GETTING HOME PROJECT

Overcoming Barriers to Housing After Violence

GETTING HOME

BC Society of
Transition Houses

With Gratitude we recognize that the BC Society of Transition Houses' office is located on unceded Coast Salish territory, shared by the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam) and səl̓ílwətaʔɬ/ Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

As this work discusses the barriers to safe, affordable and appropriate housing after violence, experienced by women throughout British Columbia, we recognize that this discussion includes all 203 First Nations throughout the province.

We understand that the displacement of Indigenous peoples from their lands and other ongoing effects of colonialism are foundational to the disproportionate number of Indigenous women and girls experiencing homelessness and violence.

We recognize the importance of valuing the connection between all living things and all systems we have created. As such, we understand that the issues of homelessness and violence can only be fully addressed through sustainable systemic change.

It is our hope that this research will contribute to the larger body of work that aims to support all those who experience violence and homelessness.

Acknowledgements

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Getting Home Project was a multi-year community-based project from 2018-2021, focusing on reducing barriers to safe, secure and affordable housing for women and their children experiencing violence in British Columbia (BC). The key issue the Getting Home Project addressed was the lack of affordable and appropriate housing for women and their children who experience violence in BC.
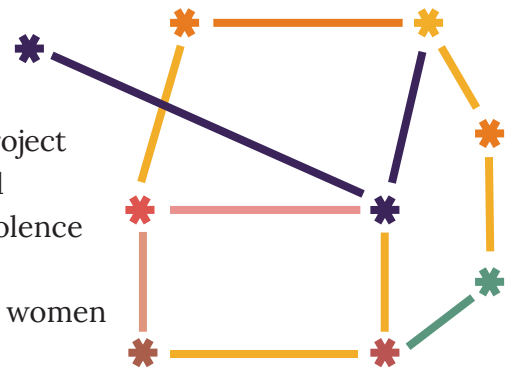
The initial objectives of the Getting Home Project were:

- To improve access to affordable housing options for women and their children experiencing violence.

- To identify key barriers for immigrant, refugee and Indigenous women and their children experiencing violence to access affordable housing.

- To develop ongoing and sustainable financial supports that improve economic security and access to long-term housing for women and their children experiencing violence.

The work of The Getting Home Project consisted of five phases:

Phase 1   Organization of the project Steering Committee, including stakeholders and project manager.

Phase 2   Identification of potential pilot sites with local organizations interested in collaboration, and an initial Community Needs Assessment to identify barriers to housing.

Phase 3   Development of action plans for four pilot sites, each with a unique approach to increasing access to housing for women.

Phase 4   Implementation of the action plans.

Phase 5   Knowledge dissemination and further research on how the COVID-19 pandemic became an additional barrier to housing.

A common theme identified throughout the project was the feeling of hopelessness in relation to housing among frontline workers and those who have experienced violence. Undoubtedly, the barriers to safe and affordable housing for women who have experienced violence are daunting. There is a need for systemic change to address the issues that face many women who have experienced violence including poverty,

discrimination and housing affordability. In addition, the undeniable existence of systemic racism, sexism, colonialism, ableism and more, that all contribute to disproportionate experiences of violence for some women and increase their risk of experiencing homelessness, understandably leaves many without hope. Despite this sense of hopelessness, creative and compassionate work continues throughout the anti-violence and housing sectors.

The specific barriers that prevent women and their children who have experienced violence from securing long-term appropriate and affordable housing were defined by four overarching categories, as follows:

- Affordability of housing
- Accessibility and appropriateness of housing and services
- Discrimination
- Poverty and other financial barriers

In order to remove the structural barriers, there is a need for long-term, systemic change at every level of policy development (grassroots, community, provincial and federal). All levels of government and decision-makers must address the intersection of violence and housing in an inclusive and holistic manner to ensure long-lasting and effective change. At the same time, there is also a need for an immediate increase in available and appropriate housing as the current circumstances regularly force women who have experienced violence into choosing between housing and safety.

During the Getting Home Project, the COVID-19 pandemic began. The impacts of COVID-19 further highlighted pre-existing social inequities. Though we are still navigating the shifting nature of the ongoing pandemic, the Getting Home Project identified four key ways women who experienced violence during the pandemic were affected:

- Increased isolation and fear of contracting COVID-19 put women more at risk of experiencing violence.

- Increased risk of poverty due to economic shutdowns and further limitations on available shelter and housing options.

- The need to use alternative service models by many violence prevention spaces.

- Increased awareness and focus around women fleeing violence in Canada, and the potential creation of a window for policy change.

The Getting Home Project initiated four pilot sites that each demonstrated community-based structural change at various levels of policy development. Each pilot site effectively increased access to housing for women and their children who have experienced violence.

Federal
National Occupancy Standards Research and Working Group

Grassroots
Comox Valley Partnership

Provincial
Rural Housing Advisory Committee

Community
Vancouver Co-op Partnership
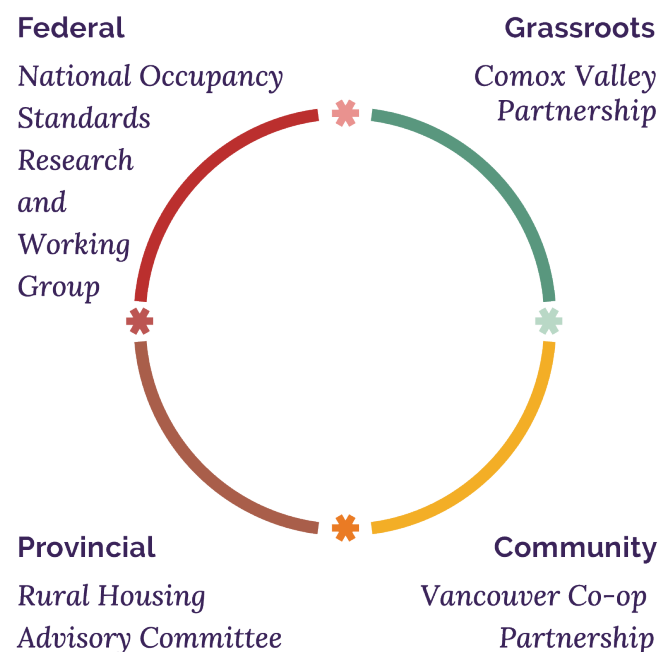
A goal of the Getting Home Project was to exemplify structural change through community-based work and inform future projects in this area.

Key insights learned throughout the pilot sites are as follows:

▶ **Build on existing partnerships.**

▶ **Knowledge share and use the strengths of others.**

▶ **Be open, honest and humble.**

▶ **Take steps to ensure longevity of projects.**

▶ **Use what already works well.**

▶ **No project is too small, or too big.**

▶ **Policy change is needed at every level.**

▶ **More than ever, adequate funding for transition houses is necessary.**

The lessons learned throughout the pilot sites also guided the development of a framework for community-based work grounded in intersectional feminist policy development and change.

RAAISE: A Framework for Community-Based Policy Change

In the final phases of The Getting Home Project, the amalgamation of research, the lived-experiences of those working on the pilot sites and reflection on the key barriers that were identified guided the development of eight policy recommendations for decision-makers within five key areas for policy action. These recommendations are a call-to-action for decision-makers to recognize the urgency of this issue and create tangible change in order to increase access to housing for women and their children who have experienced violence.

Research

Awareness Raising and Partnership Building

Analysis of Alternatives

Implementation

Self-Reflect and Review

Educate and Knowledge Share

Actionable Policy Areas and Recommendations

Increase Housing Supply	1. *Increase supply of appropriate and affordable housing for women and their children who have experienced violence.*
Create Cross-Sector Organization	2. *Create cross-sector collaboration to ensure adequate data collection related to women experiencing homelessness and the ability for knowledge sharing.*
Increase Funding	3. *Establish long-term funding for violence prevention services and housing services.*
Reduce Systemic Barriers	4. *Reduce social inequities women face that make them at risk for experiencing homelessness by reducing the gender wage gap.*
	5. *Reduce social inequities women face that make them at risk for experiencing homelessness by creating a specific government support program for women experiencing violence.*
Increase Inclusion and Accessibility	6. *Formally recognize the National Occupancy Standards as merely guidelines and create new standards to guide occupancy rates in social housing and the private rental market.*
	7. *Increase public transportation options in rural and remote areas.*
	8. *Diversify the design of affordable housing to accommodate families and increase accessibility of units.*

While the Getting Home Project has demonstrated the weight of the barriers faced by women seeking housing, it has also shown that small changes matter and can inform change on a larger scale. Every action taken to decrease the barriers to housing for women experiencing violence is important. It is our hope that the Getting Home Project leads to further work to increase access to housing for women and their children who have experienced violence and ensure that the choice between housing or safety does not have to be made.
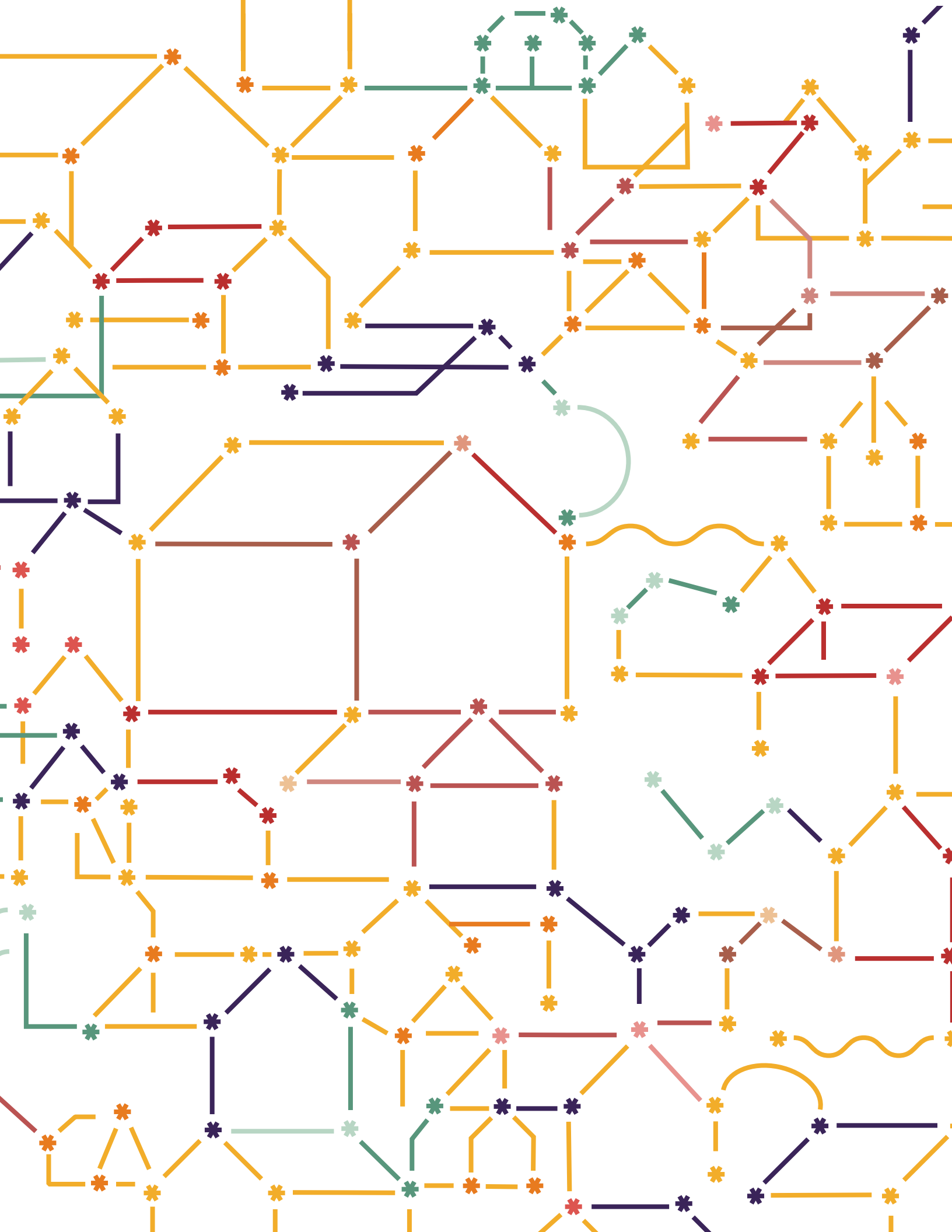
INTRODUCTION

The Getting Home Project was a multi-year community-based project from 2018-2021, focusing on reducing barriers to safe, secure and affordable housing for women and their children experiencing violence in British Columbia (BC). Those working in the transition house sector have identified a bottleneck to long-term housing for the women who access their services. The key issue the Getting Home Project addressed was the lack of affordable and appropriate long-term housing for women and their children who experience violence in BC.

Through a Community Needs Assessment conducted in the first year of the project, the Getting Home Project determined women who experience violence face barriers to housing in a multitude of ways summarized in the following themes:

Key Issue:

The lack of affordable and appropriate long-term housing for women and their children who experience violence in BC.

Affordability of Housing

Discrimination

Poverty and Other Financial Barriers

Accessibility and Appropriateness of Housing and Services

Understanding that housing is foundational to economic empowerment and security, the Getting Home Project found that there is a need for **long-term systemic change** in order to address women's economic insecurity. However, there is also an **immediate need for housing** among women who experience violence. Overall, access to secure, long-term housing is a key factor in determining economic stability and independence.

In response to the need for both foundational and immediate change in housing, the Getting Home Project implemented four community led pilot sites throughout the province.

Each pilot site was distinct and reflected the main goals of the Getting Home Project which were:

- To improve access to affordable housing options for women and their children experiencing violence.

- To identify key barriers for immigrant, refugee and Indigenous women and their children experiencing violence to access affordable housing.

- To develop ongoing and sustainable financial supports that improve economic security and access to long-term housing for women and their children experiencing violence.

This report is intended to serve multiple purposes, such as a source of research on the intersection of housing and violence and a practical guide for service providers. The key purpose of this report is to support further work in this area.

BCSTH and the Getting Home Project Steering Committee

The Getting Home Project was led by the BC Society of Transition Houses (BCSTH) and was in partnership with the BC Non-Profit Housing Association, The Co-operative Housing Federation of BC, BC Housing and Vancity Community Foundation. These five organizations form the Project Steering Committee, which met monthly to support, guide and offer capacity to the project. Each of these organizations offered valuable contributions to the project research, logistics and goals.

BCSTH is a member-based umbrella organization of transition, second and third stage housing programs, safe homes, PEACE programs, and other groups that serve the needs of women and their children experiencing violence in BC. In leading this project, the BCSTH gathered knowledgeable and well-networked organizations from the housing and financial fields to assist in meeting the project goals, while BCSTH brought an understanding of violence against women, the transition housing sector and an intersectional feminist framework to this project.

BCSTH uses an intersectional feminist framework to engage in gender-based analyses, while also taking into consideration other social structures and power relations

that impact women's lives (i.e., ableism, heterosexism, racism, etc.). In consideration of community contexts, BCSTH encourages reflection upon our social positions in our daily interactions; that is, the consideration of our own interests and perspectives and the ways in which we hold and exert power. Consequently, this approach informs strategic planning efforts in terms of how we develop more inclusive services by asking questions about who is included and who is excluded, and about who is heard and who is silenced.

The BC Non-Profit Housing Association (BCNPHA) is the provincial umbrella organization for BC's non-profit housing sector with over 600 members including societies, businesses, individuals and stakeholders. BCNPHA members manage over 60,000 long-term and affordable units of housing in 2,500 buildings across the province. BCNPHA conducts research, hosts conferences, and develops training to support the non-profit housing sector. In recognizing the significant challenges that women leaving violence face when trying to access affordable housing, BCNPHA has contributed networks, research and partnerships to the Getting Home Project.

The Co-operative Housing Federation of BC (CHFBC) is also a member-based organization representing BC's housing co-operatives. CHFBC is committed to promoting inclusive communities in the new and existing co-ops of BC. In the past, through campaigns, trainings and specific funds, CHFBC has facilitated women experiencing violence to access co-op housing. For example, CHFBC has developed the Domestic Violence Relief Fund, which assists women who have experienced violence with funding to access co-op housing. CHFBC played an

active role as a Steering Committee member on this project to continue to help make co-operative housing a reality for women experiencing violence in BC.

BC Housing (BCH) is a crown corporation that develops, manages and administers a wide range of subsidized housing options across British Columbia. As well as administering funding to non-profit organizations to operate transition houses, second stage housing and safe homes, BC Housing also administers funding for the Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP). HPP is an initiative aimed at providing individuals in identified at-risk groups facing homelessness with portable rent supplements and support services to help them access rental housing in the private (non- subsidized) housing market. This includes women who have experienced violence or are at risk of violence. Further, BCH has a supplemental application process that provides priority access to social housing for women fleeing violence. The organization is committed to housing women and children at risk of violence and integrating best practices into existing and new housing initiatives. BCH contributed resources, research, and opportunities to the Getting Home Project to integrate lasting changes within the housing sector.

Vancity Community Foundation (VCF) is a public charity created to help gather together resources to realize the potential that exists when invested in communities. Through the generosity of donors, expertise of staff and partner organizations, VCF strives to be a catalyst for transformation. As a steering committee member for the Getting Home Project, VCF brought financial acumen and strategic focus to empowering

economic security for women experiencing violence as they face financial barriers to long-term housing.

Definitions

BCSTH recognizes the importance of language within intersectional feminist research. As such, key terms used throughout the report are identified and defined below.

Women

The term women used in this report 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 2SLGBTQQIA+ and gender diverse people are disproportionately impacted by experiences of violence and continue to experience significant barriers to anti-violence supports and services. The need for gender inclusive violence prevention spaces is identified throughout the report.

The Experience of Violence

There are many terms used within violence prevention services in relation to women who have experienced violence. Both "women who experience/ have experienced violence" and "women fleeing violence" are used throughout this report to capture all forms of violence inclusive of, but not limited to, Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and domestic violence.

The Housing Continuum

This report discusses the following stages and service models of housing that together create a housing continuum. The housing continuum is fluid, as individuals enter and exit services at any point and it is not a step-by-step process to securing long-term housing.

Emergency Shelters are immediate, short-term accommodations for those experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness (BC Housing, 2021).

Safe Homes are community-based networks of private homes, hotels, motels or confidential housing units that shelter women and their children. They typically offer short stay placements, but can be longer if required. They also provide outreach services in small rural communities that are often geographically far apart (BC Society of Transition Housing, n.d.).

Transition Houses provide short- to long-term shelter and related support services to women, children, and youth who have experienced or are at risk of violence and offer temporary safe shelter (BC Society of Transition Housing, n.d.).

The term "transitional housing" is often confused for the specific service model of transition houses. Although transition houses are an example, "transitional housing" is an umbrella term for any form of temporary accommodation with services for those experiencing housing precarity.

Second Stage Housing provides service-enhanced affordable temporary housing for women, children and youth who have recently experienced violence. This model offers women, children and youth secure, affordable housing for 3 to 12 months, as well as support and programming that enable women and families to make decisions about their future (BC Society of Transition Housing, n.d.).

Third Stage Housing provides supportive housing for women who have left violent relationships and who no longer need crisis service support through independent long-term housing with lengths of tenancy from 2 to 4 years (BC Society of Transition Housing, n.d.).

Long-Term Housing is any form of permanent housing, including within the private market. Outside of the private market, there is **social** or **public housing**, used interchangeably, to describe any housing project owned and operated either by the government or a non-profit. Non-profit housing or community housing refers to a housing development which is community-based and entirely operated by a non-profit organization or a co-operative housing organization (BC Housing, 2021).

Another commonly referred to housing model is **Co-operative Housing**, where residents own and operate the housing development themselves, through a membership system (BC Housing, 2021).

Project Overview and Key Findings

The Getting Home Project consisted of five phases. The first, was the organization of stakeholders as well as a project manager, whom collectively became the members of the Steering Committee for the project. Next, potential communities for pilot sites and local organizations that were interested in collaboration were identified. Also, a Community Needs Assessment was conducted to identify barriers to housing. The third phase was the development and implementation of action plans for four pilot sites that each represented unique projects to increase access to housing for women. The last phase was focused on knowledge dissemination and further research on how the COVID-19 pandemic became an additional barrier to housing.

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5
Establish the Steering Committee.	Identify community partners. Conduct Community Needs Assessment.	Design action plans for each pilot site.	Implementation of pilot sites.	Knowledge dissemination.
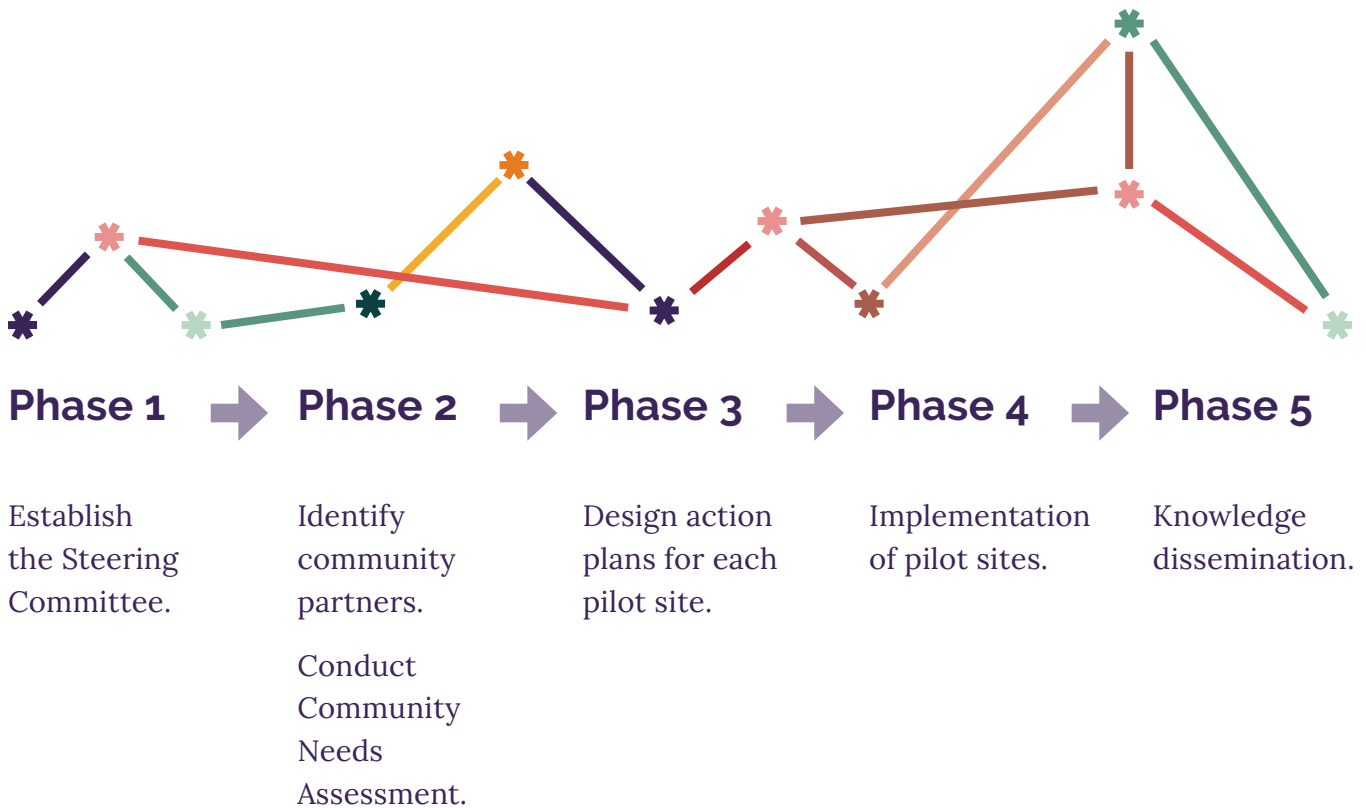
Introduction

A key finding of the province-wide Community Needs Assessment identified that for women experiencing violence there is often a **trade-off between housing and safety**. Deciding to remain in the home with their abuser puts women at risk of experiencing further violence. However, making the decision to leave the home could mean experiencing homelessness, which often makes women more at risk of experiencing violent victimization.

A significant theme that was identified through the Community Needs Assessment was a **sense of hopelessness** about housing in the sector. This sentiment has largely resulted from the multitude of systemic barriers to housing including the greatly inadequate housing supply throughout the province.

The work of the Getting Home Project clearly identified the **importance of change at every level of policy development**. This finding relates to the feeling of hopelessness identified in the Community Needs Assessment. Although provincial and federal policy development is necessary in addressing the systemic barriers

that prevent women securing housing after violence, grassroots and community-based initiatives can provide creative solutions to the need for immediate housing. Given the current state of the housing market, any initiative to increase the housing supply or decrease barriers can have an impact on the lives of women seeking housing after violence. **The housing crisis cannot be solved at a single level of policy development**; instead, a holistic and inclusive approach to policy is needed.

The early phases of the Getting Home Project identified five initial areas that required further action and policy development in order to address the barriers to housing faced by women who have experienced violence. Specific policy recommendations related to the identified areas were determined during the final stages of the project. The below policy recommendations are identified throughout the report by "policy spotlights" when relevant information to each policy is discussed.

Actionable Policy Areas and Recommendations

Increase Housing Supply	**1.** *Increase supply of appropriate and affordable housing for women and their children who have experienced violence.*
Create Cross-Sector Organization	**2.** *Create cross-sector collaboration to ensure adequate data collection related to women experiencing homelessness and the ability for knowledge sharing.*
Increase Funding	**3.** *Establish long-term funding for violence prevention services and housing services.*
Reduce Systemic Barriers	**4.** *Reduce social inequities women face that make them at risk for experiencing homelessness by reducing the gender wage gap.* **5.** *Reduce social inequities women face that make them at risk for experiencing homelessness by creating a specific government support program for women experiencing violence.*
Increase Inclusion and Accessibility	**6.** *Formally recognize the National Occupancy Standards as merely guidelines and create new standards to guide occupancy rates in social housing and the private rental market.* **7.** *Increase public transportation options in rural and remote areas.* **8.** *Diversify the design of affordable housing to accommodate families and increase accessibility of units.*

Four pilot sites were established in accordance to the key findings from the Community Needs Assessment and identified actionable areas for policy change. Each of the pilot sites represented a different level of policy development, demonstrating the need for change at every level. An important objective of the Getting Home Project was to create examples of community-based policy change and provide a guide to future work in the area of housing and violence prevention. As there were many outcomes of the Getting Home Project, the following organizes the specific outcomes of each pilot site as well as the level of policy-making each pilot represents.

Getting Home Project Pilot Site Outcomes

Grassroots	
Comox Valley Partnership	*Community partnerships* *Long-term funding for rental supplements* *Advocacy for increased funding to Homeless Prevention Program*
Community	
Vancouver Co-op Partnership	*Cross-sector community partnerships* *Guaranteed affordable housing for women experiencing violence* *Referral committee* *Housed four women and their families*
Provincial	
Rural Housing Advisory Committee	*Provincial knowledge sharing* *Transportation Project* *Research on rural housing needs* *Safe Homes Project* *Inclusion of rural voices on housing* *Long-term advisory committee*
Federal	
National Occupancy Standards Research	*Working group* *Policy analysis* *Policy brief* *Research from design perspective* *Qualitative study*

Methodology

The methodology for the Community Needs Assessment included four parts: a literature review, a province-wide online survey, focus groups and informal interviews. The literature review drew on relevant research materials such as academic research, community-based resources and conference presentations. The review highlighted some of the key barriers to long-term, secure and affordable housing for women and their children experiencing violence.

The second research approach employed was to conduct and analyze the results of the online survey with 59 respondents from across the province.

The third research strategy was to conduct focus groups, which captured a diversity of perspectives from co-op housing members to service providers to women with lived experience of violence.

Finally, our qualitative research component also included informal interviews with BCSTH's member organizations to gather information about the barriers to housing in various communities with a diversity of perspectives.

In order to evaluate the progress of the Getting Home Project, predetermined measures of performance were identified. These measures included the level of integration of the findings from the Community Needs Assessment into resources and community partnerships. As such, the pilot sites were designed based on the key findings of the Community Needs Assessment and the identified barriers related to women's economic security and housing.

The methodology for the pilot sites was structured on community-based, participatory research in order to create long lasting projects that could be maintained by the community.

The specific methodology for each project varied as the work ranged from research, community partnerships and the creation of sub-committees. To align the projects with the objectives of the Getting Home Project, action plans were designed and implemented for each site. The action plans in addition to number of meetings with the Steering Committee and community partners were also tracked as a measure of performance.

In regards to COVID-19 research, a literature review of grey and academic literature was conducted. The literature review highlighted emerging research on the relationship between housing and the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically how the pandemic acted as a further barrier to housing for women.

In order to share the knowledge gained through the Getting Home Project, various participating members attended and presented at workshops, conferences, consultations, meetings with housing sector service providers and much more. These instances of knowledge sharing were a key determinant of success for the overall performance of the Getting Home Project in addition to structural change resulting in increased access to affordable housing in the pilot site communities.

Intersectionality and Gender-based Analysis Plus

Questions in the survey, the focus groups and the informal interviews were created using a Gender-Based Analysis plus (GBA +) lens to ensure that consideration was given to how women and their children experiencing violence are affected by intersecting parts of identity and access to power. The research methodology considered identity factors such as ethnicity,

age, education, language, income, geography, culture and sexual orientation. Steps were taken to remove barriers to participation and ensure involvement in the research through offering a stipend for childcare, providing food, and consulting with local community partners about issues such as safety, language needs, time and location.

Care was taken to ensure an intersectional lens guided all aspects of the research conducted and the implementation of projects related to the Getting Home Project. This lens included reflection on the positionalities of those involved in this work and the privilege that some hold, along with the focus and understanding on the diversity of experience held by women who experience violence and homelessness.

Limitations

There were a few limitations throughout the work of the Getting Home Project. Throughout the province there are complex and diverse needs represented within each community, especially considering the topic of housing. As such, it would be irresponsible to imply that one model for policy change is applicable to all communities within BC. The Getting Home Project attempted to highlight commonalities or emerging themes between communities. However, the full spectrum of need could not be reflected in the pilot sites alone. Similarly, the multitude of barriers to housing faced by women who have experienced violence have
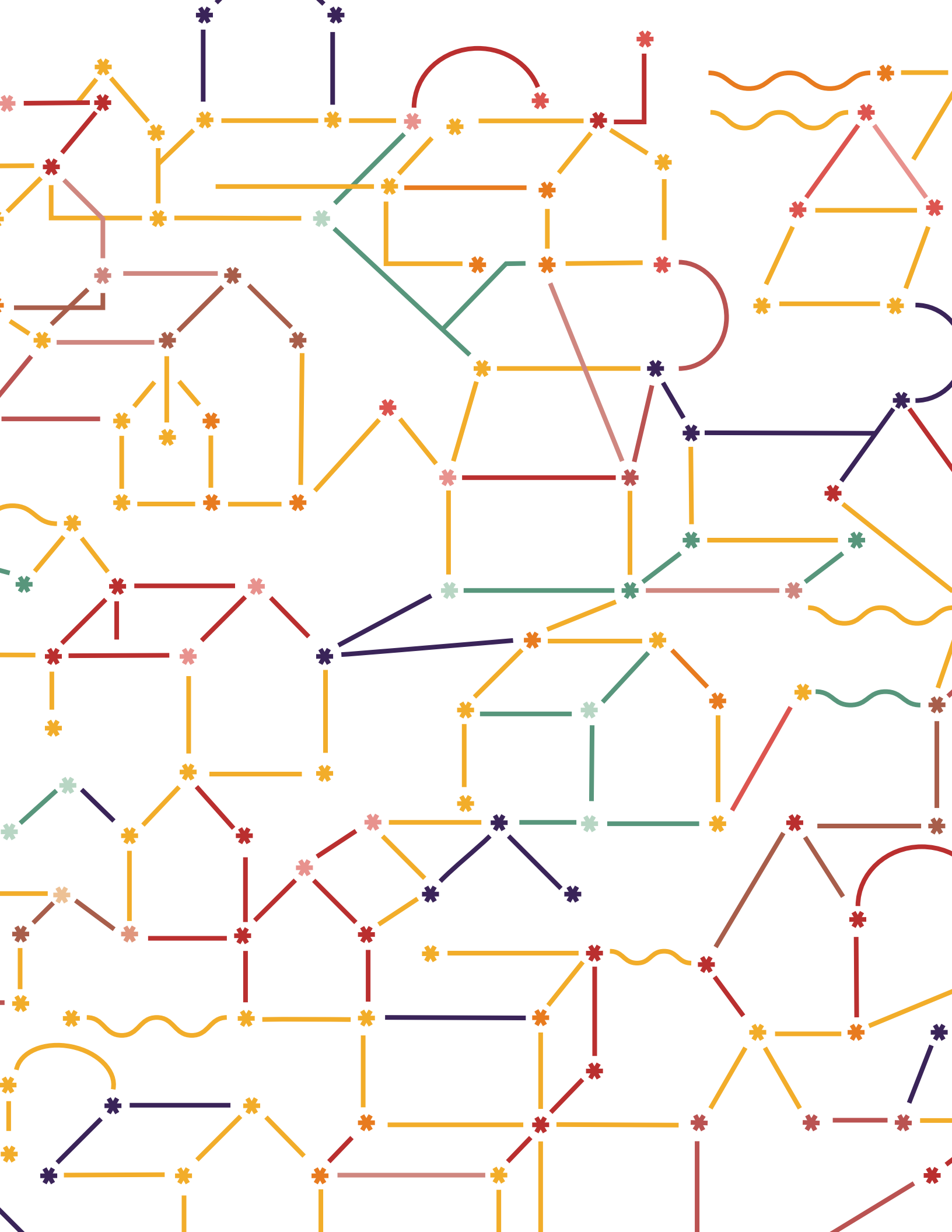
Intersectionality

a framework that acknowledges the various lived experiences, social locations and power dynamics that intersect to shape inequities. (Hankivsky, 2014)

not all been reflected in the pilot sites and outcomes that resulted.

Much of our insight about the gaps and barriers to housing for women experiencing violence came directly from our members through an online survey, which gathered qualitative and quantitative data on the issue from staff members of transition, second and third stage housing programs, and safe homes. Our members provide a diverse range of services to women experiencing violence including various levels of housing, support services, advocacy and referrals. Although all of our members see many women every year, the survey data is limited by the fact that staff can only speak to their experiences with the women they serve and not the ones who may not use their services because of barriers such as perceived stigma against transition houses, not being allowed to bring a pet with them or lack of space at the transition house or safe home. These barriers mean that some women may not be using our members' services and their unique experiences with housing may not be represented in this report. We have tried to reduce this limitation by conducting focus groups with women with lived experience to add further depth and understanding to our results.

We recognize that there is currently a spectrum of approaches within Violence Against Women (VAW) services related to gender inclusion (Women's Shelters Canada, 2019) and that the voices of trans and gender diverse people were not specifically represented through this research. Trans and gender diverse people experience violence, homelessness and poverty at a disproportionately high rate. As such, further research and policy development relating to gender inclusivity and equal access to safe shelter and housing is necessary.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Getting Home Project highlights the intersections between the housing market in BC and the experiences of women fleeing violence. It was necessary to review previous literature and research related to access to housing services, services for women fleeing violence and the connections between both sectors in order to inform potential projects that could effectively reduce the barriers to housing that currently exist. At the outset of the project, it was clear that women experience homelessness and barriers to housing in unique ways compared to their male counterparts. Furthermore, societal structures such as ableism, colonialism, systemic racism and the gender binary make some women more at risk for experiencing homelessness than others.

In order to explore these issues, four aspects of the literature were the focus:

- The current circumstances faced by shelter providers and women seeking shelter throughout BC and Canada.

- An intersectional review of the diverse experiences of women seeking shelter after experiencing violence.

- The ways in which women often have to compromise safety for housing.

- The key actionable policy areas that were highlighted throughout the literature.

Women and Homelessness in BC and Canada

In the last comprehensive point-in-time count of people experiencing homelessness throughout the province of BC, conducted in 2018, it was estimated that 7,655 people were experiencing homelessness; 30% of which identified as female (The Homelessness Services Association of BC et al., 2018). As of 2019, there were 1,259 beds in violence against women shelters and 227 beds dedicated specifically to women in emergency shelters throughout the province (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2021). Based on the available data, there are not enough spaces dedicated to women seeking shelter in the province.
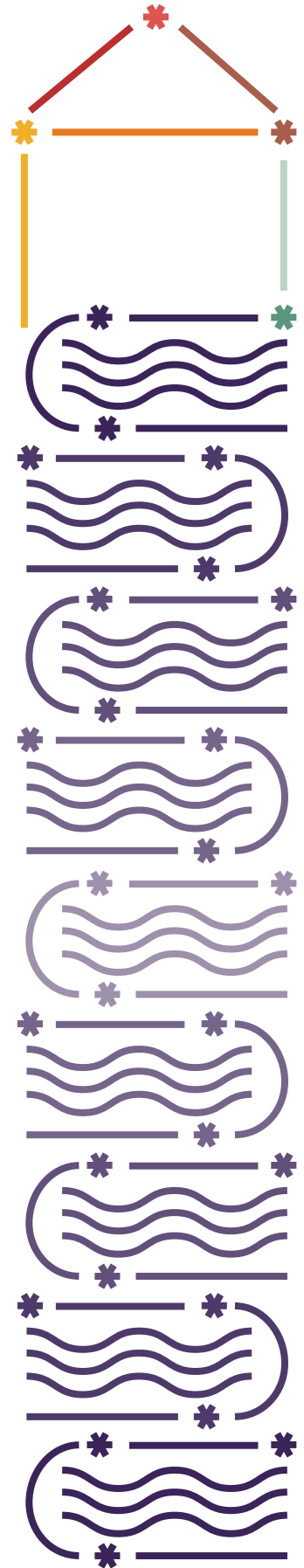
The total number of people experiencing homelessness in BC is likely higher than the count reflects as point-in-time counts commonly capture only the "visible" homeless population (The Homelessness Services Association of BC et al., 2018). Research has identified that women are more likely to be a part of the "invisible" population of those experiencing homelessness (McInnes, 2016). Often in relation to issues of personal safety, many women shelter in the homes of friends and family or in their vehicles instead of accessing formal shelter services or living on the street (Knowles et al., 2019; Schwan et al., 2020b; Van Berkum & Oudshoorn, 2015). Furthermore, women are often not defined as homeless when forced to leave their homes due to violence and are instead categorized as victims of domestic violence (Schwan et al., 2020b).

Research has shown that programs and services related to violence against women are developed and funded based on the best available data which does not reflect the actual need in communities (Schwan et al., 2020b). An extensive profile of shelters and transition homes for women who have experienced violence across the country found that service providers encounter multiple issues in daily operations as a result of inadequate funding, including the need to provide more beds than their funding allows for, particularly in urban areas where capacity issues were reported as a major challenge for service providers (Maki, 2019).

Policy Spotlight

Create cross-sector organization to ensure adequate data collection related to women experiencing homelessness and the ability for knowledge sharing.

A significant burden on the capacity of shelters and transition homes is the inability to transition women into permanent housing due to the lack of affordable and appropriate housing in their surrounding community (Maki, 2019). The lack of housing options often causes service providers to extend the length of stay for their residents to allow them more time to find permanent housing and in turn, decreases the overall availability of shelter spaces for women (Maki, 2019). The lack of women specific spaces is problematic as women experience homelessness in unique ways and are often at higher risk of experiencing violence when accessing co-ed emergency shelter services (Schwan et al., 2020b; Watson, 2016).

A Single Day in BC: Women, Children and Youth Seeking Support Services

In December of 2020, BCSTH conducted a 24-hour census of women's transition housing throughout BC. This survey included transition houses, safe homes and second and third stage programs. Among the 85 service providers that participated, 535 women, children and youth were sheltered, an additional 99 people were supported in-person but were not sheltered and 210 people obtained remote support. Unfortunately, an additional 77 people seeking shelter or services did not receive support (BC Society of Transition Houses, 2021). These findings are consistent with previous national census studies regarding VAW spaces (Schwan et al., 2020b).

921

Women, children and youth seeking shelter or support services in one day.

77
people did not receive
support or shelter

99
supported
in person

210
supported
remotely

535
sheltered
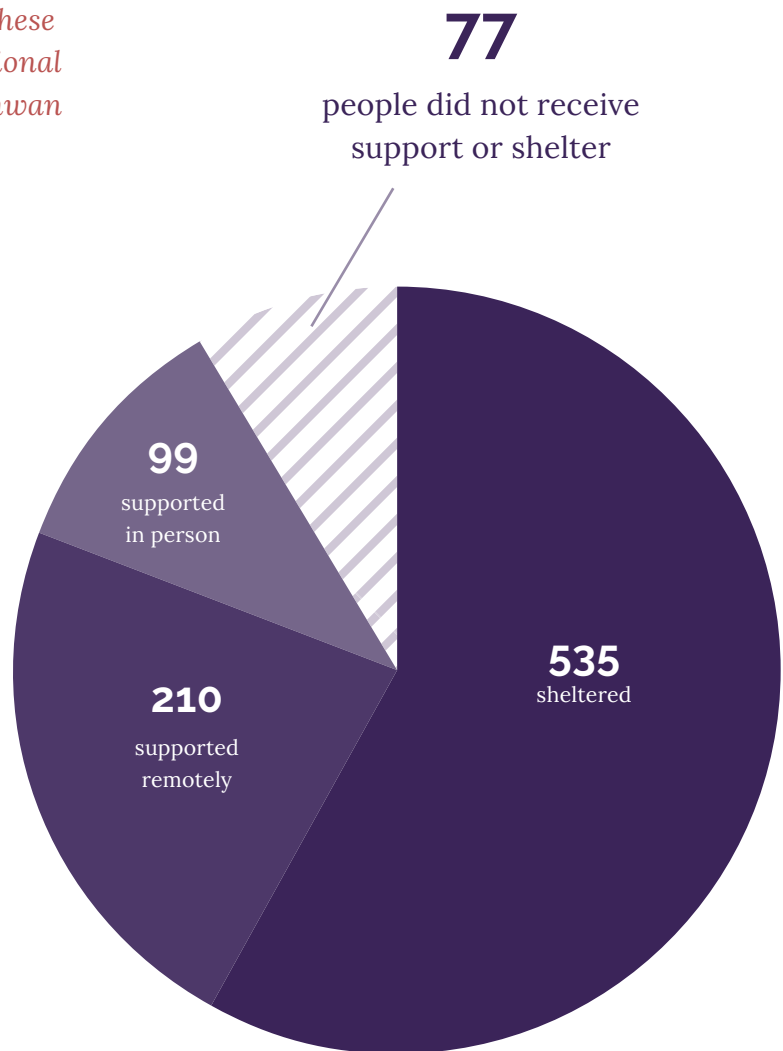
The Diverse Experiences of Women Seeking Shelter

It is clear that not all women have equal access to housing. While there are limited services specific to women, there are even more limitations when women have additional needs to ensure their safety. A key theme that emerged from the literature was that groups of women who experience higher rates of violence also face the most barriers to housing, which limits their ability to remove themselves from violent and dangerous living conditions.

The following research highlights the experiences of disabled women, Indigenous women, immigrant and refugee women, and transwomen to illustrate the connections between experiencing violence, poverty and homelessness, and the need for adequately funded services. However, the highlighted groups are not the only underserved populations as women of colour, women who are sex workers, and women who use substances are among those who experience similar barriers to services and discrimination in accessing housing (Maki, 2019; Schwan et al., 2020b).

Disabled women face additional barriers to accessing the already limited availability of emergency housing for women experiencing homelessness throughout Canada. Only 66% of available spaces have wheelchair accessible rooms and bathrooms, and accessibility services such as resources in braille are available in as little as 5% of VAW spaces (Schwan et al., 2020b).

The need for accessible shelters and services becomes apparent when we consider that those with disabilities or mental health concerns experience violence and poverty more often when compared to the general population. Those with a physical disability or mental illness are twice as likely to live in poverty and make up 45% of those experiencing homelessness, although it is estimated to be much higher in some areas (Homeless Hub, n.d. b). Furthermore, disabled women living in Canada are between two or three times as likely to experience violence and are more at risk of experiencing gender-based violence in particular (Cotter, 2018; Odette & Rajan, 2013).

Indigenous women in Canada also experience disproportionate rates of violence as they are three times more likely to experience violence and are 12 times more likely to be murdered than non-Indigenous women in Canada (Schwan et al., 2020b). Ongoing colonialism in Canada has resulted in these high rates of violence against Indigenous women along with inadequate living conditions in many Indigenous communities and disproportionately high rates of poverty among Indigenous peoples. As a result, Indigenous women are overrepresented throughout homeless shelters and VAW services (Schwan et al., 2020b).

Unfortunately, there is a lack of culturally appropriate or culturally safe programs for Indigenous women in VAW shelters and services throughout the country as only 19% provide specific cultural services to Indigenous women despite the overwhelming majority (80%) of shelters reporting that Indigenous women use their services (Maki, 2019). Furthermore, a key barrier to housing for Indigenous women is discrimination by housing providers. A study on the experiences of Indigenous women living in Vancouver showed that there are high reported levels

of discrimination against Indigenous women in the private rental market, in particular, landlords refusing to rent to Indigenous women receiving social assistance (Martin & Walia, 2019).

Immigrant and refugee women (IRW) in Canada face similar barriers to housing and safety. Previous research has identified that access to housing is a key determining factor in the successful settlement of IRW in Canada (Jackson et al., 2018). However, IRW face increased discrimination in the housing market and those who experience violence often have limited access to support services as a result of language barriers, lack of culturally specific services, lack of knowledge of available services or limited access to services such as health care due to immigration status (Jackson et al., 2018). As a result, immigrant and refugee women have an increased likelihood of remaining in abusive relationships or unsafe living conditions (Ardanaz, 2017; Jackson et al., 2018).

As referenced in the **Definitions** section of this report, the Getting Home Project and BCSTH discussed the experience of women as all self-identifying women. Although language is important, inclusive terminology does not equate to inclusive services for trans and gender diverse people who experience violence throughout the country and our province. A key theme in the literature on VAW services and homelessness is the lack of adequate services for transwomen and the limited knowledge and awareness of the needs of transwomen (Maki, 2019; Schwan et al., 2020b). Maki (2019) found that slightly over half of VAW spaces in Canada provide shelter to transwomen. More research is needed to identify how shelters are inclusive

(or are not inclusive) of all members of the 2SLGBTQQIA+ community.

Research and the activism of 2SLGBTQQIA+ people confirms that the trans community faces high rates of violence. There is a need for more research on the rate at which trans people experience intimate partner violence; although a recent study found that trans women were twice as likely to experience IPV than cisgender women (Women's Shelters Canada, 2019). It is also known that 2SLGBTQQIA+ people experience homelessness at much higher rates than the general population, especially youth, who represent as many as 40% of youth who experience homelessness (Homeless Hub, n.d. a).

Compromising on Safety

An unfortunate outcome of the lack of available support services or housing is women returning to a violent home when turned away from shelters (Maki, 2017; Schwan et al., 2020b). Even when women are successful in accessing shelters or transition homes in Canada, one in five women are forced to return to a violent home because they are unable to secure permanent housing (Schwan et al., 2020b). Within BC, only 25% of women leave transition houses for permanent housing, while only 4% of those women manage to find affordable housing; the other 75% of women remain temporarily sheltered, become homeless, or return to an abusive home (BC Society of Transition Houses, 2020).

Research has shown that women often choose to live with their abuser because they feel there is a greater risk to their safety if they have to access shelters spaces that serve both men and women or if they have to live on the street
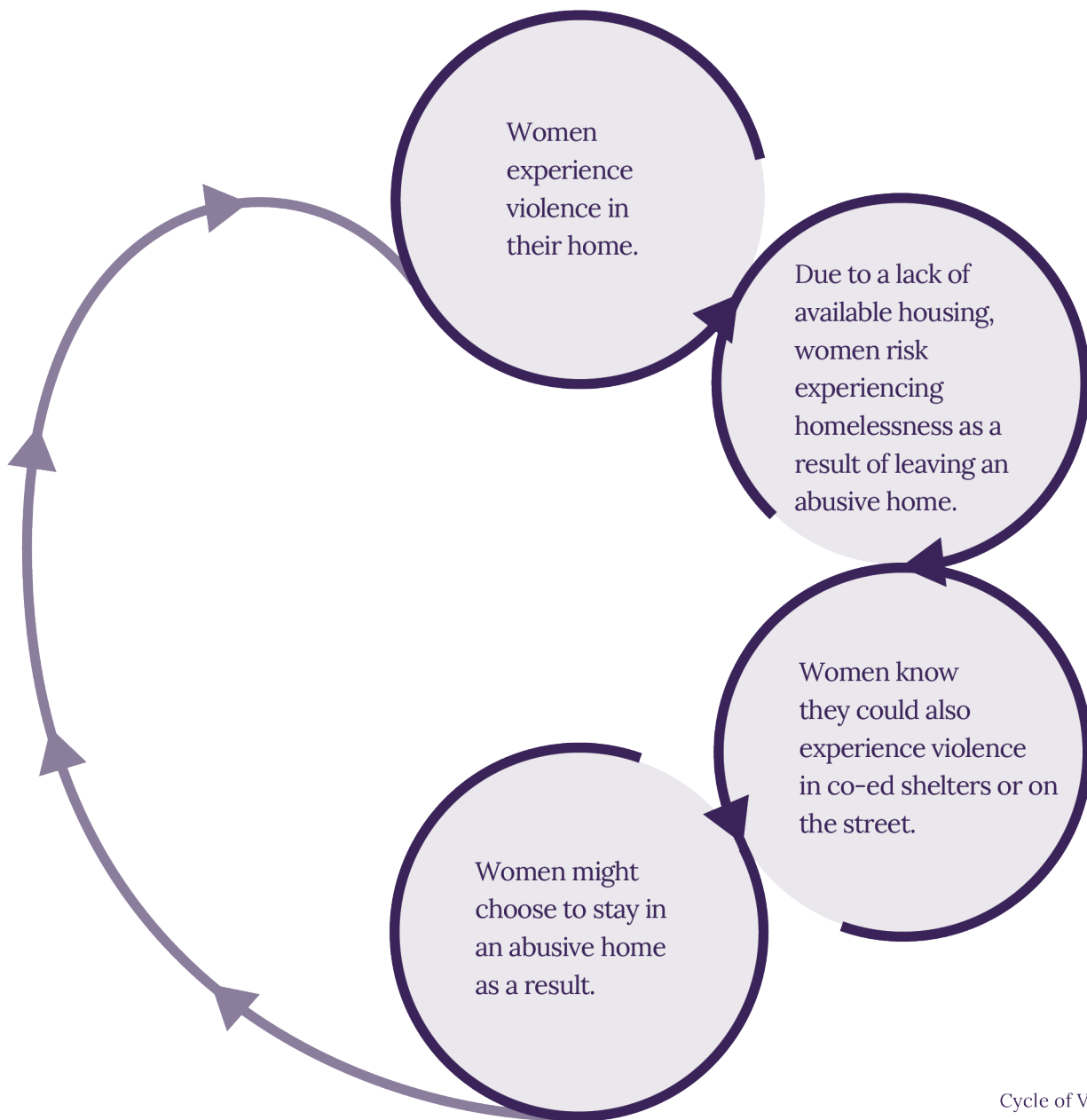
(Watson, 2016). The risk of violence in co-ed shelter spaces is not just a perceived risk, as multiple studies have shown that sexualized violence against women in co-ed shelters is particularly prevalent (Lazarus et al., 2011).

A key finding in the literature is that women often become homeless because they are fleeing violence in their home but also that women continue to live in abusive situations because of a lack of available housing, which has created a cycle of violence in Canada (Maki, 2017, 2019; Schwan et al, 2020b). Schwan et al. (2020b) states that "investments in housing are simultaneously investments in violence prevention" (p. 25), making it clear that women can only leave abusive relationships or households if they have somewhere else to go.

Women experience violence in their home.

Due to a lack of available housing, women risk experiencing homelessness as a result of leaving an abusive home.

Women know they could also experience violence in co-ed shelters or on the street.

Women might choose to stay in an abusive home as a result.

Cycle of Violence

Actionable Policy Areas

There were key themes throughout the literature related to actions required to improve the lives of women experiencing violence and in need of housing. The following identifies actionable areas for policy development. All identified areas function independently to address key issues, but also build upon one another to ensure a holistic, intersectional approach to housing and safety for women.

A key insight from the literature is the common absence of cross-sector collaboration and communication related to women's safety and housing. Schwan et al. (2020b) identifies the need for data sharing and knowledge sharing across sectors in order to accurately identify the number of women who experience homelessness, including those who often remain invisible in common data collection methods. Cross-sector partnerships will allow for more inclusive data collection, increased knowledge sharing and best practices for housing women and their children experiencing violence.

Due to insufficient government funding, VAW services and partners must dedicate substantial time to generating additional funding through fundraising. A lack of adequate operational funding limits the services VAW organizations can provide, which narrows the accessibility of their spaces and also decreases the services women can access through VAW shelters, such as assistance into permanent housing.

There is a need for further knowledge on how to best serve communities such as disabled women, transwomen and gender

Actionable Policy Areas

▶ **Increase Housing Supply**

▶ **Create Cross-Sector Organization**

▶ **Increase Funding**

▶ **Reduce Systemic Barriers**

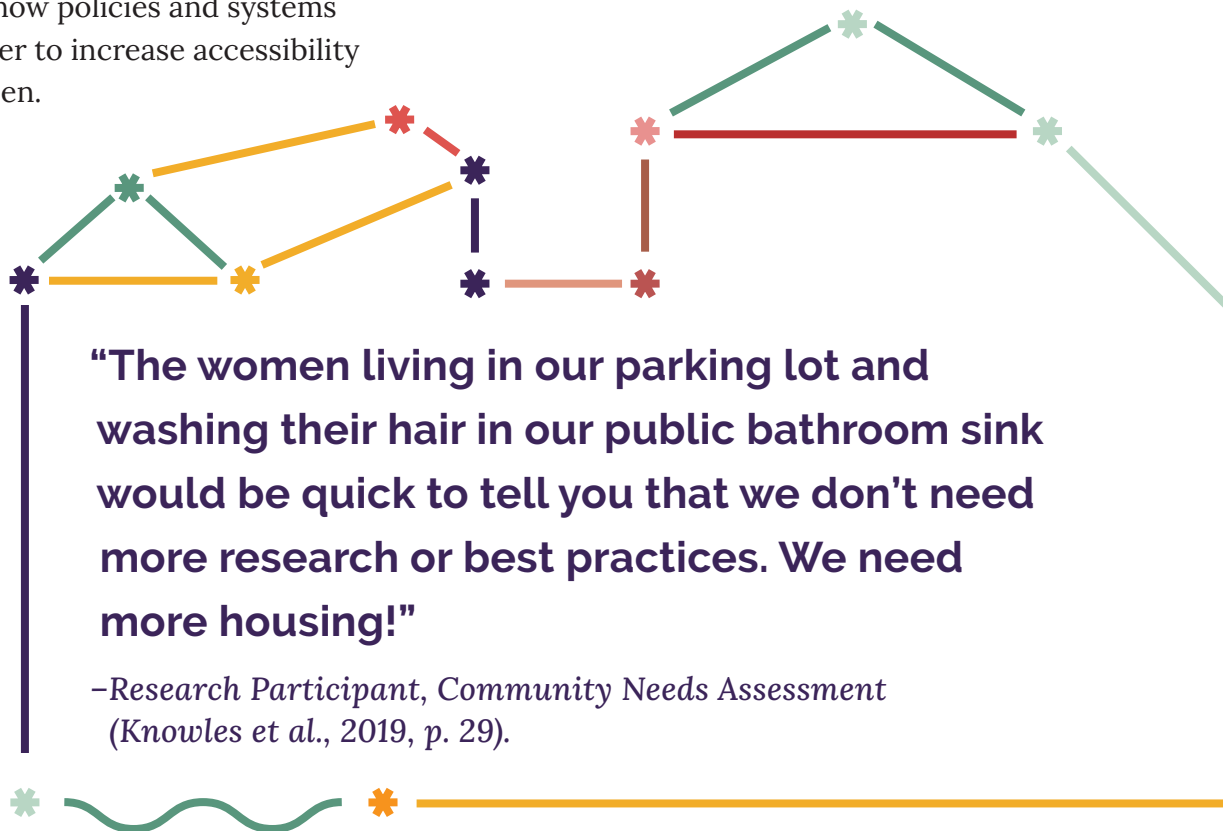▶ **Increase Inclusion and Accessibility**

Policy Spotlight

Increase supply of appropriate and affordable housing for women and their children who have experienced violence.

diverse people. Knowledge sharing, adequate funding and time to consider how to improve accessibility of services through connection to often marginalized voices can ensure that every community has its unique needs met. Services which are extended to all women and gender diverse people in need will decrease instances in which people choose to stay in violent living circumstances because they have nowhere else to live.

By including diverse voices in design and implementation of services, there is an opportunity to offer new approaches to a housing services model that has historically been male-centric due to the visibility of men experiencing homelessness (Schwan et al., 2020b). By broadening the scope of the current approach to housing, it becomes apparent how current policies and systems are causing harm to women and preventing them from securing housing (Schwan et al., 2020b). Research is needed to identify how policies and systems must change in order to increase accessibility to housing for women.

The overall finding in the literature is the immediate need for access to safe, affordable and appropriate housing for women and their families fleeing violence. The largest barrier to housing identified in the literature is the lack of affordable and appropriate housing in both urban and rural areas. The housing supply must be increased. VAW shelters are limited in the services they can provide related to housing assistance. Maki (2017) points to the importance of building supportive housing with dedicated suites that are intentionally accessible to all women, including those with disabilities, and their children. There is no "one size fits all" model for housing, and care must be taken to ensure those in need of housing can attain spaces suited to their needs.

"The women living in our parking lot and washing their hair in our public bathroom sink would be quick to tell you that we don't need more research or best practices. We need more housing!"

–Research Participant, Community Needs Assessment (Knowles et al., 2019, p. 29).

KEY BARRIERS TO HOUSING

Identified in the Community Needs Assessment (Knowles et al., 2019), barriers to housing for women experiencing violence can be divided into four broad categories:

Affordability of Housing

Discrimination

Poverty and Other Financial Barriers

Accessibility and Appropriateness of Housing and Services

In addition to these identified barriers, COVID-19 has also created additional barriers to housing and has altered how the previously identified barriers are experienced by women. The following provides an overview of these issues and how women navigate the many societal barriers that impede their ability to secure safe and affordable housing. Many of the barriers are discussed in further detail in the Getting Home Project's **Community Needs Assessment** (Knowles et al., 2019). A visual guide to the barriers is provided in **Finding a Home After Violence** (BC Society of Transition Houses, 2020).

Lack of Affordable Housing

The lack of affordable housing is felt by many across the country, especially within BC, where the average vacancy rate for rental apartments in recent years has steadily been less than half of the recommended rate of 3% minimum for a healthy rental market (Statistics Canada, 2021). Low vacancy rates have contributed to BC's high rental costs due to continually high demand for rentals with limited supply, especially in urban centres. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the beginning of 2020 made drastic changes on the characteristics of the rental market. The vacancy rates in urban centres climbed to the highest many have been in two decades (Howell & O'brien, 2021). However, this was not a trend throughout the whole province, as smaller cities and rural areas saw decreased vacancy rates in 2020 compared to previous years (Statistics Canada, 2021). For example, while the vacancy rate in Vancouver rose to 2.6% in 2020, the Abbotsford-

Mission area declined from 1.1% in 2019 to 0.6% in 2020. The rental housing market still remains unaffordable for most. In Vancouver, only 0.2% of purpose-built rental accommodations are considered affordable for those who make less than $25,000 a year (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2021).

So, while increasing vacancies in urban centres might imply more availability of housing compared to pre-pandemic years, the decrease in vacancies in more rural areas suggest that living in cities is becoming less affordable for more people, who have opted to move to areas with more affordable accommodations (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2021). However, the movement of people from urban centres to rural areas further limits the available housing for those already living within rural areas. The changes throughout the pandemic reflect the key issue for many women who have experienced violence and are trying to relocate themselves or their families; housing is not available to all equally as there remains a dire lack of affordable housing both in urban and rural areas.

Availability of Appropriate Housing and Services

Although affordability of housing is a key issue in BC, finding appropriate housing is not as simple as the associated costs. Even within social housing there are a number of barriers that prevent women from securing appropriate permanent housing. Because of the lack of affordable housing in the private market, there is high demand for social housing which causes lengthy waitlists that leave women with no options in between transition houses and subsidized permanent housing (Knowles et al., 2019).

In addition to lengthy waitlists, respondents of the Getting Home Project survey indicated that a lack of knowledge and understanding was an issue. Many of the women using their services felt that more knowledge of the application process for both BC Housing and community housing organizations would improve their chances of a successful application. Similarly, many felt that a better understanding of the experiences of the women applying on the part of the housing providers would increase sensitivity and flexibility when reviewing applications.

National Occupancy Standards

In relation to appropriate housing, the Community Needs Assessment identified many issues stemming from the National Occupancy Standards (NOS). The NOS are Canada-wide guidelines on the ideal number of bedrooms based on the age and gender of each occupant of the house. The guidelines were introduced in 1985 through the Housing Act and resulted from a collaboration between CMHC and various provincial housing agencies (Statistics Canada, 2019). The NOS guidelines are as follows:

A maximum of two persons per bedroom

Household members, of any age, living as part of a married or common-law couple share a bedroom with their spouse or common-law partner

Lone-parents, of any age, have a separate bedroom

Household members aged 18 or over have a separate bedroom - except those living as part of a married or common-law couple

Household members under 18 years old of the same sex share a bedroom - except lone-parents and those living as part of a married or common-law couple

Household members under 5 years old of the opposite sex share a bedroom if doing so would reduce the number of required bedrooms. This situation would arise only in households with an odd number of males under 18, an odd number of females under 18, and at least one female and one male under the age of 5

Although intended as a guide to assess if housing stock is adequately meeting the needs of Canadians, the NOS have been adopted as policy by many important housing providers in BC (McKay, 2021). The NOS are currently being used as regulations to guide maximum occupancy per unit by BC Housing, various co-op communities and many non-profit organizations (Knowles et al., 2019; McKay, 2021). As a result, many women with children who have accessed transition homes find they are unable to find permanent housing with the required number of bedrooms under the NOS. For example, a mother with one daughter and one son over the age of five would require a three-bedroom unit.

Key Issue #1

The NOS are guidelines that are being misused as regulatory policy.

Key Issue #2

The NOS are a barrier to accessing housing for women and children who have experienced violence due to the unavailability and unaffordability of multi-bedroom units throughout BC.

Key Issue #3

The NOS are especially harmful to immigrant and refugee women along with Indigenous households as the standards are based on the ideals of a western, nuclear family and do not account for differing cultural practices around household compositions.

Key Barriers to Housing

Despite the need for multi-bedroom units, there is a severe lack of affordable units with more than two bedrooms throughout BC (Knowles et al., 2019). In Vancouver, social housing units that have three or more bedrooms are far less common than one- or two-bedroom units (Knowles et al., 2019). In the private market, there are also less available multi-bedroom units but a high demand from families which has driven up rental costs for those units (Greater Vancouver Board of Trade, 2017). Of the rental accommodations deemed affordable for those who make less than $47,000 a year (40% of the income distribution), only 12% are units with more than one bedroom (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2021). The survey of BCSTH members conducted for the Getting Home Project in 2018 identified that 87% of respondents saw the NOS as a barrier to housing for the women who accessed their services.

Further research on the full impact of the NOS is needed as current literature on the topic is limited. However, based on the existing literature it is clear that the NOS have become a barrier to housing for women with children seeking housing after violence. Lauster and Easterbrook (2011) found that in the private rental market, the NOS enable landlords to avoid renting to families. Furthermore, Labahn and Salama (2018) determined that the NOS

Policy Spotlight

Diversify the design of affordable housing to accommodate families and increase accessibility of units.

are especially discriminatory to immigrant and refugee women along with Indigenous households as the standards are based on the ideals of a western, nuclear family and do not account for differing cultural practices around household compositions. Labahn and Salama (2018) identify that the "one size fits all" approach once again does not account for the needs and practices of the diverse population of those seeking housing in Canada.

Although the purpose of the NOS is to prevent overcrowding in urban areas and improve health and wellness, western ideals of health and wellness can impose unrealistic cultural expectations on immigrants and refugee families as well as Indigenous households (Labahn & Salama, 2018). As a result, IRW and Indigenous women are disproportionately affected by the NOS and face increased economic burden and limited choice in living arrangements (Labahn & Salama, 2018).

"In a multicultural society such as Canada, can one definition of housing need and housing suitability accurately represent housing quality across Canada?"

(Labahn & Salama, 2018, p. 4).

The above barriers to housing accumulate to create very few options or choices. Often, women opt to relocate from their communities in order to find adequate housing, which means leaving their established support systems and increased experiences of isolation (Knowles et al., 2019). BC Housing has identified that many women leaving transitional housing leave the community after accessing services from transition houses, second stage homes and safe homes (Knowles et al., 2019). In rural communities, the need to relocate is especially common.

Furthermore, women living in remote communities face additional barriers to accessing services such as transportation across rural areas and concerns over confidentiality in small towns (Knowles et al., 2019). Limited resources in rural communities have led to high rates of return to abusive homes or relocation to different communities after women access VAW services. The barriers present in rural locations are a key finding identified throughout the Getting Home Project and the issue is explored at length in the Pilot Site section on the Rural Housing Advisory Committee.

Discrimination and Lack of Awareness

In a survey of BCSTH members, nearly half of respondents identified that discrimination was a key barrier to accessing housing in the private market compared to 5% in terms of social housing (Knowles et al., 2019). Qualitative research for the Community Needs Assessment with co-op members with lived experience of violence identified that within co-op housing, there is stigmatization of women fleeing violence, stemming from a concern

that incidents of violence will occur within the community as a result of their presence.

Women who have experienced violence often experience financial abuse, have lived in precarious living arrangements and can be involved in multiple criminal proceedings related to their abuse. All of these factors can complicate routine background checks from landlords. The Community Needs Assessment identified that newcomers to Canada, such as immigrant and refugee women, face similar barriers to access due to the inability to produce Canadian references or credit checks simply because they have not resided in the country for long enough to do so (Knowles et al., 2019).

Another important finding in the Community Needs Assessment was the concern for the lack of pet-friendly housing throughout the community-based research; however, there was limited discussion of pets as a barrier to housing throughout the literature (Knowles et al., 2019). The survey of BCSTH members found that 85% of respondents felt pets were a barrier to accessing housing in the private market and was a top priority barrier to social housing (Knowles et al., 2019). The total impact of the lack of pet-friendly services and how it is a barrier to accessing both services and permanent housing requires further research.

Poverty and Other Financial Barriers

There is a strong relationship between housing stability and women's economic security. Systemic barriers that have an impact on women's finances such as the gender wage gap can present as a key barrier to accessing housing for women who have experienced violence.

In Canada, women earn than men and are at greater risk of experiencing poverty. A key contributing factor to the existence of the gender wage gap in Canada is the overrepresentation of women in part-time employment. The 2016 census found that nearly three quarters of part-time workers were women. This factor has led many to question the validity of the gender wage gap and conclude that there is no difference in wages between men and women, but instead, differences in income levels are simply because women work fewer hours than men. However, as discussed above, it has been proven that even at an hourly comparison, men still make 13% more than women (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2019). Still, since the gender wage gap increases when both part-time and full-time work are considered, it is important to determine the factors that contribute to women opting for part-time work over full-time positions.

Part-time work leads to less accumulated work experience and limits opportunities to progress within an occupation, which contributes to overall lower wages over time (Antonie et al., 2020). However, part-time work often becomes a necessity for many women with children as there are often societal pressures or assumptions made that women will be the primary caregivers for their children (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2019.). Caregiving duties compounded with a lack of affordable childcare services contribute to women more often choosing occupations that are part-time or have flexible hours, which are more likely to be lower paying (Cool, 2010).

Policy Spotlight

Address the gender wage gap to reduce social inequities women face that make them at risk for experiencing homelessness.

Women who work full-time work fewer total hours than men as they are often unable to work overtime or need to take time off of work for family related reasons (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2019). While only 9% of men state family responsibilities are the reason for taking time away from work during the week, 22% of women cite family responsibilities as the cause for missing work (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2019).

Micro level poverty prevention such as job training, confidence building and financial literacy courses are often not enough to lift women out of poverty (Knowles et al.,

2019). Structural barriers persist and limit employment available to women, who may have to opt for low wage positions and part-time work as a result.

Not all women experience the gender wage gap equally. There are differences in the wages of men and women but also differences between groups of women based on positionality. The table below outlines some key differences between the wages of women in Canada (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2018).

Gender, positionality and wages

Positionality	All women in Canada compared to all men	Immigrant women compared to non-immigrant men	Racialized women compared to non-racialized men	Indigenous women compared to non-Indigenous men	Disabled women compared to non-disabled men
Type of Work	Fulltime	Fulltime	Fulltime	Fulltime	Fulltime and part-time
Amount Earned	$0.87	$0.71	$0.67	$0.65	$0.54
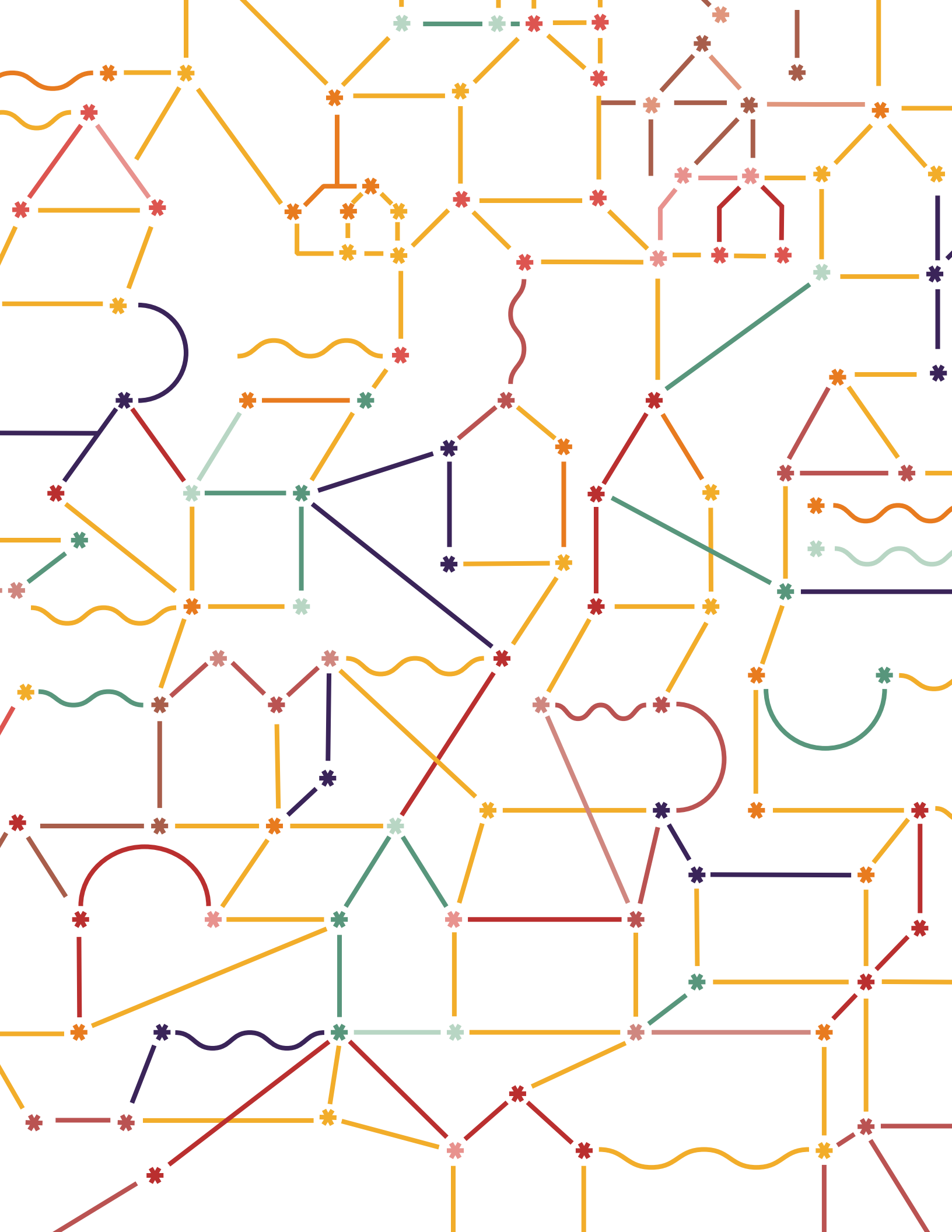
Covid-19

In March of 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic changed the nature of our daily lives for what was first expected to be a few months. As of mid-2021, we continue to navigate COVID-19 and adapt to life during a pandemic. While the COVID-19 pandemic affected the lives of most, it also highlighted pre-existing societal inequities as some groups were more at risk of contracting the infectious disease or faced a greater burden as a result of public health protocols.

> The COVID-19 pandemic had four broad effects related to the intersection of women who experience violence and access to housing:
>
> • Increased isolation and fear of contracting COVID-19 put women more at risk of experiencing violence.
>
> • Increased risk of poverty due to economic shutdowns and further limitations on available shelter and housing options.
>
> • The need to use alternative service models by many violence prevention spaces.
>
> • Increased awareness and focus around women fleeing violence in Canada, and the potential creation of a window for policy change.

At the onset of the pandemic when our communities first went into lockdown protocols, service providers in violence prevention were well aware of the potential harm that the women they served could face as a result. In November 2020, Women's Shelters

Canada provided an in-depth survey of Canadian VAW shelters and transition houses highlighting the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey divided the COVID-19 response into two phases, the first of which spans the initial lockdown from March to May of 2020 and the second of which refers to the time after the initial lockdown from June to October of 2020.

In Phase I of the pandemic, as many service providers predicted, overall use of VAW shelters and transition houses decreased and subsequently increased in Phase II (Women's Shelters Canada, 2020). These findings indicate that the increased isolation resulting from the lockdown prevented women from accessing services as they were potentially spending more time at home with their abuser (Women's Shelters Canada, 2020). There was also a concern that women were not aware that VAW services were available throughout the lockdown or were fearful to put their children or themselves in a communal space and risk contraction of the disease (Women's Shelters Canada, 2020).

A key finding from the survey was the relationship between accessing VAW shelters and transition houses and concerns over housing security. Many of the above-mentioned barriers to housing were made far worse by the pandemic. Concerns over job security and the risk of poverty were heightened as women are overrepresented in many of the economic sectors most affected by shutdowns and layoffs, such as the service industry (Kabeer et al., 2021). In terms of job loss within Canada, young women and girls were the most affected group and have not had the same level of job recovery that men have experienced (Schwan et al., 2020a).

> **"Fear over housing security and potential homelessness, particularly during a pandemic, was also a significant deterrent for women wanting to leave an abusive home."**
>
> *(Women's Shelters Canada, 2020, p. 2)*

In addition, the overall capacity of VAW shelters and transition houses decreased as a result of social distancing protocols; this limited the overall options for temporary housing and shelter available to women and children experiencing violence. A majority (71%) of VAW shelters and transition houses in Canada had to reduce their capacity to abide by health protocols, with some spaces having to reduce their capacity by up to 50% (Women's Shelters Canada, 2020). Fluctuating capacity has continued to be an issue throughout the various waves of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, women are also overrepresented in many of the sectors that were deemed essential services such as healthcare, which resulted in many women working longer hours than prior to the pandemic (Kabeer et al., 2021). For women with children, the loss of childcare through school and daycare closures also contributed to increased stress and caretaking demands (Almeida et al., 2020). These increased caretaking demands limited many women's ability to remain in a paid labour position (Schwan et al., 2020a).

The above factors all contributed to the decreased access to VAW services during the initial phase of the pandemic. Tragically, as the increase in use of services throughout Phase II began, many frontline workers reported higher rates of severe violence experienced by women compared to before the pandemic (Women's Shelters Canada, 2020).

> **"Isolation and lockdown measures to keep the public safe during the global pandemic inadvertently created a dangerous situation for women and children living with their abusers, who used this government-sanctioned increased isolation to further control their victims."**
>
> *(Women's Shelters Canada, 2020, p. 4)*

VAW service providers have worked steadily throughout the pandemic to ensure women had access to their services despite the increased barriers they have faced. Many service providers increased use of technology through video conferencing and text messaging options to reach women (Women's Shelters Canada, 2020). Women's Shelters Canada (2020) found that some service providers felt many who accessed remote services appreciated having the option to do so; however, women living in rural and remote areas without reliable internet access were negatively impacted by the change. As many

rural and remote First Nations communities do not have access to reliable internet, Indigenous women were disproportionately affected by the change in service.

The ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been devastating. However, a possible opportunity for better access to VAW services and affordable housing could arise from the increased attention given to the issue throughout the pandemic. Violence against women became a highly reported on issue within the mainstream media throughout the pandemic and has given advocates a platform to call for adequate funding (Ghoussoub, December 6, 2020). Early in the pandemic, the federal government pledged an additional $50 million in funding to VAW services throughout the country. However, due to increase in operating costs resulting from the pandemic that severely impacted already limited budgets, VAW advocates identified the overwhelming need for continued funding and support (Ghoussoub, December 6, 2020).

The provision of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) by the federal government also brought attention to the ability for the government to provide extensive financial support to individuals in crisis. In addition, the basic income report released in December 2020 called for the need of increased funding to VAW shelters and transition houses in addition to the creation of a specific government support program for individuals fleeing violence (Green et al., 2020). Considering the current policy climate regarding the need for affordable housing and increased awareness around violence against women, there is a current window for substantial structural change.

✳ *Policy Spotlight*

Create a specific government support program for women experiencing violence to reduce social inequities women face that make them at risk for experiencing homelessness.
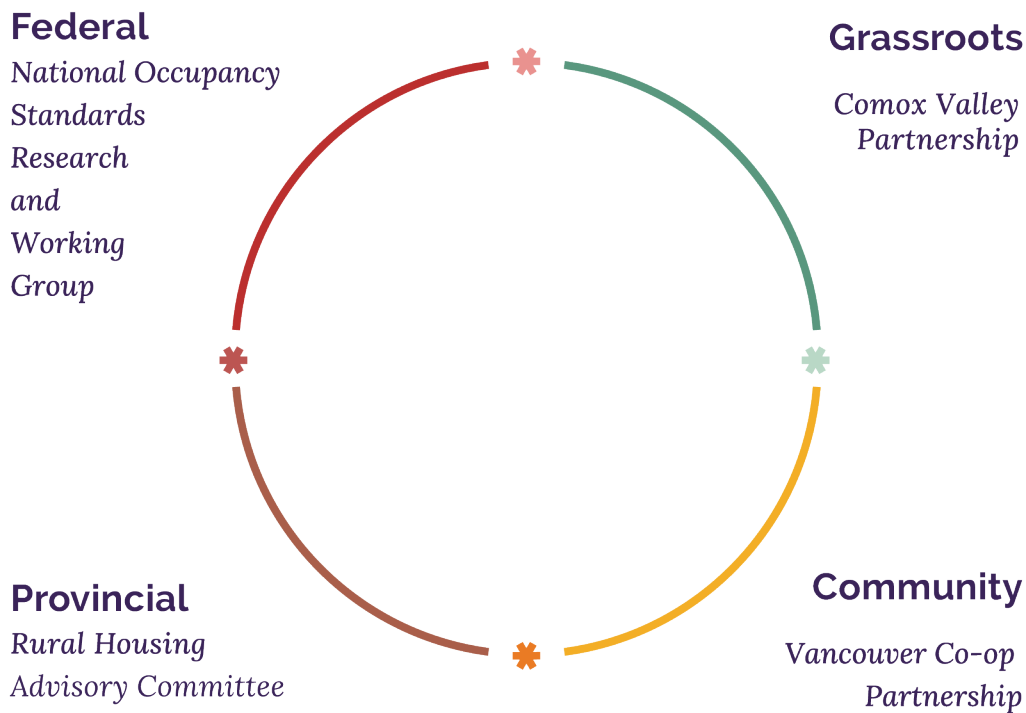
PILOT
SITES

PILOT SITES

Each of the pilot sites were unique, community-based projects grounded in partnerships and based on community-led action plans. Some of the pilot sites adapted in light of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic or created subprojects to address emerging issues as a result of the pandemic. All of the pilot sites captured many of the basic principles for meaningful work in housing and violence prevention, as follows:

	Comox Valley Partnership	Vancouver Co-op Partnership	Rural Housing Advisory Committee	NOS Research and Working Group
Increase Supply of Appropriate and Affordable Housing	✔	✔		
Cross-Sector Organization	✔	✔	✔	✔
Increase Funding to VAW Services and Housing Services	✔	✔	✔	
Decrease Systemic Barriers to Housing	✔	✔	✔	✔
Include All Voices	✔	✔	✔	✔

A key objective of the Getting Home Project was to enact policy change on multiple levels. Each of the pilot sites reflected a different level of change and action that highlighted the need for change at every level of decision-making. The four levels of policy exemplified through the pilot sites are as follows:

Federal
National Occupancy
Standards
Research
and
Working
Group

Grassroots

Comox Valley
Partnership

Provincial
Rural Housing
Advisory Committee

Community

Vancouver Co-op
Partnership

This graphic of the projects and related policy levels is presented in a non-hierarchical format to relay that change at every level is necessary in order to increase access to housing for women who have experienced violence. Importantly, although macro change is necessary to overcome many of the structural barriers women face, grassroots collaborations are impactful and often inform change at higher levels of decision-making. The following will provide an overview of each pilot site and detail how each project contributed to the objectives of the Getting Home Project.

Each project aims to address a different need. For all projects, a community-led and asset-based approach was used to guide the action plan. As the umbrella organization for our province's transition house sector, BCSTH is well aware of the depth of knowledge and creative solutions that our members bring to the work they do on the local level. Each project is informed and led by their local knowledge and insight from their on-the-ground work.

COMOX VALLEY PARTNERSHIP

Pilot Project

Community partnership between Comox Valley Transition Society and Comox Valley Community Foundation

BC Housing's **Homelessness Prevention Program** (HPP) was the focus of this pilot site. The HPP provides rental supplements to groups at risk of experiencing homelessness, including women who have experienced violence. The supplements are provided in order to increase access to the private rental market when subsidized housing is not available. BCSTH members and other transition housing services can apply for funding to have a staff member manage the distribution of 10 rental supplements. These supplements can be provided to 10 women, or divided and distributed among more women if the full supplement is not required.

The Comox Valley partnership is a grassroots initiative between the Comox Valley Transition Society and Comox Valley Community Foundation. The project developed from an identified need for long term stability in funding for homelessness prevention programs. The goal of the Comox Valley partnership was to increase the impact of the existing HPP by securing long term private funding and doubling the number of supplements available for women seeking housing after experiencing violence.

Can grassroots collaboration and creativity be used in unique ways to decrease the number of women who experience homelessness?

The Comox Valley Transition Society partnered with the Comox Valley Community Foundation in order to create an agency fund to provide financing to HPP supplements. As a Project Steering Committee member, Vancity Community Foundation offered advice and guidance at early stages of the project about the opportunities of donor-advised funds.

Pilot Sites: Comox Valley Partnership

The fundraising goal of the Comox Valley partnership was to raise $1,000,000 for the agency fund. The interest generated from the money held in trust would provide additional supplements year after year. The outcomes of this project are long term in nature and the partnership will be ongoing to facilitate the administration of the agency fund. In addition to community-based fundraising, the Getting Home Project, BCSTH and the Comox Valley Transition Society advocated for increased funding for the HPP through submissions to the BC Government during budget consultations in 2019.

The Comox Valley partnership exemplifies the creativity that can grow through grassroots collaboration. By building community-based partnerships and using existing programs in unique ways, the Comox Valley partnership created the foundation for guaranteed funding and the expansion of an impactful program that increases access to housing for women experiencing violence.
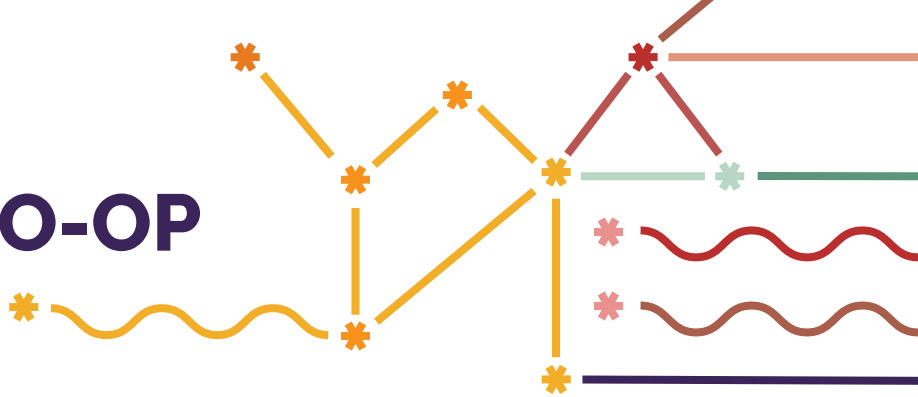
Comox Valley Partnership Key Outcomes

▶ **Community Partnerships**

▶ **Long Term Funding for Rental Supplements**

▶ **Advocacy for Increased Funding to Homeless Prevention Program**

VANCOUVER CO-OP PARTNERSHIP

Pilot Project

Partnership between the YWCA–Metro Vancouver, the Co-operative Housing Federation of BC (CHFBC), and the Community Land Trust

The CHFBC membership is comprised of 14,226 units in 247 co-op buildings, many of which are in the Lower Mainland. Co-op housing is a leader in housing women fleeing violence due to the community values and affordable nature of this housing model. Nevertheless, there are still multiple barriers to co-operative housing for women who have experienced violence. In particular, there is stigmatization within co-operative housing communities related to a fear of "bringing violence" into the community.

The aim of the Vancouver Co-op partnership was to create a relationship between the women's transition housing sector and the co-op housing community in BC, to increase opportunities for women to transition into co-op housing communities after experiencing violence.

There were two key objectives of this pilot project:

- To create a long term, formal pathway into co-operative housing for women experiencing violence.

- To create a sustainable partnership between sectors that could act as a model for structural and operational change in other communities.

Near the beginning of the Getting Home Project, the CHFBC and Community Land Trust were completing the development of a new housing co-operative in Vancouver and invited the Getting Home Project to facilitate a formal partnership with second stage houses in the area. CHFBC has an existing Domestic Violence Relief Fund, which assists women who have experienced violence in paying the required co-op member share. In order to guarantee the use of this relief fund in the co-op, a referral committee was created to identify women and their children in need of housing that were living in second stage housing. The referral committee functions as a bridge from second stage housing into permanent co-op housing when an appropriate unit becomes available. Once an applicant has been selected by the referral committee, the housing co-op automatically approves their application to join the community. There is always one guaranteed unit within the co-op to be used for this purpose.

How can formal partnerships in housing increase access for women who have experienced violence?

This pilot site focused on structural change within operational policy. The partnership allowed for formalization of an agreement, which included language in the lease of the co-op that stipulates one unit must be occupied by a woman fleeing violence (See Appendix B). There are also further considerations around how the subsidy functions and what can be done to empower the woman and family living in the unit. The agreement ensured that the co-op membership for a women experiencing violence functioned the same as any regular co-op membership so that she would have security of tenure and prioritized confidentiality. Specific considerations relating to confidentiality as well as the language used in the Lease Agreement, Terms of Reference, Application Assessment Form and Referral Form related to this project, are contained in Appendices A through E.

As a result of this project, four families headed by women who have experienced violence have accessed housing in the housing co-operative since 2018. Some of the women who secured housing through this pilot were also recent newcomers to Canada. Key determinants of the success of the program included the incorporation of language outlining the agreement in the above referenced documents. Furthermore, to ensure the longevity of the referral committee, YWCA adapted the job description of an existing YWCA position to include the oversight of the referral committee. Therefore, staff turnover would not stop the work of the committee.

The Vancouver Housing Co-operative partnership highlights the benefits that can come from sharing knowledge and the ability to develop a bridge between two sectors. This project has determined that further relationship building between sectors and awareness raising of the need for access to affordable housing for women who have experienced violence will allow for future projects to develop in other communities.

Vancouver Co-op Partnership Key Outcomes

▶ **Cross Sector Community Partnerships**

▶ **Guaranteed Affordable Housing for Women Experiencing Violence**

RURAL HOUSING ADVISORY COMMITTEE
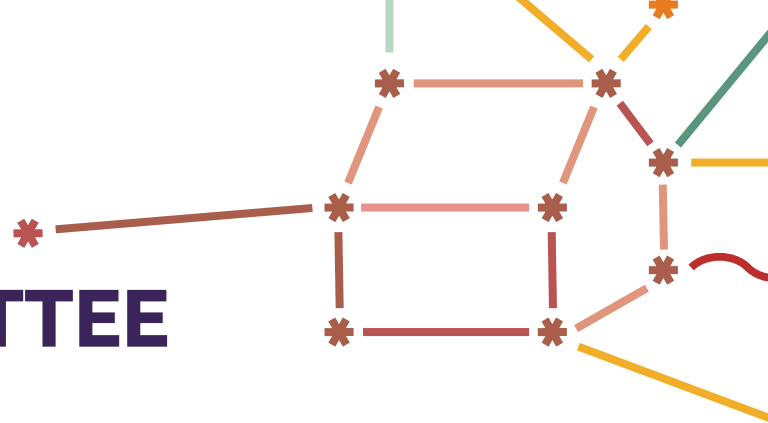
Pilot Project

Province-wide advisory committee focusing on rural housing issues and initiatives. The Rural Housing Advisory Committee members are from the Howe Sound Women's Centre, Robson Valley Community Services, North Kootenay Lake Community Services, Fireweed Collective, Campbell River and North Island Transition Society, and Princeton Family Services Society

Access to housing is experienced differently throughout the province, with those living in rural and remote communities facing unique barriers to housing when compared to urban centres. However, much of the discourse on the affordable housing crisis is in relation to urban centres, such as Vancouver. Although the attention given to Vancouver is warranted based on the conditions many people experiencing homelessness face in the city, the focus has resulted in the exclusion of rural and remote voices in the housing discussion. The Rural Housing Advisory Committee (RHAC) came directly from an identified need from the Community Needs Assessment.

The RHAC was created to bring BCSTH members together from rural and remote communities across the province to create a platform for the knowledge sharing on rural housing needs. The Getting Home Project Manager created a six-person advisory committee for an initial two-year commitment. All members of BCSTH were made aware of the initiative and were asked to submit applications if interested in participating. For the purposes of the committee, rural and remote communities were defined as having a population of less than 5,000 people and greater than 100 kilometers from the nearest medium-sized population centre (population over 30,000) or without year-round road access. Regions in BC represented by the committee members are displayed by Figure 1.

Fort St. James
Robson Valley
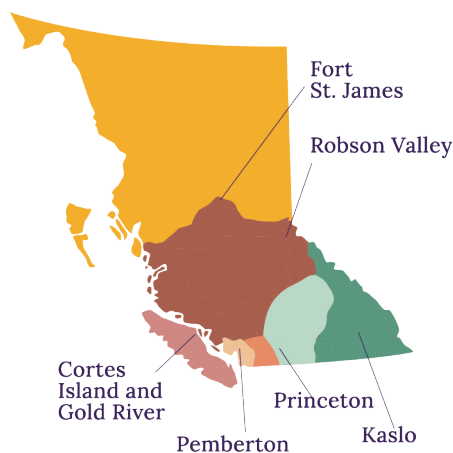Cortes Island and Gold River
Pemberton
Princeton
Kaslo

Fig. 1
BCSTH Regional Map

The committee quickly identified key challenges that were present in all their communities, including:

- Transportation
- Access to housing
- Relocation
- Cell phone coverage
- Limitations of the private safe home model

The RHAC's first step was to begin research on the intersections of housing and violence against women services in rural and remote communities. The initial research was guided by the following research question:

What innovative solutions, strengths, and ideas for change are safe homes and transition houses bringing to the rural context and women's homelessness?

Over the last two years, the members of the RHAC have completed a multitude of important projects. A survey of BCSTH members in rural and remote communities was conducted in order to collect data on the unique barriers to housing faced by women experiencing violence in rural areas. Focus groups regarding barriers to housing included women who live in rural communities. This research gathered important data on the experiences of women in rural communities and the state of available housing throughout the province. The importance of including rural voices in research on access to housing was highlighted throughout the research. All respondents indicated it was very difficult for women to find long-term, secure and affordable housing in their community after violence. Furthermore, half of respondents reported that relocation to another community was often necessary for women to find housing. It was also identified that the seasonal nature of many of the economies in rural areas contributed to higher rates of women living in poverty due to a lack of employment options.

There were two major insights from the initial RHAC research. The first had to do with the lack of services in rural areas. Women often have to travel far distances to access safe homes, transition houses or affordable housing. However, there is a lack of adequate transportation across rural areas that often leaves women with the inability to access services or requires them to put themselves in danger to travel the distance.

The second insight also had to do with the limited services available in rural areas and a lack of services that were able to accommodate women with mental health issues or women who use substances. These two findings led to the creation of two sub-projects organized through the RHAC.

The Transportation Project

The goal of the Transportation Project was to increase access to safe transportation for women experiencing violence in rural and remote locations. Without a car or the ability to rely on family and friends for rides and limited and expensive taxi services in some locations, many women rely on public transportation. However, infrequent route times and limited route options can prevent women from travelling or lead to women relying on potentially dangerous forms of transportation such as hitchhiking.

The permanent shutdown of the Greyhound Bus Service in BC in 2018 severely limited available options for transportation in rural and remote areas of BC. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in March 2020 further limited the available public transport services and the use of such public services also increased risk of transmission of COVID-19. In a survey of BCSTH membership, 77% of service providers responded that COVID-19 had impacted access to transportation in their communities. These factors all contributed to highlighting the importance of improving access to transportation services. However, it is important to understand the historical need for transportation services throughout the province, which disproportionately has impacted the lives of Indigenous women and girls.

The consequences of inadequate transportation services have been demonstrated for decades and have cost the lives of many Indigenous women and girls, specifically along Highway 16, or the Highway of Tears. Access to transportation is not a matter of convenience, it is a matter of safety and, within BC, is an act of reconciliation.

In addition to extensive research on the gaps within the current service model, the Transportation Project also initiated a pilot project to create partnerships in northern BC between transition houses, safe homes and an existing transportation service. The Northern Health Connections bus provides transportation for those travelling for health care. Although the service is available to women who have experienced violence, confidentiality concerns and lack of awareness of the service have been barriers to use.

The goal of the pilot project was to create partnerships between transition houses and safe homes and the Northern Health Connections bus in order to decrease barriers to use for women who have experienced violence. The Transportation Project has received additional funding to continue the important work that has been established so far. It is the intention of the Getting Home Project that the partnerships established are the first of many. A full report on the Transportation Project can be accessed at http://www.bcsth.ca/transportation.

✳ *Policy Spotlight* — ✳

Increase public transportation options in rural and remote areas.

The Rural Safe Homes Project

In response to the survey and focus group research through the RHAC, The Getting Home Project set out to conduct further research and develop preliminary promising practices for safe homes in order to increase accessibility for women who experience violence along with mental health and substance use issues. As services are limited in remote and rural areas, specific care for those with complex needs is hard to access. In a review of women's transition housing and support programs across the province, it was found that of the women turned away from safe homes in rural and remote areas, 25% were unable to access service because of substance use (Queenswood Consulting Group, 2019). The goal of this subproject was to enable BCSTH to help their members from rural safe homes feel equipped to provide services to a diverse range of women and acknowledge the barriers they face as remote service providers.

Through the additional research under the Rural Safe Homes Project, it was found that there is a strong desire among service providers to gain knowledge on best practices in a multitude of areas they felt were under-supported by their current services.

The following training needs were identified by service providers working in rural safe homes:

- Substance use and mental wellness
- Suicide prevention
- Trauma-informed care
- Working with Indigenous peoples
- Traumatic brain injury
- Identifying staff biases
- Reflective listening
- Harm reduction
- Issues around working solo
- Intake procedures

> **"Rural safe home providers wish for further training. Many feel that they are increasingly working outside their comfort zone as they see women with increasingly complex needs (often attributed to substance use and/or mental wellness)."**
>
> *(Watt, 2021, p. 1)*

Pilot Sites: Rural Housing Advisory Committee

Based on the research, there were key promising practices identified in addition to training that will be further explored by BCSTH and incorporated to better serve rural populations. The key promising practices included the establishment of a community of practice and community engagement of stakeholders. The specifics of this project are detailed in **_Preliminary Promising Practices for Rural Safe Homes Providing Services for Women Experiencing Violence with Mental Wellness and/or Substance Use Needs_** (Watt, 2021).

RHAC Key Outcomes

Transportation Project ▶ **Provincial Knowledge Sharing**

Safe Homes Project ▶ **Research on Rural Housing Needs**

Long-term Advisory Committee ▶ **Inclusion of Rural Voices on Housing**

NATIONAL OCCUPANCY STANDARDS

Pilot Project

The development of an NOS working group to collaboratively conduct research and advocate for policy change. The project partners are BCSTH, YWCA-Metro Vancouver, Atira, Vancouver and Lower Mainland Multicultural Family Support Services Society, Aboriginal Housing Management Association, BC Non-Profit Housing Association, and BC Housing

The Getting Home Project explored the barriers to housing related to the unintended outcomes of the National Occupancy Standards (NOS) that women and their children experiencing violence face in BC. These barriers are related to the family size, age, and gender of the housing occupants. This project aimed to research the need for flexibility, adaptability, and affordability of long-term rental housing for women and their children leaving violence.

Through the Getting Home Project, research on the NOS included a policy analysis through a rights-based and legal perspective, a qualitative study interviewing women with lived-experience, as well as a design and architectural perspective in order to gain insights on alternatives to the current standards and housing development.

How can inclusivity and diversity of families be considered within housing policy and design?

Our rights-based research challenged the usefulness of the NOS and addressed the unintended consequences of the policy. The use of housing composition guidelines within the NOS is not in line with the goals of the standards to prevent health and safety concerns from overcrowding and assess housing stock (McKay, 2021). Instead, a focus on housing composition only creates a barrier to housing that is experienced disproportionately by women and children experiencing violence.

Through this pilot project, a policy analysis, ***National Occupancy Standards: Use and misuse*** (McKay, 2021), and brief, ***Policy brief on Canada's National Occupancy Standards and the right to housing*** (Boag, 2021), were developed. Both concluded with similar findings.

Recommendations for policy change in this area are:

1. To recognize that the NOS are guidelines and are therefore not legally mandated.

2. To prioritize the safety of women who have experienced violence and their families and allow for short-term but secure accommodation regardless of family size and composition.

3. To create a new inclusive housing policy for families that acknowledges and allows for diversity in households.

4. To implement policy change that will reduce family poverty as it is a key structural barrier to securing housing.

As part of this pilot site, design-based research was conducted to understand this policy issue from a practical approach. The research conducted highlighted solutions that focus on the spatial needs of families rather than the fixed number of bedrooms required under the NOS and conventional models of housing units. In particular, it was determined that flexible and adaptable space and housing design would lead to suitable housing models. Flexible and adaptable design will have the potential to address the issue of overcrowding as well as the privacy needs of occupants within smaller housing units while also addressing the lack of affordable three-bedroom housing units in BC. More information on this research can be found at **www.bcsth.ca/gettinghome**.
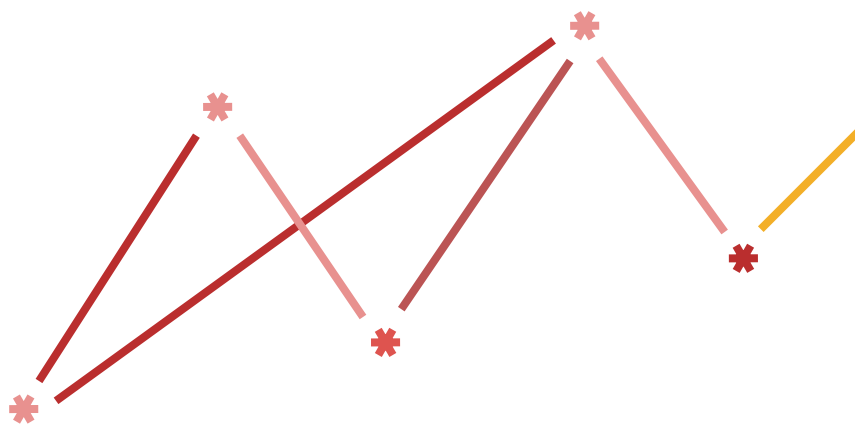
Pilot Sites: National Occupancy Standards

In July 2021, a qualitative study was conducted with 12 women who had experienced occupancy standards as a barrier to housing. It was found that subsidized housing applications do not consider the needs or preferences of families and instead determine "suitable" housing based on the NOS. Furthermore, the study found that the NOS allowed for children of similar ages and the same gender to share rooms even if the family preferred them to have separate rooms. This lack of flexibility around suitability has contributed to the housing precarity of women and children. The study also found that the needs of immigrant and refugee families are not being met under the current guidelines and understandings of "suitability". More information on this research can be found at **www.bcsth.ca/gettinghome**.

This project has contributed meaningful research on an understudied policy area and has determined that the NOS are contributing to the housing precarity and economic insecurity of women and their children who have experienced violence. It is clear that further research and advocacy is needed in this area.

Policy Spotlight

Formally recognize the NOS as merely guidelines and create new standards to guide occupancy rates in social housing and the private rental market.

National Occupancy Standards Key Outcomes

▶ **Working Group**

▶ **Policy Brief**

▶ **Policy Analysis**

▶ **Research from Design Perspective**

▶ **Qualitative Study**

LEGACIES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The pilot projects and research undertaken during the Getting Home Project contributed to tangible structural change. In addition to research that has contributed to knowledge creation, knowledge sharing and awareness raising, the Getting Home Project facilitated increased availability of long-term affordable housing in a co-op, a partnership to establish increased funding for the Homeless Prevention Program, the ability for women in northern transition houses to safely and confidentially access transportation, and more.

A common theme throughout the literature and community research was the feeling of hopelessness in relation to housing. Undoubtedly, the barriers to safe and affordable housing for women who have experienced violence are daunting. There is a need for systemic change to address the issues that face many women who have experienced violence including poverty, discrimination and housing affordability. In addition, the undeniable existence of systemic racism, sexism, colonialism, ableism and more that all contribute to disproportionate experiences of violence for some women and increase their risk of experiencing homelessness understandably leave many without hope.

Despite this, it is clear through the actions of BCSTH members, the community partners and the people that access their services, that there is resiliency that drives change forward. There were many lessons to learn

from the partners who made the pilot projects possible. Of key importance is that action is required immediately and at every level of policy development. Women seeking safe and affordable housing cannot wait. The following discusses the key lessons learned from the pilot projects that can help inform future work in this area.

Build on existing partnerships

Many of the pilot projects came from existing networking groups either within the same sector or across sectors. The Getting Home Project sought to build the bridges between many community partners who were working towards similar goals but from different perspectives and diverse backgrounds. By formalizing those connections through community projects and partnerships, work can become more efficient and beneficial for all parties involved.

Knowledge share and use the strengths of others

By connecting people from different sectors, the pilot sites employed diverse perspectives to generate creative solutions. For example, the Transportation Project was able to build connections between BCSTH members and the Northern Health Connections bus. Without increasing available routes or travel times, the service became more accessible awareness developed about the barriers to their service faced by women who have experienced violence.

The pilot projects also demonstrated that knowledge sharing within sectors resulted

in meaningful partnerships, such as the RHAC. This finding was especially important considering the voices of service providers in rural and remote communities have historically been left out of the conversation on violence and housing. The creation of a platform to share similar experiences and discuss solutions helped strengthen the voice and presence of rural and remote service providers.

Be open, honest and humble

An important lesson learned throughout the pilot projects is to be comfortable with things not going exactly as planned. Some involved in the pilot projects indicated that fostering a team environment where partners have an openness to feedback is important. As issues arise, asking the question "what can we do now?" can be more beneficial than focusing on what went wrong. Although care can be taken to ensure the best options are available for a woman, a woman's ability to choose which services she accesses is most important. This lesson is well known among service providers who work with women who have experienced violence, but it is important to share across sectors that do not have frontline experience.

Take steps to ensure longevity of projects

As identified in the literature review and Community Needs Assessment, it is very common for service providers to take on work that goes beyond their job description. The need to become housing experts while working in transition houses is a primary example. Service providers work hard to provide the best services and care possible with limited available funding. However, the demanding

nature of this work can lead to burnout resulting in high rates of staff turnover.

With this in mind, it is important to take steps to structure longevity into project models and take staff turnover into account. The Co-op partnership ensured that there was language in the lease agreement that communicated the agreement between organizations. The YWCA also adapted the job description of an existing position to ensure the continuance of the referral committee. While there are benefits to projects unfolding organically and bringing new perspectives in and out of the planning and implementation processes, approaching work with intentionality can help track progress and create longevity. Measures of performance were predetermined at the beginning of the Getting Home Project to help ensure the overall success of the project and each pilot site.

Use what already works well

Although there are many barriers to housing for women who have experienced violence, there are programs already in existence that have been successful in overcoming these barriers. Therefore, the pilot sites did not focus on "breaking the wheel" to create structural change. Instead, the pilot sites identified the programs and organizations that already existed in communities and changed the way they were being used.

An example of this was the creative solution to find private funding to increase the Homelessness Prevention Program in Comox Valley. Structural change can come from identifying the potential in existing services

and programs and figuring out how they can function more efficiently and be more accessible to a diverse community of people.

No project is too small, or too big

Building from the above lesson, there is a need for both large structural changes that take years of planning and are expensive to execute as well as small, grassroots collaborations that change the lives of a few individuals. It is easy to focus only on the societal barriers that prevent women from finding housing. However, while advocates collectively work towards change on a large-scale basis, change in whatever capacity is needed right now.

Access to co-op housing directly impacted the lives of several women and their children who were fleeing violence. Although the greater societal barriers still remain in place for those women, the opportunity to provide their family a safe and appropriate home is invaluable.

Comparatively, there is always space to advocate for change on large scale barriers, such as changing a federal housing policy. The NOS pilot site identified that the first steps towards possible change was a need for more information and awareness-raising.

## Policy change is needed at every level

In order to adequately address the barriers to housing faced by women who have experienced violence, it is important to recognize the interconnection between policy levels. As federal policy change can affect the work of frontline service providers, grassroots movements organized by service providers can inform and advocate for federal change.

Collaboration is needed at every level to ensure that holistic solutions to housing challenges for women and their children are implemented.

More than ever, adequate funding for transition houses is necessary

The pilot projects exemplified the value of adequately funding service providers. The outcomes of the pilot projects demonstrated the creativity, resilience and efficiency of those who work in the violence prevention sector. It is worth acknowledging the impactful work that can be achieved, even when underfunded, in order to advocate for the importance of more funding for violence prevention workers.
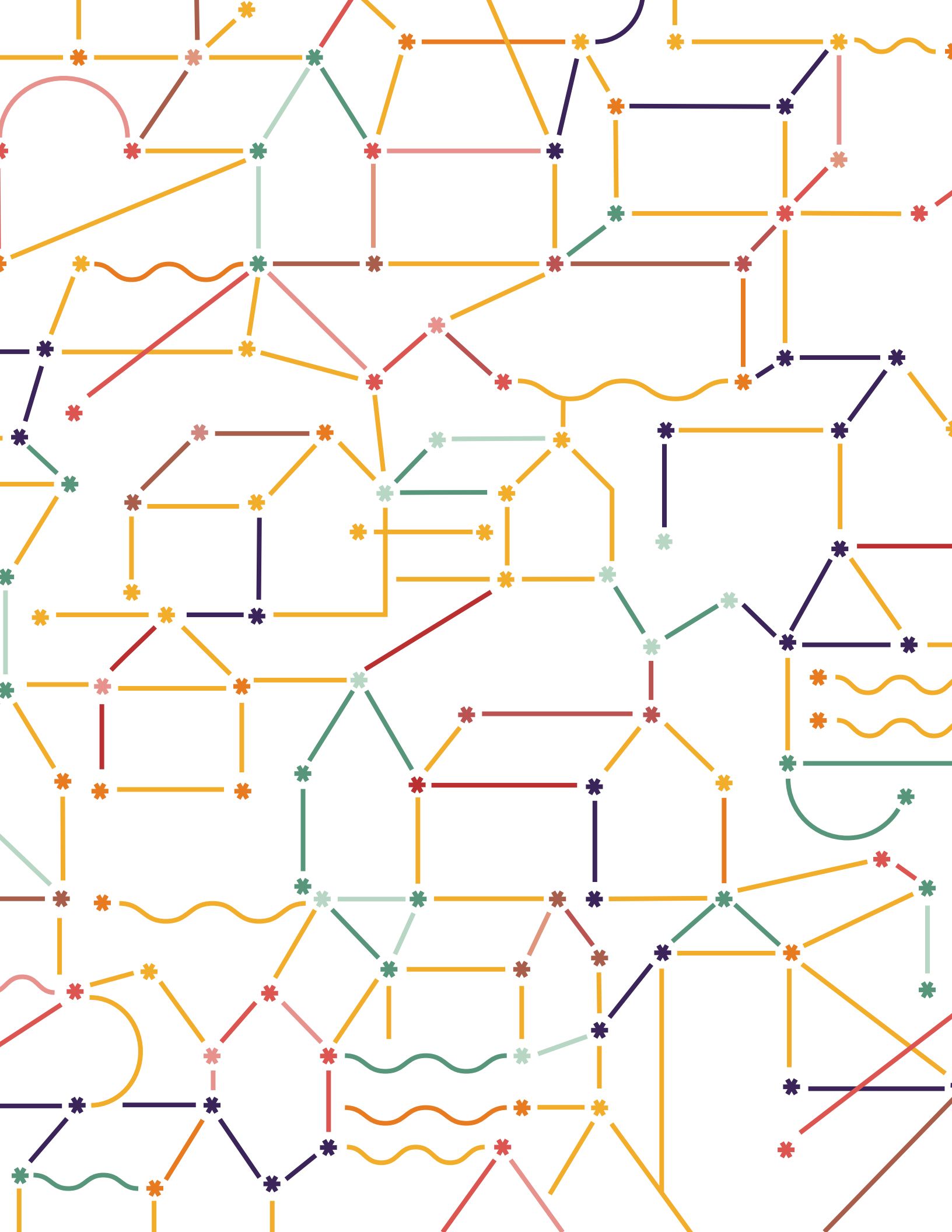
GETTING HOME IN YOUR COMMUNITY

RAAISE: A Framework for Community-Based Policy Change

An important goal of the Getting Home Project was to demonstrate different approaches to structural and impactful change in the area of housing for women and their children experiencing violence. Furthermore, it was important to reflect how this work can be applied in other communities. In addition to the lessons learned from the pilot sites discussed above, reflecting upon the steps taken to design and implement each of the pilot sites helped develop a useful framework for community-based advocacy and change. The following framework is based on both a community-based approach to policy as well as the principles of intersectional feminist research.
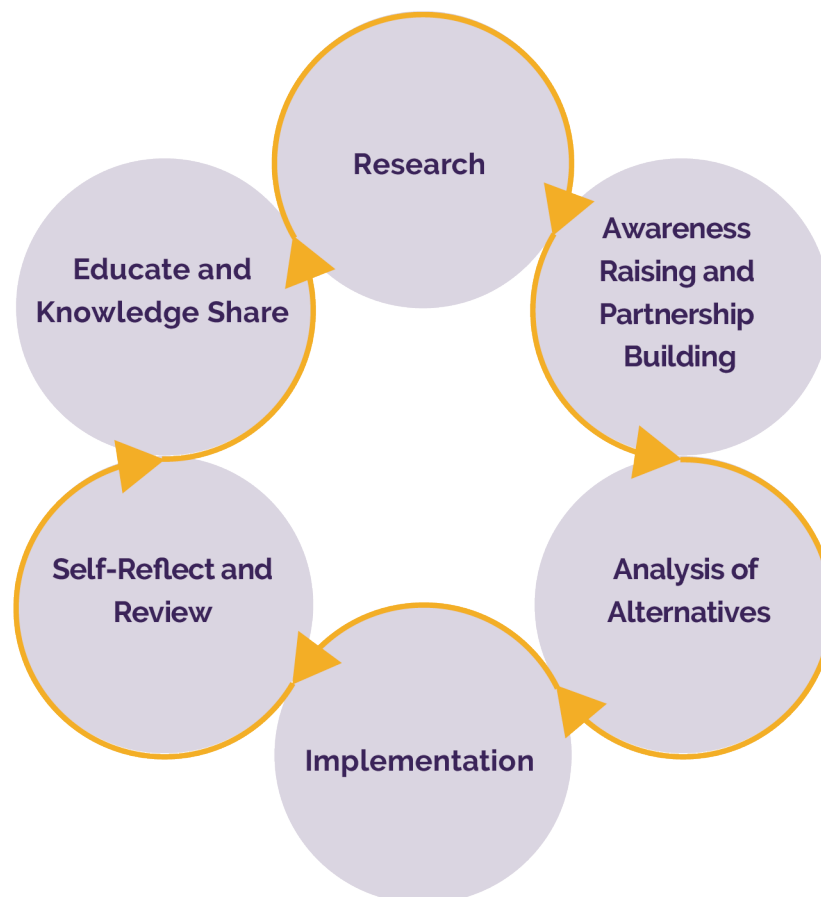
RAAISE: A Framework for Community-Based Policy Change

Research

Identify the specific issue or gap in knowledge you are addressing and gather and organize available information related to the topic. Conduct a literature review, jurisdictional scan or connect with others who have expertise on the topic. Take care to engage in **ethical research** if speaking to those with lived experience, even in an informal capacity (Boilevin et al., 2019). Contemplate your position in relation to the issue and within the context of your community. Ask how this might inform your approach to this work.

Awareness Raising and Partnership Building

Bring others in and use community connections and partnerships to raise awareness of the problem and gather diverse perspectives on the topic. Determine if there is an opportunity for a valuable cross-sector partnership and use the relationships you already have.

Analysis of Alternatives

Determine if there are existing alternatives to the current policy or program and assess the benefits and weaknesses of each among stakeholders and community partners. It might be helpful to decide on a list of criteria for assessing the most important factors in your decision making.

RAAISE: A Framework for Community-Based Policy Change

Implementation

Initiate your project with clearly articulated goals and measures of success. Be intentional during implementation by creating terms of reference, a memorandum of understanding and/or an action plan for the project. Be adaptable to change if the project is not meeting the predetermined goals and be open to new approaches or ideas to improve the implementation plan.

Self-Reflect and Review

At every step of the process, take time for reflexivity. Ask yourself how your positionality might be influencing your understanding of the project and consider if you have included diverse perspectives. After implementation it is important to continue this process while assessing your measures of success. If the project did not fulfill each measure of success, do not take this as a failure. Review what worked well and make note of what did not go as planned and what lessons could be learned from the process.

Educate and Knowledge Share

Evaluate the key lessons learned or key findings of your work and share your knowledge through your network and others doing similar work in the community. Policy should always be adaptable to new information and requires continual research and information gathering. In this sense, this framework does not have a final step, but is an ongoing process.

GETTING HOME PROJECT

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Continuing the Work of the Getting Home Project

The Getting Home Project and all four of the pilot sites have become long term projects in the communities that built them. The intention of the pilot projects was to develop examples of structural change within communities that could be used to guide similar projects in more communities.[2] The Getting Home Project work can be continued through:

- The development of more partnerships between co-operative housing and transition houses.

- Contributions to the body of research related to the implications of the NOS and alternative policies to guide occupancy in an inclusive manner.

- Organizing creative solutions to funding for existing programs such as the HPP.

- Further connections in rural and remote communities and the engagement of rural voices to address the specific barriers that arise from living in rural and remote areas.

However, the pilot projects created through the Getting Home Project were a few of many potential projects as there were a number of barriers identified through the Community Needs Assessment that warrant further research and attention.

A few areas of focus for further research are noted below but are not an exhaustive list of necessary research.

- Projects that engage and uplift Indigenous voices and communities to help develop culturally safe programming related

to housing for those who access VAW services as well as the Indigenous women who are service providers themselves.

- The need for policy development relating to gender inclusivity and VAW services to ensure all self-identified women and gender diverse people have equal access to violence prevention services. It was noted by the RHAC that education and training in this area is of key importance in rural and remote areas.

- The specific barriers faced by immigrant and refugee women upon entering Canada and the identification of promising practices in reducing barriers to accessing VAW services and housing.

- The lack of pet-friendly housing and services and the full extent to which this acts as a barrier to access for women experiencing violence. Furthermore, there is a need to identify existing promising practices that have been successful in providing foster care for pets or adapting services and housing to be pet-friendly.

It is the hope of those involved in the Getting Home Project that the lessons learned and the community-based framework that guided the project will be useful in the development of many more projects working to decrease the barriers to housing faced by women and their children who have experienced violence.

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2   Specific guidance for housing providers can be found on the BCSTH website (**Tips for Housing Providers**).

FINAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Each pilot site established through the Getting Home Project identified key recommendations based on the nature of the individual projects. However, there are overall recommendations that became apparent upon reflection of the work done through the Getting Home Project. The final policy recommendations are guided by the actionable policy areas identified in the initial phases of the Getting Home Project. The below recommendations are broad in nature and are intended to be starting points for specific policy projects. Each recommendation reflects an issue that must be addressed in order for meaningful and systemic change to occur. As highlighted throughout this report, the connections between policy areas have to be considered. As such, these recommendations work cohesively to address the intersection of housing and violence and provide a call-to-action for decision-makers to address historical and ongoing inequities.

Actionable Policy Areas and Recommendations

▶ **Increase Housing Supply**	**1.** *Increase supply of appropriate and affordable housing for women and their children who have experienced violence.* • There is an immediate need for more housing to reduce the bottleneck within VAW services. • The inability to secure long-term housing has perpetuated a cycle of violence against women and their children. • The need for housing is province-wide and uniquely experienced based on location.

Actionable Policy Areas and Recommendations

▶ **Create Cross-Sector Organization**	**2.** *Create cross-sector collaboration to ensure adequate data collection related to women experiencing homelessness and the ability for knowledge sharing.* • Women are more likely to be a part of the invisible population of those who experience homelessness, which has resulted in an inaccurate estimation of how many women experience homelessness in our province. • Cross-sector organization will promote more accurate data collection as a result of increased awareness through knowledge sharing. • Connections between sectors can use the strengths of each sector to help limit barriers to housing by creating more efficient systems.
▶ **Increase Funding**	**3.** *Establish long-term funding for violence prevention services and housing services.* • There is a need for increased long-term operational funding for VAW services. • Funding for existing programs that have proven to work in reducing homelessness should be increased. • Adequate funding will increase accessibility to VAW services and allow for more training to limit discrimination of women with diverse needs such as mental health and substance use issues.

Actionable Policy Areas and Recommendations

▶ **Reduce Systemic Barriers**

4. *Reduce social inequities women face that make them at risk for experiencing homelessness by reducing the gender wage gap.*

- Long-term economic security for women will help prevent women experiencing homelessness and allow for women to have greater choice in their living circumstances.

- Large scale systemic barriers have to be addressed in order for equitable access to housing to exist.

▶ **Reduce Systemic Barriers**

5. *Reduce social inequities women face that make them at risk for experiencing homelessness by creating a specific government support program for women experiencing violence.*

- The provision of CERB during the COVID-19 pandemic has broadened the possibilities of governmental economic support to a targeted population.

- As a result of the pandemic, there is currently a policy window for initiatives to support those who experience violence.

- There is a call for increased financial support to those who experience violence from the **Final Report of the British Columbia Expert Panel on Basic Income** (Green et al., 2020).

Actionable Policy Areas and Recommendations

▶ **Increase Inclusion and Accessibility**

6. *Formally recognize the National Occupancy Standards as merely guidelines and create new standards to guide occupancy rates in social housing and the private rental market.*

- The NOS are not an accurate measure of housing stock suitability throughout Canada and they do not prevent overcrowding in their current form.

- The policy is being misused as guidelines for household composition and suitability.

- The NOS are a barrier for women with children seeking housing and are centred on the western ideal of the nuclear family.

▶ **Increase Inclusion and Accessibility**

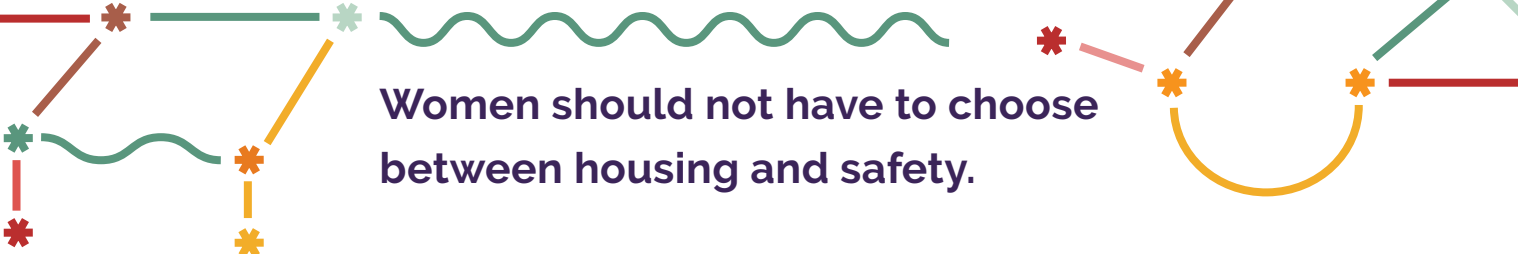**7.** *Increase public transportation options in rural and remote areas.*

- Increased accessibility to public transit will reduce the violence experienced by women in rural areas and also increase use of VAW services.

- Route frequency should be considering when assessing efficiency of transit routes.

8. *Diversify the design of affordable housing to accommodate families and increase accessibility of units.*

- Flexible design and diversified layouts will help address the severe lack of multi-bedroom units throughout the province.

- Diversification will also increase accessibility to those with disabilities who currently experience disproportionate rates of homelessness and poverty.

CONCLUSION

The Getting Home Project began by listening to the feeling of hopelessness from women seeking housing who have experienced violence and those working in violence prevention. While this project has demonstrated the weight of the barriers faced by women seeking housing, it has also shown that small changes matter and can inform change on a larger scale. Every action taken to decrease the barriers to housing for women experiencing violence is important.

Women should not have to choose between housing and safety.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the housing crisis and the epidemic of violence against women across Canada. However, it has also provided a window of opportunity for those who work for violence prevention and equal access to safe and affordable housing. Housing should be a right for every Canadian. Every time a woman is forced to make the decision between housing and safety, it is a failure of our communities and governments.

It is our hope that the work started in the Getting Home Project can continue to grow and inspire future work to help women across the province find affordable and appropriate housing that does not come at the cost of their well-being. At the beginning of this project, focus groups were asked to imagine a future where BC is a leader in affordable housing for women. The respondents' vision of a safer, more equitable future helped shape the work of the Getting Home Project. We ask the same of you: imagine a future where BC is a leader in affordable housing for women. Now, become a part of the solution and start to build that future.

Imagine a future where BC is a leader in affordable housing for women.

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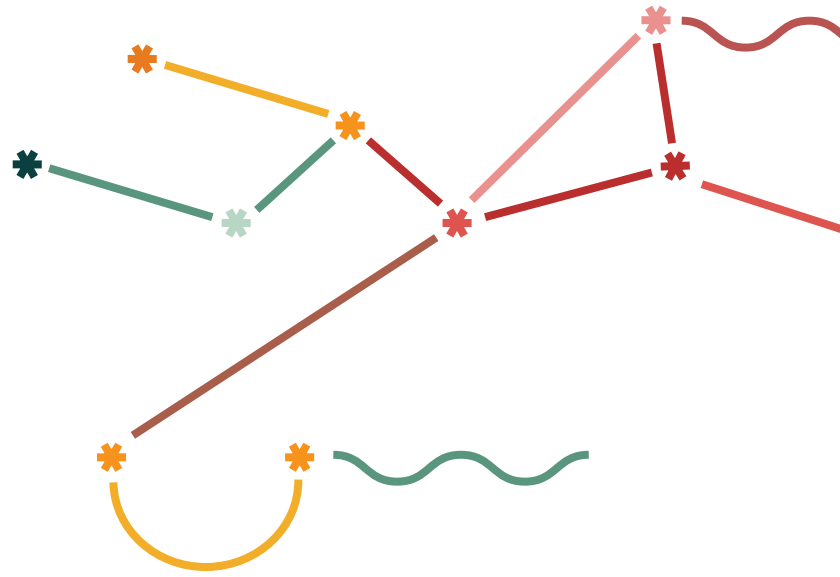
APPENDIX A:

Vancouver Co-operative Housing Pilot Project: Key Considerations Related to Confidentiality

- The agreement designates a subsidy for an available unit, not a specific unit. Therefore, the specific unit occupied by a woman fleeing violence changes over time and other residents do not become aware of the experiences of the woman simply through her occupation of a designated unit.

- Partners of the project received information on a "need to know" basis. The details of applicants and any potential issues within the co-op were only shared when necessary.

- Sitting members of the co-op board were aware of the occupant receiving the subsidy, however no other members were made aware.

- The role of the co-op is to provide housing. As with any other circumstances when women move forward from transition housing, it is the woman's choice to access services from that point forward. Even though the project establishes a cross sector partnership, there is still a clear distinction between service models (housing provider and service provider). This is to ensure there are no further barriers to access services from transition housing and the violence prevention sector if the occupant is in conflict with the housing provider.

APPENDIX B:

Language used in Co-operative Lease Agreement

Below Market Households. For Residential Units occupied by Below Market Households, the Co-operative will focus on providing such Residential Units to Occupants who have lived in Vancouver for at least three years as a first priority and Occupants who have worked in Vancouver for at least three years as a second priority. The Co-operative will make reasonable efforts to house Below Market Households in at least two three-bedroom units at all times, and to ensure that one of those Below Market Households is headed by a woman fleeing domestic violence, referred by the BC Society of Transition Houses or a partner agency in accordance with an agreement between the Land Trust and the BC Society of Transition Houses or a successor identified by the Land Trust; subject in every case to approval of such households pursuant to the Co-operative's normal membership process.

APPENDIX C:

Getting Home Project: Overcoming Barriers to Housing After Violence

Application Assessment

To Be Completed by the Getting Home Referral Committee

Applicant Name: _____

Date of Application: _____

1. Applicant Meets Eligibility Requirements (all answers below must be yes to be considered for the Getting Home Project):

   a. Leaving Abuse From an Intimate Partner
   Yes _____   No _____

   b. Applicant is Currently Residing in a Vancouver Second Stage Program
   Yes _____   No _____

   c. Applicant Meets National Occupancy Standards for Available Unit
   Yes _____   No _____

2. Applicant will be suitable for independent housing (points):

   a. Applicant is ready to leave their abusive partner
   Yes (5 points)   Other (0 points)

   b. Applicant is able to independently maintain their personal health and well-being and the health and well-being of any children they have in an independent living environment
   Yes (5 points)   Other (0 points)

   c. Applicant has paid their second stage housing charges on time each month?
   Yes (5 points)   Other (0 points)

   d. Applicant has reported any issues with their unit in a timely manner
   Yes (5 points)   Other (0 points)

   e. There have been no significant issues during Applicant's residency in second stage (for example, conflict with neighbours, police attendance for criminal activity on Applicant's part, noise complaints)
   Yes (5 points)   Other (0 points)

f. Applicant is able to abide by policies and procedures of second stage program.
Yes (5 points)   Other (0 points)

Points for Section 2 _____

3. Other factors:

Up to 5 points may be given for other factors, to be determined by other information provided, such as proximity of the available housing to work, school, and/or current supports, and/or any additional barriers the family experiences to finding long term housing.

Points for Section 3 _____

TOTAL POINTS (SECTION 2 + SECTION 3) _____

Note: If multiple applicants have satisfied the requirements of Section 1 and have equal points for Section 2, the date of application will be the determining factor in recommending them as a member to the co-op.

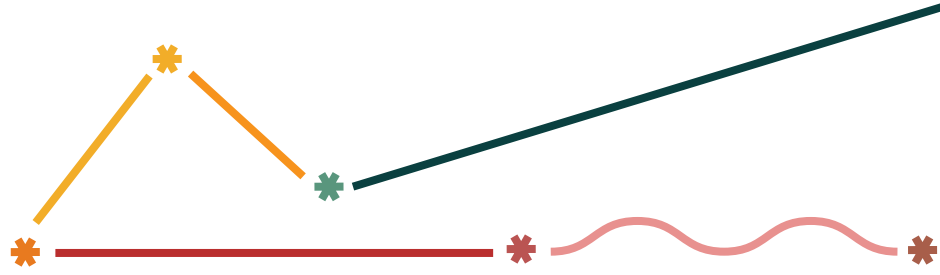**Recommended:**

Yes _____

No, Applicant Not Suitable _____

No, but waitlisted for future vacancies _____

Committee Member Signature:

Date:
_____

_____

APPENDIX D:

Getting Home Project – Second Stage Referral Form

Purpose of this form

1. Verification that the applicant is fleeing abuse from an intimate partner, which is a requirement of the Getting Home Project.

2. Determines that the Getting Home Project is a good fit for the applicant.

3. Many women fleeing abuse from an intimate partner will not have a landlord reference. This form fufils that purpose.

Referral Information

Second Stage Transition House program:

Staff Name (first and last):

Staff Job Title:

Phone Number:

Email Address:

Length of Time Staff has Known Applicant:

Applicant Information

Applicant Name (first and last):

Date of Birth:

Gender (self-identified):

Immigration Status:

Phone Number:

Email Address:

Dependent Children (40% of time or more):

1. Name (first and last):

   Date of Birth:

   Gender:

Appendices

2. Name (first and last): _____

Date of Birth: _____

Gender: _____

3. Name (first and last):
Date of Birth: _____

Gender: _____

4. Name (first and last): _____

Date of Birth: _____

Gender: _____

Verification the Applicant Has Left an Abusive Intimate Partner

To the best of your knowledge, did the applicant experience abuse?

(Please put a checkmark beside your answer)

Yes____ No____ Unsure____

Has the applicant identified that they are ready to permanently ready to leave their abuser

(Please put a checkmark beside your answer)

Yes____ No____ Unsure____

If yes, please describe the steps that the applicant has taken to permanently leave the abuser
(for example, separating joint bank accounts, making a police report, getting a protection order,
getting a parenting order, going to counselling, doing a housing search.)

_____

_____

_____

Reference

In your opinion, can the applicant independently maintain their personal health and well-being
and the health and well-being of any children they have in an independent living environment?

Yes____ No____ Unsure____
Yes, with supports (describe): _____

Has the applicant paid their second stage housing charges on time each month?

Yes____ No____ Unsure____

Appendices

Is the applicant's unit in satisfactory confition (no significant damage caused by the applicant, no hoarding issues)

Yes_____   No_____   Unsure_____

Has the applicant reported any issues with the unit in a timely manner?

Yes_____   No_____   Not applicable (no issues with unit)_____   Unsure_____

Have there been any issues during their residency in second stage (for example noise complains, conflict with neighbours, police attendance fro criminal activity on the applicants behalf)

Yes_____   No_____   Unsure_____

Has the applicant abided by the policies and procedures of the second stage program?

Yes_____   No_____   Unsure_____

Is there any other relecant information that you would like to provide in support of the application?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Staff Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX E:

Getting Home Project: Overcoming Barriers to Housing After Violence

Second Stage Transition House Referral Committee
Terms of Reference

Type of Committee: Standing Committee.

Purpose of Committee: To recommend residents of second stage transition houses to available co-op units designated for women who have experienced violence from an intimate partner. The committee verifies that the applicant if fleeing abuse from an intimate partner, determines that co-operative housing would be a good fit for the applicant.

Scope: When advised of an upcoming vacancy in a Vancouver co-op for a unit designated for women who have experienced violence from an intimate partner, the Getting Home Second Stage Transition House Referral Committee will:

- Send out an email to all second stage transition houses in the City of Vancouver advising them of the upcoming vacancy, how to apply and the deadline for application

- The YWCA Metro Vancouver will accept the applications and maintain them securely. Should the YWCA Metro Vancouver not have a member on the committee, this role will be delegated to another agency that has the capacity to do so.

- The Getting Home Second Stage Transition House Referral Committee will meet, go over the application forms, and complete the Application Assessment form for each applicant

- Qualified applicants with the highest score will be recommended to the co-op

- If multiple applicants have the same score, the committee will recommend the applicant who submitted their application first

- Committee members will provide applicants with information about any assistance available for the co-op Share Purchase

- Disseminate information about the Getting Home Project: Overcoming Barriers to Housing after Violence, in collaboration with the BC Society of Transition Houses

Authority: Decisions will try to make decisions by consensus. Where consensus cannot be reached by the last 10 minutes of the 1 hour meeting, there will be a vote, with the majority deciding.

Membership: There must be a minimum of three members and a maximum of 5 members on the committee at any given time. Members of the committee must be current employees of second stage transition houses operating in the City of Vancouver. Only one committee member is allowed per second stage transition house and/or per charity/non-profit society unless the committee is unable to recruit three members from different second stage transition houses/charities/non profit societies.

Members may stay on the committee for unlimited amounts of time, given the limited number of second stage transition houses in Vancouver from which to draw members. When a member resigns, an email will be sent to all Vancouver Transition Houses who do not currently have a staff member sitting on the committee, advising them of a vacancy on the committee and inviting them to join. Where there are multiple people interested and where that number would put the total committee members above 5, the committee members will try to reach consensus on which applicants will become committee members. If they cannot reach consensus, they will vote.

Committee members must:

- consider the both the needs of women fleeing violence and of the housing co-operatives in all of their decisions

- not give preferential treatment to applicants from their own agency, but consider all applications on their own merit

Meeting Arrangements: The committee meets once annually in September, and then again, as needed to fill a co-op vacancy. Quorum is three committee members. Minutes of the annual meeting will be taken by a volunteer member of the committee, will be distributed to the other committee members within one month, and will be stored by the YWCA Metro Vancouver. Should the YWCA Metro Vancouver not have a member on the committee, this role will be delegated to another agency that has the capacity to do so.

Deliverables: The committee will ensure that all second stage transition houses in Vancouver are informed of co-op vacancies for women who have experienced violence from an intimate partner, so that residents at their transition house have the chance to apply.

The committee will work to quickly make a recommendation to co-ops for any vacancies for women who have experienced violence from an intimate partner.

The committee will work with successful co-op applicants with information on any options to assist with their share purchase.

Review: The Terms of Reference will be reviewed biannually. The next review date will be September 1, 2021