

# Huronia Transition Homes



**Location:** Rural Ontario



**Number of beds:** 20



**Type of Shelter:** Emergency Shelter



**Type of Program:** Employment Creation

## How the Program Works

Operation Grow at Huronia Transition Homes is a holistically designed social enterprise working to reduce poverty, food scarcity, isolation, and the impacts of trauma for women with lived experience of violence.

The social enterprise combines a hydroponic vertical farm, retail store, inspected kitchen, meeting rooms, and a yoga studio. It is committed to providing women with opportunities to increase resiliency, network, and build community in a supportive environment. The social enterprise contributes to the overall vitality of women by providing opportunities for greater economic freedom, building real-life skills, increasing confidence and self-esteem, and improving food security.

On a day-to-day basis, women who come into the shelter have the option of working at the social enterprise to gain skills and income. They can also purchase food items from the store at a reduced rate.

### **Social programs and services at Operation Grow include:**

- Health and wellness workshops
- Crisis support
- Asset-mapping and goal setting
- Vocational training, including WHMIS, AODA, Health and Safety in Four Steps and various learning strategies
- Job readiness workshops
- Member events
- Community events
- Self-employment program
- Cooking workshops
- Flexible, low-barrier, paid, supportive-employment programming

### **Enterprise activities at Operation Grow include:**

- Sales from produce grown in the vertical farm
- Retail sales
- Catering and room rentals

# CASE STUDY

## Program Development and Implementation

The idea of the social enterprise originated from women accessing the organization's services. The shelter held focus groups to better understand what participants wanted the organization to develop. Once the core concepts were identified, a dedicated staff member was hired to work full-time on developing and implementing the initiative.

A working group was then established, comprising Board members, organizational staff, and community volunteers with business experience to help guide the project. The working group met every two weeks for nearly three years to support the development and implementation of the program.

When specialized knowledge was needed, the organization also consulted subject-matter experts, including a university business program, farming experts, HVAC specialists, and architects. This project was made possible through a generous donation from a private foundation, a bequest that the Board invested, and a grant from the provincial government.

## Challenges and Lessons Learned

Social enterprises can be complicated, and Huronia House has encountered several challenges along the way. The largest challenge has been balancing the business's growing needs with the social services the shelter provides.



They have overcome these challenges by being honest about the tensions they encounter throughout the process and continuously documenting them. For example, frictions exist between the limitations of resources and where energy gets invested. Growing plants is also HARD; there are so many things to learn to address ongoing farm health needs. The program is also built to support women with employment, but it cannot offer them full-time permanent employment.

To help relieve some of these pressures, Huronia plans to hire a business manager to take on the social enterprise's business activities, allowing other staff to focus on the social service and programming aspects.

## Impact

The impacts have far exceeded any of the shelter staff's expectations. Women have reported increased financial stability, confidence, a sense of belonging, transferable employment skills, social connection, and impacts of trauma. Many women have transitioned from social assistance to full-time work; others have started businesses and are moving out of poverty.

## Advice for Other Shelters:



Think holistically. Violence impacts all areas of an individual's life, and supports need to take that into account. Also, listen to the women!

## About the Economic Empowerment Programming Case Studies Series

This series of case studies was developed through Women's Shelters Canada's Community of Practice (CoP) on Economic Empowerment. The seven case studies highlight examples of how shelters and transition houses across Canada are supporting survivors through economic empowerment programming. Each profile shares approaches, promising practices, and lessons learned from organizations working to strengthen survivors' financial security, independence, and long-term stability.

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