

Second Stage Housing in BC

Background

In 2009 the administration of the Women's Transition Housing and Supports Program (WTHSP) was transferred from the Ministry of Housing and Social Development to BC Housing. WTHSP includes transition houses, safe homes, and second stage housing for women with or without children who have experienced violence or who are at risk of violence. In 2011/12, BC Housing funded 16 second stage housing programs with 160 housing units.

Second stage housing programs provide housing and supports for women who have left abusive relationships while they make plans for independent living. Many women are referred to second stage housing from shorter-term transition houses and safe home programs. Second stage housing provides emotional support, safety planning, affordable transitional housing, and referrals to support services and long-term housing.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of how the BC Housing funded second stage housing programs operate. This included looking at the services provided, housing type, and staffing models. The report can be used by providers to learn how other second stage housing programs operate. This report may also inform policy and program decisions and assist housing providers considering or developing new second stage housing programs.

The study involved in-depth qualitative interviews with the 16 second stage housing programs funded by BC Housing. Interviews were conducted with program coordinators, but in some cases other colleagues from the agencies participated in the interviews, such as program supervisors. The interviews were done over the phone and took approximately one hour to complete.

Facilities

The second stage housing programs in B.C. use a range of facility types to shelter women and their children. Typically the units are self-contained suites, but one program provides five private bedrooms in a detached house where single women live communally and share cooking facilities and other living space. Two-thirds of the housing units are located in apartment buildings and one-third are row houses.

Nearly two-thirds of programs have between six and 12 units, while less than one-sixth have either less than six units or more than 12. Larger three- and four-bedroom units are more typically located in row houses (62 per cent) than in apartment buildings (38 per cent). About half of the second stage housing units are furnished while the other half are unfurnished. Those programs with furnished units indicated they usually also provide linens, towels, kitchen items, and furniture.



Services

Second stage housing programs in B.C. provide more than shelter and a safe home. They also provide a broad range of services to women. The second stage housing program coordinators were asked to identify the support services and referrals they offer women from a list of options. All programs offer on-site safety planning, emotional support, referrals to counselling and health care services, assistance in accessing income assistance, money management, food programs, and assistance in applying for educational opportunities.

Half of the second stage housing programs were 12 months in length. Only one program was shorter than 12 months, with a length of nine months. Over one-third of the programs were between one and two years. One program allowed women to stay for three years.

Clients

Most of the programs primarily serve women with children, with some programs prioritizing women with children over single women. Some of the programs take in a number of women who are pregnant or have newborn babies. Two programs accept teen moms. Two programs said that they are seeing an increasing number of senior women.

All participants said that most women who leave the program move on to subsidized housing, including BC Housing sites and other non-market housing. Just under half of the interviewees said that women in their programs go to market housing. Interviewees from six programs said that women in their programs sometimes go back to their partners, but this was a rare situation. Some interviewees said women are less likely to go back to their partners the longer they have been in the program. They said that very few women return to their abusive partners if they complete a full second stage program.

Staffing

The second stage housing programs typically had positions that fell into the following three categories:

- *Coordinators or managers*
Responsible for program administration (including reporting, goal setting, fundraising, budgeting), tenancy management (including rent collection, paying bills for the facility), support work (referrals, advocacy, one-on-one or group support, crisis intervention, helping tenants find housing), and recreational activities
- *Support workers*
Responsible for outreach work, one-on-one or group counselling, child and youth supports, recreational activities, help tenants find housing, accompaniment to appointments
- *Tenancy management and building maintenance*
Responsible for building maintenance, rent collection

None of the second stage housing programs had staff on-site 24 hours a day, seven days a week. For emergencies, such as immediate need for emotional support, three-quarters of the second stage housing programs had an arrangement with a nearby transition house that had 24/7 staff coverage (11 transition houses and one emergency shelter).



General Successes & Challenges

The second stage housing program coordinators were asked to highlight some of the key successes and challenges of their programs.

Successes

- Provide access to safe and affordable housing with supports for women when they make the decision to leave their abusive partner
- Help women connect with stable independent housing at the completion of the programs, including subsidized and market housing
- Help women access and navigate the support services they need
- Formal one-on-one and/or group counseling meetings with women in the program on a regular basis
- Recognize that women are their own experts and they know what they are ready to do and what they are not ready to do
- Some programs are able to provide longer length of stays compared to other programs, which allows women more time to settle in and access the program services
- Well-qualified staff

Challenges

- More staff hours are needed to support:
 - Providing referrals to appropriate services
 - Early intervention with safety issues
 - Activities for children
 - Transporting women to appointments
 - Families with more complex needs or families with specific cultural needs
 - Finding appropriate long-term housing for women and children
- More funding to cover:
 - Unit turnover costs and repairs
 - Renovations or green retrofits
 - Furnishing units
 - Decent staff wages
 - Food and meals for women and children
- There is more demand for second stage units than what is available
- There are long waitlists for community services
- Navigating community services can be a challenge