



Labour Issues and Worker Wellness
in the VAW Shelter Sector

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 16 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
130 Albert Street, Suite 300 Ottawa ON K1P 5G4

Phone: 613-680-5119

Email: info@endvaw.ca

Website: www.endvaw.ca

Social Media: [@endvawnetwork](https://twitter.com/endvawnetwork)

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About the authors

Robyn Hoogendam, PhD
Manager, Research and Policy

Krys Maki, PhD
Former: Director of Research and Policy, Current: Assistant Professor, Saint Paul University

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

VAW shelters and transition houses (THs) are able to offer vital services to those attempting to live free of violence because of talented, passionate, and dedicated staff members. While the backbone of shelters/THs are its people, organizations are struggling to recruit and retain staff, and staff are facing issues of burnout, exhaustion, vicarious trauma, and overall lack of wellness in their workplaces.

The provincial and territorial shelter/TH associations identified the sector-wide labour crisis as an area in need of more research. Women's Shelters Canada, together with a project advisory committee of VAW shelter/TH leaders, developed a pan-Canadian study of labour issues impacting the sector. The study included a survey, focus groups, and a national symposium.

In partnership with the Victimology Research Centre (VRC) at Algonquin College, we collaborated on the design of a national online survey. The survey had a wide scope to reach diverse staff working in victim-serving organizations, including shelter/TH workers (management, frontline, and administrative staff). It was launched by the VRC in Winter 2021 and closed on May 31, 2022. The survey was completed by 314 shelter workers from nearly all areas of the country.

Additionally, five national focus groups and one interview were held with shelter/TH management, frontline staff, former staff, and the provincial and territorial associations over Summer 2022. Overall, we connected with 45 individuals.

The report provides information on: the scope of the labour crisis; elements that contribute to staff retention or turnover; recruitment; systemic issues contributing to labour issues; pandemic-specific challenges; feminist leadership; the study symposium; and recommendations.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Labour issues are not new to the sector. These have been heavily influenced by government funding which has not increased with inflation or rising workloads. Given funding constraints, wages are not keeping pace with inflation, which is contributing to staff turnover. While people are passionate about this work, because of low wages and high workloads, individuals are leaving the sector for other related fields which can pay higher salaries, often in the public sector.

The data shows that staff of VAW shelters/THs at all levels are experiencing high levels of exhaustion and burnout. Staff are working long hours, including being on-call and working overtime. As the rates and severity of violence have increased and cases have become more complex during the COVID-19 pandemic,¹ staff feel like they are working harder than ever. Given this situation, organizations are struggling to retain and recruit staff.

Despite the challenges, workers remain passionate and committed to the work of ending gender-based violence. Through this work, staff

¹ Women's Shelters Canada (2022). Shelters Voices 2022. <https://endvaw.ca/shelter-voices-2022>

are growing and learning. By witnessing the resilience of those coming into shelters, staff build their own resiliency and hope, and become better in their roles as helpers.

Organizations are finding innovative ways to retain staff, and maintain high-quality services for those rebuilding their lives after leaving violence. While they are working from a place of scarcity, they are trying to build strong internal environments that make staff feel connected, heard, and appreciated. When staff feel supported, they are more likely to remain with an organization.

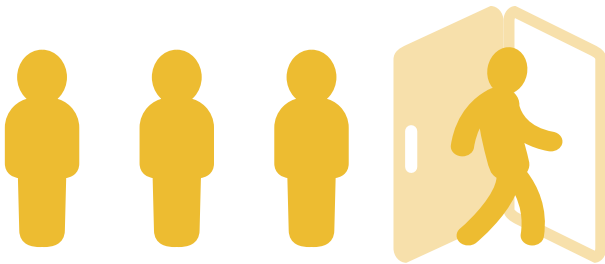
VAW shelters/THs are putting substantial efforts into keeping staff in this work. Without a stable funding environment that provides more competitive salaries, organizations will continue to see high level of turnover.

KEY FINDINGS

The key findings of this report are:

1 Many staff are leaving or thinking of leaving their current positions or even the sector altogether.

- More than **one-quarter (28%)** of survey respondents indicated that they thought about quitting their job.



- **Average salaries** in the VAW shelter/TH sector remain **below those of the general economy**, particularly for non-management staff.

66%

OF NON-MANAGERS OR SUPERVISORS REPORTED EARNING LESS THAN \$50K

- Nearly one-third of survey respondents reported that they **worked an additional job** to supplement their income.



32%

2 Staff are struggling with their mental health, and the pandemic contributed to decreased overall mental wellbeing.

- Among survey respondents, **79% had experiences of trauma** in their personal and/or professional life.
- When asked about their pandemic experience, 47% of survey respondents reported **declines in their mental health.**



3 High workloads and increasingly complex cases are contributing to burnout and retention issues.

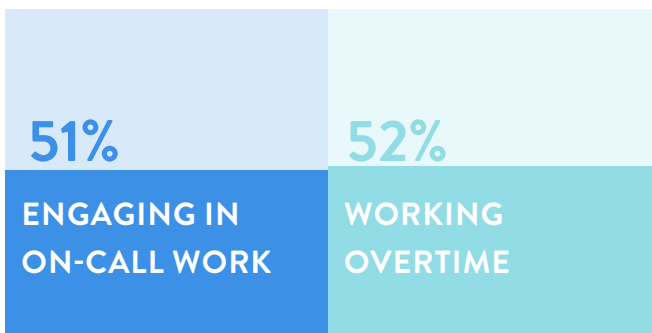
- Staff have high caseloads, with one-fifth of survey respondents indicating that their **caseload was 20 or more clients.**



- Nearly one-third (31%) of respondents often **felt overwhelmed by their caseload.**



- As staff turnover increases, existing staff are taking on more work which is contributing to **overwork and burnout.**



4 Through the study several key factors were identified that, if present, support the development of a healthy work environment:

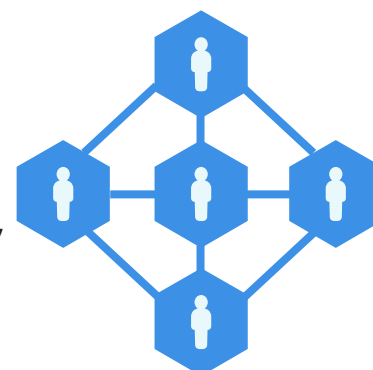
- **Appreciation and connection**
- **Strong communication and management**
- **Adequate compensation, benefits, and professional development**
- **Self- and collective care**
- **Work-life balance, support for heavy workloads, and flexibility**

5 Staff largely feel supported in their workplaces and connected to their colleagues.

- Among survey respondents, more than three-quarters (77%) were **satisfied with their relationships with their colleagues**, and over 70% (71%) were **satisfied with their relationships with their supervisors.**



- Organizations are attempting to **foster healthy community and communication** among staff through regular debriefing sessions, case management team meetings, and more informal social activities.



By engaging in this work, survey respondents reported that they saw their vicarious resilience² increase. Overall, they were better able to support survivors without taking on the negative effects of the trauma people

² Vicarious resilience is the positive impact of repeat exposure to witnessing positive coping skills, problem-solving, and courage, which in turn builds the helper's personal capacity to respond to adversity. These impacts include increased capacity for resourcefulness, attentiveness to clients, and self-efficacy (Killian, 2017).

share, while also growing and learning through their experiences with client resilience and resistance.

Organizations may be struggling, but at the Symposium participants shared many ideas for moving forward collectively. There was a strong sense of connection and hope, and the potential for taking forward a set of actions to support the work (and workers) of the sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS

VAW shelters/THs are a vital resource in combatting violence in our communities. To maintain a high quality of service for those fleeing violence, the labour crisis must be addressed. Women's Shelters Canada recommends:

1 Stable Funding

Organizations need to be provided with stable government funding, which increases over time with inflation and living costs. This includes an adequate number of staff positions, including administrative and management staff, and the capacity to double staff for night and weekend shifts.

2 Decent Work

All employees in the sector should have access to a living wage, paid sick days, a pension or retirement savings, and be recognized as essential workers (like other emergency frontline services). Working in this sector should not contribute to precarity.

3 Workplace Injury

Like many other first responders, there needs to be more recognition of the psychological harm that can come from doing VAW work. With this recognition, workers would have greater access to Workers' Compensation Board benefits for psychological injuries.

4 Human Resources (HR) Supports

Organizations indicated that they need funding for HR supports. As shelters/THs are small, many do not have dedicated HR supports. A funded provincial resource, consultant, or working group that could provide information and training would be valuable.