

TOWARDS LIVING VIOLENCE-FREE FOREVER: A COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO SUPPORTING WOMEN WITH MENTAL HEALTH & ADDICTION ISSUES

Throughout BC, transition houses, emergency shelters and non-profit housing providers are noticing an alarming trend: an increasing number of women with mental health issues are at risk of absolute homelessness and ongoing violence. These women require specialized services and supports in order to access and remain in safe, permanent, affordable housing.

CMHA for the Kootenays has been involved in several studies examining the housing and support needs of women with mental illness and addiction. One of these studies, the *Examination of the Housing and Support Continuum for Women and Children Fleeing Abuse* is currently being conducted by the BC Non-Profit Housing Association in partnership with the BC/Yukon Society for Transition Houses. This research was initiated to explore potential partnerships between non-profit housing providers and transition houses. The study began by exploring existing housing and support barriers for specific populations, including women with mental illness.

Generally speaking, women fleeing domestic abuse require longer-term supports in order to heal psychologically—moving from 'survival mode' to 'long-term planning'. CMHA for the Kootenays' transition house, Kootenay Haven, has experienced a 35% increase in the number of women with behaviours indicative of mental illness and/or anti-social behaviours from 2004/2005 to 2005/2006. Thirty-six percent of women accessing the transition house in 2005/2006 experienced long-term mental health problems, and 26% were significantly involved in drug or alcohol usage.

Understanding the housing and service barriers for women with mental illness fleeing domestic violence is often complex, inter-related, and cyclical. Women may struggle with mental health issues prior to the abuse, which has contributed to a certain vulnerability to relationship violence. However, advocates warn, "abuse creates a traumatic context in reaction to which women may develop symptomatic behaviour" (Tutty, 1998). These symptoms may range from anxiety and low self-esteem to severe depression, bi-polar disorder, schizophrenia, and self-mutilation. Without the means to effectively address these symptoms, the cycle of violence is likely to repeat in the woman's life.

The over-representation of Aboriginal women in violent relationships and prostitution in BC has been largely attributed to intergenerational abuse and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Symptoms of a disorder like PTSD—including flashbacks, emotional numbing, depression, insomnia, and hyperalertness—are more severe and require ongoing support and specialized psychological services. Many women suffering from PTSD also tend to self-medicate with drugs and alcohol.

Psychological issues act as a barrier to women accessing housing firstly because there is a shortage of housing and service facilities for women suffering from mental illness. For example, many shelters, transition houses, and non-profit housing societies have eligibility requirements that disallow women with behavioural and/or drug and alcohol addictions to receive services. These requirements are largely due to the fact that most existing service providers do not have the staffing or expertise to provide the specialized services to address the specific needs.

Mental illnesses such as depression, schizophrenia or PTSD—regardless of whether it was caused by abuse or not—can severely limit one's capacity to access housing and support services because it affects motivation, self-efficacy, and one's ability to access and process information. Therefore, community responses must take into the account that supporting women with mental health issues to live violence free for the long-term will require longer-term solutions.

CMHA for the Kootenays is currently exploring the need for ongoing specialized services for women fleeing domestic violence in the Cranbrook area. As the greatest increase of need has

been for women fleeing violence with concurrent housing barriers such as mental health and addiction issues, the Association for the Kootenays is determining what longer-term supported housing options would contribute most effectively to the psychological, financial, and physical well-being of women, thereby reducing future affordable housing barriers.

Sources:

CMHA for the Kootenays.(2006) *Women's Services – Kootenay Haven Transition House – Outcomes Report*, April 1st 2005 – March 31st 2006.

Hurford, Dianna and Elizabeth Wolferstan. *Examination of the Housing and Support Continuum for Women and Children Fleeing Abuse*. BC Non-Profit Housing Association (*Forthcoming*)

Tutty, Leslie M. (1998) "Mental Health Issues of Abused Women: The Perceptions of Shelter Workers." *Canadian Journal of Mental Health*, 17(1), March.

.