building maintenance.

5. Funders must financially support the range of services that second stage shelters provide, including:

- a. Child and youth programs
- b. Housing specific supports
- c. Legal education and representation
- d. Designated units for women with precarious immigration status
- e. Follow-up supports for graduated residents
- f. Support for mental health and substance use issues, low-barrier, harm reduction, trauma-informed practices

6. Immediately increase social and affordable housing units while also increasing second stage shelters for IPV survivors who need more support.

- a. Establish mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the National Housing Strategy's (NHS) allocation of affordable housing funding and new second stage housing builds for domestic violence (DV)/IPV survivors.
- b. Review and evaluate CMHC's Co-Investment Funding application and process for barriers that may hinder NHS goals to create more shelter spaces and units for DV/IPV survivors. Ensure that the application is accessible and attainable for shelters so that more second stage shelters can be built or renovated.
- c. CMHC co-investment funding must recognize and account for the specific needs of new second stage shelter builds, including larger units, trauma-informed design, and communal spaces.
- d. Ensure that the NHS meets the Universal Design Standard (25% of units are accessible) in second stage shelter builds.

7. Address the disconnects between VAW shelter/anti-violence sectors and government funders and establish collaboration and communication among them.

For government funders (municipal, provincial and territorial, and federal):

- a. The yet to be developed National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence and the National Housing Strategy must work together to address service and support gaps for IPV survivors.
- b. CMHC should conduct research to obtain national-level data on the social and affordable housing needs of IPV survivors.

- c. Recognize, include, and adequately fund the expertise of the VAW sector and second stage shelters in the continuum of supports for IPV survivors.
- d. Governments need to work with second stage shelters to develop better evaluation tools to improve services and respond to need. This must be guided by second stage shelters and/or their provincial and territorial associations alongside administrative funding dollars for doing this work.
- e. To accurately capture the real impacts of second stage shelters, qualitative methods (e.g. interviews and focus groups) with survivors are needed to measure the long-term effects of second stage shelters. Researchers who carry out this work must be well-versed in IPV and put measures in place to minimize potential harm as well as empower participants.⁷ This includes but is not limited to ongoing informed consent; allowing a support person to be present; contact information for follow-up support (e.g. counsellors); explaining the benefits of participating in the research; explaining the potential harm of participating in the interview; and maintaining confidentiality.⁸

Collaboration Across Sectors:

- a. Provincial and territorial housing corporations that work with shelters should receive VAW 101 training and create a liaison staff position specifically for IPV housing interventions.
- b. WSC supports the MMIWG Inquiry Calls to Justice (4.6 and 4.7)⁹ for new housing to meet the needs of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people and long-term sustainable funding for a range of Indigenous-led supportive housing for IPV survivors:

4.6 We call upon all governments to immediately commence the construction of new housing and the provision of repairs for existing housing to meet the housing needs of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people. This construction and provision of repairs must ensure that Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people have access to housing that is safe, appropriate to geographic and cultural needs, and available wherever they reside, whether in urban, rural, remote, or Indigenous communities.

4.7 We call upon all governments to support the establishment and long-term sustainable funding of Indigenous-led low-barrier shelters, safe spaces, transition homes, second-stage housing, and services for Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people who are homeless, near homeless, dealing with food insecurity, or in poverty, and who are fleeing violence or have been subjected to sexualized violence and exploitation. All governments must ensure that shelters, transitional housing, second-stage housing, and services are appropriate to cultural needs, and available wherever Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people reside.

- c. WSC supports the Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network's call for a diverse national advisory body that includes the women's homelessness sector and the VAW sector to guide and monitor policy responses to COVID-19.¹⁰ WSC recommends that this advisory body continues to work collaboratively on policy related to the intersection of VAW and women's homelessness beyond the pandemic.

ENDNOTES

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