

# Ontario Shelter Research Project

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*An Evaluation of Shelters as Service Navigation Hubs for Abused Women  
A Community-Based Project funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation  
Summary of Findings – Summer 2012*

## **About the project**

The difficulties that abused women experience in ‘navigating’ the various health and social service systems to get help for themselves and their children should not be underestimated. Many women report difficulty in getting support from formal systems. This project focused on identifying:

- what shelters do, both with respect to short-term residential services, but also in terms of ongoing outreach and “navigation/linkage” (see Figure) work to ensure women get the help they need;
- how other social service sectors perceive and understand the work done by shelters;
- factors at the system, community & organizational level that influence service delivery;
- indicators of success, in other words, the outcome measures that should be used to determine the impact of shelter services on the lives of abused women and their children.

## **What We Did**

Using individual and group interviews, and structured and open-ended questions, we talked to 68 Executive Directors, 41 staff members and 75 clients of Ontario Shelters from across the province, including those serving Aboriginal women (French-language shelters declined participation).

## **What We Found**

### Summary of Key Findings

1. Shelters provide not only a safe refuge, but time and emotional support for women, and their children, to come to terms with their situations and begin to heal. The provision of care in a calm, orderly setting, and being treated respectfully were very important for women.
2. Shelters provide direct material support to women and children who are in need, and/or facilitate access to these after they leave the shelter.
3. Shelters are community hubs where women and children are connected with other services, supports and programs. Some shelters not only refer women to other services, but actively help them make decisions, and intervene when these services are not responsive.
4. Shelters are broadly responsive to women in need, providing various kinds of education, information and counselling, enabling them, and their children, to deal with the consequences of abuse. They are flexible in when and how they provide services to allow women to heal at their own pace.
5. Shelters increase women’s capacity to manage on their own, helping them become ‘organizationally literate’. This increased capacity at the individual level contributes, in turn, to greater capacity at the community level.
6. The relationship with shelters helps women move forward; these connections may prevent further victimization or use of other (often more expensive) services. This ongoing link to shelter outreach services should be viewed as a success, not as “recidivism”.
7. Aboriginal shelters take a holistic approach to serving the person, family and community, integrating spiritual and cultural approaches to healing which often involves more direct involvement of men. Historical trauma is part of the broader context of understanding family violence.

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## Detailed Findings

### About the shelters

- ⇒ On average, there are 21 beds per shelter, but it is common for the actual number of beds the shelters make available to women and children in need exceed the Ministry designation of number of beds and level of funding the shelters receive.
- ⇒ Shelters hire an average of 16 fulltime and 11 part-time staff and many rely heavily on volunteer staff; there is very little administrative support available, particularly in smaller shelters, and resources are frequently stretched to provide services during evenings and weekends.
- ⇒ Although the primary mandate of 70% of shelters is to provide service to abused women and their children, some shelters also extend service to children of abused women (12%), homeless women (76%) and their children (59%), abused men (20%) and provide mental health respite (16%). Although most shelters serve a geographically defined area they often extend their reach beyond this.
- ⇒ All shelters reported a high rate of accessibility features in their services including: an accessible entrance (87.5%), text telephone (TTY) line (77.1%), trained staff who work with women and children with disabilities (75%), and materials in alternative formats (60.4%) and multiple languages (80.3%).

### In-shelter and community-based services

- ⇒ In addition to providing service to women in shelter, 98% of shelters offer service to women in the community and 39% offer second stage housing, but this varied by region (e.g., 14% of Northern shelters compared to 56% of Western region shelters). Noted differences between in-shelter and second-stage included:
  - clients in shelter are in crisis and require on-going support with services offered 24 hours a day, with a focus on security, short term counseling, interim custody orders, and meeting basic needs of food and shelter.
  - those in second stage housing have more access to other services, therefore counseling is provided by appointment and support is geared toward life skills, including such things as budgeting and parenting as well as information about accessing services and court processes, among others.

### Overview of services and programs

- ⇒ All shelters offer short term counseling; 98% provide food and clothing, 96% provide a 24-hour crisis line and 2-hour legal aid certificates, as well as recreational programs for children, 84% offer childcare/respite, 82% offer life skills programs, 45% provide sexual assault programs, 43% provide health care services and 88% give women who leave the shelter furniture and other household goods.
- ⇒ Beyond these basic and immediate services, shelters routinely support women to:
  - obtain housing (100%)
  - obtain employment and/or income support (100%)
  - understand and navigate child welfare/protection services (100%)
  - deal with issues related to Family law (98%)
  - obtain education and recreational services for children (89%)
  - obtain additional health services, or health documentation (84%)
  - deal with issues related to criminal law (82%)

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- ⇒ In addition they often support women to:
  - obtain child health services
  - apply for residency or make a refugee claim
  - obtain cultural- or language-specific services
- ⇒ In addition to the supports and services provided to women and children, 76% of shelters also provide services and/or referrals for abused men and 81% report providing services or referrals for abusive men/fathers.
- ⇒ Shelters provide a range of woman-centred supports, geared to client needs. These supports range from providing information to accompanying women to meetings and appointments and helping them understand rules, policies and outcomes, such as legal decisions. In more than 90% of shelters, the staff help women work through their options and develop a plan.

## Networking and advocacy

- ⇒ All shelters reported working together with other agencies or organizations to meet the needs of vulnerable women and children; 98% of shelters participate in community and educational activities to raise awareness about violence against women and children and to improve the services, systems and policies that affect them; and 96% are involved in research and evaluation of services.
- ⇒ Committee meetings provide opportunities for interaction between Executive Directors and front line workers of other agencies. Interdisciplinary committees foster relationship building and communication across levels of service. Knowledge exchange is fostered through cross training with other agencies, education programs, and agency information days.

## Barriers to providing services

- ⇒ women's poverty and lack of income support
- ⇒ inadequate funding of shelters and shelter services
- ⇒ lack of availability/access to existing services in the community, especially affordable housing
- ⇒ complexity and lack of effectiveness of legal system
- ⇒ lack of knowledge and awareness, by actors in the broader system, of what shelters do
- ⇒ lack of understanding and sensitivity, by actors in the broader system, about the needs of abused women and their children

## **Next Steps**

The team has developed an evaluation approach, based on the findings of this project, to assist shelters in evaluating their services using tools and approaches the complexity of providing shelter services.

## **Project Team**

The project team was composed of four shelters directors: Michele Hansen, Huron Women's Shelter, Linda Ense, Hamilton Native Women's Centre, Clare Freeman, Interval House of Hamilton; Kate Wiggins, Women's Community House in London; three university-based researchers from Western University: Drs. Marilyn Ford-Gilboe, Roma Harris and Nadine Wathen; and Barb MacQuarrie, Community Director of the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children. An Advisory Committee composed of shelter directors and those from key related sectors providing service to abused women provided advice.

*For more information:* Michele Hansen, Project Lead, Executive Director, Huron Women's Shelter  
[michele@huronwomensshelter.com](mailto:michele@huronwomensshelter.com) tel: 519-524-5333.

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Figure : Model of the Central Role of Shelters in Abused Women's Help-Seeking

