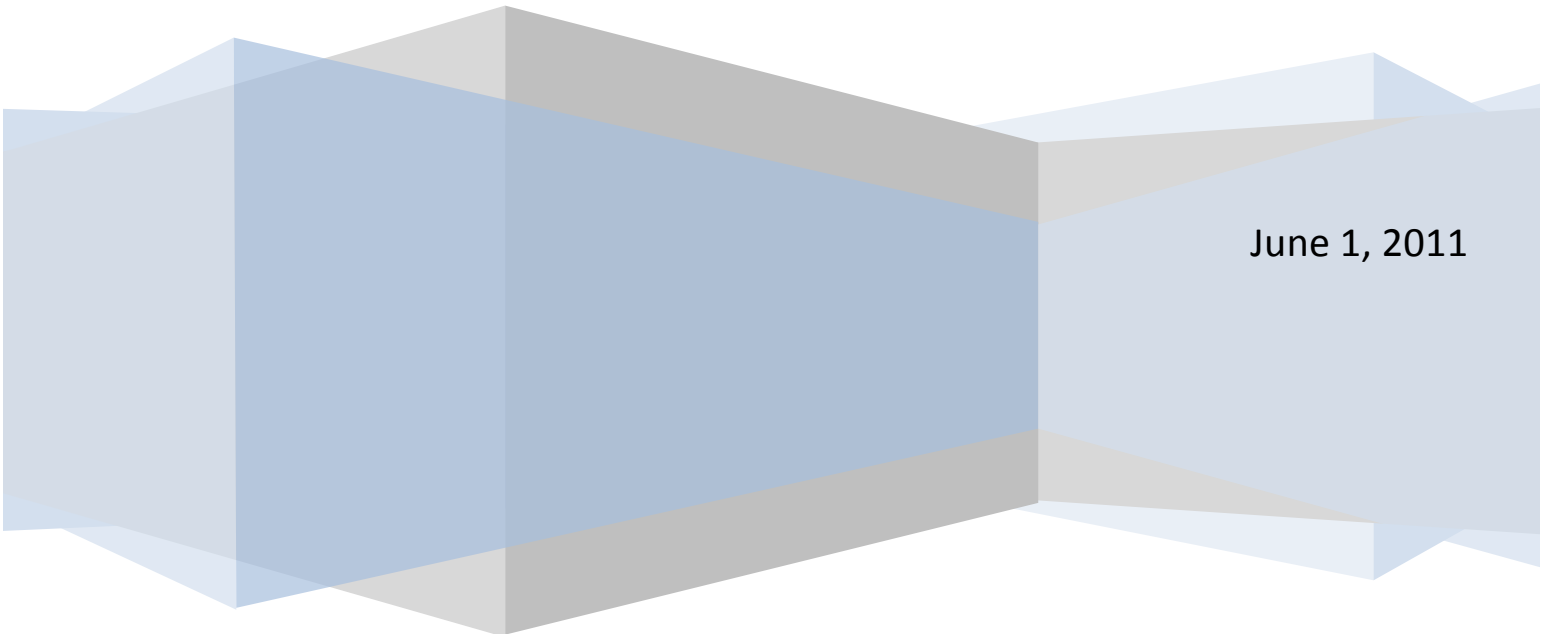


# An Evaluation of Shelters as Service Navigation Hubs for Abused Women

A Community-Based Project funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation

**Brief Report**



June 1, 2011

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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We invited the Executive directors of all English-language Ontario women's shelters to participate in a survey regarding the range of services and system linkage/navigation functions provided by shelters to their clients. To ensure geographical representation, we interviewed a minimum of 7 shelters from each of the 4 regional administrative boundaries (RABA regions)<sup>1</sup>. We conducted interviews in person or by telephone between February and July 2010. A total of 56 interviews as well as 12 self-completed condensed online surveys were completed: 12 from the Central region, 11 from the Eastern region, 12 from the Northern region, and 20 from the Western region, as well as 12 shelters who served primarily Aboriginal women. Of the 12 Aboriginal shelters, 4 were in the Northern region, 3 were in the Western region, 2 were in the Central region and 1 was in the Eastern region.

## Shelter Information

On average, there were 17 beds per shelter. It was not uncommon for the actual number of beds to exceed the level of funding. Shelters hired an average of 12 fulltime and 9 part-time staff and relied heavily on volunteer staff. In contrast to larger organizations, there was very little administrative support and resources were frequently stretched for evenings and weekends. For 72% of shelters, their primary mandate was to provide service to abused women and their children, although 6.3% included homeless women within their primary mandate and others included vulnerable women of any kind. In addition to their primary mandate, shelters also extended service to children of abused women (16%), homeless women (53%) and their children (41%), abused men (15%) and provided mental health respite (9%). Other populations served included women who had experienced any form of violence - including landlord or employer abuse, immigrant women, teens sexually abused by family and or non-family members, sex trade workers, women with addictions, and young women (and boys) at risk. Although most shelters serve a geographically defined area they often extend their reach beyond their geographic boundaries. All shelters reported a high rate of accessibility services including: an accessible entrance (84%), a text telephone (TTY) line (69%), specially trained staff for working with women and children with disabilities (66%), and materials in alternative formats (49%) and multiple languages (71%). The most commonly available languages were English and French and, in some cases, safety planning information was available in 13 languages. Although funding was not always available at the individual shelter level for translation into other languages, shelters took advantage of shared resources (such as [www.shelternet.ca](http://www.shelternet.ca)) to help meet the need.

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<sup>1</sup> RABA is an Ontario provincial inter-ministerial initiative to realign all administrative boundaries to a single standardized administrative boundary system. Eventually all ministries in Ontario will be required to use the RABA system.

## **In-Shelter and Community Services**

In addition to providing service to women in shelter, 97% of shelters offered service to women in the community and 36% offered second stage housing. EDs reported that there was no difference in the service level or in the philosophy of care between in-shelter and second stage housing; however, there were differences in the needs of the clients and how service was delivered. Women in shelters are in crisis and therefore shelters provide a transitional support program with services offered 24 hours a day. The focus is on security, short term counseling, interim custody orders, and meeting the basic needs of food and shelter. Women in second stage housing have more access to other community services. Counseling is provided by appointment and support is geared toward life skills, including such things as budgeting and parenting as well as information about accessing services and court processes, among others.

## **General Services and Programs Offered**

Almost all of shelters offered short term counseling (98%) and had a 24 hour crisis line (94%). In addition, almost 80% provided food and clothing and two hour legal aid certificates; between 60% and 70% provided furniture and other household goods, life skills programs, child care/respite, and recreational programs for children; 43% offered sexual assault programs, and 35% offered health care services. In addition to serving women and children 97% of shelters participate in community and public policy advocacy and 91% are involved in research and evaluation of services.

Across the province, shelters routinely support women:

- in accessing housing (97%)
- in obtaining employment and/or income support (100%)
- in obtaining additional health services, or health documentation (82%)
- with issues related to family (94%) and criminal (78%) law
- in understanding and navigating child welfare/protection services (94%)
- in accessing education and recreational services for children (78%)
- in accessing child health services (75%)

In addition they often support women to:

- apply for residency or make a refugee claim (26%)
- obtain cultural- or language-specific services (66%)

Counseling helps women understand the dynamics of violence, recognize different forms and cycles of abuse, develop safety strategies, understand childhood experiences of violence or sexual abuse; it also provides support for parenting and other related issues. Obtaining safe and affordable housing is a priority for abused women. Shelters report assisting women primarily in obtaining subsidized housing, followed by rental properties, although 50% of shelters reported helping women purchase their own home. All shelters reported providing job training programs and employment resources. Financial

support is obtained from a number of sources including: Ontario Works, disability support, employment insurance, and other employment-related or income support services. Shelters support women in almost every area related to family and criminal law. Although not as common, 26 % of shelters routinely or often provide support and 52% sometimes provide support to women in applying for Canadian residency or making a refugee claim. Shelters facilitate access to health services by providing both within shelter services and access to community health care centres. Services include pre- and post-natal education, support to women and newborns, programs to help women develop healthy lifestyles (e.g., smoking cessation, nutrition, exercise), health services for women with disabilities, services for women with addictions, and mental health services. In addition, shelters make arrangements for routine physical exams, assessments and treatments, forensic exams, documentation of assault, and access to specialized health services. Across the province, 68% of shelters routinely or often, and 30% sometimes, assist women to obtain culturally appropriate or language specific services.

Shelters offer a range of services for children by providing or making arrangements for subsidized child care, access to or relocation of schools and recreational programs, and on-site recreational and learning activities for children. Shelters work closely with child protection services and most reported using a collaborative services model with Child Welfare. Seventy-seven percent of shelters routinely or often, and 21% sometimes, help women in accessing child health services. .

In addition to the supports and services provided to women and children 76% of shelters reported that they also provide services and/or referrals for abused men and 69% report providing services or referrals for abusive men/fathers.

Shelters provide a range of woman-centred supports, geared to client needs, ranging from providing information all the way to accompanying women to meetings and appointments and helping them understand rules, policies and outcomes, such as legal decisions. In more than 90% of shelters, the staff helped women work through their options and develop a plan. All shelters reported networking with other agencies or organizations to meet the needs of vulnerable women and children.

## Networking

Shelter staff frequently get together or 'network' with a representatives of other organizations, including government services and agencies in the education, not-for-profit, medical, community and legal sectors; both through one-to-one contacts and by participating in coordinating committees. Contact occurs through both formal or informal channels. Workers may also make 'cold calls' to identify new services that may be relevant to shelter clients. Case conferencing is done on an individual basis. Shelter workers will frequently follow through by accompanying a woman to an appointment. Committee meetings provide opportunities for interaction between Executive Directors and front line workers of other agencies. Interdisciplinary committees foster relationship building and communication across levels of service. Knowledge exchange is fostered through cross training with other agencies, education programs, and agency information days.

## **Barriers to Service**

Beyond simply not knowing that services are available, directors identified numerous barriers to providing service. Lack of funding is at the core of many issues. Lack of funding limits resources, staffing, and training. For women, access to income support is key to them being able to access and retain housing. Outside of the shelters availability and accessibility to service provides creates barriers for women. In Northern and remote communities geographical barriers can seem insurmountable and within urban communities women often are faced with extremely long waiting lists. This is compounded by the fact that service providers tend to work in silos and that there is a lack of coordinated care. Generally there is a lack of understanding of the dynamics of violence. This results in rules and regulations that ultimately discriminate against women both in obtaining housing and in get fair representation within the legal system. The women themselves also have their own personal barriers to overcome. In addition to a lack of personal readiness due to the erosion of women's self-esteem and confidence as a result of abuse, women frequently lack the education and skills necessary to survive on their own.

## **Work-in-Progress and Next Steps**

This report provides a summary of our work to date and will be updated with information gained from Executive Directors who completed a shorter self administered online survey. We are currently undertaking an in depth analysis of the open-ended questions from the Executive Directors survey, which will allow for a greater understanding of how the various services offered in and through shelters help women and their families, as well as how shelters advocate on behalf of women. This will be complemented by interviews with shelter staff and women who have used shelter services. To date, we have completed 42 staff interviews and 73 client interviews from across the province. The last phase of our interview work will be with managers and front line workers from the broader sector and will include service providers such as Ontario Works, the Ontario Provincial Police, the health care and legal system, and Child and Youth Services. The final report will be ready in the fall of 2011.