

A map of British Columbia showing a transportation project route. The route is highlighted in blue and passes through several locations: Fort Nelson, Mackenzie, Fort St James, Terrace, and Prince Rupert. The map is divided into three horizontal sections: a dark green top section, a white middle section, and a dark green bottom section. The title 'BCSTH Transportation Project' is centered in the white section. The route starts at Fort Nelson in the north, goes south to Mackenzie, then west to Fort St James, then south to Terrace, and finally west to Prince Rupert. The route continues south from Prince Rupert, passing through Terrace, Fort St James, Mackenzie, and Prince George, ending near Fort Nelson.

BCSTH Transportation Project

Fort Nelson

Prince Rupert

Terrace

Mackenzie

Fort St James

Prince George

BCSTH Transportation Project

Phase 1 Report (Summer/Fall 2020)

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Executive Summary

Affordable and reliable transportation is key to women's safety, particularly women who are experiencing, or at risk of, violence. The BC Society of Transition Houses launched the Transportation Project to conduct research on transportation needs for women experiencing violence in rural communities and to facilitate pilot projects focused on solutions. The focus of this project is on rural transportation between communities where there are fewer transportation options. The first stage of this project worked to determine transportation needs, to identify existing gaps and barriers, and to explore possible solutions. Phase 1 research methods included a province-wide survey, a literature review, pilot project and Solutions Lab with transportation providers, a transition house and a safe home in northern BC.

The initial findings revealed that the transportation needs of women experiencing or at risk of violence are not being met. Transportation gaps included limited routes and infrequent service. Barriers to transportation use included lack of confidentiality and anonymity, lack of trust in the system, and lack of knowledge about available transportation options. The pilot project identified some promising practices to improve transportation for women, including: partnerships with transportation providers, gender-based and trauma-informed training for transportation providers, leveraging community assets, practical solutions to confidentiality concerns, communication about transportation options, and safety planning for hitchhiking. These practical, local actions would also be useful in other locations. In 2021, BCSTH will continue this work with funding from the Vancouver Foundation.

Introduction

Affordable and reliable transportation is important for women's safety. Access to safe transportation within and between communities can be a key practical challenge for women who are experiencing, or at risk of, violence (BC Society of Transition Houses, 2021).

In Phase 1 of the Transportation Project, the BC Society of Transition Houses (BCSTH) conducted research to:

- Examine the transportation needs of women experiencing violence in BC, particularly rural and remote communities in northern BC, and if these needs are being met.
- Identify existing gaps and barriers to safe and reliable transportation for women experiencing or at risk of violence in rural and remote communities in BC.
- Explore some actions that can address transportation challenges.

For women who do not have access to a car or transportation from friends or family, public transportation is often the most affordable and available option. In British Columbia, the end of Greyhound Bus service, which was a major transportation provider in rural BC, drew more attention to the lack of safe, reliable transportation. Then, the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020 placed further limits on safe transportation options for women. This research was limited in scope, focusing on bus transportation. Taxi service does not exist in all communities and, where it does exist, can be cost-prohibitive.

The ultimate goal of this project is to understand how to facilitate access to safe transportation that meets the needs of women experiencing or at risk of violence.

Methods

Information to address policy and practice questions was gathered with a community-based research approach. We believe that it is crucial to listen to the voices of those with on-the-ground experience and knowledgeable community organizations. These voices help to inform what strategies we undertake through this project to reduce the transportation barriers women experiencing violence face. For this reason, we conducted a mixed methods project which included the following five activities:

Northern BC Transportation Route Research – June 2020

BCSTH created a database and maps of four public transit routes in northern BC (Via Rail, BC Bus North, Northern Health Connections Bus, and Ending Violence Against Women Shuttle) to see which communities had service to other communities and the frequency of service.



British Columbia Northern BC Transportation Map October 2021

BC Survey – July 2020

BCSTH conducted an online survey of staff from BCSTH member organizations in all regions. As this was described as a rural transportation survey, 86% of the 75 respondents were from communities with a population of 29,999 or fewer. The purpose of the survey was to identify the needs, gaps and barriers to affordable transportation options for women experiencing violence.

Literature Review – Fall 2020

BCSTH conducted a literature review on transportation and violence against women to highlight the key issues with transportation.

Pilot Project – Fall 2020

With the aim to find local transportation solutions, BCSTH piloted a project partnering a transition house and a safe home program along Highway 16 with the Northern Health Connections bus¹. The pilot's goal was to address some of the challenges that impact women's safety in transportation in northern BC. The project has created strategies for women using transition house services to travel in anonymity.

Solutions Lab – December 2020

Representatives from the partner organizations in the pilot project participated in a virtual Solutions Lab. The discussion led to a better understanding of barriers to transportation, described project successes and lessons learned, and generated additional ideas for potential solutions.

Definitions

Women: In this document, 'women' refers to women who are experiencing or at risk of experiencing violence.

It refers to, and is inclusive of, all self-identified women. While we recognize that gender-based violence has significant impacts on cis-gender women and girls in Canada, we also acknowledge that 2SLGBTQIA+ and gender non-conforming people are disproportionately impacted by experiences of violence and continue to experience significant barriers to anti-violence supports and services.

Rural: A community with a population size of 29,999 or fewer.

Remote: A community or geographic location with a population of less than 5,000 and/or at least 100 km from a city with a population greater than 29,999. It can also be a community or geographic location without year-round road access. The project recognizes that geographic isolation can be compounded by lack of access to social networks, internet and cellphone service, and financial resources.

Safe home program: A safe home program operates in remote communities providing emotional support, safety planning, referrals and short-term shelter, which can include an apartment unit, hotel room or a secure private home.

¹ The [Northern Health Connections](#) service is a structured health transportation service established in 2006 and enables access to health services and medical appointments. It transports non-urgent health care passengers to their medical appointments. This service also provides seniors (60+) and women experiencing violence with low-cost transportation along existing routes. Northern Health Connections is a flexible service allowing for the routes and times to be shifted and redesigned as services and practitioner referral patterns change. The service has been recognized nationally as a leading health care practice with interest from other jurisdictions in Canada.

Findings

The project provides recent information on the transportation issues of women in rural and remote communities in BC. While BCSTH member organizations across the province responded to the survey, 85% were from rural or remote communities.

Needs

Women need reliable and safe transportation to relocate within or outside their home communities. They also require transportation to help rebuild their lives in safety. They may need to access health, counselling, financial, government and legal services. They may need transportation for education and employment.

Results of the online survey indicate that existing transportation options do not meet the needs of women. The vast majority (69-72%) of 75 respondents indicated that existing transportation options do not meet the needs of the women they serve.

Table 1: Do current transportation options meet the needs of women at risk of violence?

| Do the transportation services available meet women's needs? | | | | |
|--|-----|----------|-----|-------------|
| Distance travelled | Yes | Somewhat | No | No Response |
| Within your community | 5% | 21% | 69% | 5% |
| To another community | 4% | 21% | 72% | 4% |

When asked how often transportation is a barrier for women trying to access anti-violence services, 85% of respondents indicated that transportation is sometimes or often a barrier. When it comes to accessing other services, such as the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), legal services, or healthcare services, 84% of respondents indicated that transportation is sometimes or often a barrier.

Table 2: How often is transportation a barrier to accessing support services for women at risk of violence?

| How often is transportation a barrier for women trying to access services? | | | | | | |
|--|-------|-----------|--------|-------|--------------|-------------|
| Type of Service | Often | Sometimes | Rarely | Never | I don't know | No response |
| Your agency (services for women fleeing violence) | 35% | 50% | 5% | 1% | 4% | 5% |
| Other services (ex: MCFD, court, doctors, etc.) | 38% | 46% | 5% | 0% | 4% | 6% |

Women's need for transportation does not always correspond to transportation schedules. Women may have pressing needs and are not able to wait for infrequently scheduled bus service. They may have other reasons for not being able to wait for transportation that aren't shared with the transition house workers.

I did give the example of the one woman who let me know that she wasn't willing to wait because she needed methadone. So, you know what I mean? There's reasons. And when we know, we can work with it, but sometimes women are holding those things close, or safe, and we don't always know why. We don't always know what's happening that they need to leave sooner.

Barriers and Gaps

The Transportation Project identified both gaps in available transportation services and barriers to women using existing services.

Limited Transit Routes

Solutions Lab participants told us that many seemingly remote towns are serving as an informal transportation hub for women who are travelling from even less accessible communities to larger centres. Small communities located along major highways often have at least some, albeit limited, public transportation. For communities that do not lie along these routes, including many Indigenous communities, women without their own vehicles are left with very few transportation options. Solutions Lab participants identified the lack of connection to the web of small communities within the transportation system as a critical barrier that prevents women fleeing violence from reaching safety.

When asked who would be left behind without specific, targeted transportation initiatives. Solutions Lab participants told us that it was the most remote and isolated women who were greatest at risk.

I've said it before, but it's the more remote, most vulnerable women [who will be left out without targeted solutions]. So, women on reserve. Women living very rurally. Women with poor internet access. Women with very limited social networks. So, really the most remote of us, for sure.

Frequency

The Solutions Lab indicated that infrequent transportation is the most commonly cited barrier to safe transportation in rural and remote northern BC. Frequency was seen as being a much greater barrier than cost as the organizations often support women in need and pay for their trips.

It is important to understand that a transportation system may look comprehensive on a map, but if routes are too infrequent then the service becomes cost or time prohibitive for many women.

Travel Scenario: A woman with no vehicle needs to travel from Vanderhoof to Prince Rupert for an appointment on Friday afternoon at 3 pm in September, 2020. She could take the Northern Health Connections bus for \$40/return trip, or else she could take the BC Bus North for \$130/return trip. However, due to infrequent service, a trip that takes only seven hours by car would require her to stay in Prince Rupert for three nights. The costs above are only transportation costs; they do not include food, accommodation, or childcare. Because of infrequent transportation, this trip can cost a woman several hundreds of dollars.

This is one of the best case scenarios. The route from Vanderhoof to Prince Rupert is one of the better serviced transit routes in northern BC, as both of these communities are located directly along Highway 16, and both have stops for multiple transit options. For example, a round trip on public transit from Fort Nelson to Prince George will take a woman 6 days.

When surveyed, service providers indicated that the afternoon was the most likely time that a woman would be able to make an appointment in another community.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Survey respondents indicated that transportation options for women are often unreliable and unsafe. Transition house and safe home workers in the Solutions Lab specifically identified confidentiality as a significant barrier to safe transportation. They told us that a woman may choose to not travel at all rather than risk an option she perceives as not being confidential or anonymous.

A woman may be required to provide identification to check her ticket; this can be an issue for confidentiality. It can also prevent women who have had to flee violence with no possessions and identification from accessing transportation. Disclosure that a woman has left for another community can have dire consequences. When women are fleeing those in positions of community power, such as RCMP officers, their anonymity is of increased concern.

I would say that one of the biggest barriers to... maybe lots of my clients, would be anonymity in community, but also from RCMP from time to time. For whatever reason... I know there's often this stress around being trapped, or having it on a record somewhere that they were in a certain place, or accessing a certain transport ...I would say that that's when I get a bit of an, "... I don't want to give my name and address". The train, you can't get on without a piece of identification. And that's often not something my clients have ...

Confidentiality is difficult in small town transportation. Participants emphasized that in small communities the bus driver often knows those riding on the bus. As well, bus stops are often centrally located and highly visible on a main street, where waiting for the bus may compromise anonymity. It was suggested that a solution may be to have optional discreet pick-up locations that could be arranged with the transition house/safe home staff beforehand.

Trust

Many women who have had traumatic experiences may not trust public transportation systems and be unable or hesitant to use public transportation (Criado-Perez, 2019). Solutions Lab participants confirmed these findings.

Women are living in very precarious situations, and that can encompass their whole life and worldview. Ability to meet a service and to trust that they're going to be provided with what they need isn't always there. And, just the ability to simply feel safe on a public transit experience that might be taking them kind of far away. You know they're pretty vulnerable, for who they might meet and what kind of influences they might be open to in such a vulnerable time... I think that substance use can often come as a barrier for women. And definitely real and perceived racism. And, the fear of that happening in a place that they don't have control to leave.

In the Solutions Lab, BCSTH learned that trusting the available transportation can present particular challenges for women in rural and remote communities because often their only option for travel is with the RCMP or the Ministry of Children and Family Development. In communities in rural BC, studies have found a prevalent sense of mistrust towards the RCMP (Michalko, 2016). While participants recognized that any access to transportation is better than nothing, they also told us that trusting these organizations may be challenging for women who have had negative or emotionally charged past experiences.

Access to Information

Survey respondents and Solutions Lab participants identified women who are socially isolated in rural and remote communities as being at high risk of being left without information about targeted transportation initiatives. They may have limited access to social networks that informally communicate information on essential services, including transportation, and be unaware of available options.

Digital isolation is recognized as exacerbating the challenges faced by women. Many new transportation solutions use smartphone apps or require passengers to purchase tickets online (Schwann et al, 2020; Allen & Farber, 2019). This is not realistic for women with limited access to the internet. Many women cannot afford the devices required to connect; others may live in communities with limited cell phone service or without high speed internet.

COVID-19

In our survey of 75 service providers across BC, 77% of respondents told us that transportation options had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 3: How much impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on transportation?

| Has COVID-19 impacted access to transportation in your community? | |
|---|-------------|
| Level of Impact | % Responses |
| Yes, it has had a large impact | 33% |
| Yes, it has had some impact | 44% |
| No, it has not had any impact | 8% |
| I don't know | 12% |
| No Response | 4% |

Transportation Options

While this project focused on bus transportation, there are other public transportation options.

For some women, hitchhiking is their transportation of choice. It may be perceived as less risky by women who have experienced violence.

Solutions Lab participants told us that hitchhiking is still a common form of transportation along Highway 16. One service provider stated that it is the number one mode of transportation used by women they serve. Despite the increased risk of violence that women are exposed to, hitchhiking can offer women with limited resources a sense of self-sufficiency and independence, and the ability to travel on their own time.

Women who are living in constant risk, what they perceive as risk might vary from what you and I perceive as risk. And where their level of normal risk is, is elevated. And so that extra one step that's maybe ten steps for us just doesn't feel like that much more. And so to really see it from her eyes, like: this just is my life. And these are my options. And if I want to be able to do what I need to do when I need to do it, this is what I'm going to do.

Taxis are another potential option. The survey found that some transition houses have partnered with taxi companies to provide safe transportation. However, taxis are not available in all communities; and where available, they are not affordable, reliable or considered safe.

Some organizations have access to a vehicle that can be used to provide transportation to women between several small communities in a region. Solutions Lab participants said that this option is safe and confidential for women; however, it can be constrained by staffing capacity. Further, this option is only available to those women who are accessing violence against women services. Limitations on providing such trips due to lack of physical distancing capacity within small vehicles was the most frequently cited reason for the impact of COVID-19.

Practical Solutions

It is possible to address some of the transportation barriers when transition houses work in partnership with transportation providers.

The pilot project developed a promising strategy that allowed women to travel anonymously on the Northern Health Connections bus. Special tickets were booked by the transition house that removes the requirement to provide ID to board the bus thus protecting anonymity.

This partnership also explored ways to address addictions and past traumas on long trips. The potential of providing a free seat for a companion who can provide support to an individual who is under the influence of drugs or alcohol was suggested. While not able to eliminate the barriers to safe transportation entirely, this project has identified important areas in which other transportation providers could improve safety for women at risk of violence. A trauma-informed lens is critical to this approach.

Moving Forward

In BC, there are challenges to safe transportation for women. Along with information on the current state of transportation for women in rural and remote BC, Phase 1 of the BCSTH Transportation Project gathered information to address the barriers and gaps to safe transportation. Through the successful pilot project, practical approaches that might be transferrable to other settings were identified.

Partnerships

Partnerships between transition house and transportation service providers can support the needs of women. Outreach to transportation providers can help build awareness of needs, gaps and barriers. Collaboration in planning and training can support the development of safer transportation.

Training for Transportation Providers

Solutions Lab participants said that training on gender-based violence and trauma for transportation providers would be important for ensuring that transportation can offer women a safe space.

A little more education on gender-based violence and how it might be impacting rural and remote women before they're going on the bus. So that people understand that, yes you need to be confidential in all aspects, but in this one in particular. Because there's a good chance that these drivers are going to recognize or are going to know women accessing the bus and it's really dire that they never let anyone else in community know that they've seen this person leave community, or vice versa... maybe if I tell you why it is really important you're confidential, then confidentiality might look differently to you.

The Solutions Lab also emphasized the role that such training can play in protecting drivers and other front-line transportation workers by maintaining their physical and emotional safety.

Thinking... also of the needs of keeping [transportation providers] safe, emotionally and physically. Sometimes our clients are facing multiple barriers, whether it's substance use, or mental health, or just the trauma, it could be really fresh, or they could be feeling mistrustful... So I'm thinking that trauma-informed lens would be a protective factor for both staff interacting with clients as well as our clients accessing transportation.

In addition, they suggested trauma-informed training for other workers in the transportation sector, for example, transport truck drivers and inspection officers with direct access to the people frequenting highways. Participants suggested that this increased awareness could serve as a protective factor for women along transportation corridors.

Community-based Strategies

Some study participants advocated for community transportation as an important piece of the solution to transportation challenges in rural and remote communities. Community transportation should emphasize solutions that use a community's own assets to meet the needs of the residents. According to the Community Transportation Hub (2020), "Community Transportation is about viewing the issues of staying connected and having access to affordable and accessible transport as being critical to the vibrancy of small-town life and the health of its people."

I think some of the grassroots, community-based solutions for the smaller communities would be wonderful. Maybe having access to a pocket of funding for transportation that a community organization or not-for-profit could utilize and create more utilization of the strengths that communities have.

However, not all communities have the capacity to implement solutions, even with increased funding. This is exemplified by the struggle to consistently run shuttle buses in some small communities even with funding from the First Nations Health Authority.

... they run into a number of issues... The transportation's there, in these little communities, but trying to find somebody to take ownership to be the driver – and a lot of this is volunteer driving. And then they'll get a driver, and then nobody shows up. And then everything just loses its credibility. But I know that they try and they try. But it's tough. It's tough on these communities.

Addressing Confidentiality Concerns

One practical solution employed in the pilot project allowed women to travel without showing identification. Bus tickets were booked by the transition house enabling a woman to board the bus anonymously.

It was noted that training drivers and transportation providers on gender-based violence and trauma would increase understanding of the need for confidentiality.

The Solutions Lab also noted that the location of bus stops might be a barrier. More discreet bus stops that are less public are a potential option.

Communication and Outreach

Solutions Lab participants recognized a knowledge gap in internet-based transportation options and services for women at risk. One participant pointed out that while the internet is very good at helping you find information you are searching for, it is less likely to direct you to information you are *not* looking for. For example, if a woman doesn't know that a transportation option exists, she is less likely to search for it. The importance of community bulletin boards in public locations was emphasized as an important space for communicating to women about the services available to them.

I think one of the best places to put hard copy material is in women's restrooms, all over the place. Because they have the time and the space to have a really good look at it without other people noticing that's what they're doing.

Solutions Targeting Isolation

Women in rural and remote communities can experience different types of isolation. They may be geographically isolated from other communities, physically isolated from essential services and public transportation routes, socially isolated from support networks, and digitally isolated from information about and access to services. Communities that may only be an hour's drive apart may experience vastly different degrees of isolation. Transportation solutions must consider these varying, yet often overlapping, degrees of isolation if they are to meet the needs of women in rural and remote communities in BC.

Safety Planning for Hitchhiking

Solutions Lab participants stressed the importance of de-stigmatizing hitchhiking so that safety planning can be adopted into the practice.

I think hitchhiking is probably the number one mode of transportation. We updated a lot of our wording in our programs, instead of saying 'women fleeing violence' to say 'women at risk of violence' as well, because when women are considering that hitchhiking is their best option... that really puts women at risk of violence. We try to do safety planning around that. But to be honest, most of the time when they're going to use that option, it's rare that they actually tell me... So sometimes we don't get the opportunity to safety plan around that.

Solutions Lab participants did not think that the anti-hitchhiking billboards along Highway 16 help to reduce the incidence of hitchhiking or the risk involved. Rather, they reported that these billboards victim-blame, and put the ownership of violence against women on the women rather than the perpetrators.

Conclusion

Phase 1 of the BCSTH Transportation Project found that access to affordable, safe, and reliable transportation within and between communities is vital to the safety and mobility of women experiencing or at risk of violence. This phase of the project conducted research, built partnerships, and piloted on-the-ground solutions between transition house organizations and the Northern Health Connections bus. The findings revealed the needs, gaps, and barriers to safe transportation for women across rural and remote BC. It also explored some ways of addressing the gaps and barriers.

While community-based solutions are important to fill gaps in transportation and meet local needs, the issue of access to transportation needs to be addressed from a systemic level as well. A better-resourced, more extensive transportation system may not be safe or reliable if it does not consider the needs of women experiencing, or at risk of, violence.

If you are interested in the continued work of BCSTH on transportation barriers and solutions for women and their children experiencing violence, check out the project website at <https://bcsth.ca/projects/bcsth-transportation-project/>.

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