Toward a Better Understanding of the Needs of Shelter Users:

A Consultation with Shelter Residents and Workers

PATHS

Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan

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March 2005

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Status of Women Canada — Condition féminine Canada

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Abstract

In January 2004 the Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services embarked on a project intended to gain a better understanding of the needs of women using women's shelters and the barriers and challenges they encountered while trying to meet those needs.

PATHS gathered information for this project by analyzing provincial shelter statistics from the Women's Shelter Information System and by consulting directly with current or recent shelter residents through personal interviews and with front-line shelter workers through focus groups.

General areas of need identified through the consultation process include survival/basic needs. legal assistance and protection. personal and emotional support. and personal growth. More specific sub-categories are outlined under each general area. Recommendations for change put forth by consultation participants (shelter workers and shelter residents) are included throughout this document.

While needs are separated and categorized in this document, in reality they are very interconnected. The fifth section of this document discusses the common threads that are woven through the discussion and connect the experiences and challenges discussed in each category.

Section One: Introduction

Violence against women is a very serious and far-reaching social problem in our communities – a problem that, for women using shelters, has had a very deep and painful impact in their lives. Women's shelters have been working for three decades in Saskatchewan to provide safety, support, and resources for women and children fleeing domestic violence. Shelters, along with other community-based and governmental organizations, have taken on the often overwhelming task of assisting women in our communities as they face the challenges and barriers they inevitably encounter when trying to escape domestic violence.

The challenges faced by women who use shelters[1] are complex, and the barriers women encounter as they attempt to live free of violence are difficult to overcome. It is important to ensure that women fleeing violence do not have to face these challenges alone, and that they have access to the support and resources they need to build a life free of violence. In order to provide the best possible assistance to women using shelters, it is important, first, to understand the complex needs of these women (and their children) and second, to determine what approaches, programs, and supports are most helpful to meet these needs.

The Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan (PATHS), an organization founded and directed by shelters in Saskatchewan, felt it was important to gain a better understanding of the needs and challenges of the women they serve. As there appeared to be a lack of prior research on these issues that consulted directly with Saskatchewan women using shelters, PATHS undertook a province-wide consultation process with shelter residents and front-line shelter workers, believing that increased knowledge will equip shelters to enhance service, both within and outside of shelters, to women using shelters.

This document is the result of a consultation process conducted by PATHS with shelter residents and front line shelter workers, and is intended for use by Saskatchewan shelters and connected services as a starting point for discussion about improving service and support to abused women. It outlines the process of consultation, provides a description of who uses shelters and why, describes the needs identified by participants, identifies if and how those needs are being met, lists recommendations from residents and workers for change, and provides a description of general trends.

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[1] The word "shelter" is used throughout this document to refer to emergency, transitional, and/or interval homes/shelters that offer accommodation and support on a short-term basis to women (and their children) fleeing domestic violence.

Section Two: Description of Project

The project, funded primarily by the Women's Program, Status of Women Canada, began in January 2004. In the five months that followed, the approach and methods of the project were developed by a Research Committee that consisted of Amy Stensrud (PATHS' Coordinator), Diane Delaney (Acting Director, Isabel Johnson Shelter), Jocelyne Praud (Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Regina), Linda Cunningham (Executive Director, Piwapan Women's Centre) and her staff, and Maria Hendrika (Executive Director, Regina Transition Women's Society). The committee decided that interviews, focus groups, would be the primary methods of data collection, augmented by the analysis of provincial statistics already being gathered by many of the shelters in Saskatchewan. The format for the interviews and focus groups were developed in May and June, and consultation with shelter residents and shelter workers through these interviews and focus groups, was carried out in June and July.

Data Collection Methods

1. Interviews and Focus Groups

To gather first hand information, PATHS embarked on a consultation process with residents and staff in shelters across Saskatchewan in the summer of 2004. PATHS' Coordinator, Amy Stensrud, and a temporary Research Assistant, Tmira MacCallum, visited 9[2] shelters over the course of just under 2 months, including:

Piwapan Women's Centre, LaRonge
Waskoosis Safe Shelter, Meadow Lake
Prince Albert Safe Shelter for Women, Prince Albert
Battlefords Interval House, North Battleford
Southwest Safe Shelter, Swift Current
Regina Transition House, Regina
Isabel Johnson Shelter, Regina
Wichihik Iskwewak (WISH) Safe Shelter, Regina
Moose Jaw Transition House, Moose Jaw

Including both residents of shelters and shelter workers in the consultation was not only desirable, but necessary. Shelter residents were able to offer a personal, individual account of their needs, challenges, and experiences. Shelter workers were able to provide information and perspective gained from working with thousands of women in shelters

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[2] A total of 13 shelters were asked to participate in the consultation but 4 shelters chose not to be involved.

with a multitude of different circumstances and experiences, and from an extensive knowledge of the programs, services, and supports geared toward abused women.

All participants were assured anonymity through a strict set of procedures, which included no access to audiotapes or transcripts by anyone other than PATHS' Coordinator and Research Assistant, erasing all audiotapes at the project's end, and the removal of all identifiers from quotes and paraphrased feedback used in any verbal or written materials produced.

Interviews with current or recent shelter residents

Information about the project was sent to each participating shelter to be distributed by a shelter worker to residents a few days prior to our scheduled visit to the shelter. Residents who volunteered to participate were introduced to us (the two researchers) on the day of their scheduled interviews.

In total, 20 interviews were conducted. 17 of these interviews were with women who were staying at a shelter and 3 were with women who had recently left a shelter. All interviews were recorded on audiotape, and on average interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The lowest number of interviews conducted at an individual shelter was 1, and the highest number at any individual shelter was 5.

Each interviewee was asked a series of questions (refer to Appendix A) intended to gather information about the challenges she faced or would face and the needs she had or anticipated having before, during, and after her shelter stay. The questions were also intended to solicit information and opinions about how well she felt she was able to meet her needs using the resources and supports at her disposal.

The interview format and questions were developed by the two researchers in consultation with a Research Committee. The interview was then tested with residents at Isabel Johnson Shelter who volunteered to participate and offer feedback about the experience. Feedback from these volunteers was valuable for strengthening the interview format and questions.

Focus Groups with Shelter Workers

We also conducted focus groups with shelter workers[3] at 7 of the 9 shelters we visited. The director at each shelter scheduled the focus group. Participation in focus groups was intended to be voluntary, although in some shelters the director strongly encouraged the staff to attend. In total, 51 workers participated in the focus groups, with an average of about 7 people attending in each group. Each focus group lasted approximately 60 - 90 minutes.

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[3] The term "shelter worker" refers to employees of shelters who work directly with shelter clients/residents. Executive Directors did not participate in focus groups and, for the purposes of this document, are not included in this term.

Focus group participants were asked what needs women accessing shelters have and to what degree they felt shelters, government agencies, and other community-based organizations were meeting the women's needs (refer to Appendix B for focus group discussion questions).

Input gathered from focus groups and interviews was extensive, and in some cases was beyond the scope of this report. Examples of issues that will not be discussed in this report that we received feedback on include qualifications and job descriptions of shelter workers, pay rates of shelter workers, leadership challenges, debates about shelter policy and procedure, funding challenges, perceived life skill deficiencies (cooking, cleaning, etc) in residents, and discussions with interviewees about why domestic violence exists. This input, while not discussed in detail in this document, will likely be useful to PATHS in the future.

2. Women's Shelter Information System

The Women's Shelter Information System (WSIS) is a database developed by the Department of Community Resources and Employment (DCRE) in consultation with the shelters they fund. Data is collected at each participating shelter using a standard intake form for all women and children residents. All shelters that participated in this study, with the exception of Waskoosis Safe Shelter, receive funding from DCRE and are required to submit intake information into WSIS. Information gathered through WSIS tells us a great deal about the characteristics and experiences of women and children who stay in Saskatchewan shelters. WSIS also collects information about the person the woman identifies as her abuser. Any statistics quoted in this discussion paper are from information collected in WSIS over a one-year period, from April 1, 2002 to March 31, 2003.

Potential Limitations

1. Our pool of potential participants was limited to who was residing in each shelter on the day we arrived in the community. Using a convenience sample was unavoidable, given our timelines and resources, but may have affected the nature of the data we were able to collect. Despite having employed such a limited sampling technique, we were able to achieve a fairly representative sample with respect to age and constitutional status.
2. The subject matter of the interviews was very personal and intense, which may have resulted in a low level of trust between interviewee and interviewer in some cases. It is likely that some interviewees withheld information or thoughts because they did not have time to establish trust with the interviewer. Conversely, however, it is quite possible that some women felt more comfortable being candid about such personal topics because of the limited, anonymous nature of the relationship.

3. Because the majority of the women we interviewed were current shelter residents, they were necessarily in the midst of a great deal of crisis and turmoil. As a result, it was difficult for many of the women to accurately report all of their respective challenges and needs, and they were, in some cases, unable to fully comment on the effectiveness of programs and supports available because they had either just begun accessing, or had not yet accessed, them.
4. The reliability of statistics produced by the WSIS is dependent on the reliability of the intake data collected in shelters. Data accuracy can be compromised by client dishonesty or withholding, poor interview technique, an interpretation by interviewer and/or client of a question that is different than the standard interpretation, inaccurate record keeping, or data entry errors.

Section Three: A Snapshot of Shelter Users

It is widely accepted by those working on violence issues that domestic violence is pervasive throughout all of society, irrespective of race, class, sexual orientation, education level, age, or other social categories. The diversity of women who experience domestic violence, however, is not reflected in the population using shelters. While women and children who stay in shelters are by no means a homogeneous group, the vast majority are marginalized, disadvantaged, and face a multitude of challenges. This section will attempt to provide a description of who is staying in Saskatchewan shelters using data collected through the Women's Shelter Information System (WSIS) from April 1, 2002 to March 31, 2003.

Constitutional Status
74% of women admitted to shelters in Saskatchewan during the aforementioned period were Aboriginal, including 63% who identified themselves as Status Indian, 4% as Non-Status Indian, and 7% as Métis. It is important to be aware, however, that despite the high percentage of Aboriginal shelter residents overall, the proportion at individual shelters was markedly different in some cases. For example, Moose Jaw Transition House reported that only 29% of its residents were Aboriginal, while Piwapan Women's Centre in LaRonge and WISH Safe House in Regina reported that 95% were Aboriginal. Of the 20 women we interviewed, 13 identified themselves as Aboriginal (65%), while 7 (35%) identified themselves as Caucasian.

Age
WSIS data shows that women in shelters fall into a wide age range, and there is no specific age group that predominates. The majority of women are between 20 and 44, with only 15% being older or younger than this range. The average age of women in shelters is 32. The average age of the women we interviewed was also 32.

Education and Employment
Women using Saskatchewan shelters reported having limited educational achievement, with 56% having not completed grade 12 and 14% having achieved grade 8 standing or less. Only 14% have participated in a post-secondary program, most of whom have not yet finished the degree, diploma, or certificate they were working towards.

An overwhelming majority of women, or 80%, in shelters are not employed. When asked what their major source of income was, 56% of women using shelters reported that they relied on Saskatchewan Assistance Plan, Employment Insurance, or Band allotments. Another 13% reported that their income came from sources other than employment, and 13% reported having no income at all. These figures, amounting to 82% of women in shelters having no employment income, indicate a high reliance on government programs to meet their financial needs.

Reason for Accessing a Shelter
When asked what issue brought them to the shelter, 84% of women stated that they were fleeing abuse. The type of abuse they were fleeing varied, but a large majority reported experiencing physical abuse (65%) and/or psychological abuse (79%), while other forms of abuse were experienced less frequently, including sexual abuse (14%), abuse of children (13%), abuse of pets (5%), and destruction of property (21%). Intake forms ask women to report all types of abuse that apply to them, so in many cases it is likely that they indicated experiencing more than one type of abuse. The abuse experienced was most often perpetrated by a live-in or ex-live-in partner (75%).

Reasons other than abuse for accessing shelter were lack of housing (11%), transience (1%), mental health (4%), and other unidentified reasons (10%). The proportion of women with housing as their primary issue was not uniform across all shelter, however. For example, Piwapan Women's Centre in LaRonge and Southwest Crisis Services in Swift Current reported much higher levels of 'housing clients' at 38% and 26% respectively. In contrast, Isabel Johnson Shelter in Regina and Prince Albert Safe Shelter for Women reported extremely low levels of housing clients at 1% and 3% respectively. It is not clear why the rate varies so much across the province, but it is important to note that in some cases, it is possible that shelter intake policy may be partly responsible for the number of housing clients reported. For example, some shelters have strict policies that only allow intake for women identifying violence as their primary issue, while other shelters have much more liberal policies regarding the admittance of housing clients. As a result, shelters with stricter policies may either be admitting fewer housing clients, or, alternately, that housing clients simply do not report as such and appear in statistics to be violence-related clients.

Children
56% of all shelter residents in the aforementioned year long period were children. The age of children in shelters varies, with 6% under 1 year, 36% between 1 and 4 years, 30% between 5 and 9 years, 22% between 10 and 14 years, and 5% above 15 years of age (1% not recorded). The constitutional status of children closely matches the status of the women, as discussed above, with 78% of children identified as Aboriginal. 85% of women interviewed for PATHS' project had children staying with them in the shelter.

Section Four: Needs of Shelter Users

Information gathered through WSIS indicates that only 6% of women admitted to shelters plan to reside with their abuser once they leave the shelter and only 8% plan to reconcile the relationship.

Worker at shelters across the province related, however, that these intentions often do not translate into reality once women leave the shelter. As one shelter worker stated, " I think a lot of [the women] come in [to the shelter] with the goal of leaving their partners. On intake they all say 'I'm never going back' and, of course, it changes through the course of their stay because of all the barriers they encounter along the way." In other cases, shelter workers say that they suspect some women who arrive at the shelter door do not intend, even upon intake, to permanently end the relationship with their abuser, but that "sometimes they just want a rest [from the abuse], some food in their belly".

As a result, shelter workers in all 9 focus groups across the province indicated that many clients return to the shelter more than once. Whether a woman who stays in a shelter hopes to end her abusive relationship or she simply needs a rest from the abuse, it is safe to assume that she wants the abuse to stop, say shelter workers.

This section discusses the needs of women and children using shelters and how well these needs are being met, as identified by shelter workers in focus groups and shelter residents in individual interviews. There are many needs that arise as women work toward a life free of violence and abuse. All interview participants (shelter residents) were asked, through a series of questions, to identify what they needed to improve life for themselves and their children. Focus group participants (shelter workers) were asked to identify what they thought shelter residents needed immediately prior, during, and after their shelter stay to work towards an abuse-free life. The list of needs compiled from interview data was nearly identical to the list of needs compiled from focus group data, so feedback from both groups of participants is discussed together throughout this section. How well participants felt these needs were being met, however, tended to vary from community to community, depending on the programs, resources, and characteristics of each community. Some feedback and recommendations will apply to all or most communities, while other feedback and recommendations will only apply in a few cases. It is important, then, for readers to view the information in this document not as a blanket prescription, but as a starting point for discussion about the strengths and weaknesses in their community's programs and services, issues of common concern across the province, and the potential opportunities and solutions for positive change.

The section is broken down into 4 categories of need, including survival/basic needs, legal assistance and protection, personal and emotional support needs, and personal growth. Needs are not listed in order of importance or ranked in any way. Each category is broken down into several sub-headings that include participant feedback from shelter

workers and shelter residents about how well the identified needs are being addressed as well as any recommendations for change the workers or residents may have. In some cases recommendations are directed at shelters, and in others they are directed at government departments, other community-based organizations, or a combination of several groups. Recommendations listed come from both shelter residents and staff, and in many cases were voiced by both groups.

Survival/Basic Needs

Unless basic needs such as safety, shelter, food, and clothing are met, it is unreasonable to expect that one would be able to focus on much else. For those women most likely to access shelters, finding a way to meet these needs is near impossible without considerable assistance from law enforcement, shelters, other community-based organizations, and government departments. A considerable amount of time during focus groups and interviews was spent talking about these types of basic needs, how and if they were being met, and what realities acted as barriers to achieving independence from an abuser.

1.   Emergency Response and Support

Before they arrive at the shelter, most women are in crisis situations involving violence or the threat of violence and need reliable, supportive emergency response. Feedback about the speed and quality of emergency response centered around 4 main topics, including police (RCMP or City Police), Mobile Crisis, Emergency Intervention Orders, and regional challenges.

Police
The level of shelter resident satisfaction with law enforcement personnel was varied, showing no clear trend. Some individuals had excellent experiences with officers, as in the case of one shelter resident who said, "They were excellent. My oldest son, he was five, he still remembers the policewoman that was out there cuz she gave him teddy bears and she was talking and, you know, just making it more calming. You know, they helped a lot." Other women reported having very negative experiences with police who had a lack of sensitivity and understanding about the dynamics of the situation and who, in some cases, disrespected and belittled them in much the same way their abusive partners had. Other issues raised were
- a reluctance to take abuse seriously;
- tendency to believe abuser's story over victim's;
- poor response times to most disadvantaged neighborhoods, especially in larger cities and northern communities; and
- and a reluctance to arrest abuser, especially if abuser had to be tracked down by police.

According to information gathered through WSIS, 56% of women in shelters had contacted police with regard to abuse. Of those women, just over half (53%) of women felt that the responding officer(s) were very helpful, while the remaining women reported having some level of dissatisfaction with the way officers dealt with their situation. These numbers are fairly consistent across the province, with no one community showing a significantly higher or lower level of satisfaction. This data seems to indicate, then, that the quality of police response to domestic violence may be dependent on the attitude, beliefs, and level of compassion of individual officers. Shelter workers in all 9 focus groups stated that quality of response did depend on which officer responded, and that, in the words of one shelter worker, "some of them are great and very understanding, while some are not". Many officers are required to take part in domestic violence education/sensitivity training, and shelter workers who are familiar with the course content generally agreed that the training is good. As one shelter worker related, "they do have an excellent educational component, but whether the constable listens and learns and takes it to the street is another matter".

While workers and residents expressed frustration with the lack of understanding and sensitivity shown by officers responding in some domestic violence cases, shelter workers and staff said that they can see why individual officers may become jaded or callous when they often get called to the same home repeatedly and see little to no change. Shelter workers and residents agree that it must get frustrating for police, but do not see it as an excuse for poor treatment of victims. One shelter worker said:

> *I wish the police would understand, we've been in this business for a long time and we are disappointed many times by women going back, we've seen addiction issues, we've seen mental health issues . . . I've heard many times [from police] ' Oh, I've been out there a hundred times, I'm not going again' or it's the same old story' . . . but you know what, it's always going to be the same old story. You have to treat everyone like it happened fresh, but they don't do that.*

In some communities, shelter workers noticed a marked improvement in the treatment of their clients by police when the shelter had a positive, active relationship with local police. These workers saw strong relationships with law enforcement as key to improving service to abused women and children.

Mobile Crisis
Women are increasingly relying on Mobile Crisis[4] (in communities that have such an agency) for emergency response. Several women reported having called Mobile Crisis to assist them with escaping violence and/or transportation to the shelter in their area. Shelter workers in one community reported that not only does Mobile Crisis assist women in emergencies, but that they also support staff

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[4] An emergency response agency that provides social and health crisis and emergency intervention services on a twenty four hour a day, seven days per week basis.

at shelters by offering advice, assistance, or a chance to debrief a stressful situation. Overall, workers and residents were pleased with the service provided by Mobile Crisis.

Emergency Intervention Order (EIO)[5]
WSIS data shows that of those women who contacted police, only 18% had police tell them about EIOs. This statistic is consistent with shelter workers reporting in focus groups that police seem to be reluctant to offer EIOs. One reason offered for this reluctance is the amount of paperwork and legwork involved in obtaining an EIO. Staff in a few shelters related that women are much more likely to be offered an EIO from Mobile Crisis than police.

Participant Recommendations

- Improve/simplify the EIO process;
- Improve communication and relationship between police/RCMP and shelters;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of domestic violence training for police; and
- Address racial and class bias of police/RCMP to improve quality of response to the most marginalized women.

2. Safety

For women fleeing violent relationships, safety is a primary concern. All interview participants related that ensuring their own safety, and that of their children if applicable, was one of the main reasons they sought refuge in a shelter. In many cases they were looking for a place to stay where no one, especially their abuser, could gain access to them without their consent. As one interviewee stated, "the most important thing is that it's safe, that nobody can come here and nobody can phone you and nobody can bother you".

While most of the shelter residents we interviewed were able to find transportation to the shelter fairly easily, there were a few women who came from rural communities who struggled to find transportation to the shelter. Shelter workers reported that finding transportation is sometimes difficult if a woman has to travel from another community. In particular, women who live on a reserve often have difficulty getting to the shelter, either because they are unable to get travel paid by the band office or because they are afraid to approach the person designated to approve travel because of confidentiality issues. For example, if the person who approves emergency funds for travel has loyalty

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[5] An Emergency Intervention Order is intended to give relief to a victim of domestic violence in an emergency, and may provide the victim exclusive occupation of the home, a police officer to remove the abuser from the home, a police officer to supervise while the abuser or the abused person takes personal belongings from the home, and/or a restraining order saying that the abuser may not contact the victim.

or ties to her abusive partner, a woman will likely not feel comfortable applying for the funds in fear that her partner will be told of her plans to leave.

Generally, shelter residents felt that the shelter where they stayed, through security systems and confidentiality policies, helped them to feel safe. Many shelter workers also agreed that their shelters were, overall, very safe places. In some shelters, however, both clients and staff commented that a lack of security within the shelter, such as reliable bedroom-door locks or lockers, left women feeling vulnerable to invasion of privacy, theft, or violence at the hands of other residents.

While overall shelter residents seem to feel safe within the walls of the shelter, being out in the community during their shelter stay is often scary for the women. They feel frightened to leave the shelter alone for appointments. While in some cases shelter workers are able to accompany women, this is often impossible because there is not enough coverage to allow shelter workers to leave the shelter. At one shelter, the solution to this problem was to provide residents with cell phones when they left the shelter so that they could call for help if they needed to while they were out.

A major concern voiced by both shelter workers and residents is the safety of women once their shelter stay is over. One resident said that she feared "being alone with my son. I know that I won't be safe after I leave [the shelter]." Another resident related that after her first shelter stay she ended up going back to live with her abuser eventually because trying to make things work with him was safer than trying to avoid him in the small community where she lived. Because of the fear and danger women face after leaving shelters, some feel they have no other choice than to relocate to a new community. As one woman relates " . . . it's not safe for me to be [in my home town], even though I would have a phone, even though I [would] alert my neighbors, its still not safe, so I'd rather just move away and get a house and nobody knows where I live, it'll be much better."

Participant Recommendations

- Ensure bedrooms have locks on the doors and/or lockers for valuables;
- Have double staff coverage or alternate arrangements so that shelter workers can accompany women to outside appointments;
- Improve access to transportation for women living in rural and reserve communities; and
- Increase the number of second-stage housing spaces so that women have access to secure, longer-term accommodation where they feel safe.

3. Secure, Comfortable, Short-term Accommodation

Women fleeing violence need a place to stay. Given that these women often leave their homes on very short notice, require safety, security, and support, and in the case of women accessing Saskatchewan shelters, are not able to pay for accommodation,

women's shelters are the only option available. Both workers and residents agreed that shelters need to strive to be not just the "only option", but a place where a woman can feel comfortable and able to let her guard down as she mentally and physically recovers, 'regroups', and makes plans for life following her shelter stay. One interviewee related that the shelter she stayed in had provided that kind of atmosphere for her and her children:

> *I wanted to feel relaxed and feel, like you know, like I didn't have to worry about dropping something or whatever, you know I just wanted to feel relaxed because [at home] it's always so tense all the time . . . I knew it could be different, like being [at home] and then when we come here it's just like (sighs), you know and its just like a weight off your shoulder. And the kids, at first they were worried about getting in trouble and it took a while too [for them to relax at the shelter].*

For many, just knowing that they have a secure place to stay and that they do not have to worry about running out of food for themselves and their children gives them an opportunity to relax and think about what the next steps will be rather than living minute to minute, wondering if they will be able to provide safety, shelter, and food for themselves and their children.

Both shelter workers and residents agreed that the physical setting plays a major role in atmosphere development. A clean, nicely decorated, home-like space with a functional layout and enough space to ensure comfort for women, children, and the staff is very important when working toward a relaxing and calming setting, and has a substantial impact on the ability of shelter workers to meet the objectives of the shelter. For example, when children do not have adequate space to play without taking over all common living space, stress levels rise for everyone involved.

Fair, efficient organizational procedure was also cited by workers and residents as important for providing a secure, comfortable environment. In general, shelter residents valued a structured environment where everyone was expected to contribute to daily living through chores and food preparation. Shelter workers echoed this view point, and while opinions varied about how the tasks of daily living should be structured, workers at all shelters involved agreed that it was important that procedure and structure not become an end in itself, but rather a method for ensuring a positive experience for all residents.

Participant Recommendations

- Renovate shelters to provide a more spacious, comfortable, home-like setting; and
- Create chore structures and responsibilities/expectations/rules that contribute to shelter objectives, the ability to work towards mission/mandate, and the overall experience of all residents.

4. Financial Stability/Money to Meet Basic Needs

While domestic violence is a reality for women of all socio-economic backgrounds, women who access shelters are almost all living in poverty, and, as discussed in section 3 of this document, most rely on government programs as their primary or only source of income. The relationship/family dynamic shelter users are fleeing only compounds this stark financial reality, especially if their abuser has control over household finances. When you consider the low-income level, lack of financial independence from the abuser, and any addictions or any life-skill challenges that may exist for the woman or her abuser, it becomes obvious that the financial reality for women using shelters is usually quite desperate.

Interview participants who had received assistance or advocacy from shelter workers when attempting to secure financial aid were relieved and grateful to have someone on their side so that they didn't have to navigate the system alone. Shelter workers voiced disappointment that, while they are sometimes able to help women in this way, often they do not have time to help as much or as often as they would like.

Women staying in shelters rely primarily on the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan (SAP) and other programs run through the Department of Community Resources and Employment (DCRE). Feedback about whether women's needs were being met through these programs fell into two categories – quality of interaction with DCRE staff and adequacy of financial aid received.

Quality of Interaction with DCRE Staff
Women who used the call centre to contact DCRE for SAP all reported negative feelings about their experiences. Constant busy signals, misunderstandings because of a lack of face-to-face interaction, and a lack of compassion by call centre employees were identified as major concerns. In addition, shelter workers, especially in more northern shelters, reported that because English was not the first language of some of their clients, there was a language/communication barrier when these particular clients accessed the call centre.

Feedback about interaction with DCRE staff who are not associated with the call centre was much more positive. Many of the women interviewed reported feeling that the social worker assigned to their file was very supportive and compassionate. Women related stories of social workers who had encouraged them to flee violence, supported any decision they made, and recognized the seriousness of the violent situation. A few examples of positive feedback are:

- *She was very supportive, she gave me a lot of encouragement. I let them know . . . and they just listened to me and what I had to say and they told me what, like just to get out. They didn't give me a hard time or anything.*

- *She actually cared. I think too maybe it helped that she's an adult child of an alcoholic and so when I went in and talked to her she looked at, you know, what my game plan was . . . and she was just very compassionate, she wasn't judging me or . . . and she made sure to let me know when she was going on holidays so that she'd have my cheque ready before she left.*

In a few cases, however, shelter residents reported very negative experiences with unsupportive and judgmental social workers. Shelter workers also voiced some concern over women having had negative experiences with social workers in DCRE's Income Security branch. These negative experiences included such things as highly inappropriate questioning about the abuse, comments unsupportive of her choice to leave her abuser, and a cold and unsympathetic demeanor. Aside from some unsupportive DCRE staff members, negative experiences can also often be attributed to poor/inefficient policy that social workers are required to work within. For example, women fleeing abuse need funds immediately, but DCRE policy can get in the way of meeting this need in a timely fashion when the woman is currently in receipt of SAP jointly with her abuser. In addition, one focus group participant pointed out that a negative experience with a social worker can often be attributed to poor communication between client and worker, since many shelter residents do not understand what the social worker is asking or telling them and are easily frustrated, especially in such a vulnerable state.

Adequacy of Financial Aid
There was a number of special or emergency benefits that shelter residents identified as particularly helpful, including comfort allowance, furniture allowance, extra funds for clothes, and transportation funds. For those who were able to access these extra funds, the money made it possible to plan a fresh start for the woman and her children.

A general consensus amongst shelter workers and residents, however, was that despite special or one-time benefits, money available from DCRE fell far short of meeting the women's financial needs. Costs of living, and in particular housing costs, far exceed the monthly allowance provided under SAP rates. This shortfall is a reality for anyone depending on SAP, but in the case of women fleeing violence, the shortfall is particularly acute because it is often a barrier to independence from her abuser. Insufficient funds are felt most acutely in northern communities, where necessities like food, shelter, and diapers can be as much as double the cost than the same supplies sold in central and southern areas. As one shelter resident who lived in a small northern community told us:

> *…we gotta go 30 miles to the highway and then another 10 miles and there's only one store, the northern store and there's pampers that I could get here [in the city] for $18.99 they were $29.99 in the [northern] store, and at the drug store they were $39. And I had two of them in pampers, and the store never had sales*

*cuz they were the only store they had no competition. If you want a good deal you
gotta go to [(name of city)], three hours, with three of these [kids] that's kinda
rough too hey, I don't really want to do it.*

According to shelter workers, many women have not learned adequate budgeting,
cooking, or household management skills, which means that they are not able to
make the most of the little money they are afforded by government programs,
making their financial situation even more desperate.

Participant Recommendations

- Develop a team in every community within DCRE dedicated to serving
  clients fleeing domestic abuse and have that team visit shelters rather than
  having clients visit DCRE;
- Improve service at the call centre, and, if possible, bypass the call centre
  step for shelter clients and have them meet with a social worker directly;
- Have some staff at the call centre who speak Cree, Dene, and other First
  Nations' languages;
- Increase SAP rates to reflect actual costs of basic needs; and
- Build on DCRE programs like First Step to include more extensive life
  skills training so that women are able to stretch money further and/or offer
  life skills programming in shelters or other community-based
  organizations.

5. Clothes and Household Goods

When women flee an abusive relationship, they often have no choice but to leave all of
their belongings with their abuser and have little or no access to them once they leave.
As a result, women and their children have an immediate need for clothing, and once they
leave the shelter, for items to set up a new home.

While in some cases these needs are met through DCRE special allowances mentioned
under the previous topic, shelters play a large role in providing these necessities to their
clients. When asked which services the shelter offered that were most helpful, several
women commented on how important gifts of clothes and household goods, acquired
through donations to the shelter, were to them. As one shelter resident related, "We came
in here with two little bags of clothes, that's all we had, and through donations and that,
my kids are fine, and I don't have to worry about buying them clothes, shoes, jackets . . .
and things like that really weighed on me before and now they don't."

6. Quality Affordable Housing

Finding housing is one of the highest priorities for women staying in shelters. Both shelter residents and workers told us that the search for housing is often complicated by an extremely low income, high rental rates, racial and class discrimination, lack of references, and housing shortages. These factors make finding any housing at all difficult, and finding quality affordable accommodation near impossible.

Women staying in shelters do not have enough money to pay for quality housing, and as a result are forced to settle for substandard, unsafe housing that can have a negative impact on their health and well-being. Staff and residents describe rental units with mold, bugs, poor heating, broken fixtures, windows, and appliances, lack of security, and many other intolerable conditions. Complaining to outside authorities, such as the Rentalsman, is not seen as an option for women, because doing so will likely hinder her ability to find another place once she has been labeled "a complainer".

For many women living in northern communities, even housing with these substandard conditions costs far more than women can afford, since housing is so scarce in those communities. A worker from a northern shelter related that:

> *There was this lady that was here that just had a baby a week ago, she's raising 4 kids, and lives now in the grossest dump I've ever seen for like $600 a month, and she gets $410 [in rental allowance from SAP]*

Workers from northern shelters reported that women looking for housing often had no option but to move into homes with appalling conditions that were also very expensive because nothing else was available. In the words of one shelter worker, "if you don't take it [housing with substandard conditions] then you don't get anything".

Workers from one shelter reported that Aboriginal women in their urban community often face an additional barrier that non-Aboriginal women do not face when trying to secure housing, regardless of their financial situation, since there are many landlords of 'higher quality' units who refuse to rent to Aboriginal tenants. While this practice is illegal, it is often difficult to prove even if a woman had the time, energy, and resources to complain to the authorities.

As a result of all of the barriers described above, women leaving shelters often end up renting from "slum landlords" who, residents and workers report, do not respect the rights of their tenants and often take advantage of them. Because these women have very limited housing options, slum landlords hold a great deal of power.

Low-income rental units managed by local housing authorities are an excellent remedy to these challenges. Tenants are ensured a clean, safe, affordable place to live and can be sure that their tenant rights will be respected. The few women we interviewed that were

able to obtain low-income housing were excited and relieved that they would be able to provide a comfortable home for their children. Most, if not all, housing authorities give priority on waiting lists to women fleeing violence. Unfortunately, there are simply not enough low-income units to fill the need. There is a severe shortage of low income rental units, as evidenced by the increasing numbers of women and children arriving at shelters for whom lack of housing, and not violence, is their primary reason for seeking a shelter space.

Another good option for shelter residents seeking longer-term housing (non-permanent) is second stage shelters. These facilities offer private units, unlike the communal setting of an emergency shelter, for an affordable price to women who have experienced domestic violence. Second-stage shelters, which are in some cases attached to the same organization as an emergency shelter, also provide ongoing support and are sensitive to the unique needs of women who are rebuilding their lives after violence. However, second-stage shelters often have a very difficult time securing funding for capital/start up costs, and an even more difficult time securing ongoing core funding. As a result, second stage shelters are even scarcer than low-income housing, with only 5 second stage shelters in operating in Saskatchewan. Second stage shelters, then, are often not a realistic option for most shelter residents.

Participant Recommendations

- More low-income rental units;
- Zero tolerance by government for slum landlords;
- Comprehensive inspection and licensing schedule to eliminate substandard housing (i.e. inspecting properties regularly and not just in response to complaints);
- Higher rent allowances for SAP recipients (note: participants didn't feel that this alone would address the problem since landlords would raise rent in proportion); and
- Funding to develop and sustain more second-stage housing units.

7. Childcare

Women in shelters require childcare to allow them to find housing, secure financial support, attend counseling/addiction/mental health appointments, or to give them respite. A few shelters are able to assist with childcare, whether it be provided by shelter workers or by accessing out-of-shelter programs. Unfortunately, many shelters are generally not able to provide childcare for their residents. According to shelter workers, the lack of childcare often prevents women from being able to take the steps necessary to achieve independence and begin healing because they are busy caring for their children all day, every day.

Childcare is also a major barrier to achieving goals once women leave the shelter. Many of the women interviewed identified childcare as a major concern. They feared that they

would not be able to do things like pursue education or attend necessary appointments, or simply that they would not be able to manage their children on their own.

Participant Recommendations

- Provide childcare in the shelter for a few hours per day, or even for a few hours per week, to allow women to attend appointments or have respite; and
- Increase availability of childcare through community and government programs for low-income parents.

Legal Assistance and Protection

1. Protection from Abuser

Women who have left an abusive relationship need protection from the abuser to ensure their safety. The law and legal system should provide protection for women, but in reality, as we heard from both workers and residents, this is rarely the case. Residents and staff expressed frustration over the ineffectiveness of protective laws and measures such as Emergency Intervention Orders (EIO) and peace bonds or restraining orders. Abusers often do not take these measures seriously because, from experience, they know that they are difficult to enforce and that, in most cases, if they breech the order they will suffer little or no penalty. There is little incentive for a woman to report abuse to police because they can do very little to protect her, and their involvement may put her in more danger because the abuser will be angry with her. As a result, women do not feel safe or protected. As one resident pointed out "when you are walking down the street or anything, how are you gonna protect yourself with a restraining order?"

Participant Recommendations

- Abusers need to be more effectively monitored to ensure they are complying with conditions i.e. restraining orders, conditional sentences, etc.

2. Intolerance of Domestic Violence and Appropriate Penalties for Abusers

Women experiencing domestic violence need and deserve to know that domestic violence is not condoned by our society, and in particular, by our courts. This is not, however, the message being received by the residents and workers we spoke to in shelters. Their experience is that abusers facing charges receive very light sentences, most often involving no jail time. A few of the experiences related to us in interviews with shelter residents include.
- "It was scary . . . he said that if I charged him one more time and he got away with it then he was gonna kill me and come after me."

- "The time when he smothered me with a pillow he only got one year for that, it was only one year . . .smothering me with a pillow, I even blacked out."
- "and a lot of times they get released, you know, and so you're in fe ar, and I think that really has to, I really think that has to change."

As one shelter worker states, "The justice system, I think it fails the women. It's better now that the RCMP lay the charge, but still, he just gets a little slap on the wrist and they are back on the street. So the woman is terrified to say anything because he threatens her life."

Participant Recommendations

- "There should be clear and defined consequences, not conditions, not releases, actual jail time" (focus group participant);
- Follow the example of some reserves who are removing the abuser from the community.

3.   Custody and Separation

Women staying in shelters who wish to end their relationship with the abuser require legal representation to seek custody and/or separate from the relationship. Because of the limited finances of the majority of women in shelters, Legal Aid is their only option. A few women interviewed indicated that they were unable to access Legal Aid's services because their partner was already being represented by Legal Aid. Shelter workers reported that, in most cases, Legal Aid was very helpful to women needing representation, but, like many agencies, Legal Aid was overworked and under-resourced.

Personal and Emotional Support Needs

1.   Violence/Abuse Education

Information about the dynamics of abusive relationships is offered to women at every shelter in Saskatchewan to help them understand, for example, that the abuse is not their fault, is wrong, and is a tool used to control them. In some communities, there are agencies other than shelters that provide abuse information as well, such as outreach programs, nurses, and youth-focused agencies. Both residents and staff who have had contact with these programs indicate that they are a very good resource. For shelter users, though, the majority of the information they get about abuse comes from their stay at the shelter.

Nearly all shelter residents interviewed identified information and education they received about abuse as one of the most important services provided to them at the

shelter. Those who were in a shelter for the first time called the education an eye opening experience. Residents shared that:

- "I've been doing a lot of reading, taking advantage of a lot of the things they have here, and like, when I got here I didn't even realize how abusive of a relationship I was in, I didn't until I got here."
- "If I hadn't gotten all this [information] I would probably be going back. But now I see that I can't. And even this weekend, I had to go get clothes and he was there and he was still the same, his actions, his words, and everything, but . . . a month ago that was just life. I look at it now and I say just keep talking because that just makes me realize how much more I gotta stay away. And that's from the teachings and learnings here."

While abuse education is very valuable to women staying in the shelter, learning about the dynamics of abusive relationships is often not enough to ensure women will not go back to their abuser. As one shelter worker points out, "It's not like being a carpenter where you've built a house and there, you've built a house . . . its those small steps . . . maybe next time she leaves [the abuser] a day earlier than the last". Women interviewed who had been in a shelter at least once before illustrated this point well. The repeat shelter users reported that when they had returned to the abuser after their last shelter stay they were better able to recognize the abusive patterns and controlling behaviors. Repeat shelter residents said.

- "Well I think it made me a stronger person to be able to, even just to look for the signs."
- "Good thing I knew the cycle and what to look for . . . I knew when to get out before he flew off again."

Many of the shelter residents interviewed felt strongly that not only was violence education important for them, but that it was also important for everyone in their community. The women believed that if children were taught about violence in school at an early age, and if adults were taught about violence through various public education techniques, that domestic violence would be significantly reduced in their communities.

Participant Recommendations

- Increase staffing levels at shelters and/or find alternate staffing arrangements to ensure that there is time to work with each woman on abuse education as early in her stay as possible (Note: Some shelter workers felt that abuse education should be postponed at least three or four days to allow residents to rest and recover, while others felt that it should be delivered as soon as possible in case her stay at the shelter was short);
- Work in cooperation with other agencies and service providers which the women may access to ensure that she will get a consistent message about violence and abuse;
- Establish/enhance follow up support/outreach programs for women leaving shelters;
- Educate children about violence through school curriculum; and
- Educate communities about violence through a variety of public education techniques.

2. Non-Judgmental Support and Respect

Support offered in a non-judgmental way is extremely important for women in shelters, since they are often feeling vulnerable, shameful, and are constantly judging themselves. Several women we interviewed commented on how much they appreciated having shelter workers who respected and supported them as the women made their own decisions. For example, one resident shared that:

> *[The counselors] show you a different side of the story than what you're thinking and they make you think and then it's up to you to make a choice. All about choices . . .they want me to come around to my own decisions and figure it out.*

A few of the interviewees also commended the staff in the shelter they were staying at for treating them as equals, or in the words of one resident, "They make you feel like you're the same level as them like they're not higher up than you or better." She felt that it was important for all shelter workers to treat residents with that same kind of respect. Another resident shared that it was also important that many of the shelter workers who worked with her had ample life experience:

> *. . . I can openly discuss anything that I need to, they're not judgemental, all of them seem to be very, very experienced and life experience, its not just straight out of a book, they've actually been there and done that, so that makes me feel a whole lot better, like I'm not alone".*

Workers from a few shelters we visited spoke about the importance of non-judgmental support, but felt that shelters in general could do a better job of this, particularly when it came time for women to make decisions about whether to reconcile with their abusive partner. Shelter workers know from experience that women leaving shelters often return to an abusive situation, but because "a lot of women feel ashamed and embarrassed to talk about their partner [to shelter workers]" (focus group participant), this reality is not talked about between shelter workers and residents. One shelter worker asserted, "Shelters need to wake up and look at the larger picture of the family. Offer information about where the family can get counseling or where the partner can get help." Further, the worker said, this approach would acknowledge and respect the right of women to make their own choices.

Participant Recommendations

- Increase shelter staffing levels to ensure women get support when they need it;
- Recognize the likelihood that women will return to abusive situations and find ways to support this decision such as offering help with safety plans and offering programs or referrals to help heal the family;
- Continue to find ways to interact with women that make her feel respected and an equal.

3. Counseling

Many of the interview participants identified counseling as being very important both in the short and long term. During a short-term shelter stay, it was important to them to have access to formal and/or informal counseling to assist them to work through intense feelings they were experiencing. It was also important for them to be connected to counseling, either through the shelter or through some other agency, after their shelter stay so that they could continue to work on issues they were dealing with. This need for ongoing counseling is not surprising because, as several focus groups discussed, women who access shelters tend to have multiple issues and challenges, including addictions, mental illness, childhood abuse (43% of shelter residents have survived childhood abuse, according to WSIS), and many other complex issues.

Unfortunately, access to counseling during a shelter stay is not always easy to get, according to workers and residents who participated in this study. Several shelter residents commented that it sometimes felt that shelter workers did not have enough time to devote to them and that they were overworked. Workers from several shelters strongly agreed, reporting that they were often so busy and focused on trying to run the 'household' aspect of the shelter, that they did not have enough time to devote to individual client counseling, group sessions, or other beneficial programming. Many shelter workers expressed frustration that they were often working alone and did not feel that they could deliver the quality of service they wanted to. Workers from some shelters, however, felt that they were generally able to provide the level of counseling and service they wanted to and that staffing levels were generally adequate to meet the needs of residents.

We did not receive enough data from focus groups or interviews to determine whether the need for long-term counseling was being met for women after they leave the shelter, so further information would need to be gathered in each community to determine how well this need was being met.

Participant Recommendations

- Daily or weekly groups for women to participate in to get support from each other and the counselors;
- Have more staff available / different staff structure so women can access counseling when they need it; and
- Work with outside agencies and/or develop follow-up outreach programs to ensure women have access to longer-term counseling.

4. Coping Strategies and Long-Term Support

The maximum shelter stay is generally between 4 and 6 weeks, depending on the shelter. It is important to note, however, that the majority of shelter residents stay for a much shorter period of time. According to WSIS, the average length of stay is just under 12

days, or not even two weeks. Ideally, when women leave shelters they would be free to make decisions for their future based on what is best for themselves and their children, and not based on fear, desperation, guilt, or a lack of options. To do this, women leaving shelters need to be armed with coping strategies/tools and access to long-term support.

When asked what would be the most difficult thing to cope with once they left the shelter, many interviewees listed loneliness, fear, isolation, and lone-parenting as the issues that they anticipated would be extremely challenging for them, in addition to the basic needs discussed earlier, including money, housing, safety, and childcare. While some of the residents and staff we interviewed said that their community (either through the shelter or some other agency) offers resources to help address these challenges, many voiced concern that these needs would not be/are not met for women leaving a shelter. As one shelter worker said, "It is tough once they are out of the shelter because they are lonely and need support. Those women who have been able to get a little extra support post-shelter tend to do better" and are less likely to return to an abusive partner. Women who have lived on a reserve prior to their shelter stay and plan to settle off reserve once their shelter stay is over report finding it difficult and overwhelming to adjust to life off-reserve, especially in a city, without their families or support networks. Workers from shelters that have a higher proportion of residents in this situation report that this adjustment is a major barrier to independence and often plays a major role in a decision to return to a violent partner. As one shelter resident related, "But to be in a city I haven't been in for 25 years, it's a big change."

Participant Recommendations

- Offer follow-up programming and support to women after they leave the shelter; and
- Improve accessibility to practical supports such as childcare, transportation, recreation, etc.

5. Self Esteem Development

> *[I would like to change] the lack of love and respect that I have for myself and the way, like, I treat my children, because when I think of what he did to me, it gets to me and then I take it out on them, and I can't do that.*

The above quote from a shelter resident illustrates how low self-esteem can affect the individual and her family, and how it is often intertwined with the violence experienced. Both shelter workers and residents identified low self-esteem as a major barrier to women healing from the past and achieving the goals and dreams they have for their future. Physical and emotional abuse, by its very nature, corrodes self-esteem, and when combined with other esteem-damaging experiences, such as gender, class, and race oppression, cultural genocide, addictions, mental and physical health challenges, and so on, often annihilates self-esteem/love/respect/worth. Many women in shelters have experienced many of the aforementioned challenges and more. This reality is

overwhelming, according to residents and workers in shelters, as it is often hard to know which issues to begin dealing with, and how to begin rebuilding self-esteem. Further, low self-esteem is often a major barrier to women achieving independence and happiness for themselves and their children.

Support from shelter workers, other residents, shelter programming, being empowered to make decisions, life skills development, educational achievement, and employment were all identified by participants as ways that can help improve self-esteem for clients of shelters. However, as discussed in many focus groups, self-esteem is a very difficult and complex need to address.

6. Children's Needs

It is safe to assume that children staying in shelters have experienced a great deal of trauma and crisis. WSIS data tells us that some of the children have been physically abused and/or emotionally abused by their father (8% physical, 25% emotional), mother (1%, 2%), sibling (2%, 2%), or other person (4%, 8%). While these numbers are small compared to the abuse statistics for women in shelters, WSIS also reports that 61% of children staying in shelters have witnessed their mother or female caregiver being abused and 20% have witnessed the abuse of a sibling or someone else they care about. Witnessing violence is a form of child abuse. Whether children staying in shelters have experienced abuse or not, adjusting to life in a new place (in this case a shelter) away from their fathers, other family, and friends is often difficult for children, according to shelter workers and residents, even if their homes were filled with trauma and crisis.

In addition to the basic needs that are intertwined with their mother's (food, shelter, clothing, etc.), shelter workers and residents identified several needs of children staying in shelters, including space and opportunity to play, safety, abuse education and counseling.

Space/Opportunity to Play
Whether or not children have adequate space to play depends heavily on the individual shelter's facility. Some shelters have large child-friendly play areas, while other shelters report having too little space, forcing children to 'take over' common living areas to play. The likelihood of children having opportunity for play is also dependent on the resources of the shelter. If play areas are inconvenient for parental/staff supervision, if shelters are unable to provide childcare while women attend appointments or rest, and/or if there are limited activities for children to participate, then children are much less likely to have adequate opportunity for play. Both staff and residents reported that when a shelter is not able to offer play space and opportunity, children are easily bored and are more likely to be disruptive. As a consequence, it is more difficult for all residents to have a good experience in the shelter. It is not uncommon, shelter workers report, for a mother to feel guilty that her children are unhappy and choose to leave the shelter to go back home when her children request it.

Abuse Education/Counseling

As earlier discussed, children in shelters are likely to have experienced various forms of abuse, and require support to begin to understand and heal from those experiences. To meet this need, children would require access to abuse education and counseling during and/or after their shelter stay. Several of the shelter residents who had children felt that abuse education was important for their children. Some shelter workers told us they run child-specific programming to help children understand abuse, but many reported that they did not have programs in place.

While shelters may be a good place for children to begin accessing abuse education and counseling, especially for families who stay in shelter for close to the maximum 4-6 weeks, in-house shelter programming cannot and should not be the only resource for education and counseling. In a few communities, there are agencies, whether they be shelters or other community-based organizations, that offer programs for children who have witnessed or experienced abuse. Many communities, however, have no such programming available. A lack of resources for children may be one of the reasons that the referrals to counseling or educational programs offered by staff in shelters for children is extremely low. According to WSIS, only 4% of children in shelters are referred to counseling services or programs.

Safety

Protecting the safety of children is extremely important, since choices are made on their behalf and their well-being is entrusted to their parents. In the event that one or both parents may not be providing a safe environment for children in their care, Child Protection Services is responsible for ensuring the safety of the children involved. In cases where domestic violence is occurring, it is difficult for social workers representing Child Protection Services to determine what would serve the best interests of the child(ren). Sometimes a woman will access a shelter because the Protection Worker assigned to her case has told her that if she did not leave her abuser and take her children with her to a shelter her children would be apprehended. Many shelter workers admitted that, in those situations, Child Protection is left with no other option but to threaten apprehension. However, having women staying in shelters who are there under such an ultimatum makes it difficult to work with them. Further, shelter workers are often not aware of the conditions placed on the woman, such as no contact with the abuser. Staff at one shelter, however, saw it as an opportunity to 'win over' the woman and try to help her see that she has been given an opportunity to improve life for her and her children.

Participant Recommendations

- Ensure all shelters have adequate play space for children;
- Offer or provide access to activities for children to participate in;
- Provide abuse education to children in shelters as often as possible;
- Ensure each community has education and support for children who witness violence; and
- Better communication between shelter workers and Child Protection workers.

7. Addictions and Mental Health Needs/Challenges

According to workers in every shelter where we held focus groups, more women staying in shelters than ever before have active addictions or are in the early stages of recovery. WSIS data indicates that 14% of women admitted to having a problem with alcohol, while 8% of women admitted to having a drug problem. Due to the shame associated with admitting to an addiction, the rate of addiction recorded on intake forms is likely low, say shelter workers. While we do not know for sure what the actual rate of addiction is for women in shelters, it is clear from the discussions amongst staff in focus groups that addictions are becoming a major problem in shelters.

Shelter workers report that it is not uncommon for women who would likely be better served by addictions treatment facilities to arrive at shelters because there is no space in treatment or because they have no one to care for their children while in treatment. Even when a shelter does seem to be the appropriate place for a woman with an addiction, shelter workers often do not feel equipped or able to understand and meet her needs, especially without sacrificing the safety or security of other shelter residents.

Shelter workers had similar challenges when serving clients with serious mental illnesses. Women in shelters who suffer from mental illness tend to have needs that shelter workers cannot meet and can sometimes be disruptive or dangerous to other shelter residents, especially if they are unwilling to follow prescribed treatment or medication plans outlined by their doctors.

Programs and counseling offered through organizations such as Mental Health Services or Addiction Services are generally very good, according to shelter workers, but are always very busy. As a result, many shelter residents who are dealing with an addiction or mental health challenge cannot access assistance soon enough or often enough. One shelter reported being better able to meet the needs of these residents by having a counselor from Addiction Services and Mental Health Services visit the shelter for appointments and programming on a regular basis. Other positive shelter initiatives that were mentioned include in-house Alcoholics Anonymous or Al-Anon meetings and building strong relationships with organizations working in the addictions and mental health fields.

Participant Recommendations

- Build stronger relationships with Addiction Services, Mental Health Services, and other agencies working in these fields;
- Have addictions and mental health counselors come to the shelter on a regular basis;
- Offer more extensive training to shelter workers on addictions and mental health; and
- Make childcare available for women wanting to enter addiction treatment with the assurance that she will not 'lose' her children as a result.

Personal Growth

1. Supports for Education and Employment

Many of the women interviewed saw education as a means to independence by making them more employable and better able to contribute to their community. Educational goals ranged from completing grade 12 to completing a university degree. A few of the women looked up to the shelter workers and wanted to someday become a counselor in a shelter so that they could help others the way they had been helped.

While there are many educational programs offered through local institutions, shelter workers and residents identified several barriers to accessing education. Finding money for tuition and living expenses is a major barrier for many women, especially if they are ineligible for government programs such as Provincial Training Allowance (PTA) or Student Loans because of past choices. For example, one interviewee said that she had gone to school a few years back and was receiving PTA, but dropped out, partly because of the abuse she was experiencing. She wanted to return to school but was afraid that she would either be ineligible for PTA or would have to repay the funds she received from PTA in the past. Other barriers identified included lack of childcare, lack of confidence/low self-esteem, and transportation.

2. Parenting Skills

Because of the intimate nature of the shelter setting, workers and residents are able to observe family dynamics and parenting techniques in action. Workers at several shelters, along with a few shelter residents, voiced concern about the lack of parenting skills some women in shelters possess. In many cases, say shelter workers, women who have difficulty parenting effectively were not, for a variety of reasons, parented well themselves. Dealing with violence, and the crisis and trauma that results from it, makes parenting even more difficult. As one shelter resident related,

> *Eventually I'd like to learn some better parenting skills, cuz sometimes when you're stressed out you take it out, like you're angry at your kids, and it's not even their fault, you know? It's really hard to keep a level and to keep a balance when you're in a situation like that and it's very, very hard to get the kids to understand, so I'd like to be able to learn something like that. Just find out about different agencies and different classes and courses that are offered just to gain some more knowledge to be a better parent.*

While some shelters do offer assistance with parenting skill development in either formal or informal ways, workers in shelters often find it difficult to meet this need for their clients, since women often get defensive if their parenting is questioned. One shelter worker felt that unless a woman identifies a need for parenting help herself, it was very difficult to meet this need.

3. Assistance with Action Planning and Referrals

A number of shelter residents said that they needed assistance planning for their futures and finding the resources and supports to assist them as they carried out their plans. They expressed feeling overwhelmed by the prospect of planning and making changes on their own, and those who had received support in this process from shelter workers were very grateful. A quarter of residents we interviewed specifically named referrals to outside agencies as one of the services they hoped to receive from the shelter. One resident who was referred to counseling services related that "[the shelter workers] didn't set it up for me but they told me here's some phone numbers you can phone if you feel that you need counseling so I took it…a bunch of people came and talked to me already".

Aside from providing referrals for financial assistance (41%) and medical services (25%), referral rates as recorded in WSIS are actually quite low, which may mean that the many shelter residents are only being referred to a small number of resources, and that some are not receiving any referrals while in the shelter. Alternately, the low statistics could mean that referrals are not being tracked accurately.

Participant Recommendations

- Bring in a variety of outside agencies on a regular basis to explain their programs and services to shelter residents;
- Build stronger relationships with other community-based organizations and find ways to collaborate with them; and
- Refer clients to other agencies more often.

Section Five: Common Threads

Women using shelters in Saskatchewan have a multitude of needs and challenges, as evidenced by the information presented in the previous section. The degree to which each of these various needs are being met often varies from community to community, but there are several common threads, or themes, that emerge from the input from shelter workers and residents.

1. Despite the fact that most women who stay in shelters insist during intake that they plan to never return to their abusive partner, many women do end up going back, often more than once, before exiting the relationship permanently. One of the major reasons why the intention to leave does not translate into reality is because women are overwhelmed and overcome by the barriers to independence they face.

2. Women seeking space in shelters are often facing multiple challenges in addition to domestic violence, including addictions, mental health problems, and a long history of being abused/witnessing abuse in various forms, to name only a few. As a result, shelters are struggling to balance the complex needs of their residents while their mandates, in most cases, center exclusively on domestic violence.

3. Women in the northern half of Saskatchewan face unique barriers to leaving a violent partner and establishing independence over the long term. Transportation to a shelter (or in general) is difficult to access, especially if a lack of confidentiality is an issue. The north experiences extraordinarily high costs for basic needs such as housing, food, diapers, and household goods. Women in northern shelters are more likely to have been living on a reserve prior to their shelter stay than women in southern shelters, and may find it difficult to return to the reserve but find adjustment to living off reserve in a larger center a difficult adjustment.

4. Communities do not have integrated, collaborative, approaches to meeting the needs of women fleeing abuse, and as a result, gaps and inefficiencies are created to the detriment of these women and the entire community.

5. Despite the official stance Saskatchewan has taken against domestic violence in the form of laws and formal protections, the experiences abused women are having with the legal system, social service system, and at the community and familial levels, tell a much different story. Often the message being sent is that domestic violence is not important, and that further, it is tolerated.

6. While the majority of clients at shelters are children, shelter programming and services has historically been primarily aimed at women. Shelters are struggling to find ways to better tailor the shelter environment and programming to children, but are facing major resource restrictions.

Section Six: Conclusion

Women's shelters have been working for three decades in Saskatchewan to provide safety, support, and resources for women and children fleeing domestic violence. Shelters have made a substantial and positive contribution to Saskatchewan in general, and to countless women and children in particular. Much has changed since shelters began providing service in the 1970's, including legal reform, cultural shifts, and the addition of numerous programs and services to address domestic violence issues. Despite all of this change, however, one thing is clear: domestic violence still persists in our communities, and we need to continue to find effective ways to help and support those affected by domestic violence while also working to prevent it.

Valuing the knowledge and experience of women who have survived domestic violence, along with those who work tirelessly in shelters to support them, is an important step toward more effective policies, programs, and supports. If we aim to remove barriers and lessen challenges for women using shelters, we must take our cue from the wisdom these women possess, and involve them in strategizing for change.

This project has begun the process of including women's voices in the discussion. As organizations and individuals working to end violence against women, we must now come together to find ways to use the gifts of knowledge and experience given by the women involved in this consultation process to enhance and improve support to all women who come to us for assistance.

Appendices

Interview Questions

1. How long have you been at the shelter?

2. Have you stayed at a women's shelter before?

3. Do you have children staying at the shelter with you?

4. How did you become aware of the shelter?

5. Did you have any problems in accessing the shelter? If so, what were these barriers?

6. What kinds of support or assistance were you looking for when you decided to come to the shelter? What are you looking for now?

7. Can you tell me about what brought you to be staying at the shelter?

8. How do you think violence – either recent or in the past – has affected your choices and the course of your life?

9. Were you facing challenges other than violence prior to your stay at the shelter.
   ▪ For example, a lack of money, finding adequate housing, or unemployment?
   ▪ Other examples might be physical or mental health issues, parenthood, addictions, or depression?

10. What do you need to address these challenges? What agencies or services have you accessed so far? Have they been helpful? How could they have been more helpful?

11. Imagine that the issues and challenges that we have discussed, such as addictions, mental health problems, financial instability, etc, didn't exist for you but the violence was still occurring, would you still have used the shelter? If yes, why? If not, what would you have done instead?

12. Have you had any contact with the police in regards to the violence you have experienced? How did you feel the police handled your situation?

13. Have you had any contact with the justice system in regard to the violence you

have experienced? How was this experience for you? Did you feel the justice system took your needs and safety into consideration?

14. Which DCRE programs have you accessed (i.e. income security, child protection) either while the violence was occurring, as you were making the decision to leave and go to the shelter, or during your stay at the shelter?
▪ Can you tell me about your experience with (INSERT DCRE PROGRAM) during this time? Do you think the response and/or support was appropriate?
▪ Was your experience with DCRE supportive or unsupportive as you made decisions about your situation? Do you feel they understood your situation? If not, what could they have done differently?

15. Has the shelter offered you information on violence and abuse? What other sources have you gotten information about violence and abuse from? If so, was that information consistent with what you have learned at the shelter? How has this helped you in your decisions about your situation?

16. What do you like best about the shelter?

17. What do you think is the most important service or activity offered by the shelter? What other programs or activities do you feel the shelter could offer that would help you?

18. If you could change one thing about the shelter what would it be?

19. What do you think will be the most difficult issues or challenges you will face after leaving the shelter?

20. What would you like to change about your life after you leave the shelter, if anything?
Probe: What are the 3 most important things you would like to change/accomplish over the next few months? In the next year? What will you need to meet those goals?

21. In your opinion, why does domestic violence take place in your community?

22. In your opinion, what could be done in your neighborhood or community that would help prevent domestic violence?

23. Is there anything else that you would like to add or suggest that we haven't already talked about?

Focus Group Discussion Questions

What needs do women using shelters have?

What works well at your shelter for women trying to meet these goals?

What does not work well at your shelter for women trying to meet these goals?
What do you recommend should be changed?

In what ways do other agencies/programs help abused women meet their goals?
- Police/Justice/Emergency Response
- Child Protection/Income security/Addictions/Housing programs, etc.
- CBO's (Anti-violence programs, etc.)

What do these agencies do that does not work well for abused women in shelters? What would work better?

Compiled List of Recommendations

<u>Shelter-Focused Recommendations</u>

1. Improve communication and relationship between police/RCMP and shelters.
2. Ensure bedrooms have locks on the doors and/or lockers for valuables.
3. Have double staff coverage or alternate arrangements so that shelter workers can accompany women to outside appointments.
4. Improve access to transportation for women living in rural and reserve communities.
5. Increase the number of second-stage housing spaces so that women have access to secure, longer-term accommodation where they feel safe.
6. Renovate shelters to provide a more spacious, comfortable, home-like setting.
7. Create chore structures and responsibilities/expectations/rules that contribute to shelter objectives, the ability to work towards mission/mandate, and the overall experience of all residents.
8. Provide childcare in the shelter for a few hours per day, or even for a few hours per week, to allow women to attend appointments or have respite.
9. Increase staffing levels at shelters and/or find alternate staffing arrangements to ensure that there is time to work with each woman on abuse education as early in her stay as possible (note: some shelter workers felt that abuse education should be postponed at least three or four days to allow residents to rest and recover, while others felt that it should be delivered as soon as possible in case her stay at the shelter was short).
10. Work in cooperation with other agencies and service providers the women may access to ensure that she will get a consistent message about violence and abuse.
11. Establish/enhance follow up support/outreach programs for women leaving shelters.
12. Increase shelter staffing levels to ensure women get support when they need it.
13. Recognize the likelihood that women will return to abusive situations and find ways to support this decision such as offering help with safety plans and offering programs or referrals to help heal the family.
14. Continue to find ways to interact with women that make her feel respected and an equal.
15. Conduct daily or weekly groups for women to participate in to get support from each other and the counselors.
16. Have more staff available / different staff structure so women can access counseling when they need it.
17. Work with outside agencies and/or develop follow-up outreach programs to ensure women have access to longer-term counseling.
18. Ensure all shelters have adequate play space for children.
19. Offer or provide access to activities for children to participate in.
20. Provide abuse education to children in shelters as often as possible.
21. Offer follow-up programming and support to women after they leave the shelter.

22. Ensure better communication between shelter workers and Child Protection workers.
23. Build stronger relationships with Addiction Services, Mental Health Services, and other agencies working in these fields.
24. Have addictions and mental health counselors come to the shelter on a regular basis.
25. Offer more extensive training to shelter workers on addictions and mental health.
26. Bring in a variety of outside agencies on a regular basis to explain their programs and services to shelter residents.
27. Build stronger relationships with other community-based organizations and find ways to collaborate with them.
28. Refer clients to other agencies more often.

Outside Agency/Community Focused Recommendations

1. Improve/simplify the EIO process.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of domestic violence training for police.
3. Address racial and class bias of police/RCMP to improve quality of response to the most marginalized women.
4. Develop a team in every community within DCRE dedicated to serving clients fleeing domestic abuse and have that team visit shelters rather than having clients visit DCRE.
5. Improve service at the call centre, and, if possible, bypass the call centre step for shelter clients and have them meet with a social worker directly.
6. Have some staff at the call centre who speak Cree, Dene, and other First Nations' languages.
7. Increase SAP rates to reflect actual costs of basic needs, and
8. Build on DCRE programs like First Step to include more extensive life skills training so that women are able to stretch money further and/or offer life skills programming in shelters or other community-based organizations.
9. Increase availability of childcare through community and government programs for low-income parents.
10. Abusers need to be more effectively monitored to ensure they are complying with conditions i.e. restraining orders, conditional sentences, etc.
11. "There should be clear and defined consequences, not conditions, not releases, actual jail time." (Focus Group Participant)
12. Follow the example of some reserves who are removing the abuser from the community.
13. Educate children about violence through school curriculum.
14. Educate communities about violence through a variety of public education techniques
15. Improve accessibility to practical supports such as childcare, transportation, recreation, etc.
16. Ensure each community has education and support for children who witness violence.
17. Make childcare available for women wanting to enter addiction treatment with the assurance that she will not 'lose' her children as a result.