



West Central
Women's
Resource
Centre



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WINNIPEG

Department of Urban
and Inner City Studies

Project: Developing a Gender Based Strategy to End Homelessness

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Background:

Homelessness for women* (includes cisgendered, transgender and gender nonconforming) is underestimated and largely hidden. The definition of homelessness under the Government of Canada's Homelessness Partnering Strategy describes homelessness as "staying in a shelter or place not fit for human habitation (such as under a bridge, squatting, in a vehicle, etc.)" Women are less likely to access mainstream homeless shelters as they perceive high risk for random violence in those spaces, and far more likely to find shelter in the context of dangerous relationships with strangers or associates, experiencing violence or exploitation in order to stay warm (2015 Winnipeg Street Census). These arrangements are volatile and only sustainable for days at a time.

Little quantitative data exists to verify this reality. Winnipeg's 2011-14 HPS Community Plan excluded women as a priority, however our 2015 Street Census counted 381 women experiencing homelessness. As Winnipeg's homelessness prevention system becomes more rigorous, intake criteria for various programs and services are getting more defined, creating gaps for women. Federal funding for Housing First services hinges on the definition of chronically or episodically homeless individuals. When hidden homelessness is chronic or episodic, it rapidly deteriorates women's health and increases systemic costs. These women experience a daily level of escalation that mainstream housing programs are not resourced to support, yet they are regularly assessed out of Housing First intensive supports.

Women-serving agencies often work in siloes, accentuating existing system gaps. They witness women being turned away from Violence Against Women shelters weekly. Sometimes this is due to lack of bed space, but also that women experiencing violence due to unsafe housing are considered homeless and ineligible for VAW services. Women-serving organizations also witness turn-aways due to participant intoxication, difficulties communicating through the

referral process or escalated behaviour. Nearly 60% of women in Winnipeg identified family breakdown or violence as the cause of their first experience of homelessness, as opposed to 40% of men (Winnipeg Street Census 2015).

WCWRC attends the Headingley Women's Correctional Facility's Community Inreach Fair twice a year. Housing is consistently identified as the inmates' primary concern upon release. However, communication between community supports and the prison are fraught with barriers, and women experience further barriers to community integration upon release. While we make dozens of preliminary contacts with women to help with release planning, we successfully connect with only 1-2 women a year upon release. Without better planning, both of these systems will continue to exit women into homelessness.

In 2017, WCWRC was awarded a grant to further explore the issue of Women's homelessness with women serving agencies across Canada and to establish a gender-based strategy to guide ending homelessness for women that can be implemented within Winnipeg's current 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness. They received \$10,000 for a research component to further explore the issues, policy gaps and potential solutions.

In collaboration with UWinnipeg researchers MacKinnon and Dunsmore, a research plan has been developed that will include:

1. A literature review of existing research on women and homelessness/housing insecurity. This will also include a review of existing housing strategies, both in Manitoba and across the country to determine what, if any, gender-based analysis was done in the creation of the plan. For example, in Winnipeg, the ten-year Plan to End Homelessness drafted in 2014 acknowledges that the data gathered is likely not reflective of the actual number of women facing homelessness, as women face a higher risk of violence and assault when homeless and therefore are more likely to stay in situations that are dangerous and unhealthy than access the shelter system. Yet, when examining the system traps that exist for people experiencing homelessness, the limited access to the VAW shelter system and a lack of a women's homeless shelter were not acknowledged as barriers in the plan.
2. A policy review of current provincial and federal policies that exist that put women at risk of homelessness or housing insecurity, or that keep them homeless. This will provide a clear picture of the policy areas that we can address with the strategy and better inform which systems, departments of government, etc. need to be engaged in our process. We also know that the current systems in place in Winnipeg – either low acuity housing supports or the housing first model for high acuity cases of chronic homelessness create a gap that many women are falling right through. For example, a woman's case may be high acuity for a number of reasons (domestic violence, CFS intervention, etc.) yet she fails to meet the high barrier definition of homelessness that determines eligibility for the housing first program (six consecutive months of

homelessness) and therefore she is underserved through both existing streams of housing supports.

3. Interviews and focus groups

- a. Approximately 8 -10 focus groups with women that have first voice experience of homelessness and housing insecurity.
- b. Approximately 8 – 10 focus groups at major partner agencies that do front line work (eg. Sunshine House, EUTC, Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, Indigenous Women’s Healing Centre, North End Womens, North Point Douglas, Sage House). Up to 10 participants in each session.
- c. Approximately 8 – 10 Interviews – individual with 2 of each government systems (EIA, CFS, Justice, Health, housing (eg. MH, RTB)

- d. 1 – 2 focus groups with Landlords (interviews with public sector and private sector landlords)

Researchers and WCWRC partners have begun the process of working with a steering committee of service providers, government officials and people with lived experience in the development of research tools and an application for ethics approval through the University of Winnipeg Ethics Review Board is in progress.

Deliverables:

A gender-based strategy to end homelessness will be published by the WCWRC in November 2019. (note that if funding is provided by the MRA, appropriate acknowledgement will be included in the report).

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