Understanding Safe Homes in B.C.

Introduction

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 are at risk of violence.

Safe homes are typically located in small, remote areas and provide shorter-stay support and crisis intervention, where transition houses do not usually exist. A safe home may be an apartment or townhouse unit, private residential home, or hotel/motel room. There are 26 safe home programs in B.C. Approximately 375 women and children stayed in safe homes in 2009/10.

This report summarizes the findings of a study looking at the current state of services in the Safe Home Program. The study was initiated by the Women's Transition Housing and Supports Program and conducted by BC Housing's Research and Corporate Planning Department. The purpose of this study is to get a better understanding of the program and how it operates. The study does not provide an analysis of the services needed or current best practices.

The study involved in-depth, qualitative interviews with all 26 safe home program co-ordinators by telephone. Interviewees were asked 35 open-ended and coded questions on the following topics:

- General successes/challenges/lessons learned
- Services and outreach activities offered to women through the program
- Program related questions
- Descriptions of safe home facilities
- After-hours coverage and services provided
- Staffing structures
- Partnerships

Types of Facilities Offered

The safe home program uses a range of facility types for women and children. Women may be given a room in a hotel/motel or an apartment or townhouse that is owned or rented by the operator. They may also be placed in a residential home with a family. In some cases, a woman may be transported to another community rather than staying at a local facility. The following table highlights some of the key characteristics of the various facility types and services, as well as some of the key strengths and challenges associated with each type of housing.

FACILITY TYPE	% PROGRAMS OFFERING FACILITY TYPE	ACCESS	SECURITY	STRENGTHS	CHALLENGES
Rooms in local hotels or motels	▪ Offered by 81% of programs ▪ Rooms are booked as needed	▪ Accompanied by program coordinator/ volunteers or police ▪ Program coordinator/ volunteers make arrangements, but women make their own way there	▪ Women cannot reveal their location to anyone during and after their stay ▪ Women sign confidentiality agreements with operators ▪ Reservations are not made in a woman's name ▪ Operators monitor visitors	▪ Most have staff on-site 24 hours ▪ Usually are rooms available ▪ Easy for women to find ▪ Offers anonymity	▪ Rooms are impersonal ▪ Women can be seen by someone they know ▪ Not ideal for women with children ▪ Can be fully booked ▪ Can be expensive ▪ No cooking facilities
Rooms in residential homes, operated by families	▪ Offered by 46% of programs ▪ 47 rooms available	▪ Accompanied by program coordinator/ volunteers or police	▪ Operators receive advice on security features and risk-assessment ▪ Operators have to have a criminal record check and some sign a confidentiality agreement ▪ If a woman's situation poses a risk to the family, she will be placed in another facility	▪ Provides emotional supports ▪ Provides home-like environment	▪ Some women do not want to be a burden on the host family ▪ Some want to be on their own ▪ Neighbours might see and recognize the woman ▪ Operators can be unavailable

FACILITY TYPE	% PROGRAMS OFFERING FACILITY TYPE	ACCESS	SECURITY	STRENGTHS	CHALLENGES
Rented/Owned Apartment or Townhouse Unit	- Offered by 35% of programs - 16 rooms available	- Accompanied by program coordinator/ volunteers	- Units are not listed at the front door intercom - Some have security systems, as well as other security features	- Offers more privacy - Provides home-like environment - Costs are fixed	- Costs are fixed - Other tenants in the building might recognize the woman - There can be conflicts between tenants if the unit has space for more than one woman
Immediate transportation out of the community (to nearest transition house or to friends/family)	- Offered by 73% of programs, mostly only as needed	- Inter-city bus - Ferry - Coordinator or volunteer drives women	- Do not put bus tickets in a woman's name - Travel with a buddy - Check in with another staff person before trip and after returning	- Some women feel safer or have better support networks available in other communities - Some communities have more resources to offer women	- Infrequent transportation services - Cost of transportation

Service Provision

The program provides more than shelter and a safe home. It also provides a broad range of services to women and children. Program co-ordinators were asked to identify the support services and outreach activities they offer women. All providers offer emotional supports, referrals to counselling and other services, safety planning, and transportation.

Safe home providers reported that they often provide services to women in partnership with other organizations. The following table shows how the program works with some of the most common community partners:

PARTNERS	PROGRAMS/SERVICES/ACTIVITIES
Aboriginal Bands	- Referrals - Promote awareness in community; ban abusers from community
Church groups	- Operate thrift stores (fundraising; women have access to free household items and clothes) - Provides safe home apartment at no cost - Ministers may refer to program
Crown Counsel/ Judges Association	Educate on domestic violence in Aboriginal communities
Hospital/ local health services centre/ Ministry of Health/ regional health authority	- Referrals by emergency room nurses and other professionals - Provide emergency medications - Health services counsellor - Addictions and mental health services
Ministry of Children and Family Development	- Collaborate on programs with family services - Referrals
Other service providers in the community	Regular meetings to discuss issues
Outreach programs funded through Public Safety and Solicitor General	- Referrals for services - Advocacy on poverty issues - Communications - Provide access to knowledge and expertise on legal issues - Share resources - Community education and events
RCMP/ police/ tribal police	- Referrals and support - Meet regularly - Educate about abuse in Aboriginal communities - Collaborate on – Take Back the Night event (annually, September) – Victim Assistance Program – Workshops on healthy relationships
Schools	Presentations to students on violence and abuse
Transition House	- Provides after-hours services e.g. crisis line - Provides shelter and supports for high risk women

Staffing

Most of the program co-ordinators indicated their paid staff work both daytime and after-hours. Half of the safe homes have only one person who is paid to operate the program in their communities. There are no locations where the coordinator holds a full-time position paid through the program. In 23 of the 26 safe homes, the coordinator has another paid position with the organization or within the community. Twenty-five of the 26 program co-ordinators are paid part-time wages. One safe home employs their coordinator on a casual basis only. A total of six safe homes employ casual workers.

While some safe homes do not rely on volunteers because the agencies feel that the work is too complex, intense, and potentially dangerous, 58 per cent of the safe home providers rely on volunteers for the following duties:

- Operate residential home facilities
- Provide after-hours coverage
- Drive/accompany women to appointments
- Help with women's children
- Take women shopping or do the shopping
- Do the house cleaning or cooking
- Help to fill out forms
- Lead a weekly support group for women
- Help to fundraise and promote the safe home program

General Successes and Challenges

The program co-ordinators were asked to highlight some of the key successes and challenges of the program.

SUCCESSES

- Ability to help women locally
- Ability to provide a continuum of care
- Having the outreach and/or transition house services as part of the same agency that allows the safe home program to provide a one-stop-shop for shelter and services
- Having strong relationships with other service providers in the community
- Having additional staff/volunteers to help coordinator with after-hours coverage
- Having a thorough in-take assessment
- Program staff bring a wealth of experience and skills
- Some agencies are able to provide training to their staff involved in the program, which they see as a strength

CHALLENGES

- Burnout for both staff and volunteers
- Lack of housing options in the community
- Transportation issues
- Providing anonymity in a small community
- Cell phone coverage is an issue for some communities
- Lack of program funding
- Lack of funding for training for both staff and volunteers
- Lack of awareness and differing perceptions among individuals and communities about what is considered abuse