

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR

SECOND STAGE SHELTERS



WOMEN'S
SHELTERS
CANADA

HÉBERGEMENT
FEMMES
CANADA

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INTRODUCTION

This guide provides an overview of the different practices and approaches used by second stage shelters across the country. We hope this document will help orient organizations opening second stage shelters for the first time, while also providing affirmation and new ideas for existing second stage shelters.

Second stage shelters are an essential part of the continuum of supports available for survivors of domestic violence in Canada. Many survivors are not ready or able to move into independent housing after a brief stay in an emergency shelter. By combining longer-term housing with wrap-around supports, second stage shelters enable survivors to move further along the path to healing from abuse.

While second stage shelters face many of the same challenges as emergency shelters, they also have unique needs, challenges, interests, and practices. Recognizing this, Women's Shelters Canada (WSC) launched a Community of Practice (CoP) on Second Stage Shelter Operations in 2024 to create a dedicated space for second stage shelters to connect with and learn from one another. This CoP brought together just over 20 second stage shelters from across the country to share their experiences, learn from each other, and collectively strengthen their practices. The CoP culminated in a national virtual gathering in November 2025, open to all second stage shelters across the country. This guide compiles the key takeaways from all these conversations.

Each section of this guide covers a different aspect of second stage shelter operations. It summarizes the various approaches used across the country and shares some things to keep in mind as you decide on your approach. At the end of the document, you will find profiles of a few shelters located in different parts of the country that show how all of this might look in practice in a single organization. Throughout the guide, you will also find notes from the national virtual gathering, highlighting what is working right now for shelters across the country and their vision for the future.

There is no single right way to do things, as each shelter is unique. This guide is not about sharing answers or identifying the "best" approach. Instead, our goal is to provide some insight into the many different approaches used across the country to spark ideas and reflection. We encourage you to take what works for you in your context, and leave what doesn't.



ADMISSION

This section looks at who second stage shelters accept, how they make those decisions, and what the process looks like.



WHO CAN ACCESS SECOND STAGE SHELTER?

- Some second stage shelters only accept survivors who have stayed in an emergency shelter.
- Some second stage shelters also accept referrals from other community organizations or coordinated access lists, not just from emergency shelters.
- In some cases, second stage shelters accept self-referrals from survivors.

DO SECOND STAGE SHELTERS ACCEPT CHILDREN AND YOUTH?



- Most second stage shelters allow dependent children up to age 18.
- Some make exceptions for children who are older than 18 if they have specific needs or are in school.
- A few shelters allow “dependents” without specifying an age limit.
- A few second stage shelters only accept single women or women with very young children (e.g. 0-5 years). Shelters that only accept single women may still support pre-arranged visits with children who are not in the resident’s custody.

WHAT ARE THE ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA?

Different organizations have different eligibility criteria and/or weigh them differently.

Some organizations prioritize survivors at the highest risk of ongoing violence, while others also consider factors such as housing need. The decision about criteria and priorities can depend on factors such as:

- Organizational mission and mandates. In some regions, funders may specify who is eligible for shelter and what criteria must be prioritized or considered.
- The local context. For example, shelters located in communities with a severe shortage of affordable housing may weigh housing needs more heavily than those in areas with greater access to subsidized or affordable housing options.
- Factors unique to the shelter. For example, if a second stage shelter is located in a public area or if it shares space with other agencies, it may not be able to offer the level of security and confidentiality required by survivors at high risk of ongoing violence.

Some shelters also have additional criteria that they consider, such as:

- The survivor's ability to live independently
- Whether they are on a housing/subsidy list
- Whether they have stayed at an emergency shelter and for how long
- Willingness to meet programming requirements, such as regular meetings with their worker or participating in group activities
- Willingness to meet programming requirements such as regular meetings with their worker or participating in group activities



DO SECOND STAGE SHELTERS KEEP WAITLISTS?

Given that survivors stay at second stage shelters for longer periods and many second stage shelters have only a few units, spots do not open up very often.

- ➔ Some shelters keep waitlists and check in with those on the waitlist to see if they are still interested and eligible when units become available.
- ➔ Given the length of time it takes for spots to open up, some organizations find that applications are out of date by the time a spot is available. Instead of keeping a waitlist, they notify referral partners when openings come up and/or speak with survivors who contact them around that time.
- ➔ The decision about whether to maintain a waitlist or not may depend on the size of the shelter and how often units turn over, how many referrals they get from partners, and how long it typically takes survivors to find alternative housing in their community.



WHAT IS THE ADMISSION PROCESS?

Steps may include:



An application form



An interview with staff to confirm eligibility and expectations. This may include scenario-based questions to assess whether the survivor is a fit for communal living.



A decision by staff based on the information collected. Many shelters indicated the importance of this being a collaborative decision. In some cases, this might be all staff; in others, a few specific staff; or there may be a dedicated admissions committee.



PROGRAM AGREEMENTS

All second stage shelters require residents to sign some kind of agreement when they move in. In some cases, residents sign something like a rental agreement. In other cases, they sign program agreements. Sometimes they sign both a rental agreement and a program agreement. This will often depend on jurisdictional or funding requirements; the type of agreement signed can affect whether residents are considered tenants under the local Residential Tenancy Act.

Program agreements outline the **expectations and responsibilities** of the resident and the shelter, as well as the supports they can expect to receive while in shelter.



PROGRAM AGREEMENTS GENERALLY COVER:

SERVICES AND APPROACH

An explanation of the clinical or supportive services available, and how the shelter delivers these services

PROGRAMMING REQUIREMENTS

Expectations around participation in counselling, structured activities, and group sessions

LENGTH OF STAY

Policies on how long residents may stay, renewal processes, and conditions under which stays can be extended or ended

CODE OF CONDUCT

Rules around respectful behaviour, nonviolence, confidentiality, smoking, alcohol and drug use, pet policies, use of common spaces, and fire safety

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS

Housing fees, deposits, rent payment schedules, and policies around damages or cleaning fees

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

How breaches of the agreement are addressed. In general, this involves multiple stages, such as an initial verbal notice or conversation, a written warning that the resident must acknowledge, and a final warning that can lead to either immediate dismissal, if there are safety concerns, or dismissal following a 30- to 60-day notice period. The earlier steps often explore why a resident has been unable to follow the requirements and identify supports or strategies to help them adhere to the requirements moving forward.

USERS' BILL OF RIGHTS

Some shelters include a Users' Bill of Rights that outlines what the resident can expect from the shelter in terms of privacy, support, rights, etc.

END OF STAY

Requirements for notice periods, conditions for early termination, and re-entry policies

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Although residents in second stage shelters have their own units, it is still a communal living environment, and conflicts can arise. To prevent and address conflict, shelters will try approaches such as:

- ➔ Offering training or programming for residents on conflict management, boundaries, non-violent communication, and constructive approaches to conflict
- ➔ Setting expectations and discussing concerns at intake meetings and group meetings
- ➔ Hosting a discussion between two survivors in conflict with a staff mediator

Overall, program agreements are a key tool for balancing the autonomy of individual second stage housing residents with the need to create a supportive and secure environment at the shelter for all residents. They also underscore that second stage shelter is not simply housing, but a space with dedicated programming and supports to help a survivor heal and rebuild.

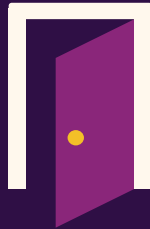


INTAKE & MOVE-IN

The intake and move-in process is a critical transition period for survivors entering a second stage shelter. Shelters emphasized the importance of preparing residents for the emotional, practical, and social adjustments that come with moving into a more independent living environment.

INTAKE PROCESS:

Once a resident has been approved to move into the shelter, the intake process varies from shelter to shelter. Some of the steps may include:



- ➔ Reviewing the program/resident agreement with the resident to ensure they understand expectations and responsibilities, and having them sign the agreement
- ➔ Setting up a crisis plan that identifies an emergency contact who can care for the survivor's children in case of a medical emergency or if the mother has used substances
- ➔ Establishing the survivor's needs and setting goals for their stay in shelter
- ➔ Orientation to the building, the programming offered, and the other residents


ADJUSTMENT AND TRANSITION CHALLENGES


Moving from first stage or emergency shelter to second stage shelter requires significant adaptation. This transition may involve:


- ➔ Building a new support relationship with a different worker or case manager
- ➔ Leaving familiar routines and community, including bonds formed with other women in communal living
- ➔ Managing increased independence, such as caring for their unit, budgeting, and navigating daily responsibilities, such as cooking for themselves
- ➔ Feelings of isolation as they shift from a shared environment to a more private unit


SUPPORTING SURVIVORS THROUGH THE TRANSITION

Shelters can ease this transition through strategies such as:

- 

Clear orientation processes that include walkthroughs of the unit, building, and program expectations
- 

Frequent check-ins during the first weeks to help women settle, address challenges early, and reduce isolation
- 

Providing practical supports such as helping with grocery access, budgeting, transportation, or connecting to community services
- 

Peer connection opportunities to help survivors rebuild a sense of community in a less communal setting than emergency shelters

A thoughtful intake and move-in process can significantly reduce stress, strengthen safety, and support survivors as they take on more independence in their housing journey.



RENT & DEPOSITS:

RENT:

Most second stage shelters collect rent from residents, although the amounts vary widely:

- ➔ In regions where second stage shelters do not receive operational funding from their provincial governments, residents are often required to pay market rent or something close to it. In this case, shelters will work with residents to connect them with social assistance or other programs that can help them pay their rent.
- ➔ Many shelters will set rent as a percentage of the resident's income and/or will align their rents with social housing rates in their community.
- ➔ For residents who receive social assistance, rent payments are often set up to go directly to the shelter.



DEPOSITS:

- ➔ Some shelters collect damage deposits and/or last month's rent in case there is any damage or any missing items upon departure. In this case, the room is reviewed with the resident upon departure to evaluate if anything needs to be replaced.
- ➔ Sometimes, the deposit amount is relatively small and intended as a deterrent rather than to cover actual damage costs. Other shelters may encourage residents to replace small items rather than taking it out of their deposit (e.g. if plates have been broken, the resident can get new ones at a dollar store rather than forfeiting their damage deposit).
- ➔ Some shelters rely on partnerships with social services boards or other agencies to cover damaged or missing items, rather than collecting damage deposits. This kind of arrangement can also allow residents to take furnishings with them when moving out of the shelter, saving them some of the costs of setting up their own apartment.



PROGRAMMING

Second stage shelters are not just housing; they are intended to help survivors heal and rebuild after experiencing violence. Some shelters frame their work as programming that comes with housing, rather than the other way around, to emphasize the importance of this aspect.

At a minimum, residents in second stage shelters are expected to meet regularly with their support worker. This could mean weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly meetings. Sometimes the sessions are more regular for the first few months and become more spaced out as progress is made. Beyond these one-on-one support meetings, there is a wide range of programming offered in second stage shelters across the country.

OPTIONAL VS. MANDATORY PROGRAMMING

Some second stage shelters have mandatory programming, while others offer optional programming. Here are some things to consider when making this decision:



Funders may require programming to be mandatory.



Shelters may decide to make some core programming mandatory to ensure residents are achieving their objectives, such as developing skills they need for independent living and taking steps to rebuild from violence, while offering other programming on an optional basis.



Mandatory programming can be a barrier for some residents. Shelters considering mandatory programming must consider whether they are willing to end someone's stay for not participating.



Some shelters find a middle ground by making the regular meetings with support workers mandatory, while keeping all other programming optional.



If programming is optional, it may be challenging to ensure residents are participating (see below for suggestions to tackle this).

STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION:

➔ **Make programming relevant:** Offer sessions based on participants' identified needs and interests.

➔ **Make programming flexible:** Different times of day, shorter sessions, or rotating days. Include both group and one-on-one options to accommodate comfort levels.

➔ **Create a welcoming, safe environment:** Foster a non-judgmental, supportive atmosphere where participants feel comfortable joining. Use icebreakers or informal social time to reduce barriers for new participants. Highlight confidentiality and privacy practices, especially in group sessions.

➔ **Incentivize participation:** Offer small rewards or recognition, like gift cards, certificates, or shared treats. Celebrate attendance milestones or contributions in a visible way.

➔ **Integrate fun and variety:** Include interactive, hands-on activities (crafts, games, cooking, creative projects).

➔ **Peer involvement and leadership:** Encourage participants to lead parts of a session or share skills/experiences. Use peer mentors to model engagement and share benefits.

➔ **Clear communication and promotion:** Use posters, flyers, text messages, or announcements to remind participants of upcoming sessions. Explain the purpose and benefits of each session clearly, highlighting why participation is valuable.

➔ **Remove practical barriers:** Provide childcare, transportation support, or meals/snacks.

➔ **Solicit feedback and adapt:** Ask participants what topics or formats they would like. Adjust programming based on attendance trends and participant feedback to better meet their needs.

FREQUENCY & TYPE OF PROGRAMMING:

The frequency and type of programming offered will depend on factors such as staffing, funding, and residents' interests and needs. Some examples of the types of programming offered include:

- ➔ Regular meetings with support workers
- ➔ Group sessions on topics such as domestic violence and life skills
- ➔ House meetings
- ➔ Informal gatherings such as meals, cooking, and socials
- ➔ Peer support sessions
- ➔ Drop-in sessions where residents can access computers or get support with their housing search
- ➔ Children's groups or programs
- ➔ Fun group activities outside the shelter/in the community

PROGRAMMING FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Second stage shelters offer a mix of group programming for children and youth, one-on-one support, and resources for parents, depending on capacity and funding:



Children’s and youth groups: Many shelters run group programs for children (often ages 6–12) and teens when numbers allow. These may include emotional regulation activities, creative play, and seasonal programming such as summer sessions. Some shelters share programming with emergency shelters.



Individual support: Some shelters offer weekly one-on-one sessions and individualized plans to help children feel supported, process trauma, and build skills at their own pace.



Parenting and family support: Shelters often offer parenting groups or other skills development programming for parents (sometimes run by community partners).



Childcare: When possible, shelters will offer childcare to allow residents to attend adult programming or appointments.



External supports: Some shelters do not offer dedicated children’s programming and instead help parents access daycare, subsidies, or external supports.



Informal and case-by-case support: Staff often engage in informal work, such as supporting children during stressful family dynamics or helping mothers manage daily schedules.

PROGRAMMING: INSIGHTS FROM THE NATIONAL GATHERING

WSC held a virtual national gathering for second stage shelters on November 18 and 19, 2025. During this gathering, 70 participants from across the country had the opportunity to connect and discuss the challenges facing the sector, what is working for them right now, and their visions for the future. The notes from their discussion on programming are included below.



PROGRAMMING

Second stage shelters are not just housing; they also offer programs and supports to survivors to help them rebuild their lives. The type and extent of programming offered varies across the country. Some shelters have mandatory programming for survivors, while at others it is optional. Some of the challenges that second stage shelters experience in this area include limited capacity to offer programming (staff, funding, resources, etc.) and limited ability to get survivors to participate in and engage with programming.

WHAT IS WORKING FOR YOU IN THIS AREA RIGHT NOW?

Framing second stage as a program first and foremost, a program that comes with housing	Having folks sign a program agreement	Re-sign agreements every six months to confirm commitment	Mix of mandatory and optional activities
Let women guide programming	Make it as choice-friendly as possible	Offer services in person, over the phone, etc.	Being flexible to meet women's schedules (e.g. if she works)
Childcare in nearby playroom while moms are in group	Setting a minimum number of workshops people need to attend; they pick which ones	Adapt to cultural needs of those in the shelter	Use practicum students (e.g. social work, child and youth, etc.)
Offer activities in partnership with an emergency/transition house or other agencies	Low-cost activities when there are no funds (e.g. a walk)	Art therapy for the kids	Group for moms and kids together to rebuild connection
Parenting support for mothers	Summer camps for the kids; moms can join	Self-esteem, healthy relationships, dealing with trauma	Group fitness classes in the shelter/using videos too
Wilderness trips/camping	Counselling available for all clients in-house	Dental workshops with dental students	Women cooking meals for clients and staff from their culture
Have personal supplies on hand; women can fill a bag at the group	Informal coffee & connect events to break the ice and connect to services in a casual way	Set goals and revisit these each session	

PROGRAMMING: INSIGHTS FROM THE NATIONAL GATHERING

IF YOU COULD FORGET RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS, WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE DOING IN THIS AREA? WHAT IS YOUR DREAM/VISION/IDEAL?

More outings	Workshop on being a "handy woman" so they can do stuff around the house	Fully funded, standardized, nationally guided but locally tailored implementation	Transportation to community events
Help them with shopping & purchases (e.g. winter coats)	More detox supports – spaces but also support with stigma	Survivor-led, trauma-informed, culturally-grounded	To be able to offer childcare in the evenings during groups
Have ways to support women getting to and from work (right now the shelter is far from workplaces)	Additional therapeutic supports, art therapy	Evaluation tool, with shared outcome indicators to help know what works	Extend our hours to offer programming at more times and accommodate women who work
Have a thrift store that creates opportunities for employment or volunteering	Having a nurse on-site, especially for mental health	Built-in supports for children and youth, not as an afterthought	More connections with workplaces & ways for women to get back in the workplace
Accessible therapy – like legal aid model, but therapy	Having someone specialized in substance use to offer specific services for women who need this	Dedicated group facilitators so staff aren't doing this on the side	



VISITORS

Second stage shelters across the country generally have policies on how many visitors residents can have, when they can have them, and who they are. The details of these policies vary widely, but in general, they aim to balance the need to ensure confidentiality and safety for all shelter residents with the importance of each resident having access to their support network.

For example:



Some shelters ban visitors entirely



Some shelters allow a limited number of visitors:

- In some cases, residents must select and identify their visitors ahead of time (e.g. they choose two people who can visit them at the shelter during their stay)
- In some cases, the number of visits per month or year is limited



Some shelters allow visitors but do not allow overnight guests; some shelters allow overnight guests for a limited number of nights per year



Some shelters exclude close family (e.g. grandparents) from these rules, meaning family can visit more frequently



Visitor access/presence is often logged or recorded in some way, such as by signing in and out and/or requiring copies of ID

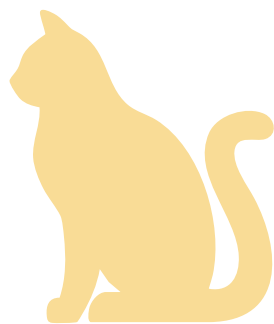


PETS

Policies on pets vary across shelters. Some shelters accept pets on-site, some arrange for pets to be fostered elsewhere (e.g. sanctuaries, kennels, foster families), and some shelters only accept service animals.

Shelters that accept pets may have guidelines or restrictions on how many and what kinds of pets they accept, often based on the shelter's size and available facilities. They may specify:

- ➔ The kinds of pets they accept (e.g. only dogs and cats)
- ➔ The size of pets they accept (e.g. only small animals)
- ➔ The number of pets they can have at a time and/or the number of pets per resident



There are many considerations when deciding to accept pets:

- ➔ Most shelters require vaccination and/or sterilization records before accepting a pet
- ➔ Most shelters will only accept pets that the resident already owns; they will not allow residents to obtain new pets while staying in shelter
- ➔ Shelters may require proof that a resident can cover expenses such as pet food and vet bills, so that the shelter does not become responsible for these costs
- ➔ Shelters may only accept pets if they have a private outdoor space connected to the shelter, as they may consider walking the pet in the neighbourhood to be a safety/confidentiality risk
- ➔ Shelters may require that pets be kept in specific locations, such as on-site kennels or in residents' rooms

Shelters that accept pets may have residents sign a pet addendum/agreement when moving in with a pet, in addition to the standard program agreement. This addendum lays out the rules and expectations around having a pet in the shelter, and may include guidelines such as:



The size or type of pet that is allowed



The responsibilities of the pet owner (e.g. to feed the pet, to care for the pet, to ensure the pet gets exercise, to clean up after the pet) and that these responsibilities are solely up to the resident



Which areas of the shelter the pet can be in



The procedure that will be followed if the pet becomes aggressive or if there is conflict with other pets and/or residents, including the conditions under which a pet would be removed from the shelter



The procedure that will be followed if a resident leaves their pet behind at the shelter, including the steps the shelter will take to contact the resident or their emergency contact and the length of time after which the shelter will rehome the pet or pass them on to a local pet rescue agency



An emergency contact who could take care of the pet in case the resident leaves, becomes unable to care for the pet, or passes away while in shelter



LENGTH & END OF STAY

LENGTH OF STAY

The length of stay differs between shelters:

- ➔ Typical lengths of stay range from 6 months to 2 years, although most shelters will consider extending a resident's stay if they are actively looking for housing or engaged in an immigration process
- ➔ Some shelters offer longer stays, such as 2-5 years, if the survivor requires additional support



END OF STAY

In most cases, a resident moves out of the shelter when they reach the maximum length of stay. As noted above, in some cases, residents will receive an extension if they are actively looking for housing, in the midst of an immigration process, or require additional support.



In some cases, residents will leave the shelter early. This may be the resident's choice, if they have found alternate housing or feel the program is not a good fit for them. Sometimes, a shelter may need to end a resident's stay earlier than planned. Some of the reasons for doing this are:

- ➔ If they are not paying their portion of rent
- ➔ If they are not following the rules, particularly around respect, confidentiality, and the safety of staff and residents
- ➔ If they are not participating in programming

The program/residency agreement will lay out the required notice periods for both the shelter and the resident.



TRANSITIONING OUT OF SHELTER:

Most second stage shelters help residents secure housing for after their time in shelter. This process often begins very early in their stay, as it can take a long time to find affordable housing or reach the top of waitlists for subsidized housing spots.

-  Some shelters have partnerships with donors or companies that allow them to support residents with moving costs, rent deposits, or furniture when they are moving into their own housing.
-  Many shelters provide some outreach or post-accommodation follow-up support to former residents who have moved out for a certain period of time after they leave.

RE-ENTRY:

Some shelters allow residents to move in for a second time on a case-by-case basis, while others do not. If this is allowed, there are often specific requirements, such as:

-  A certain length of time in between stays
-  If the resident left early or was required to leave previously, the reasons for this departure must be addressed before another stay is considered

END OF STAY: INSIGHTS FROM THE NATIONAL GATHERING

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Most second stage shelters have a set length of stay, which can vary from 6 months to 2 or even 5 years. In most shelters, there are standard procedures for ending someone’s stay early if needed, such as providing 30-60 days’ notice when possible (or less in an emergency) and helping to connect someone with other resources. Even in cases where someone’s time at the shelter has gone smoothly, there can be challenges at the end of their stay and during their transition out of shelter. It is increasingly difficult for survivors to find a safe, affordable place to move into when their time in the shelter has come to an end, and the transition to independent housing can be significant and challenging for some.

WHAT IS WORKING FOR YOU IN THIS AREA RIGHT NOW?

Be clear about expectations; this is not just housing	Transparency and predictability that end of stay is upcoming	Workshops that explain how to prepare to live in affordable housing (e.g. maintenance)	Extensions when needed because there is nowhere for them to go
Emphasize that this is temporary housing	Relationship speaks to success!	Developing financial literacy, which alludes to economic sovereignty and permanence	Offering a follow-up program beyond their end of stay as long as they need
Sense of belonging and sense of purpose need to be built	Monthly meetings to set goals and work on a discharge plan right away	When safe and affordable housing is available, end of stay is generally successful	Celebrate the end of stay!
Creating a sense of community leads to success after their stay at second stage	Building life skills into programming (e.g. paying rent, budgets)	Being firm in end of stay deadlines and expectations (e.g. sending a letter 6 months before)	Acknowledging grief and loss experience when end of stay comes up

END OF STAY: INSIGHTS FROM THE NATIONAL GATHERING

IF YOU COULD FORGET ABOUT RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS, WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE DOING IN THIS AREA? WHAT IS YOUR DREAM/VISION/IDEAL?

More affordable/third stage housing to offer, owned by the shelter

Subsidies to make market housing accessible

Security deposit, first month's rent, and ongoing subsidy

Robust peer support program that can train and pay participants for becoming mentors and/or peer support workers

More second stage units – could allow for more flexibility of length of stay

Being able to help women with unforeseen costs and make the transition less stressful

Supplement should be dependent on circumstances, not income

Continuing counselling services, life skills, and other programming to folks who have exited

Animal-friendly, dog-friendly, affordable, safe housing



REPORTING & EVALUATION

Second stage shelters collect and use data for multiple purposes, including reporting to funders, guiding internal decision-making, and understanding resident experiences.

PRACTICES INCLUDE:



Tracking information required by funders while also collecting data that helps improve internal programs and services



Colour-coding questions on a feedback form can make it easy to sort out which questions/data are for which purpose (e.g. internal review vs. funder reporting)



Using mixed methods to capture different experiences and different types of data (e.g. surveys/feedback forms, interviews, verbal feedback, and anecdotal notes)



Interviewing a variety of participants to capture both positive and negative experiences; it is helpful to do the interview in a space where the resident is comfortable (e.g. office, coffee shop, informal community space)



Tracking former residents over time to understand the impact of the shelter and its programming; some shelters ask residents who are moving out whether they can contact them in a year or two to gather information on how they are doing and assess ongoing outcomes



Establishing a clear process to organize, analyze, and map collected data to support reporting and program evaluation

HARM REDUCTION: INSIGHTS FROM THE NATIONAL GATHERING

WSC held a virtual national gathering for second stage shelters on November 18 and 19, 2025. During this gathering, 70 participants from across the country had the opportunity to connect and discuss the challenges facing the sector, what is working for them right now, and their visions for the future. The notes from their discussion on harm reduction are included below.



HARM REDUCTION

Many survivors use substances as a way of coping with their trauma. Shelters across the country are grappling with how to best support survivors who use substances, and how to balance their needs with those of other residents who are in recovery or who have children in the shelter. Some shelters have tried to lower barriers for women using substances, and are integrating a harm reduction approach into their work. This is complex work and can be challenging to do with limited staff and resources.

WHAT IS WORKING FOR YOU IN THIS AREA RIGHT NOW?

Harm reduction policies developed in conjunction with local addiction centre (CMHA)	Allow survivors to return to shelter once they meet the 3 Cs (cool/calm/coherent)	Full support for relapse cases	Immediate crisis response plan – childcare/wellness focus
Participation agreement/consents to be signed with shelter workers	No judgment/honesty approach	Weekly day treatment – external delivery within shelter	Lifeguard system in rooms (button) – timed to alert front desk to attend to client to prevent overdose
Substance-free shelter	Collaboration with other shelters in area for referrals	Addiction groups for peer support	Safer use site connected to main branch
Sobriety safety plans	Request for victims to seek relapse prevention and continue with supports	Celebrate small wins for recovering addicts	Safe use supplies made available for substance users
Request for 3-6 months sobriety on intake	Saving space for victims when they leave to receive addiction support	Parent contacts social worker with shelter staff and seeks assistance to show care for kids	Smoking sheds
Behaviour-based return policy for users			Supervised safe usage

HARM REDUCTION: INSIGHTS FROM THE NATIONAL GATHERING

IF YOU COULD FORGET RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS, WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE DOING IN THIS AREA? WHAT IS YOUR DREAM/VISION/IDEAL?

Research-backed regulations and guidelines that are implemented across the board to all shelters

More funding for treatment beds in the same shelter

More after-care resources (after return from treatment centres) for self-sufficiency and sobriety

Specific (mental) health care support

More harm reduction programs in general

More cross-collaboration across shelters for referrals and ease of transition

More assistance from federal/provincial government

Reduced waiting time for referral to treatment centres

24-hour staffing to support substance users

Concurrent mental health and substance use programs

More collaboration with addiction/treatment centres

More staff training on the relationship between substance use and trauma

DECOLONIZING SECOND STAGE SHELTER WORK: INSIGHTS FROM THE NATIONAL GATHERING

WSC held a virtual national gathering for second stage shelters on November 18 and 19, 2025. During this gathering, 70 participants from across the country had the opportunity to connect and discuss the challenges facing the sector, what is working for them right now, and their visions for the future. The notes from their discussion on decolonizing second stage shelter work are included below.

Indigenous women face disproportionately high rates of violence across the country and also grapple with intergenerational trauma due to Canada's history of settler colonialism, residential schools, and other policies and practices that have harmed and continue to harm Indigenous communities. The MMIWG Calls for Justice highlight the importance of having Indigenous-led shelters and transitional housing available across the country, and for culturally safe and appropriate services to be available for Indigenous women across the country. We all have a role to play in reconciliation and decolonization.

WHAT IS WORKING FOR YOU IN THIS AREA RIGHT NOW?

Cultural worker who meets with new clients and does group activities	Smudging	Join nearby communities for cultural games, pow wows land based activities	Inuit Child First: Inuit program for funding
Indigenous women's outreach worker to connect women with supports from nearby communities	Culturally appropriate food and dietary needs are all met	Partnership with indigenous communities to do drum circles	Jordan's Principle
Based on clients' needs/maintain open communication with clients	Storytelling Indigenous gardening so there is access to traditional food and medicine	Build partnerships with community organizations	Look on the Indigenous Services Canada website for funding opportunities for indigenous clients or they can directly help clients
Ask clients if they would like to be connected to these resources	Women care for themselves better when they are caring for the plants they grow	Community event annually for MMIWG co-funded between shelter and local community band	Sitting in office with desk between is not ideal, so instead clients can choose which space to meet in
Training for staff	Indigenous artwork on the walls of the shelter	Case management will help clients re-access their community afterwards	Reciprocal indigenous consulting: took a look at the shelter's policies, procedures, paperwork to make sure the language and programming are culturally safe and accurate
Elder drop-in and beading workshops once a week in the morning with coffee	Spiritual room where folks can meditate, engage in cultural practices	MOU with the closest First Nation; holding a certain number of beds for folks from that nation	
Storytelling	Renamed all of the rooms to the names of animals in the area and that are significant to the location		
Sewing			

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IF YOU COULD FORGET RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS, WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE DOING IN THIS AREA? WHAT IS YOUR DREAM/VISION/IDEAL?

More housing and programming that is available for all different populations	Smudge-proof water system; wood and more grounded design; sweat lodge in one of the housing units	Capacity to hire indigenous folks within the organization	Land-based healing programming
Third stage housing: complexes that are not run down	Gathering spaces – having a big enough space in the community to have everyone gather comfortably	Building on language program, especially for kids	Provide transportation and family supports when client would like to go to community pow wows, women's sweats
24/7 daycare, especially because there are many 12-hour shifts	Having the city allow for these culturally appropriate pieces to be built in naturally	Staff managing several languages	Nation-to-nation governance when it comes to developing culturally safe and survivor-centered approaches
Smoke houses	Have the culture fully integrated; not something that needs to be brought in	Have more indigenous programming	Get data; information is power



BUILDINGS, UNITS, & AMENITIES

SHELTER BUILDINGS

There is a range of approaches when it comes to shelter buildings:

- ➔ Some organizations own their shelter buildings
- ➔ Some organizations rent units in other buildings to use as second stage spaces
- ➔ Some organizations have partnerships with other community agencies or municipalities in which the other organization owns and operates the building while the shelter provides programming for residents

UNIT SIZE & SET-UP

Most shelters have a mix of apartment sizes to accommodate families. For example, they may have a mix of studios, 2-bedroom units, 3-bedroom units, and a few 4-bedroom units. Some shelters are built with “floating rooms,” allowing the units to be adjusted in size as needed. Floating rooms are bedrooms positioned in between two complete units, with locking doors on either side. Depending on the shelter’s needs, they can unlock either door. This would allow a one-bedroom unit and a four-bedroom unit to become a two-bedroom unit and a three-bedroom unit.

Many shelters have furnished or partially furnished units. Some shelters will limit whether residents can bring in their own furniture and which kinds they can bring in to reduce the risk of bedbugs. In some cases, shelters have arrangements with donors to re-furnish rooms when residents move out, allowing residents to take some or all furnishings with them into their new living space.

Some second stage shelters provide additional storage areas for residents to store belongings or furniture that can’t be brought into the unit. Many second stage shelters have noted that the on-site storage is insufficient.

AMENITIES

Second stage shelters often have other amenities such as:

A shared kitchen

Community rooms/lounges

Laundry rooms

An art space

Kids' playroom

Meeting rooms

Office spaces for staff

Outdoor space, sometimes with play equipment, community space, or a barbeque

Internet access





MAINTENANCE

Shelters rely on a mix of staff, contractors, and residents for upkeep.



Many shelters have a dedicated maintenance worker, sometimes shared with an emergency shelter; others rely on a social service board that provides their funding, separate housing management organizations, or outside contractors



Larger jobs are generally handled by external contractors or partner agencies



During their stay, residents are expected to clean their own units; in some shelters, residents are also expected to share several communal chores and/or help care for communal areas



Some shelters give residents the option of signing up to carry out specific tasks and pay them for these tasks



Many shelters use cleaning companies during resident/unit turnovers



Most shelters conduct regular unit visits/inspections to check that the unit is in good condition and identify maintenance needs; the frequency can vary from monthly to a few times a year



SECURITY

Although second stage shelters vary in how confidential their building locations are, they all use multiple layers of security to keep residents as safe as possible.

Here are some of the safety and security features used by second stage shelters across the country:

- Cameras that cover the exterior and common areas and/or that allow residents and staff to see who is at the front door before they allow access
- Double doors or electric swinging gates at the main entrance
- In some cases, residents' unit keys don't open the main shelter entrance; anyone entering the building must be buzzed in (in this case, it is often staff at a connected emergency shelter who buzz folks in after hours)
- Using key fobs or codes instead of physical keys to make it easier to change/reset if a key is lost or shared
- Bulletproof glass in certain areas
- Tall perimeter fences
- Having residents sign confidentiality agreements and helping them understand the importance of keeping the shelter's location confidential
- Having clear policies around visitors ([see Visitors section](#))
- Working with residents to identify and mitigate any ways their abuser may be tracking their location, such as checking for air tags in their/their kids' belongings, checking location settings on their/their kids' phones, and discussing best practices for sharing photos or posting online (visit www.techsafety.ca for more tech safety tips)
- Working with residents to identify risks, such as kids being followed back to the shelter from school



STAFFING

Most second stage shelters do not have staff on-site 24/7.



Some shelters have staff during weekdays but not weekends



Some shelters have staff five days a week, including a mix of weekends and weekdays



Some shelters arrange staffing so that there is someone on site during the day and the evening, but not overnight



At organizations that operate an emergency shelter and a second stage shelter, residents can call staff at the emergency shelter if needed during the hours when there are no staff at the second stage shelter



At organizations without an emergency shelter, there is often a staff person on call in case of an emergency at night or on the weekends

The number of staff in second stage shelters varies widely and is largely dependent on funding. What is more consistent are the types of roles that shelters staff for, and how those roles support residents. Common roles include:



- ➔ **Coordinators or managers:** Oversee day-to-day operations, supervise staff, and often also provide direct support to residents
- ➔ **Support workers:** Meet regularly with residents, provide counselling, and assist with housing searches and life skills according to the residents' needs
- ➔ **Outreach staff:** Support former residents or those living more independently in the community
- ➔ **Night or on-call staff:** Provide coverage outside regular hours, either on-site or through an attached emergency shelter; in some cases, support workers or coordinators will take turns being on call (this may not be a separate staff role)
- ➔ **Maintenance staff:** Handle repairs, cleaning, and safety checks, sometimes shared with emergency shelters.
- ➔ **Programming staff:** Facilitate groups, workshops, and community activities; in smaller shelters, support workers may be the ones running programming
- ➔ **Child & youth staff:** Provide programming for children and youth, with some shelters also having counsellors for children and youth; many smaller shelters do not have dedicated staff for children and youth

HIRING & RETENTION: INSIGHTS FROM THE NATIONAL GATHERING

WSC held a virtual national gathering for second stage shelters on November 18 and 19, 2025. During this gathering, 70 participants from across the country had the opportunity to connect and discuss the challenges facing the sector, what is working for them right now, and their visions for the future. The notes from their discussion on hiring and retention are included below.



The entire gender-based violence (GBV) shelter sector is facing challenges with staff burnout and retention, due to the challenging nature of the job and higher salaries available in other sectors. This creates a cycle of constantly hiring and training staff who may not stay in the role for very long.

WHAT IS WORKING FOR YOU IN THIS AREA RIGHT NOW?

Improved salaries	Board or staff committee dedicated to well-being of staff	Recognizing the grief and loss of staff when we can't support everyone	Anything to do with "tenant" issues goes to an external person
Health benefits			
Collective insurance plan	Conflict resolution policy	Career pathway for advancement	When referrals come in from GBV shelters, ask for supports in place and ability to live independently
EAP program	Created dedicated manager for training and onboarding	Will support process of moving on/going back to school	
Pension plan			Staff retreats, manicures, etc. as appreciation
More vacation time; wellness days	Budget for training staff	Flexible workday for most folks, as possible	Voluntary weekly lunches
Staff feel supported	Workplace onboarding guides; invest in the beginning	Family-forward (flex days, can take lieu time instead of pay, family sick leave)	Yoga Mondays
Staff feeling like ideas and suggestions are taken seriously	Feeling of community	Unionized – can flex time in following pay period	Monthly outings
20 minutes in meetings to check in and see how everyone's doing	Do staff healing together	Regular check-ins on complex cases/ staff meetings to talk things through	Use Teams channels for peer recognition and impact (success stories)
Timesheet system has shifted to trust-based system	Workplace culture – lots of opportunities for staff to connect		Self-care hour once a week – can leave early
		Workload balancing	Birthdays off, paid day
Safe space to express if there's too much work	Build in connections with coworkers, especially as a small staff	Registered clinical counsellor for clinical supervision; available one-on-one or for challenging cases	Alternate outings and facilitator coming in for team building once a month
Added people and culture manager	Recognizing the issues can help		Occasional gift cards for social workers/staff

HIRING & RETENTION: INSIGHTS FROM THE NATIONAL GATHERING

IF YOU COULD FORGET RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS, WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE DOING IN THIS AREA? WHAT IS YOUR DREAM/VISION/IDEAL?

Full, stable staffing levels	Not being asked to do more with less	See our whole sector be offered clinical supervision	More positions available
Hire another manager	Higher wages	More mental health supports and work-life balance	More training
Double-shifting at night	Do more things together – outings, lunches	Specialized staff (e.g. addiction supports, cultural supports) to spread workload	More professional development/learning opportunities
Hire more workers so staff aren't wearing multiple hats	Unrestricted funding to do what we need to do	Therapist or psychologist for staff	Do succession planning
Hiring full-time as opposed to part-time	Allowing more mental health days without going into vacation days	Trauma-informed workforce practice	Predictability for staff and survivors
More specialized roles – chef, cleaner	RRSP matching	Support with formal education/further degrees, diplomas while still in the position	Daycare spots for staff
Pay people with lived experience to bring that lens, and ensure they don't get burnt out	Staff retreats abroad	More growth opportunities within the agency	More long-term units & larger units to reduce turnaways
Cost of living increases	4-day work week		
Health and retirement benefits to do this job long-term	Ability to do more staff healing, offer more benefits and wellness days		



SHELTER PROFILES

Every second stage shelter looks a little different, depending on their funding, space, community, and residents. We have included a few profiles of existing second stage shelters to illustrate how different organizations combine some of the approaches shared in this guide in practice.



	RURAL ALBERTA	NORTHERN BC	URBAN QUEBEC
Staffing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 staff + 1 maintenance • Monday–Saturday • Flexible shifts • Shared on-call 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 staff (3 coordinators + maintenance) • Roles divided by housing, families, transition 	(7 staff – 2 full-time): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 Administrative Coordinator • 2 Intervention Coordinators • 1 Coordination Support Officer • 2 Community Support Workers • 1 Community Support Pivot Worker
Programming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandatory programming/groups 5 days/week • Youth programs once/week • One-on-one meetings with support worker • Respite provided to attend groups • Youth support included • Referrals made if resident opts out of programming 	Mandatory, but their one-on-one support session counts as participation if they are not attending group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-on-one meetings as needed • Housing visits every 3 months • Peer support project • Annual tenant meetings • Weekly or occasional activities • Community dinners
Maintenance / Unit Oversight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintenance worker + shared responsibilities • Residents contribute to cleaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinators do walkthroughs • Maintenance staff • Shared cleaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contracted maintenance worker • 2 women for snow removal • Housing visits every 3 months • 1 staff member handles upkeep and manual tasks in units
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandatory programming enforcement • Staff retention & wages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition can feel isolating • High caseloads 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty obtaining authorization to communicate with health professionals • Challenges accessing health system and affordable housing
Strengths / Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small, tight-knit team • Highly engaged • Flexible programming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong team coordination • Integrated community approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohesive and committed team • Creative follow-ups • Flexible meeting locations • Empowerment approach • Harm reduction • Trans and non-binary inclusive • Creation of services and positions tailored to client needs