

Interval House



Location: Urban Ontario



Number of Beds: 30



Type of Shelter: Emergency Shelter



Type of Program: Building Economic Self-Sufficiency (BESS) Program

How the Program Works

Interval House's Building Economic Self-Sufficiency (BESS) Program was developed and launched in 1998 to help survivors move toward long-term economic stability, independence, and safety after abuse.

BESS is not a traditional employment program. It was the first program of its kind specifically designed to address the unique barriers that survivors of IPV face, recognizing that women often encounter complex barriers beyond job readiness, such as trauma, financial abuse, housing instability, disrupted work histories, childcare responsibilities, legal issues, and loss of confidence.

The program uses a coordinated, trauma-informed, wraparound approach that supports women in addressing multiple barriers affecting long-term economic stability and independence. Participants can access services individually or through group programming, depending on their goals and readiness to work.

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- Employment planning and job search support
- Resume and interview preparation
- Counselling and emotional support
- Housing stabilization support
- Financial literacy education
- Advocacy
- And referrals to community resources

BESS is intentionally flexible and client-centred. The program recognizes that barriers are interconnected, progress is often non-linear, and survivors engage with services at different levels of readiness and capacity.

Employment support is not delivered as a standalone service, but as part of a broader approach focused on long-term stability, safety, and economic self-sufficiency.

CASE STUDY

Program Development and Implementation

The BESS Program was developed after Interval House identified a significant gap in traditional employment services for survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV).

Staff observed that many women wanted to pursue employment or education but were struggling within systems that did not fully understand the realities of abuse. Survivors were often expected to meet traditional employment timelines while simultaneously coping with trauma, housing instability, safety issues, financial abuse, childcare responsibilities, interrupted employment histories, and major life transitions.

To better understand these barriers, Interval House consulted with current and former clients, as well as organizations within the gender-based violence sector. These consultations confirmed the need for a specialized program that took into consideration the overarching, systemic barriers that survivors of IPV face.

The philosophy and structure of BESS were also informed by Interval House's research on barriers to employability and employment for women survivors of IPV. This work reinforced the need for a flexible and trauma-informed approach tailored to survivors' experiences.

Rather than replicating a traditional employment model, Interval House designed BESS as a wraparound program recognizing the relationship between emotional well-being, safety, housing stability, financial resilience, and employment outcomes.



The program initially launched on a smaller scale and has continued to evolve over time through client feedback, staff learning and development, evaluation, and adaptation to changing community needs.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

One of the biggest challenges was balancing traditional employment expectations with the realities survivors face after intimate partner violence.

Many employment programs and funding structures prioritize rapid workforce attachment and short-term outcomes, which do not accommodate the longer-term, individualized support survivors need.

Interval House addressed this challenge by remaining grounded in a trauma-informed and survivor-centred approach. The program recognizes that recovery and employment readiness are rarely linear, and that progress manifests differently for each participant.

CASE STUDY

Women may also experience different barriers at different stages of employment. Early on, survivors may struggle with confidence, safety concerns, or employment gaps. After securing employment, additional barriers related to ongoing instability, emotional well-being, workplace dynamics, and caregiving responsibilities may affect retention and long-term sustainability.

This reinforced the importance of ongoing, flexible support rather than focusing only on job placement outcomes.

Another important lesson was the need for specialized staffing. Supporting survivors in finding meaningful employment requires staff who understand both employment services and the impacts of trauma, abuse, and systemic barriers.

Impact

The BESS Program has supported thousands of survivors of intimate partner violence in moving toward greater economic stability, confidence, independence, and long-term safety.

Women participating in the program have successfully pursued and maintained employment, education, skills development, and more stable housing while also rebuilding confidence, autonomy, and fulfilling long-term goals after abuse.

The program has also contributed to broader conversations within the gender-based violence sector about the importance of economic self-sufficiency as part of long-term safety and recovery for survivors.

Advice for Other Shelters:

One of the biggest lessons learned is that employment programming for survivors cannot simply replicate mainstream employment models. Programs must be intentionally designed around the realities of intimate partner violence, including trauma, financial abuse, safety concerns, housing instability, and systemic barriers.

It must also ensure a holistic, wraparound approach to enable survivors to access what they need at different times in their healing, recovery, and search for employment.

For shelters interested in developing similar programming, Interval House would encourage organizations to:

- Engage survivors directly in program development
- Build flexibility into service delivery
- Integrate employment support with broader holistic services wherever possible
- Recognize that recovery and employment readiness are rarely linear
- Remain willing to adapt programming as client needs evolve

One important lesson learned is that “meeting clients where they are” does not mean lowering expectations. Rather, it means aligning services with an individual’s current capacity, priorities, and readiness for change while continuing to support movement toward long-term goals.

Most importantly, organizations should approach economic self-sufficiency as part of a larger process of rebuilding safety, stability, confidence, and autonomy after abuse.

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.

This project was supported by:



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