



BC SOCIETY OF TRANSITION HOUSES
Access to Transition Housing for Aboriginal Women
Executive Summary

February 08, 2016



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Introduction

Violence against Aboriginal women is intrinsically linked to colonial policies and attitudes. Since the time of contact, the government of Canada has enacted a highly intentional strategy of assimilation, dispossession, and removal of Indigenous peoples from their lands and resources, for the purpose of capital gain. Historically, these strategies have targeted Aboriginal women, the life givers of their nations. Gendered Canadian policies, such as the Indian Act, have had far reaching material and psychological impacts on Aboriginal women. Through the discriminatory regulation of Indian status, the Indian Act displaced thousands of Aboriginal women and their children from their home communities. For a long time, the Indian Act denied Aboriginal women the right to participate in community governance, severed the ability of Indigenous mothers to parent their children, and until very recently, distributed matrimonial property to men in the event of marital breakup. Such policies have shaped social and cultural norms and attitudes in harmful and complex ways. Indigenous women are marginalized in every aspect of Canadian society. One of the most tragic manifestations of this human rights issue is the staggering number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls.

Devastatingly high rates of gender violence are the natural outcome of a patriarchal system that relies on the destruction and oppression of Indigenous women. Today, Aboriginal women in Canada are almost four times more likely to experience gender violence (Health Reference Center Academic, 2013), and in some communities the rates of violence against Aboriginal women are as high as 90% (Ontario Native Women's Association, 2007). Given these statistics, resources that can provide safety are critical to the well being of Indigenous women. Transition houses are one such resource.

Although women can find immediate physical safety in a transition house, arrival at a transition house does not necessarily mean that women have escaped violence. Male violence against women is relentless and pervasive, with men finding creative ways to control and abuse. Male violence is exacerbated by structural violence; women may experience multilayered forms of abuse in legal processes and in family court, due to the patriarchal nature of the justice system. When women leave transition houses, they are often challenged to find safety in their home communities, especially in communities that lack infrastructure and resources. Women may stay in abusive relationships for a number of reasons, including the fear of losing her children, poverty, and isolation from her support system. These barriers are magnified for Indigenous women.

Understanding the intersections between the ongoing legacy of colonialism, the gendered nature of violence, and the unique experiences of Aboriginal women, is integral to creating safety for Indigenous women at a transition house. Because these intersections are so complex, a multi-faceted approach to service delivery is necessary.

Service Delivery Framework

The promising practices service delivery framework was developed by looking at multiple lines of evidence, including recent literature; service provider interviews; and facilitated focus groups with women with lived experience. Promising practices from the three lines of evidence were organized into six different and interconnected areas, envisioned as a circle, with women and children at the center, to emphasize the importance of a woman-centered approach. The other areas of the framework are: creating safety; cultural identity; foster empowerment and engagement; establish and maintain partnerships; and the continuum of support.

Creating safety requires organizations to be educated on the historical and contemporary factors that contribute to the safe housing crisis for Aboriginal women and families. Promising practices in creating safety can be organized into rules and policies; staff supports; physical security; confidentiality measures; access; sustainable funding; and linkages to permanent housing.

To address centuries of trauma and loss, cultural identity is a crucial part of a service delivery framework for Aboriginal women. The framework highlights how transition houses must honour cultural identity as a protective factor through programming, access to Elders and knowledge keepers; holistic wellness; and language.

Fostering empowerment and engagement is included in the service delivery framework as both a process and an outcome. Fostering empowerment and engagement in the framework is inclusive of governance and policy; programming; and access to peripheral services, as well it includes the work of leadership structures.

As this sector is consistently underfunded, another key piece of the framework is to establish and maintain partnerships. Collaboration is necessary, in order to maximize the reach of services. Finally, the continuum of support that surrounds the framework includes all aspects of a women's journey through a transition house; from intake, to referrals, exiting, follow up, and outreach.

Methodology

The service delivery framework was developed with an intersectional approach and an Indigenous feminist lens to create space for the voices of Aboriginal women, and the staff who serve them, to be heard. The purpose of data collection was to identify the current needs and best practices in order to inform the service delivery framework. Data was collected through three lines of evidence: Literature; focus groups; and interviews. All qualitative data collected was analyzed using a thematic analysis and grounded theory approach.

Eighty sources of academic and grey literature were analyzed for the literature review in order to address key areas such as cultural relevance and guiding values, delivery, governance, safety, continuum of support, and more. Of the eighty sources, 29 were relevant to identify best practices to inform the service delivery framework.

During the BCSTH's Aboriginal Women Consultation project, five focus groups were conducted with women who had either accessed transition house services in the past, or who had been turned away from accessing transition house services. The focus groups identified unique needs of Aboriginal women who have experienced violence, barriers, and ideas for improving situations for Aboriginal women and their children. Key areas addressed in the focus groups were location and travel; confidentiality; intake; delivery; cultural relevance; and family.

Interviews were also conducted with eleven service providers from ten transition houses across British Columbia to gather information to inform the service delivery framework. Key areas addressed in the interviews and not in the other lines of evidence included program services; referrals and intake; engagement; and staffing.

Data findings

Literature review

Over 80 academic and grey literature sources were analyzed in order to identify barriers and possible solutions or promising practices. The literature serves as one line of evidence in creating the service delivery framework.

The literature identified barriers in service delivery such as accessibility of supports and services, lack of awareness, lack of culturally relevant services, and barriers with regard to hiring and training staff. A number of significant challenges Aboriginal women face if they live on reserve and are in need of victim supports and services were also acknowledged. These barriers include a low awareness of legal rights and how to navigate the justice system, difficulty in securing affordable and permanent housing, and the lack of safe transportation to and from transition houses.

The literature also identified a number of possible solutions and promising practices, which are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Literature review areas and promising practices

Area	Promising Practices
Woman-centered care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Use an intersectional feminist theoretical framework to ensure Aboriginal women are included in service delivery ✓ Consider harm-reduction model to keep barriers low, and ensure access to services
Cultural competency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Recognize and respect differences between nations and peoples ✓ Ensure open, respectful, and non-judgemental communication ✓ Develop strategies for increasing Aboriginal workforce and capacity
Governance and policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Focus policy changes on the effect of colonial policies and root changes in traditional values ✓ Develop accountability mechanisms for all parties involved in service delivery ✓ Engage in research and meaningful data collection to create an ongoing process for identifying best practices
Physical safety and security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Carefully plan the location and physical structure of the TH and ensure the house is physically accessible for those with disabilities ✓ Create plans and procedures to safely transport women to and from the TH ✓ Ensure crisis management plans and tools are in place
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Try to ensure resources are community based and within close proximity ✓ Increase awareness of available resources ✓ Encourage information sharing with regard to gender violence through word of mouth to overcome the normalization of violence
Serving Children and Youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ensure staff who work with children and youth have specific training and are qualified ✓ Include talking circles for children and youth for dealing with the long-term impacts of witnessing violence

Area	Promising Practices
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Foster youth empowerment, support skills development, and encourage youth to use their skills for positive social change
Continuum of Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ensure data collection is done in a sensitive way, and prioritize the immediate needs of the woman over the administrative needs ✓ Ensure cultural components in programming is done in a respectful manner, with consideration to the input and acceptance of all residents and staff ✓ Hire outreach workers to provide ongoing support to women transitioning out or have staff inform the women that they are welcome to return to programs, workshops and other services
Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Hire Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff who treat women with cultural sensitivity and share a philosophy that is consistent with Aboriginal values ✓ Offer regular training on issues of confidentiality, and the consequences of failing to respect the privacy of women with complex familial ties in small communities
Relationships and partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Form partnerships with organizations and individuals based on their credibility within community ✓ Enhance capacity to deliver effective, culturally relevant services through community coordination ✓ Develop a relationship with community and have grassroots buy-in and support from community leaders and organizations

Some key themes emerged from the literature, focus groups and interviews that have formed the foundation of the service delivery framework that are presented in this document. These key themes are briefly presented below:

Creating Safety

Focus group and interview participants shared a vision for creating both physical and emotional safety in transition houses. More specifically, interview participants shared the vision to end family violence, and foster healthy and supportive environments for women and their families. They also discussed barriers in creating safety, such as around transportation to and from transition houses, as well as being understaffed. Suggestions for promoting safety included offering cultural competency training to staff, and working towards 24-hour staffing.

Cultural Identity

Throughout the focus groups and interviews, participants underscored the importance of fostering cultural identity. They discussed that transition houses offer opportunities for cultural practices and connecting women to cultural activities in the community. Interview participants also mentioned how transition houses are prepared to provide women with culturally appropriate food options.

Women and Children

The importance of adapting services and programs to meet the needs of women and children. Specifically, focus group participants suggested that counselling and sharing circles for children and youth be offered at transition houses. Interview participants discussed a number of ways

transition houses could improve their service delivery, including by enhancing cultural sensitivity and cultural competency training, as well as building trust with Aboriginal women.

Foster Empowerment and Engagement

During the focus groups and interviews, participants shared the need for empowering and engaging women in transition houses. Women expressed that they would like to be asked for their input on service delivery, such as resources that would empower them. Participants also discussed specific programs and services that they found valuable, which included individual counseling, support groups, and daycare. They further found safety planning and healing plans to be valuable, but also potentially challenging (e.g., MCFD mandating safety plans when women may not be ready).

Establishing and Maintaining Partnerships

Focus group and interview participants shared that establishing and maintaining partnerships is an important part of the work of transition houses. They mentioned that partnerships are often in the forms of collaboration with other service providers and organizations, networking, or raising awareness in communities. Participants also suggested strategies to improve partnerships, such as informing women early on about services available at partner organizations.

Continuum of Support

Throughout the focus groups and interviews, a continuum of support for women in transition houses was identified as a challenge. For example, barriers for entering transition houses included fears of the system and of being judged. Suggestions to improve included making the transition house more welcoming and preparing women on what to expect before they arrive. Participants also spoke to issues around exiting transition houses, such as financial barriers and finding long-term housing. Suggestions to improve included offering outreach workers or mentors, and continuing to involve women in services after they leave the transition house.

This document provides an overview of the service delivery framework and also a summary of all of the findings that contributed to this framework.

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Appendix A: Promising Practices Service Delivery Framework

