



“A Place to Rest”

The Role of Transitional Housing
in Ending Homelessness for Women:
A Photovoice Project



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Housing First” has been widely promoted as the best practice for homeless populations. Many communities are currently shifting towards this method of service delivery in an effort to reduce the rapidly growing homeless population. Research supports that women, the fastest growing sub-population of the homeless, have unique needs in terms of shelter and services in transitioning from homelessness to home. Yet little research has been conducted to determine the effectiveness or impact of the Housing First model on women.

The purpose of this project was to determine the role, if any, transitional housing has in ending homelessness for women. It also sought to explore whether there is something unique about women’s experiences of homelessness and pathways into homelessness that can inform how the Housing First model is translated into practice. This project offered the unique opportunity not only to evaluate women’s experiences in transitional housing, but also to examine their experiences once they had been permanently housed.

Using a participatory research methodology called photovoice, women with lived experience of homelessness were engaged in a process of reflection, discovery, empowerment and critical dialogue as a means of expressing their experiences with homelessness and homeless services. The participants were nine women between the ages of 27 and 66 who had previously been housed in the YWCA of Calgary’s transitional housing program YWCA Mary Dover House and were permanently housed in the community prior to the project start date. The women had diverse pathways into homelessness and were of diverse origins.

From the thematic analysis of the transcriptions and photovoice images, six major themes were identified: transitional housing, permanent housing, stereotypes of homelessness, pathways into homelessness, journey from homelessness to housing and the healing journey. Through further analysis, 20 sub-themes and 15 categories were produced.

The women described the key aspects of transitional housing as 1) Support: the counsellors and the 24 hour services they provided; 2) Community of Women: being surrounded and supported by other like-women; and 3) Time: a period to recover emotionally from various traumas, to find appropriate resources, and to find appropriate housing. It is through the interplay of these components that the role of transitional housing in ending homelessness for women is revealed. Our research confirms that these elements must be offered in concert in order to make a significant difference in the lives of homeless women.

Although moving directly from homelessness to permanent housing (as under the Housing First model) may be effective for some homeless women, findings from this study demonstrate that this may not be the case for all. Our results suggest that once permanently housed the women, especially those with histories of trauma, struggle with the trade-off between the rules that kept them safe in transitional housing and living as independent, autonomous adults in the community.

In closing, the greatest challenge lies in determining how to preserve and facilitate the elements of support, time, safety and community of women in the Housing First context. Transitional and supportive housing clearly have an important role to play in ending homelessness for some women. These types of programs are critical and need to be maintained at some level. Regardless however, until more affordable, appropriate and safe housing stock is available in Calgary, all sources of housing including emergency and transitional shelters are required and due to the enormity of homelessness, will constantly be at capacity.

INTRODUCTION

The YWCA of Calgary has been providing housing services to vulnerable women for over 100 years - an exceptionally long history supporting, serving and advocating for women in need of safe, affordable, shelter and other social supports. Today, the YWCA operates two main housing programs for women experiencing homelessness in Calgary. YWCA Mary Dover House provides emergency and transitional housing to single women and women with children in times of crisis or transition and YWCA Community Housing, a Housing First Project operated in partnership with the Calgary Homeless Foundation, provides screening and case management support to women permanently housed in Calgary Homeless Foundation owned properties.

Through the YWCA's extensive history of working with and supporting women experiencing homelessness, we are aware that women have unique needs resulting from complex intersections of poverty, gender, race, histories of violence and available housing service-delivery models. Their various pathways into homelessness and their general use of less formal housing strategies, often renders women invisible in homeless counts, and ultimately, service creation.

In response to increased rates of homeless persons enumerated in homeless counts, cities such as Calgary have developed strategies to end homelessness, many of which are grounded in the Housing First philosophy. The priority of Housing First programs is to move people experiencing homelessness into appropriate permanent housing first, and then begin to work on the issues that contributed to their homelessness from the stability and safety of their own home. This approach has been contrasted with continuum of care approaches that typically involve emergency shelter and transitional housing service components prior to an individual being housed in the community.

The wholesale adoption of the Housing First approach has raised two questions that the YWCA sought to explore through a research project. First, are there any gender differences that impact the application of this model? Given that the evidence basis for this approach has primarily relied on studies involving men with co-occurring addiction and mental health issues, the project was intended to explore whether there is something unique about women's experiences of homelessness that can inform how Housing First gets translated into practice. Second, the project was interested in understanding what, if any, value the experience of transitional housing had in ending homelessness for a sample of permanently housed women who were former residents of the YWCA Mary Dover House transitional housing program.

The YWCA approached Dr. Christine A. Walsh from the University of Calgary Faculty of Social Work with the desire to understand women's service experiences with transitional housing and the Housing First model provided through the YWCA. The goal was to create a project that could result in recommendations for community housing services for women in Calgary, as well as contribute to the growing knowledge base about women's unique experience with homelessness. Through our collaborative work with Dr. Walsh, we designed a photovoice project to explore the above questions, the findings of which are presented in this report.

LITERATURE REVIEW

WOMEN AND HOMELESSNESS

Historically, the experience of homelessness has been viewed as a predominately male problem. Yet, women's experiences with homelessness are equally important and complex. The key difference however, has been that women as a homeless population have conventionally been left out of societal discourse, public policy and research agendas, thereby affecting funding priorities and the development of service delivery models. This spotlight on male experience has rendered women continually invisible. Feminist writings have been documenting this underrepresentation since the 1980s (Klodawsky, 2006). A review of today's literature suggests that homeless women are still struggling to survive because of a general lack of recognition of the uniqueness of their experiences with homelessness (Baker, Billhardt, Warren, Rollins & Glass, 2010; Klodawsky, 2006; Rahder, 2006; Walsh, Rutherford & Kuzmack 2009; Whitzman, 2006).

One of the chief reasons for women's invisibility is that the homeless have traditionally been defined as those who reside 'on the streets'. This is understood as the "visible" or absolute homeless; those who live in areas that are considered not intended for human habitation such as on the street, in a shelter or hostel, or an abandoned building (Miller & Du Mont, 2000; Research Alliance for Canadian Homelessness, Housing and Health [REACH], 2010). It includes the stereotypical image of homeless people pushing shopping carts, sleeping in parks, on benches or in emergency homeless shelters. This definition largely reflects the experiences of homeless men however, rather than homeless women. While there are a small number of women who fit this picture, the majority of homeless women are instead, part of the "hidden" homeless. The use of this traditional definition has had a significant impact on how society views and approaches homelessness and is one of the biggest reasons women are underrepresented and consequently, under-serviced.

Hidden homelessness, on the other hand, refers to homeless populations who are not easily seen. The term has emerged to encompass homeless and unstably housed women who are less visible on the street and in emergency homeless shelters (Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation [CERA], 2002; Novac, 2006). Women instead use many informal strategies that render them less visible in order to avoid the increased physical and sexual danger associated with living either on the streets or in co-ed emergency shelters (CERA, 2002; Walsh et al., 2010; Wenzel, Koegel & Gelberg, 2000). One study documented the high incidence of violence experienced by homeless women: of 97 homeless street women interviewed in a Toronto study, 37% had been physically assaulted and 21% had been sexually assaulted one or more times in the past year (Khandor & Mason, 2008). Staying in homeless shelters while waiting for affordable housing is also difficult for women who have histories of childhood or domestic violence, as the presence of men in co-ed shelters can be experienced as threatening and dangerous (Walsh et al., 2010).

Informal strategies used by women to avoid shelter and street life include staying with friends or acquaintances (Novac, 2006; Weber Sikich, 2008), becoming involved with men who have homes (Klodawsky, 2006; Thomas & Dittmar, 1995), exchanging housing for sex (Neal, 2004), remaining in abusive relationships (Tutty et al., 2009), staying in unsafe and over-crowded housing (Bopp, et al., 2007), and sleeping in cars or couch surfing (Scott, 2008). Many of these circumstances are not included in the majority of homeless data and, therefore, it becomes very difficult to determine actual numbers (CERA, 2002).

Counts of homeless women, which exclude members of the hidden homeless population, provide an inaccurate and underestimated picture of the extent of the problem. For example, nearly one quarter (22% of 3,491 or 768 individuals) of the people counted in The City of Calgary's 2008 Homeless Count were women (City of Calgary, 2008). This count was a "point in time census" where the definition of homelessness "included people who are living on the streets, as well as those who are staying in emergency shelters, or in facilities offering longer term shelter and support for people who would otherwise be living on the streets," (p. vii) and did not include the many women within the "hidden" homeless population. No accurate estimate for this population in Calgary exists; however, the Canadian website, www.hiddenhomeless.ca, estimates that for every one homeless person seen on the street, four are homeless and not enumerated. A rough estimate for Calgary then, would be 3072 homeless women.

The Calgary Committee to End Homelessness acknowledges that there are likely many more homeless women living with friends, family, or remaining in an abusive situation due to a lack of alternatives (2008). Calgary's 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness, created by the Calgary Committee to End Homelessness and overseen by the Calgary Homeless Foundation, underwent revisions in 2010, three years into the plan. One of the revisions is a renewed focus on the unique needs of vulnerable populations, including women (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2011). The foundation states: "women merit special attention due to vulnerability to violence and typically lower incomes, particularly when they are lone heads of households." (p.17). It identifies a need to provide tailored interventions including "developing re-housing and stabilization programs, targeting homeless women with complex needs, including hidden homeless women and those fleeing domestic violence" (p.22). Welcoming women's voices and perspectives on housing is a crucial step toward addressing women's homelessness and for effective policy and program development (Rollins, Saris & Robledo, 2001).

In addition to women's invisibility due to their hidden homelessness, their many pathways into homelessness are also distinctive. These include: poverty (CERA, 2002; Novac, 2006; Thurston et al., 2006; Wallis & Kwok, 2008), leaving prison (Baldry, McDonnell, Maplestone & Peeters, 2006), experiencing trauma (Stermac & Paradis, 2001), addictions (McNaughton & Sanders, 2007), mental health (Whitzman, 2006), pregnancy (Loates & Walsh, 2010; Paradis, Novac, Sarty, & Hulchanski, 2009), domestic violence (Thurston et al., 2006; Tutty et al., 2009) and a lack of affordable and subsidized housing (Anucha, 2008; CERA, 2002; Lenon, 2000). While some of these circumstances are similar for men, women, because of deep-seated systemic gender inequalities, experience them uniquely. The manner in which the intersection between women's experiences with poverty, addictions, mental health and domestic violence shape women's homelessness has been defined as "gendered homelessness," or rather, examining women's homelessness using a gendered perspective (Lenon, 2000; Thurston, et al., 2006; Tutty, et al., 2009; Weber Sikich, 2008).

This interconnection between family violence, poverty and homelessness is profound for women. Two of the most significant reasons women return to an abusive spouse is because of lack of affordable housing and a lack of financial resources (Tutty, 2006). Many women fear they will not have the financial means to support their families; these fears are very real. According to the Government of Alberta (2010), women's total income in Alberta in 2008 was 55% that of men's, \$34,000 versus \$61,700 respectively – one of the widest gaps in the country. In this same report, women also make up the majority of minimum wage earners in Alberta at 58% and account for 92% of the single parent households dependent upon welfare (Alberta Human Resources and Employment, 2006).

In 2008 and 2009, the majority of provinces across the country raised their welfare rates for lone parent families, including Alberta. However, these new rates still fall far short of what is needed to meet an adequate standard of living in Canada. For example, a mother with one child now receives \$15,749 in Alberta (compared with \$13,703 in the year prior), yet this still presents a shortfall of over \$6,500 to even meet the poverty line (National Council of Welfare, 2010).

Poverty affects a woman's ability to acquire and keep safe and affordable housing. The Canada Mortgage Housing Corporation considers housing affordable when a person does not spend more than 30% of their gross income on rent. When we consider the number of women working for minimum wage or dependent upon inadequate government income supports, it becomes evident that many are at risk of becoming homeless. In April of 2009, the Alberta minimum wage increased to \$8.80/hr. According to the City of Calgary (2011), a person employed at a minimum wage job working 40 hours a week for 52 weeks per year has a monthly affordable rent limit of only \$458 per month. Yet the average monthly rent for a bachelor apartment in Calgary in 2010, was \$711 per month - a discrepancy of \$253 per month. In fact, a woman would need to earn a minimum wage of \$13.67 per hour to afford a bachelor suite. The gap only worsens when considering the rent costs of one (\$895), two (\$1,072) and three (\$1,060) bedroom apartments with discrepancies rising as high as \$614 per month (City of Calgary, 2011). This places women leaving abusive situations in a difficult predicament; they must choose between being forced into expensive units, living beyond their means with little money for food or clothing and one step away from homelessness or returning to an abusive situation.

Fleeing domestic violence is arguably the most obvious example of how women's homelessness is gendered and distinct from that of men's and is also one of the strongest contributors to women's homelessness (Dale, 2008; Miller & Dumont, 2000; Pavao, Alvarez, Baumind, Induni & Kimerling, 2007; Tutty, et al., 2009). Susan Scott (2008), author of *All Our Sisters*, powerfully illustrates the situation faced by many women:

Although many women leaving a dangerous situation do not consider themselves homeless, they quite literally no longer have a home of their own, and once they leave the domestic violence shelter, they may never have a safe place again. Not only do they leave most of their material possessions behind, but many, without skills or resources (and access to affordable housing), are also entering a life of poverty so dire that they return to the abuser, or they become effectively homeless, sleeping on friends' and relatives' floors (p. 43).

Dale (2007) refers to this as a "downward spiral" where women cycle through abuse, homelessness, poor housing, poverty, then return to abuse, and return to homelessness. The lack of affordable housing options has been identified as one of the largest barriers for women trying to leave an abusive partner (Tutty, et al., 2009). A supply of accessible and affordable housing for women has been touted as one of the most reliable ways to prevent recurring cycles of domestic violence (Baker et al., 2010; Dale, 2008), yet securing safe housing away from an abuser is extremely challenging as many women face additional economic barriers such as finding living wage jobs (Baker et al., 2010).

Distinguishing women's homelessness from that of men's, by recognizing their unique experiences including pathways into homelessness and survival strategies, is necessary to address the general lack of recognition about women's homelessness in order to inform research, policy, funding and service delivery. Without this shift, communities will continue to see growing numbers of homeless women. The National Poverty Association considers women one of the fastest growing homeless groups across Canada (Neal, 2004).

TRANSITIONAL HOUSING

Beginning in the 1980s, organizations serving homeless populations began to notice a growing number of their clients were women, both with and without children (Barrow & Zimmer, 1999). This rapidly expanding clientele group had needs that were more complex than the populations they had previously served. According to Barrow and Zimmer (1999), homeless emergency shelters, as a result, found themselves ill-equipped and under-resourced to serve this population, which required longer residency periods and increased support services to address the traumatic experiences that preceded their stay.

Transitional housing developed out of the need to bridge emergency housing and permanent housing, and to provide more privacy, services, and stability to an increasingly diverse clientele. Barrow and Zimmer's (1999) synthesis of the literature on transitional housing in the United States provides a broad overview of these types of facilities. They found that although transitional facilities still have a stipulated time-limit, usually between three months to two years, there is an expectation that clients will "graduate" to permanent housing. To that end, transitional housing programs facilitate independence and address the issues that have contributed to a woman's homelessness. Although these programs have the same end goal, the method to achieve it varies significantly between programs. At one end of the program continuum lie programs that make retention contingent on adherence to rules and mandated participation in program activities, whereas other programs strive for flexibility through allowing optional program activity attendance and few regulations. Barrow and Zimmer also found that transitional housing programs vary in terms of the subgroup of the homeless population they target, physical structure type, level of privacy, location, and admission criteria, all of which work together to influence and shape program outcomes.

According to Winship (2001), the substantial variation in program approaches complicates efforts at conducting an overarching evaluation of transitional housing programs. Effective evaluation is further confounded by a number of factors, including the high attrition rates found in transitional housing projects which could potentially result in data collection from only the most motivated clients. In addition, there has been a lack of long-term or follow-up evaluations beyond a 12-month period (Novac, Brown, & Bourbonnais, 2009). Stern (1994) also noted that non-operational outcome terms, such as 'housing success' and "adequate housing," are highly-ambiguous which may result in the classification of undesirable living situations as adequate or successful.

These evaluation challenges have resulted in a scarcity of rigorous research on the outcomes of homeless services in Canada, including evaluations of transitional housing projects. In one of the only existing Canadian studies, Novac et al. (2004) conducted a review of the outcomes from nine transitional housing programs and found that 60 to 90 percent of residents moved to permanent housing or were otherwise successful. Contrary to those findings, another Canadian study of 40 women living in a transitional housing project found that the risk of homelessness and housing insecurity persisted after program completion (Wekerle, 1988). Evaluative studies conducted in the US found that participants who completed transitional housing programs were more likely to obtain permanent housing than those who did not (Baier, Murray, North, Lato & Eskew, 1996; Barrow & Zimmer, 1999; Prabuki, Wootton, McCormick & Washam, 1995).

Research on outcomes of Transitional Housing for abused women has yielded mixed results. In a study conducted by Matulef, Crosse, and Dietz (1995), 41% of this population moved into stable housing; a significantly lower percentage than the other populations studied. A Canadian evaluation of 68 second stage shelters found second stage housing to be a key reason women decided not to return to abusive partners (SPR Associates, 1997).

People who are most likely to benefit from transitional housing include those who are recovering from traumas; lack social networks; have a background of multi-generational poverty; are exiting institutions without independent living skills; need skill training in order to obtain a living wage; have mental health problems; are attending addiction treatment; are physically or mentally disabled; or are recent immigrants. (Nesselbuch, 1998; Novac et al., 2009; Sprague, 1991).

Research on women's experiences with transitional housing highlight a number of predominant themes. The first theme surrounds program rules and regulations, and mandated services. Melbin, Sullivan, and Cain (2003) conducted interviews with stakeholders from six transitional housing programs and discovered that most women found the rules too restrictive. The one rule that had unanimous support from all the women interviewed was that assailants were prohibited from the premise. The second trend highlighted the importance of ensuring the women were safe. The women in Melbin, Sullivan and Cain's (2003) study felt they would be safer from their assailants in transitional housing and felt there was someone to talk to if they didn't feel safe.

The third theme was the importance of staff-client relationships. According to a study conducted by Lindsey (1996), direct service staff was an integral factor in determining whether the women interviewed were successful in their stabilization. Staff who were respectful and encouraging rather than paternalistic and judgemental allowed the women to gain confidence. Women whose support workers were flexible and empathetic were more likely to give positive feedback regarding the program's effectiveness (Melbin, Sullivan & Cain, 2003).

Other common themes included length of stay, assistance with childcare, education and training, emotional support and counselling, privacy/personal space, geographic location/accessibility, and quality of housing (MacFarlane & de Guerre, 2008; Melbin, 2003; Tutty, Ogden, Giurgiu, Weaver-Dunlop & Damant, 2009; Walsh, Rutherford & Kuzmak, 2009). Since, many of these factors are inter-related, making improvements in one area may mean trade-offs in another. This has led to a degree of contention surrounding the "correct" way to deliver services in transitional housing facilities (Novac et al., 2009).

Achieving "housing readiness" is the underlying goal for all transitional housing programs; however, there is substantial debate surrounding the appropriateness of this goal for all groups and the validity of the assumption upon which it is predicated. The underlying assumption of transitional housing is that there is something to transition to, and unless the shortfall between income and housing costs is addressed, transitional housing programs cannot be effective (Gerstel, Bogard, McConnell & Schwartz, 1996). There is consensus amongst the research community that these programs can only succeed if adequate permanent housing is available in the community (Barrow & Zimmer, 1999; Fogel, 1997; Nesselbuch, 1998; Novac et al., 2009). Critics suggest that transitional housing siphons off monies that could be better spent supplying permanent affordable housing (Barrow & Zimmer, 1999).

Proponents of transitional housing argue that some individuals and families with multiple problems and traumatic histories need more than just a house to re-stabilize and that support services are central in facilitating independence (Nesselbuch, 1998; Sprague, 1991). Critics are sceptical about the benefits of such programs and worry that the effects of long term shelter stays will create enabling behaviour or shelterization (Fogel, 1997). This criticism is most strongly targeted at those programs clustered around the high-demand end of the spectrum. In these rule-heavy programs, the contradiction between facilitating empowerment and preventing women from having choice in their treatment plans or schedules is most evident (Weinrab & Rossi, 1995).

HOUSING FIRST

The Housing First model is an alternative to the “continuum of care” model of service delivery, which includes transitional housing programs. The continuum of care model includes a series of step-by-step residential programs that provide different levels of service, and different levels of restrictiveness, with the most intensive treatment offered in the most restrictive setting. Clients progress from more restrictive and intensive settings to less restrictive programming (Ridgway & Zipple, 1990).

The Housing First model, in contrast to the continuum of care model, is a paradigm that places emphasis on providing services to homeless individuals by addressing Housing First, rather than a focus on treatment and helping individuals achieve housing readiness. The model shares a “bottom line” commitment to immediate and continuing access to independent housing (Padgette, Gulcer & Tsemberis, 2006). After housing is secured, the focus shifts to providing both short term and long term services that address each individual’s particular needs, such as crisis-intervention and case management follow up to prevent homelessness from re-occurring (Stefancic & Tsemberis, 2007). The model is defined as “consumer driven” in that it allows clients to define their own needs and goals (Tsemberis, Gulcer, & Nakae 2004). This model is gaining momentum, with consumer choice incorporated in the program’s service delivery philosophy (Padgette, Gulcer & Tsemberis, 2006).

The organization “Pathways to Housing” in New York City developed the Housing First model in the early 1990s (Tsemberis, 1999). The Pathways program, which has served as the prototype for new programs, is based on the following principles:

- a) Housing and treatment services are provided by separate agencies, with apartments rented from landlords in the community who have no direct relationship with the treatment agency;
- b) Support and treatment services are provided in the community;
- c) Services are available 24/7; and
- d) Service plans are individualized for each tenant, the frequency and sequence of services is not predetermined, and consumers are full partners in the development of service plans (p. 228-229).

In an effort to prioritize services for vulnerable, chronically, and episodically homeless individuals, Calgary’s 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness adopted Housing First principles to guide its implementation (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2011). Calgary is the second Canadian city to adopt the Housing First model, following Toronto (City of Toronto, n.d.). According to the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness (2008), the model brings together local, provincial and national governments, and the private sector in an effort to address both the social and economic circumstances that can affect people experiencing homelessness in communities.

There is a growing body of literature that supports the effectiveness of the Housing First model and explains, in part, why so many communities are moving towards such a service delivery model. For example, an American multi-site study conducted by Tsai, Mares, and Rosenheck (2010) found that, of the 709 clients who were assessed, clients who received immediate, independent housing had more days in their own place, fewer days incarcerated, and an increased perception of having choice over treatment than those who received transitional housing before being placed in independent housing. No differences were found, however, on other clinical or community adjustment outcomes. While the results of this study do not favour transitional housing programs, the authors maintain that service providers should not disregard all instances when clients may prefer or need this type of program. Rather, they caution making assumptions about the ability of transitional programs to better prepare clients for independent living.

The Pathways to Housing program has demonstrated the success of the Housing First model with severely mentally ill clients (Gulcur et al., 2003; Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2000; Tsemberis, Gulcur & Nakae, 2004; Stefancic & Tsemberis, 2007). For example, Stefancic and Tsemberis (2007) found that the majority of mentally ill participants were still in independent housing four years after being placed by Housing First agencies. In another study of 80 participants in Housing First programs, of which 91 percent carried a major psychiatric diagnosis, 84 percent remained successfully housed for 12 months (Pearson et al., 2007).

Randomized trials targeting clients with substance misuse have yielded equally positive results (Padgett, Gulcur & Tsemberis, 2006; Tsemberis, Gulcur & Nakae, 2004). In one such study, participants who were assigned to programs following the Housing First model accessed substance abuse and psychiatric services less often than participants that were in a continuum of care program (Tsemberis, Gulcur & Nakae, 2004).

Henwood, Stanhope and Padgett (2011) adopted a slightly different approach to examining the effectiveness of Housing First by investigating the views of front-line providers working within “Housing First” versus “treatment first” or continuum of care models. The interviews revealed that for providers working within transitional programs, the pursuit of housing absorbed a great deal of their time. Meanwhile, Housing First providers were able to focus more on clinical issues, as clients already had housing. The study concluded that more work is needed to determine what aspects of the transitional model should be preserved or modified in order to increase effectiveness and to allow providers to focus on clients’ clinical issues.

While the Housing First model has been applied to a range of individuals and has demonstrated positive results in several studies, the majority of these studies have had predominately male samples. On average, 75% of the participants in the studies reviewed were male (Stefancic, Gulcur, Fischer, Tsemberis & Shinn 2003; Henwood, Stanhope & Padgett, 2011; Padgett, Gulcur & Tsemberis, 2006; Pearson et al., 2007; Stefancic & Tsemberis, 2007; Tsai, Mares & Rosenheck, 2010; Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2000; Tsemberis, Gulcur & Nakae, 2004). A review of the literature produced only one evaluative study looking specifically at women’s experiences with Housing First. In this study, Metraux and Culhane (1999) examined women and reoccurring homelessness in New York City and found that exiting to subsidized or private-market housing had a significant and strong association with a decreased risk of subsequent shelter stays. The apparent positive influence of housing was found to weaken after the first 180 days however, and the authors suggest this indicates that housing becomes more difficult to maintain with time. In conclusion, they suggest that “although housing cannot remediate problems such as experience with domestic violence, for example, it can provide an atmosphere more suitable to addressing these problems, and it can prevent a single homeless episode from becoming a series of repeat stays” (p. 392).

The Housing First literature to date suggests that this model is successful with several homeless sub-populations; however, women as a sub-population have been largely ignored. Schiff and Waegemakers Schiff (2010) argue that due to the limited research on this model with other populations, “it is thus premature to conclude that this is an appropriate model for all other housing insecure groups” (p. 71) and further highlights the absence of research examining culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal women. Kertesz, Crouch, Milby, Cusimano, and Schumacher (2009) share similar concerns, noting that the effectiveness of the Housing First model has not been demonstrated for those struggling with combined addiction and criminal justice issues as well. In contrast to Housing First models, transitional housing, or studies examining the effect of the continuum of care model is strongly lacking. What results then, according to Kertesz et al. (2009), is that neither approach has been demonstrated consistently to be effective for all populations.

METHODOLOGY

There is a paucity of research on transitional housing in general, and a significant gap in the literature evaluating women's experiences in transitional housing facilities. Furthermore, research exploring the effectiveness of the Housing First model for women is almost nonexistent. Most studies that have been conducted on Housing First have utilized predominately male samples with little to no input from service users. The previous section highlighted some of the unique ways women experience homelessness and has provided some background to the transitional housing model and the Housing First philosophy. As we have seen, there is a degree of contention surrounding the "best" model for service delivery for homeless populations in general. Furthermore, the evaluation of these models has neglected to adopt a gendered analysis which takes into account the issues and circumstances that lead women to becoming homeless, and the ways in which they experience homelessness as unique from their male counterparts.

This context prompted the development of the current research project exploring what value the experience of transitional housing had in ending homelessness for a sample of permanently housed women who were former residents of the YWCA Mary Dover House transitional housing program. In addition, the project sought to explore possible gender differences that would impact the application of the Housing First model. Given that the evidence basis for this approach has primarily relied on studies involving men with co-occurring addiction and mental health issues, the project's intent was to explore whether there is something unique about women's experiences of homelessness that can inform how Housing First is translated into practice. The objectives of this research project were:

- To understand women's service experiences with transitional housing and the Housing First model provided through the YWCA;
- To contribute to the knowledge base about women's unique experiences with homelessness;
- To identify the possible role of transitional housing in ending homelessness for women; and
- To provide recommendations for larger community housing services for women.

PHOTOVOICE

The project team was committed to building capacity in women, especially those who are members of marginalized communities. As such, the team strove to conduct the research in a way that was consonant with feminist, multicultural and social justice values. Goodman et al. (2004) proposed the following six key foundations to feminist, multicultural, and social justice practice: ongoing self-examination, sharing power, giving voice, facilitating consciousness raising, building on strengths, and leaving people with tools for social change. The team chose a qualitative method called Participatory Action Research (Wang & Burris, 1997) which exemplifies these founding principles.

Photovoice is a form of participatory action research that uses a specific photographic technique and captioning process through which people can identify and represent their experience and perspective, as well as enhance their community. As a practice based in the production of knowledge, photovoice has three main goals: (1) to enable people to record and reflect on their community's strengths and concerns; (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs; and (3) to reach policymakers (Wang & Burris, 1997).

The decision to use the photovoice method stemmed from the commitment to employ a method that empowers participants and generates a sense of pride and ownership. The photovoice method was deemed most appropriate as it gives participants a voice and provides them with an opportunity to take action on the realities of their lives. This is in contrast to a “top down” research methodology that imposes its agenda on the participants and may, or may not, lead to benefits for them. One of the key values of a photovoice methodology is that research is conducted “with” rather than “on” participants (Wang & Burris, 1997), which is consistent with the ethos of YWCA service delivery practices and is especially important when working with vulnerable populations.

The participants were engaged as experts of their own experiences as they best understand the supports and services that are suitable for their needs. Their participation on the team was a vital component to addressing the research question effectively in an effort to ensure that any future decision making and planning was informed by service-users. We informed the participants of the role of the researchers in the group, as facilitators in exploring the research question rather than experts in the field of women and homelessness.

RECRUITMENT

PROCESS AND CRITERIA

The Community Integration Specialist, an employee of the YWCA who provides direct services to the women in YWCA Community Housing, provided a handout that described the research project to single, adult women who had moved from transitional housing at the YWCA into permanent community housing. Women then, of their own volition, contacted a member of the research team if they were interested in participating. As none of the researchers were involved in any direct service provision at the YWCA, the relationships were built solely within the context of the research project. This helped to create a safer environment for participants to share their experiences regarding their past and current housing experiences.

Women were told that a \$40.00 gift card would be provided to participants for each workshop to compensate them for their time. The details of providing honorariums were outlined within the consent process. The team recognized that financial compensation for participation is crucial in honouring the time, effort and expertise of the women.

CONSENT

Ethics approval for the research study was obtained from the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB) at the University of Calgary. All of the participants were volunteers and were free to withdraw their consent at any time during the project. The consent form was explained, including an opportunity for questions and discussions, and then signed with the women during the first workshop they attended. After the first workshop, and as new participants joined the group, one researcher would meet individually with the participant to provide an overview of the project and obtain informed consent.

Women were informed that their decision to participate in the research did not in any way affect their current or future services from the YWCA. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and that if they withdrew after participating in any of the workshops, their images would be collected and destroyed. The process for using study materials in dissemination activities was discussed during the first and last workshop.

Participants were made aware that the researchers could not guarantee that contributions made during the workshops would be anonymous or confidential amongst the group but all group participants were asked to keep any shared information confidential. As images that were taken by the participants also became part of dissemination activities, the team consulted with participants on which images they wanted to select for various dissemination activities. Participants were told that a copy of their selected photographs and captions would be used for research purposes and that it would no longer be possible for them to withdraw their images at that time. It was explained that any material provided could be used for dissemination as outlined in the consent form. The participants were given the option to be identified as anonymous, by a pseudonym, or have their name cited.

DESCRIPTION OF WORKSHOPS

Nine women who were housed through the YWCA Mary Dover House program and are now permanently housed in the community met weekly for 10 weeks to share and reflect on their experiences of homelessness, transitional housing, and permanent housing. Digital cameras were distributed to each woman and a volunteer professional freelance photographer provided instruction on the use of the camera and photography tips and techniques. Women shared their photographs and discussed the meaning of their images throughout the workshops.

The team met at a non-profit community centre near where the majority of participants resided. The space was warm and inviting with access to a large kitchen during the workshops. Every workshop began with dinner in the kitchen to prevent barriers to participation and foster building trust and a sense of community. Following dinner, the research team and the women moved to the community room where the photographs and discussions were shared. For a more detailed description of the workshops, please see Appendix.

At just over the halfway point in the project, the researchers and six of the women attended and presented at the inaugural All Our Sisters: National Conference on Women and Homelessness in London, Ontario. The three-day conference united service providers, policy makers, academics and other women with lived experience of homelessness. At the conference, during the project presentation, a couple members of the research team briefly gave an overview of the project, while the majority of the time was dedicated to the women. They each shared a photograph and spoke about their experiences with homelessness, transitional housing, and permanent housing. Consistent with the participatory action research methodology, the conference fostered a sense of community and empowerment for all women in attendance.

DATA COLLECTION

There were six types of data collection for the research project. First the participants were asked to fill out a brief demographics questionnaire that asked about ethnic background, citizenship status, language, and the factors that led them to access YWCA Mary Dover House.

The members of the research team recorded segments of the workshop during which the participants were either sharing their photos or engaged in a focus group discussion about issues related to the research question. This was approximately 1.5 hours to 2 hours of voice recording per workshop. In total, the discussion during seven workshops was audio taped and transcribed. We recorded these discussions on an Olympus DS-30 recorder and then transferred all of the recorded workshops to .wp3files using express scribe dictate software. The files were then transcribed verbatim into a Microsoft Word document.

During the workshops, one of the researchers took detailed notes of the workshop proceedings and of the discussions. The notes were typed to supplement the verbatim transcripts that were created from the voice recordings and then used during the thematic analysis.

At one of the first workshops, the members of the research team provided the participants with five questions and asked them to reflect on these questions as they were taking pictures and to try and capture images that represented their experiences. The questions were approved in the ethics submission:

1. What has your experience been with homelessness?
2. What was your experience with transitional housing?
 - a) What did you like about transitional housing?
 - b) What did you dislike about transitional housing?
3. How did transitional housing affect your experience with homelessness?
4. Did providing housing help you connect with other resources to satisfy your needs?
5. How are women's experiences with homelessness different than other groups of individuals?

During the first two workshops the members of the research team described the research project, established ground rules as a group and explained the photo consent forms. Photographic instructions were provided by a photographer in workshop two, which helped the group explore how visual images can give meaning to experiences. Since group attendance increased after the second workshop, the researchers re-visited the meaning of imagery throughout many of the workshops and spent time as a group discussing imagery.

Participants began presenting their photography at the third workshop. The participant was engaged by the team to review the meaning of their photographs through statements such as:

1. What does this image symbolize for you?
2. What does this image mean to you?
3. What does this image represent for you?
4. How does this represent homelessness and/or transitional housing for you?

Often group discussion would ensue that elaborated on the photograph and the overall research focus.

Captioning of the photographs was an ongoing process that involved a member of the research team creating captions based on what the woman had said about their photos from the verbatim transcripts. Each woman was then given a printout of their photos with the caption to change, reword, or edit. Final approval/consent was obtained for each image and caption by the last workshop. During the workshops, if the members of the research team were unsure of what the participant wanted to express with their photo, one member of the research team would spend individual time with the participant discussing the photograph further in order to create an appropriate caption. The women's involvement in the selection

and captioning of the photos they felt best represented their experiences, allowed them to distil their varied experiences and feelings into a handful of images and statements that were most important to them.

The members of the research team recorded their initial impressions after each workshop. This included topics such as group dynamics, emerging themes, or interesting quotes.

DATA ANALYSIS

The transcripts, notes, images and captions, and written reflections were used for the data analysis, in addition to the verbatim transcription of the audio taped workshops, which included all spoken words without editing as well as noting non-verbal comments such as laughing or crying. A preliminary coding scheme was constructed based on an initial preview of the six forms of data. The next level of data review involved manual coding and recoding of the interview transcripts by identifying themes, creating categories from these themes and lastly, coding the categories. The constant comparative method (Coleman & Unrau, 2005) was then utilized, whereby one piece of data is compared with another piece to allow the reviewers to develop conceptualizations of the possible relationships between various sections of data.

FINDINGS

DEMOGRAPHICS

Nine women between the ages of 27 and 66 participated in the study. They identified as either Caucasian (n=3), Aboriginal-First Nations with treaty status (n=4), Japanese (n=1) or Central Asian (n=1). Seven participants were Canadian citizens, one a permanent immigrant, and one a landed immigrant. Six participants identified their primary language to be English and all were able to communicate in English without a translator or interpreter.

All of the participants were born outside of Calgary and the year of arrival to the city ranged from 1970 to 2010. Typically, multiple circumstances led women to the YWCA Mary Dover House program. While four listed only one circumstance, five of the participants listed two or more of the following circumstances as precursors to accessing YWCA Mary Dover House: no place to live, recovering from addictions, poverty/no money, or fleeing family violence.

Six participants stated the YWCA Mary Dover House program helped prepare them for living in the community, one stated she was unsure, and one said she did not need help adjusting to the community due to previous experience. One participant identified that she had learned life skills such as how to pay rent and shop for groceries, another found the counselling was helpful and a third woman indicated that she benefited from access to transportation resources, computers, and assistance with conducting research for housing supports.

Participants had been living in permanent housing between four days to five months prior to the beginning of this research project. Eight were permanently housed in the same community property owned by the Calgary Homeless Foundation and one of the participants was housed in market housing in the community.

THEMATIC RESULTS

Discovering what role, if any, transitional housing played in supporting the women to end homelessness in their lives was the primary goal of the project. Women were asked to describe the positive and negative aspects of the contribution of YWCA Mary Dover House in moving from homelessness to permanent housing. From the thematic analysis of the transcriptions, six major themes were identified: transitional housing, permanent housing, stereotypes of homelessness, pathways into homelessness, journey from homelessness to housing and the healing journey. Through further analysis, 20 sub-themes and 15 categories were produced and are outlined in Table 1. Findings are presented using quotes from the transcripts with the author or chosen pseudonym, or an image and caption created in the Photovoice process.

Table 1: Framework of Themes

Theme 1: Transitional Housing

Sub-Theme 1: Positive Aspects of Transitional Housing

Category 1: Community of Women

Category 2: Counsellors and Support

Category 3: Resources and Programs

Category 4: Time

Sub-Theme 2: Negative Aspects of Transitional Housing

Category 5: Staff Attitudes

Category 6: Structure and Rules

Theme 2: Permanent Housing

Sub-Theme 3: Positive Aspects of Permanent Housing

Category 7: Privacy and Independence

Category 8: Safety and Security (“I’m safe”)

Category 9: Regaining of Roles

Category 10: Services

Category 11: Space and Time

Category 12: Self Esteem and Hope

Sub-Theme 4: Negative Aspects of Permanent Housing

Category 13: Loss of Connection

Category 14: Fear

Category 15: Trade-off between Safety and Rules

Sub-Theme 5: “More Than Four Walls”

Theme 3: Stereotypes of Homelessness

Sub-Theme 6: Stigma and Shame

Sub-Theme 7: Gender

Sub-Theme 8: Invisibility

Sub-Theme 9: Identity

Theme 4: Pathways into Homelessness

Sub-Theme 10: Poverty

Sub-Theme 11: Immigration

Sub-Theme 12: Domestic Violence and Abuse

Sub-Theme 13: Addictions

Sub-Theme 14: First Nations

Theme 5: Journey from Homelessness to Housing

Sub-Theme 15: Dependent Upon Individual

Sub-Theme 16: Time and Support

Theme 6: The Healing Journey

Sub-Theme 17: Loss

Sub-Theme 18: Rebuilding

Sub-Theme 19: Sources of Support

Sub-Theme 20: Giving Back

TRANSITIONAL HOUSING

This first major theme includes issues, thoughts and experiences about transitional housing. All the women in the project had lived in the YWCA Mary Dover House transitional housing program, and consequently spoke often about these experiences in both positive and negative ways.

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF TRANSITIONAL HOUSING

All women made positive comments about their YWCA Mary Dover House experience. Jessica, for example, expressed that “the YWCA was the biggest blessing in my life” and “a beautiful place” that she identified as a “turning point” for her. Carrie added it was “almost heaven.” Comments about the positive aspects of YWCA Mary Dover House comprised the following categories: community of women, counsellors and support, resources and programs, and time.

Community of Women

The sense of community among women was one of the most commonly cited positive aspects of transitional housing and included: expressions about belonging, acceptance, relationships, peer support, connection with other women, feeling alone, and having communal space to gather. Many women talked about other women they met, friendships they made, and experiences they shared as important to their experience of community, as illustrated in the following quotes:

What I liked most about MDH was the kitchen area. That’s where everybody got together. The women would get together and you could talk or watch TV. Lots of times we would laugh. When you are out on the street, you’re alone all the time. So that’s what I liked about the transitional housing, about living at MDH. (Carrie)

Knowing that I wasn’t alone in this situation. I was couch surfing – there were lots of other women doing that. Being surrounded by women who were in the same situation...For me, the isolation was awful. It was awful before I got my own housing and going into transitional housing. Then, just being around other women, it was a really positive thing for me. It was really uplifting. (Carrie)

It really helped having somebody to talk to...there’s always somebody we can talk to other than the counsellors. Their support is great, but I like community support better sometimes... There are other things you can be truthful with, with somebody who understands where you’ve been. I like that about the women. (Otter)

Colette also appreciated the community of women, as can be seen in the following quotes and picture:



“I came from a year of hell before I went to the MDH to go straight into a place where I’d be by myself; I’m so grateful for the community of women.” (Colette)

Counsellors and Support

Another common topic regarding the positive aspects of transitional housing was the relationships with the counsellors and the availability of support 24 hours per day.

Seven of the women specifically identified the sense of support they benefited from while at YWCA Mary Dover House. Flo shared that “counsellors at the YWCA are so supportive”; Otter remarked: “my counsellor really went out of her way to talk with me” and Jessica, commented: “I find that in (another large shelter) you could be among a thousand people and still feel by yourself. When you were in MDH, you had a counsellor all the time.” Otter also stated “with the support that was given to me, I got to make that choice to stay. Usually I don’t make that choice to stay, (I leave).”

Yoshiko, an immigrant woman whose second language is English, explained how she felt the counsellors treated her respectfully and “like normal – like nothing happened before. I really appreciated that.” Others spoke about how the counsellors “guided” them, gave “direction” and even “challenged” them at times to move forward, change, and think about things differently. Otter said “I think the YWCA did that for me - it introduced me to different methods of changing...gives you different ideas about why you keep ending up on the street” and “people sit and listen here, the problem, they help you with the problem. Gave me ideas all the time. How to move on. It was so cool.” Yoshiko expressed gratitude “my counsellor taught me a lot. If I didn’t get help, maybe I’d be dead” and “I still remember what they said to me.”

Similarly, Heather stated:

There was always someone there to talk to. I’d say, “I feel I need this” and there would be someone to turn me in the right direction...I still needed help, you know, where to get started. I found MDH pointed me in the right direction. I still had to do the work, but at least I knew where to start and where to go for help.

Three women mentioned that access to 24 hour support was important. As the following comments and images illustrate:

*I thought it was really good, like at 3 o’clock in the morning, if I couldn’t sleep because there is something on my mind, at least I knew I could go down to the second floor and there was somebody to talk to. Even if it wasn’t for counselling or anything – just to shoot the breeze.
(Heather)*

*Just knowing that, if I needed anything, somebody was there. Somebody could answer my questions...just having that kind of support. Knowing that you guys were there, because going into the YWCA was the last resort for me. And just knowing that I wasn’t alone in this situation.
(Carrie)*



I feel very good that I was able to go through the Y. I learned a lot and a little bit more about myself. I never thought someone could help me so much. Someone would listen to me and they did (crying). Nobody ever listens to me (crying). (Otter)



*This tree symbolizes me when I went into MDH. I had no confidence left, I was vulnerable and weak and that is not who I am. This tree has been bent by wind and storms. But the tree isn't all the way over. I certainly have never been broken but I have been bent. The YWCA transitional housing gave me support when I was sideways.
(Colette)*

Resources and Programs

Women referred to the resources and programs provided by YWCA Mary Dover House. Yoshiko stated that there was never a shortage of food, coffee or other basic needs, likening it to “everything – ‘A to Z’.”

Colette enjoyed the stocked pantry:



The pantry was my biggest hangout at the YWCA. It was always fun to go to the pantry and see what was there. You could never plan what you were going to cook until you went down and looked in the pantry. Being in the kitchen – (where I am comfortable) and cooking (what I am good at), feels like I am back to being me. (Colette)

Carrie referred to how the transitional housing program helped connect her with other resources: “Transitional housing was important to me because I didn’t know about the programs out there.”

Likewise, Heather shared, “It gave me a place where I could look into resources, find a place and find out about going back to school and going to addiction counselling.”

Other women referred to specific programs offered while in transitional housing. Flo mentioned the “life skills program” and Otter referred to the domestic violence groups: “I started going to classes after that (domestic violence) happened to me – my incident happened. I didn’t know what else to do, so I just went to all these classes all the time. I didn’t know that it would work for me, but it did.” Yoshiko declared, “I love, love the ESL classes”; she proudly presented an image of her ESL certificate:



I received a certificate from the YWCA ESL class. I have never had good marks like this before because I was busy taking care of my parents. They were aging, getting sick and we didn't have any friends or family around.
(Yoshiko)

Time

Five of the women mentioned time to rebuild, plan, rest, heal, and recover from their various experiences of homelessness as a positive aspect of transitional housing.

Having the time to deal with issues. Like usually my life is hurry up, fix it and move on. This time I got to be able to sit back and look at why some things keep reoccurring...but I got time this time. I never had the time before to actually look at different issues you know? I can rest and take care this time. So, that's what I appreciate about MDH. (Otter)

Colette offered a different perspective and appreciation for the time given by transitional housing:

I found MDH gave me time as well. But (laughs), a little bit different from everyone else: it gave me time to not think. To go into a vegetative state and not think about anything – just to shut out the rest of the world. That's what I needed. To just go on my bed and just lay there and relax.

NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF TRANSITIONAL HOUSING

While the women in the project spoke often about positive experiences of living in transitional housing as outlined above, they also discussed the negative aspects associated with this type of living. These comments consisted of two categories: staff attitudes, and structure and rules.

Staff Attitudes

Three of the women disclosed experiences when they felt disrespected and/or mistreated by a staff person while in transitional housing. Flo described how even though she had finished her addiction treatment and had received her completion certificate, one staff believed Flo had been exited from YWCA Mary Dover House previously for alcohol use as she explains: “I did not get kicked out in all the times...the three different occasions I was in MDH I never drank. That really upset me because she said it goes on my file...I didn't tell her I was very upset but I left the office feeling really put down.” As a result, Flo questioned, “how (well) does the staff interact with the ladies moving out?” Two other women questioned the communication between staff and clients and for one woman, this resulted in feeling disrespected and judged:

That was one of the things that I actually resent about the MDH is that when I got there, I felt like it was assumed I was a veteran of the system. (In one) situation, I was made to feel that because I was a resident of MDH all of sudden my intelligence quotient rapidly diminished. When the staff don't interact on a regular basis with the residents you don't get to know each individual resident. All you get to do is read a file and you certainly don't get to know anybody or their

experience by reading a file. I used to say to my own employees, "Get the hell out of your office and find out what's going on." (Colette)

Like for the counsellors there's lots of stuff that they know, and there's a lot of shit that they don't know. The way that they are in their offices and that, I just felt like sometimes if they were just out there just a little bit more, I know that they're busy but being on the 4th floor now they're all together up there in that office. That door closed like that. (Otter)

Structure and Rules

Women identified aspects of the structure, physical space, appliances and design, and some of the rules, related to program regulations and policies, as another negative aspect of transitional housing. Otter commented on the lack of spiritual space, where First Nations women could engage in traditional practices such as smudging and burning of sweet grass. She also commented on some of the difficulties of sharing laundry and bathing facilities.



I hated this laundry room. You had to be there sometimes because people would take your clothes. I remember one (of the dryers) being broken for so long. (Otter)



Showers, I hated the showers, if you're lucky you get your own bathroom and shower. But it was always quick in and out. I hated to have showers there. You never knew if you should wear flip flops or not. (Otter)

Others described some of the additional challenges of living in shared accommodations:

But there were certain things I didn't like about it...like living with a nineteen year old that stayed up 'til three o'clock in the morning talking on the phone when I had to get up at six and those type of things like she was a nice girl and everything but it just two different people... just the fact of having to live with anybody. (Heather)

You have individual women coming into places like the MDH and they're all coming from very different points or experiences in life. So you end up either in the emergency (dormitory) room with five other women or you're in a shared accommodation when you move into transitional housing. You have no control over what that other individual is doing. (Colette)

Heather explained the impact that women, who used drugs and alcohol while in transitional housing, had on her and other women.

Then on the other hand I had a problem there because one of the residents was obviously using. It was very obvious to everybody and nothing was ever done...I felt safe only because I feel very strong with my sobriety. But, if I hadn't you know, she would definitely be a trigger. I know she was for a couple of the women. One of the women there did feel triggered. But nobody could really understand why nothing was done about it.

Colette describes how some of the rules in transitional housing made her feel like she was “in prison”:



This is the kitchen at the YWCA. The kitchen is the heart of the home - it is really welcoming. I loved being in their kitchen - That was my lifeline. The thing that made me sad about the YWCA kitchen was that the cupboards were always locked. There were times when I was cut off from spending time in the TV room too. As wonderful as the MDH is, and as much help it has given to me, sometimes I felt like I was in prison. My day wasn't my own; I couldn't come and go as I pleased. I felt like I was untrustworthy. People were questioning my integrity or intentions. (Colette)

PERMANENT HOUSING

The second theme presented from that data is that of permanent housing. This included descriptions of women's experiences with being permanently housed in the community, and like transitional housing, also included positive and negative sub-themes.

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF PERMANENT HOUSING

All the women in the project expressed feeling “fortunate”, “grateful” and “thankful” for the positive features of permanent housing, including categories of: privacy and independence, safety and security, regaining of roles, identity, services, space and time, and self-esteem and hope.

Privacy and Independence

Women commonly identified that privacy and independence were a positive aspect of permanent housing. Heather shared, “Best thing about having my own place is privacy. Couldn’t even pee alone (before). I enjoy sitting at home alone. I like me time.” While, Yoshiko illustrated similar sentiments in her images and captions:



This place is like my dream. I wanted to have my own space. Finally I could prepare things for myself. I didn’t have a place or time to do so for the last 10 years. (Yoshiko)



I used to live at my parents. I had my own room, but I never had my own private space. I never had a place like this before. I’m still financially dependent, but finally I have my own kitchen and living room. This picture represents independence, and shows my private place, something I’ve been dreaming of for a long time. (Yoshiko)

Susan noted the freedom she had obtained through permanent housing, in that, she can have people over: “I can have visitors...my friends can come (over) - it’s more freedom. I’m so happy in this building. “

Otter also revealed that permanent housing has contributed to her independence:



Having my own place means I can have coffee whenever the hell I want. If I want coffee at three in the morning I can. (Otter)

Finally, Heather describes how having her own private space has permitted her a sense of solitude:



This is Elliston Park, an off-leash area near where I live. It's beautiful and peaceful. This man, he's all by himself out there but he doesn't look lonely to me, he looks like he's just enjoying his solitude, peace and quiet. That's what this picture represents: solitude, peace and quiet. It's nice to be completely alone, without being isolated. (Heather)

Safety and Security

Four participants discussed how permanent housing provided them with a sense of safety and security. Otter expressed that “it’s extremely important to me, like even my own daughters don’t know where I live, that’s how important it is”; her imagery and caption elaborate on the importance of safety for her.



This is my nice heavy door. I like my heavy door because I'm safe behind it. It even looks really strong. (Otter)

Flo commented on the security of the building she lives in, as people have to buzz to get inside the main door: “one thing about me living at (permanent housing building), I feel secure 'cause nobody can just walk in there. Other places I've lived in apartments in the city - there was no security. This is the first secure building I've lived in.”

For Jessica and Heather, security took different forms:



My bed means security and to have a bed instead of a mat really means a lot. When you're in the (another shelter) you have a mat on the bunk beds. Just to have a bed instead of a mat, I'm so grateful. (Jessica)



This is security. Security means not having to be on guard, knowing that you have people that love you nearby. A home means security to me. Security of being able to choose if I feel like laying around or going out, dressing up or not. (Heather)

Regaining of Roles

The regaining of roles was a positive outcome of permanent housing that a few women identified. They spoke primarily about regaining their roles as mothers and grandmothers. For Flo, she was able to regain her role as a mother and a grandmother and began supporting members of her family.

I have my grandson over quite a bit 'cause he's so young he's doesn't really understand what's going on (with his mother) and he loves the apartment...I pick him up in the mornings and I take him to school because he's doing so good in school I don't want (him to not go)...I'm there to support them now.



When I look at this picture I see a cycle and it hurts me. I don't want (my children) to have to struggle the way that I did. I have my own home now and being in a place where I can support them makes me feel good. (Flo)

Services

Two women talked about the importance of continuing to access services once they were permanently housed. This was especially important to Otter, as illustrated in the following quotes:

I like that we're in touch with the counsellors...Like the support that I have from (YWCA staff) in the permanent housing, I am so very grateful considering the troubles that I've had with Enmax and welfare...It's great that we have that outside support from the Y - that's what makes a whole lot of difference for me - is that support. I'm not just 'gonna be left. I really want to make a big difference and with the support it makes me feel a whole lot better, a whole lot safer. I could call our house manager and she works at the Y so it's another thing that makes me feel safe - having staff around.

They offered me different groups, like I get to go back to the Y and have my group there and that's really good. I get that place to understand certain things...that group is to deal with trauma and the part of moving on after what I went through.

Yoshiko said she appreciated continuing to access the YWCA ESL classes, "I love - I'm enjoying the English class, the ESL class...I received my certificate from the YWCA ESL class because I completed 128 hours. I never had the golden mark like this."

Space and Stability

Having stability and space to dream and work on rebuilding a future was emphasized by two of the study participants. Susan discussed how she is able to relax and focus on her future now that she is permanently housed:

When I lived in YWCA I was a student and then, my room was small, I didn't have a table. In my bed I was reading and writing and everything was in my bed. But now I have a big place and it's like you can do more things. It's more relaxing and you can focus on your future right? Having a place is more relaxing. You don't need to worry about (things).

Otter expressed similar thoughts in this image and caption:



It's more than a roof over my head. There are so many things to work on still and this place gives me that time to do that, but it's not settled yet. I'm just working on a lot of things all the time. That's my place, unsettled but I like it. (Otter)

Carrie describes how having a permanent home has allowed her to stop “running”:



I can put my weary feet in my living room and I don't have to run anymore. A lot of the homelessness was running, running in my mind, running away, running to something, running away from something. When I went into the MDH I was tired of running and I just thought I 'gotta stop running, as soon as I made that decision to stop running a home came open for me. (Carrie)

Flo shared the emotional aspects of having a home:

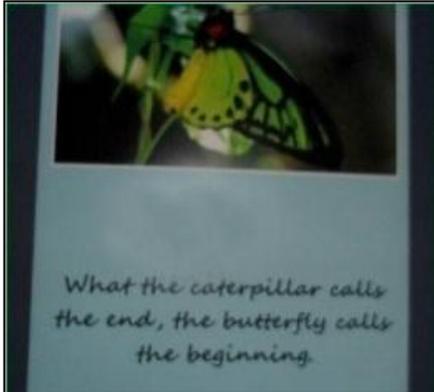


Having all my things together in my home makes me feel content. I feel relaxed because I'm stable now and can put all my memories up around me. I have good memories, pictures of people I still mourn and my Indian doll. In my home I have all my people with me. (Flo)

Self-Esteem and Hope

A few women expressed that they had increased self esteem as a result of being permanently housed. Flo stated “I feel more confident, motivated now that I have my own space.”

Robina similarly expressed positive aspects after being permanently housed:



I felt like I was at the end because I had no HOME - until the YWCA gave me a HOME. I feel really good about having my own home. (Robina)



Having a destination, which is my new home, has changed my life quite a bit. Makes me feel content. I like my life now. (Robina)

Some women disclosed that initially they did not feel they deserved a home. Flo expressed, “when I first saw it, I was speechless. It was too nice (for me)...I couldn’t (bring myself to) say I wanted it.” Carrie shared a similar belief:

I never thought I would have my own place because I didn’t think I deserved it. I don’t make enough, I don’t have a degree. They made my dream come true. I became use to being alone and in isolation. I believe a lot of homeless women suffer with pain and isolation. I had been sober for a long time, (and thought) I should have my shit together.

Hope was another prominent theme in the data analysis. Jessica represented hope with the following image:



Light can be hope. It’s so warm, it’s so nice and inviting to have your own home, I never thought it would happen. (Jessica)

Heather also referred to hope in her imagery:



I like the message in this picture. The frame is broken but the message to me is beautiful and means that even though I don't have any money I can still have things of beauty. To me these words are beautiful and it's a message of hope. (Heather)

NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF PERMANENT HOUSING

The data analysis also revealed negative aspects of permanent housing including a loss of connection, fear, and the trade-off between safety and rules.

Loss of Connection

One of the most common themes identified in the analysis was that of a loss of connection from other women, specifically those who lived in the transitional housing program, YWCA Mary Dover House, where the women had previously resided. Many described how they felt “cut off” from YWCA Mary Dover House and the sense of community they had developed there, as Colette explains:

The thing is, you're completely cut off when you leave MDH... (crying) sorry...I loved being in their kitchen. That was my lifeline -being in the kitchen. Since I left MDH I have several times, you know, called about jobs or volunteering but you're cut off. You're not allowed back.

I really felt like I made friendships there (crying) I built relationships. It feels important to me that I am my sister's keeper. And just to see them and say you know “Hi how are you, or sit down and have a cup of coffee” or “sit down and watch a TV show and have a good laugh.” It doesn't happen anymore... And I worry now that those women...because they're in apartments by themselves and you know at the MDH I could knock on their door, see them in the halls and say “Hey drop into the kitchen.” So I worry that maybe at the (permanent housing building) it's become a little bit too cut off... everyone at (permanent housing building) is still not completely on her feet, is still working to build herself up and build a full life again. So we still have that sense - or I certainly still have that sense of I would like a community.

Robina agreed:

I kinda' miss it myself. I was thinking of going back there too, but I'm not sure if I'm allowed... I'm just by myself in there, in the apartment and there's no one to talk to. It's not like MDH, you could talk to everybody and anybody in there.

Flo fondly recounted, “and they'd come knocking at your door (laughing); whereas now, sometimes I get lonely.”

Not surprisingly the women also expressed a sense of isolation due to the loss of connection. Heather eloquently states, “There’s such a difference between isolation and solitude. Solitude is nice but, isolating, that’s such a common problem with us.” Carrie shared that she misses the community of women and how it would be nice to visit with others:

That’s the first thing I noticed when we moved in here. We don’t have that common area or you run into someone in the hallway...it was so, I loved that. I really loved it. It was so nice to have other women around and just saying hello or somebody to talk to and come out of that isolation.

Otter describes how she manages to maintain her connection with other women who continue to reside at YWCA Mary Dover House:

I know people that are still there. I’m not ‘gonna forget that. I was friends with them there and I want to continue to be friends. So, I go to the Y quite a bit. Some of the girls just say to me, “you’re here more now than you were when you stayed here.” I go sit in the lobby and I talk to people, go outside and talk to people...I only get to go to the second floor because (the staff) will watch me you know. Like to make sure (I don’t go into the residence).

Fear

Women identified a fear about losing the permanent housing, becoming homeless again and losing all that they had gained. As Jessica illustrates:

It is scary, I have a fear of being homeless...I hope that it lasts but I’ve gone through so much. Once you finally have everything...what happens if it goes away? ‘Cause it’s happened before...but I’ve never had it this good so I really hope it lasts.

I think that MDH spoiled me because now that I have my own apartment, it would suck to be homeless more than it would have before. I always had a very small amount with me and it just kept getting less and less. Now I’m like, if I had to be homeless again I would lose everything. Even though I’d survive it, I know it would still suck so much more ‘cause you know what it’s like to be able to have your own space.

Other women expressed similar concerns about losing their home. They explained that they are assessed every six months to confirm their suitability for subsidized permanent housing. Some questioned whether their housing is really “permanent” if they have to be reassessed every six months, stating how this created a sense of uncertainty and fear. Susan, for example, stated:

For example, I’m working (in a temporary) agency. Sometimes I work, sometimes I don’t work like two three weeks right? A permanent job is different, more stable...you have (to have) a very low income (to live here)...I just feel like it’s not really permanent. I just feel that way. In the next six months we don’t know what’s going to happen. This is not permanent...it still feels transitional.

Colette agreed stating,

It's still transitional...every six months you go through an assessment...provide proof of income for renewal of lease and if they deem that you're not within their criteria anymore then the expectation is that you find somewhere else to live... so I completely agree it doesn't feel like permanent housing.

Susan admitted, "I've been feeling emotional (since I got) the (assessment) letter. I just didn't understand...the letter was very hard, I just didn't understand what is happening." Otter confirmed, "It felt like it came up so fast like whoa! I haven't been there six months so I didn't wanna' be re-assessed. It was hard when I saw that."

Trade Off Between Safety and Rules

Even though safety was identified as a positive aspect of permanent housing, some women shared situations where they did not feel safe. The women also discussed at length an incident of domestic violence that occurred in their building with one of their neighbours during the course of the study. Otter expressed:

(it is a) little bit of an illusion,... you're saying it's safe I didn't find it safe at all on Friday... We've been through a lot of shit all of us in our different ways one of the things is abuse and that happened on Friday.

Jessica concurred:

I agree with you completely domestic violence and knives and cops we don't need to deal with that (after) what we've been through...that's like the most unsafe thing in the world. That really upsets me...it's just too traumatic, I can't handle it...it makes me want to vomit.

Women noted that the rules designed to keep them safe are also the ones that impact on their ability to become independent and autonomous. Otter argued on behalf of having rules in the permanent housing complex to keep women safe, and that women should be at a certain place in their healing to be admitted into the program.

I thought we were all over this, that all of us moved to this place because we got through a lot of the issues. We have our plans in place...I used to leave my door open for her. I won't do that no more. It's still a great place to stay it's an awesome place to stay but I'm not happy seeing that or hearing all that abuse... I've gone through that so many times.

Jessica also expressed concerns related to the incident:

How about the people who put (permanent housing building) up - the Homeless Foundation - or whoever's in charge of that accepts the responsibility for the ultimate consequence of the abuse that happens. That's basically what they're saying, you gotta' be an adult right but there's a consequence - women who get beaten statistically can die if nothing is done. If they say this is the rules you can't have men live here why can't they step up and say you can't have a man beat your ass and have the cops here twice, I'm mad about this. How can you say not to have a man live here but he can beat you?

Jessica further states:

I think that we should be able to do anything legal in the privacy of our own homes, I think that we should have that legal right, that legal freedom and I don't think we should be harassed by the landlord or anything but I do believe that laws should be obeyed. I think that when it comes to physical violence the safety of the women in the house and the security of the women in the house not to mention the poor lady whose going through this I think that there should be something done.

Some women argued that a domestic violence situation can happen anywhere. Flo said, it's "just like living in society" and Carrie added:

That's what happens in every area, that's reality. It happens everywhere...I'm not saying what happened was right, I know this lady and I know she has issues and I know she went for help, but she doesn't want to quit so like what do we do, kick her out? It's an apartment building, we're adults we're living there, paying our rent...I don't have any problems with following the rules, but I feel like I am being treated differently, but I have a home - that's what I care more about is having a home.

"MORE THAN FOUR WALLS"

Women also shared details about the nature of home, which included the concept of "more than four walls." Some of the women shared how having a home is different than having shelter. Otter declared, "to have a home is something else. I've been able to keep a roof over my head. But it (has) not been home." Regarding her current housing, Otter noted, "I love it, it just doesn't feel like a home yet, but I love being there. It's unsettled...one, two, three bags (remain unpacked) - all unsettled."

For Heather, having a home meant being able to keep her dog.

That was a pre-requisite for me - it had to be affordable but they had to allow dogs. Being able to just get some of my old life back and he (my dog) represents all that I've got left from my old life...everyone said it (would be) impossible (to find a place that would allow dogs).



Buckets means everything to me. My father's nickname was Buckets and after he passed away four years ago we bought Buckets and named him as a tribute to my father. Shortly after my father died I found out my job was going to end, and then a year after that my partner, Gord, died. I fell into a depression and started drinking heavily; then I lost my home. All I had was the shirt on my back and my dog. I was always told that you'll never be able to have a home and have Buckets. But here I am today, I have a home and I still have Buckets. He is what kept me going. In four years I lost everything but he is the one thing that I kept. Home for me means being able to get some of my old life back and he represents all that I have left from my old life. (Heather)

Carrie reflects on how a sense of community affected her perception of home:

I remember a few years ago when my son was a young boy and I had housing through the Métis housing. I was living in the north east area and I knew everybody there. We all lived in the same kind of world and the same kind of income. Then (Métis housing) moved us... They bought it in (another community). Where all the rich people are and I was poor as dirt. I remember saying it was so nice to have my house, but it was so...why would they buy a house out there? Where all the rich people live, and my daughter, oh my God, my daughter she just, like she had to compete all the time, living on next to nothing. It was difficult. But I loved the house. So I think a house is not enough. It's community...belonging.

Colette describes the intangible attributes of home: “no one can jeopardize my home anymore because my home is what I want it to be.” She elaborates:



A friend gave this to me. I carry home with me. It is in my heart. No matter where I go it is home. It is not four walls and a roof. It is something less tangible. It is a feeling and emotion, a spirit, memories. I can carry those with me anywhere. (Colette)

STEREOTYPES OF HOMELESSNESS

The third major theme that was identified in the data analysis is that of “stereotypes of homelessness”. Women talked about how societal myths and stereotypes have impacted their experiences both with being homeless as well as with attempts to exit homelessness. These expressions included the stigma and shame, gender, invisibility, and identity.

STIGMA AND SHAME

Participants in the project discussed the shame and stigma connected with being a homeless woman. Carrie revealed, “I carried a lot of shame about being homeless...all these ‘shoulds’ society puts on you. A lot of shame and self-doubt.” Susan did not tell her classmates about her housing situation because of her shame, she stated “if they knew I lived in a woman’s shelter, they (would be) surprised...I never tell.” Carrie shared a similar struggle about whether to tell people about her situation:

Yeah it was hard, “Do I tell this person that I’m living at the Y? Do I let them know that I’m homeless?” When I first moved in there. You don’t want people to think less of you. Society, you know; you have to be successful and if you’re living at the Y, then obviously you’re not. You’re a failure in their eyes or whatever. I had a hard time with that. Then I decided “Oh to the hell with it, I don’t care anymore what people think.”

For other women, stigma was a source of struggle. Jessica stated that she had experienced “a lot of stigma. We are not even considered human.” Heather identified typical stereotypes such as, “people think you are just lazy” and, “why doesn’t she get a job?” to which she retorted, “Hire Me!” Some women

disclosed the impact of these stereotypes and stigma on their self esteem and recovery from homelessness. Heather confessed, “I’m 56 years old. I shouldn’t be such a screw up. You know, that’s my thing. But things happen.” She further shared how this has impacted her employment prospects:

I’m learning how to do a cover letter... I don’t want it to look like I’m in this project because I was homeless. I told most of the truth, you know...but I wasn’t going to put down (the title of the study) how transitional housing played a part in me having a home, because that would put me, well a lot of employers just wouldn’t even look at my resume.

Others wondered about the role of society in contributing to the stereotypes and myths about homelessness. Referring to society, Carrie stated, “They think (the homeless) are lazy and they are addicted or something. That’s why they don’t like to donate.” For Yoshiko, “when I was with my family I thought the outside world was nice to low income people. But I found out that society sometimes don’t like people. They don’t try to understand. They think that these things will never happen to them.” Heather describes the stereotype she faces:

The stereotype of people on welfare sitting at home with a 6 pack of beer getting drunk every night. Well excuse me but after I pay my bills and utilities, I’ve got 20 bucks to get me drunk for the month, you know. And that’s unless I eat.

Women shared diverse perspectives of the homelessness population. Colette shared, “there are all kinds of faces to homelessness. I am not your typical poster child. Women from every walk of life. There was a woman at MDH with a PhD.” Heather likewise noted, “there was a lawyer at the (another shelter).” Others suggested the struggling economy as specifically contributing to homelessness. Carrie added, “homelessness is becoming more and more not just drug addicts, alcoholics. It’s just everybody; anybody can be homeless today. The way the economy is.” Susan concurred, “people are losing their jobs”, and Heather added, “just one paycheck can set an awful lot of people back.”

GENDER

The group also engaged in a discussion around how gender was implicated in women’s experiences of homeless women. Heather felt that:

There are a lot of different reasons a woman can be homeless. A lot of it’s domestic abuse and a woman’s not as well physically equipped to deal with being homeless. Women are easy to take advantage of. Like, I don’t have the street smarts. I’ve been taken advantage of a lot. Whereas I don’t think a man would be subject to that.

Some women identified that gender role expectations impacted the stigma associated with women’s homelessness. Carrie stated, “I think with a man it’s more acceptable. With women you are the mother, housewife, the caregiver, the caretaker... there’s just more shame.” She further stated:

When you see a woman on the street, homeless woman, there’s this stigma there that like... I’m even guilty of that myself. I don’t know how to explain it...like “oh what’s her problem” or “what did she do” or “she’s a slut.” With men it’s different.

Susan agreed adding:

Mostly every culture has women who stay home; care about the kids. How come she lives on the street now? If my friends, if they knew, they (would be) shocked. "How come she lives on the street? Something is wrong, she's sick." They will never accept, to think right way, that's why mostly I hide you know. I never tell.

INVISIBILITY

The invisibility of homeless women was identified from the data. Carrie, declared, "I was invisible. I was couch surfing." As a result of this invisibility, two of the participants commented on a lack of services for single, adult homeless women.

There is not a lot out there for women. Women's homelessness is hidden. Homeless women are not visible. I was searching for a home for seven years. I was angry and frustrated. Why isn't there something out there for women or for me? I am struggling to make a living. Single adult women, you know, all my children were gone, grown up and you know. It's a lot easier for women with children to get housing or to get assistance or whatever they need. But for women without children there was nothing there. That was really frustrating. (Carrie)

I think men, especially my ex, he's had a lot of opportunities to have a roof over his head, yet he's still on the street. When I first moved into the YWCA I told him, it was winter time. He said "Oh so you got a nice warm bed to sleep in and I (don't)." I said "Well there's the (shelter); there's places for men. Why don't you take advantage of that like I am at the YWCA?" I really resented him saying that. There's more places for men. (Flo)

IDENTITY

Definitions and stereotypes of homelessness impacted the ways in which women in the project identified themselves. Otter offered, "that word homeless – you usually think that means you have to be on the street, to be really down." As a result of this, for Colette:

Realizing I was homeless was a process. It took a little while to get there....it really struck me. It never really sat with me that I was homeless. Never gotten my head around that. When I spoke to a couple of the ladies at the YWCA and then when I read the synopsis of Susan Scott's book. Homelessness takes on different forms for women. I had been struggling with that. My role as a mother was gone. My role as a homemaker was gone; as a wife was gone.

Carrie shared that she "never thought she was homeless until (she lived in) MDH."

PATHWAYS INTO HOMELESSNESS

Another theme that appeared during the data analysis was the women's various "pathways into homelessness". Through women's descriptions of their experiences came information about factors that contributed to their homelessness. This section shares these findings and includes sub-themes of poverty, immigration issues, domestic violence and abuse, addictions, and First Nations-related experiences.

POVERTY

Poverty was commonly experienced by women in the project, and, for many, continues to be a challenge even with permanent subsidized housing. Heather announced, “my goal is to reach the poverty line” even though she is permanently housed and attending school. Carrie described how poverty impacted her ability to afford a place to live, even though she was working full-time:

My situation was different. I had a job but didn't make enough money to pay rent. I remember thinking and feeling “Carrie you just aren't smart enough, Carrie you just aren't working hard enough” and I'm struggling to make a living here. I'm struggling. Like I just, I want a home!

Jessica shared how she continues to struggle with poverty and depends on the financial support from social services describing them as “a barrier” in her image of a brick wall.



This is a brick wall and it's the view outside of my bedroom window. It represents a lot to me because it is just like pushing through a lot of barriers; like going up against a brick wall. Social services will take away services. I cannot work because of trauma and violence in my life. This brick wall represents social services. (Jessica)

IMMIGRATION

Two women identified language barriers and isolation as additional challenges related to being an immigrant. Susan, an accounting student, shared, “I am an immigrant. I have no family or friends in Canada. I went to the MDH (unable to finish due to tears).” She later continued stating:

I live in Canada for just five years. I quit one life and was starting a new one. It's been hard. My English is my second language right, my classmates they just read once and they understand everything. But I have to read like two or three times. Then we had like first exam in the (program), because if you failed it, you have to take the course again. Then I was very worried because I have no money to pay back, for the exam (crying).

Yoshiko shared how her lack of support as an immigrant made things more difficult:

I was busy with my parents. In B.C. I had job and I was very busy but after a couple years my parents needed some help because they are both getting old and they needed some help and we didn't have any friends or people. I was with my parents such a long, long time. I never went outside to negotiate with people. I had a normal good life before and we had no problem. After I lost my dad we lost everything.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

Women also shared histories of domestic violence and childhood abuse. One woman disclosed, “a lot of my homelessness was psychological. I was sexually abused as a child and never told anyone. I ran my whole life until MDH.” Jessica also disclosed abuse as a child and “a life of trauma and poverty...I was violently abused when I was growing up. I’ve got (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder).” She symbolized the consequences of abuse for her in the following image:



It's like confusion...when you get lots of anxiety and stress, especially if you've gone through a lot of abuse, you can feel confused and you don't really know what to say so you just freeze. (Jessica)

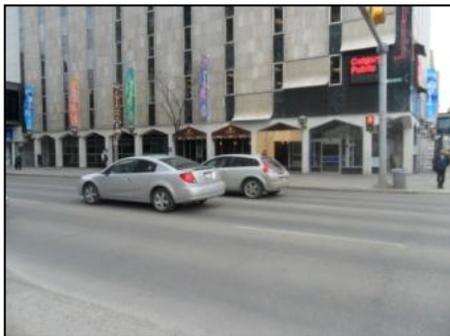
Yoshiko, who also experienced domestic violence, states:

Come out from domestic violence...After I lost my Dad everything changed. Brother and I had a lot of arguments. Finally I called 911. When I went outside the house with the police officer I realized I was going to be homeless.

Otter also shared she survived domestic violence, “we’ve all gone through a lot of shit, all of us in our different ways one of the things is abuse... that’s what happened to me, I got knifed.”

ADDICTIONS

Some women revealed that addictions, often to cope with the other experiences of loss, abuse, trauma and poverty, were related to their homelessness. For Heather, after losing “literally everything” including her father, life partner, job, and home, she “fell into a depression and started drinking.” Otter used an image to discuss drug addiction.



This is the library, to me its drug city. That's what it means to me, it's where you go to pick up. You can find anything you want in there. When I was using I would go all the time. Now I have no business there and I don't go anymore because it's not a good place to be. Going there reminds me of going there to use. In MDH I would just go there to get a coffee because it became a different place for me. If I go in I get triggered and can feel it right away because I still want. It is a place that means a lot of different things for different people. (Otter)

FIRST NATIONS

The experience of First Nations women in regards to residential school experiences, resulting generational abuse and what has been deemed by Flo as “the cycle” was noted in the data. Flo who identifies as homeless all her life” shares her story through images:



I took this picture while I was in a recovery program in British Columbia. It gives me courage to not see myself there anymore. I can see the journey from being here to where I am now with a place that has all my things. When I see these images the first one has a lot of grief and despair and the second one brings me back to when I was raised by my grandmother until I was five. I was bounced around as a child and I never really had that stability of nurturing from my mother. After my grandma raised me she brought me back to my parents and from my parent’s home I got thrown into a residential school until I was fifteen. These photos show what I had and what I lost. I just thank God that I never lost my language, I can still speak Blackfoot fluently. (Flo)



Flo elaborates on “the cycle” and what it has meant for her family:

It’s like you can’t just get out, you’re stuck.... my daughter and grand-daughter we haven’t seen her for five years because the father kept her away and so we’re dealing with a lot of issues right now that’s why I have to go back and forth they’re doing counselling and she’s homeless now she’s in a shelter...it’s a cycle, and it hurts me.(crying)

JOURNEY FROM HOMELESSNESS TO HOUSING

When women were asked whether they could have gone from homelessness straight to permanent housing, there was a resounding “no.” This section presents the fifth theme, that of their “journey from homelessness to housing” and outlines two sub-categories under this theme. The first reflects the women noting that housing needs vary depending on the individual and the second discusses the need for time and support.

DEPENDENT UPON INDIVIDUAL

The women articulated that homeless people have varying needs and that housing options and support programs were dependent on the individual needs of each homeless person. Heather explains:

I think a lot of it depends on the individual. There are a lot of people that don’t have the skills to live on their own. They need the transitional housing to get the skills. Like how to cook, how to take care of themselves. It all depends on the person. There are some that don’t want to. Then

there's some that aren't capable, don't have the skills, and then there's people that just hit a rough spot and have the skills but just need help to get back to where they were.

Jessica added:

I think that in homelessness you run across a lot of people who couldn't handle regular housing. If they don't have that period in between with the transitional housing you wouldn't be able to root out the ones who won't unfortunately make it. Because homelessness for a lot of people is a choice. I know that that's hard to believe but I have met a lot of people who are like that.

Carrie agreed stating, “a lot of people make that choice and live on the street. You know some of them are alcoholic, drug addicts they don't want to give that up you know. That freedom of being on the street.”

Colette described the responsibilities associated with permanent housing:

Permanent housing is real. We've signed a lease you better pay your rent every month. You better pay the bills, you better follow the rules. Whereas in MDH it's a little bit - you don't have that pressure. Like certainly the responsibility is there to pay your rent and to pay your way. But the pressure is not as absolutely real as it is in permanent housing.

Carrie expanded, “in permanent housing you're pretty much on your own. You can choose just what you need or you know if you need it, or when you want it or how are you gonna' do it, it's up to you.”

TIME AND SUPPORT

Another common category regarding the journey from homelessness to housing that was raised by the women was the need for time to adjust and recover – the kind of time that can be offered in transitional housing. This was the case for Colette:

I spent 6 months in transitional housing. I don't see Housing First as something that would have given me the support, strength and time to rebuild my foundation, build myself at a time when I was at my weakest. I couldn't have come to this point without being in transitional housing at the YWCA. I got the time to be vulnerable and weak. I don't think you're capable either. Certainly I wouldn't have been, you know, I came from a year of hell before I went to MDH and just you know, emotional and to go straight into a place.

For Heather, transitional housing gave her the time to find housing that was appropriate for her situation.

Just before I went to MDH I was couch surfing. I had to get out of there right away. So I ended up giving first month rent and my security deposit for a place I wasn't too crazy about. Anyways it turned out the guy ended up in jail with my damage deposit and first month's rent and all my belongings. Because I was forced to make that decision because I didn't have time.

Otter stated, “to go straight into housing without support, I don't believe it would have worked for me. For other people I think it could work. There are some out there that it would.” She continued:

You move so fast you don't have time to think things through. Sometimes you have to think situations through. It's a big move to get into your own place. That's a big move when you're not used to ah, having that. Like, for myself, it's been years since I had my own place. So ah, it's still messy, it's still not put together because I'm still not used to having it. Maybe I've been there altogether a month and some bit you know. So yeah, it would not have worked for me going

straight in there 'cuz I would not have looked at all the issues the way I should. You know, 'cuz they're pretty damn serious some of them (laughs).

THE HEALING JOURNEY

The final theme of the data concerns the process of healing and how women discussed recovering from their histories of homelessness. “The healing journey” includes categories of loss, rebuilding, sources of support, and finally, giving back.

Loss

During their experience of homelessness and their initial connection with services, six women shared how “low”, “depressed” and “lost” they were. Flo stated “I’ve have had a lot of losses in my life. My father died, my son died and my brother died... I had a real heavy burden when I moved into the YWCA. Being homeless your self-esteem goes way down.”

Robina’s image and caption below illustrate her experience:



“This picture was me like...a woman who is sad because she is helpless and she is confused. Doesn’t know where to go...” (Robina)

REBUILDING

After experiencing various losses, women then shared their process of rebuilding. In rebuilding, women described moving on and even thriving after being “at the bottom.” Colette’s image reflects the category of rebuilding:



This picture represents what staying at MDH was all about. When I went there the whole foundation of my world was gone, I was at the bottom. They helped me rebuild my foundation again and allowed me to start moving towards a full and productive meaningful life again. (Colette)

Yoshiko shared she looks forward to the future and does not want to look back:

Because this is the type of life I always wanted to have. Now at age 53 I finally have it. When I was in shelter I was very depressed. I want to say “bye” to my past. We need to move on. Successful/smart people don’t look to the past they only look forward. After counseling, I thought I didn’t want to have negative thoughts just be positive and stay healthy.

In contrast to her depression above, Yoshiko depicts her current life in positive terms using the following two images:



I am enjoying taking English Second Language classes every single day. When I go through hard times in life I found it difficult to communicate with other people but now I have my own life and I know that I can do anything. Having friends and getting my life back to normal is very important to me. This picture represents having a normal and healthy life. (Yoshiko)



This is in a park that is around the corner from the YWCA. I like to see these tiny animals have a home where they can have their own life. Having a life is important to me. Animals can teach us a lot about how to be strong and persevere. Even though times are really hard they manage themselves everyday...this teaches me a lot. (Yoshiko)

Otter shares where she is in her journey and where she aspires to be in the following images:



That's my paperwork. I've never had paperwork before but you have to do it if you want to straighten the things that are messed up about yourself out. It's related to visibility in the system, they have to know where I am now and before I never wanted them to know. Now I've got bills to pay and I have an address. This photo represents that I have a lot more to work on and I'm trying, I'm putting it together. (Otter)



I just love it. It's strong, that's what it represents for me. That it's strong. It's growing it's progressing, it's just strong. That's what I want to be. I want to grow and progress in my life. I don't want to stay in one place. I want more. (Otter)

Susan, who recently obtained her diploma and is looking for permanent employment, shares her optimism for the future in the following two images:



When I first lived at the YWCA I was a student and my room was small. I didn't have a table and it was in my bed that I was reading and writing. When I was homeless I was still successful in school. People who have a hard life fight more, they're more successful. My classmates all had a home. Even though I'm having a hard life, I'm still focused on my life and fighting. (Susan)



I'm still on my journey working to accomplish my dreams. Working towards my dreams puts me closer towards what I want, such as having a nice home in a building like this one. What helps me to have this dream is being able to finish school. (Susan)

Colette has “no concerns about what’s coming around the corner. None at all.” She describes, “it feels like I’m back to being me.” She depicts her journey in the following images:



I love to sit down by the river, walk by the river. But on a snowy day like this, the bench is still full of snow, it's, you can't sit down and relax. You have to keep going. So it, it reminds me of that, that sometimes I just want to throw up my hands and say “I quit.” But you can't, the seat is too wet to sit down right now so you have to keep going. (Colette)



It represents who I am now, where I am now. That whatever is coming around the corner is exciting. It doesn't present any fear or foreboding for me at all. So that's what I love about this bridge. It's also a foot bridge, so you can carry yourself across it. You know, there's no traffic, there's nothing to get in your way. It's a very simple peaceful bridge right across the river. (Colette)



This tree is how I came out of MDH. You can see all the other trees haven't started blooming. The grass is brown. Not completely straight, but in full bloom. That's how I am, not completely straight but in full bloom. (Colette)

SOURCES OF SUPPORT

Throughout women's descriptions of their experiences with homelessness and housing, information about their sources of support was articulated. Religion or spirituality was part of each woman's "journey" and gave them "strength."

Colette shared that her church and its members were important in helping her through her journey:

It was just magical being so close to the river path and I used to, like on my walks would, I went out there with my iPod and I have all of my pastor's sermons on my iPod. So I got to walking so fast that (laughs) when I started out I would, it would take me, I could only walk for one sermon. But by the time my 5 months was up at MDH I was two and a half sermons around the river (laughs).

For Carrie, her First Nations culture was her source of strength and pride.



My shawl that I made, my Pendleton, my eagle fan, and underneath the eagle fan is my sacred ceremonial stuff that I don't want to take a picture of, but anyway, and so these are just things that were that I worked for and that were given for me. I never stopped my journey with my creator, with God. (Carrie)

She describes how she carried on her spiritual and cultural practices even while living in her car:

When I was homeless I never stopped going to sweat lodges, I never stopped going to the Sundance, I never stopped smudging and I never stopped using my drum. I used all of those things and I'm just so glad that I can put them up and remind myself that this is what I've done.



I have an eagle fan and I've had it for fifteen years and I remember during the time I was homeless carrying that fan in my car and I holding it (thinking) I'm going to find a home for you one day. So just seeing that, I just feel proud of my heritage. (Carrie)

Another First Nations woman, Robina, also referred to her culture through her photography:



The eagle represents that you are closer to God. (Robina)



This is a Lynx - it is my spirit name: Wawbi Bizhiw Kwe which means White Lynx Woman. (Robina)

Flo also identified religion as a source of strength for her: “On my Native reserve I went to Sunday service there last week. It gives me strength.”



Since I've had a home I've been able to re-capture my strength in religion and my love for music. I practice music with my cousin and his daughter and have a guitar in my apartment now. (Flo)

Other sources of support identified by Flo included members of her family. Flo shared the following about her sister:



This is my niece's daughter, I'm glad she's staying with my sister. My sister is my mentor, she doesn't drink. When I first came back from B.C. I stayed at her house and she helped me get back on my feet and I just look up to her. Like she's very family oriented and she's got the gift of looking after kids she's raised like three foster kids and they're grown and gone now. (Flo)

Yoshiko agreed about people as sources of support, stating, “many people saved my life. I couldn’t survive without help, I didn’t know what to do when I was on the street and my neighbours they were trying to help me.”

For Heather, her main source of emotional support was her dog. She describes how she had to make a tough decision when she was accessing housing:

I was staying at MDH and I couldn’t have him with me so I turned him over to the humane society emergency boarding program so they kept him with the understanding that when I got settled, he was mine back.

Colette also identified nature as a source of support, stating her time by the river “was magic.”



When I was at MDH I walked and ran around the river with my iPod all the time. I want to have a way to remember running around the river. It was all beautiful weather and the trees were in bloom so this symbolizes that. My runs around the river listening to my iPod, or feeding the geese, that just captures it all for me. It was just magic. Coming back to the YW I was sad at everything that I’d lost but I felt like in a way I was taking advantage of being by myself and having no one but myself to be responsible for. (Colette)

GIVING BACK

Now that the women are in permanent housing and are on their journey of healing and recovery, many shared that they felt “empowered” and “wanted to make a change.” Carrie spoke about how empowering it was to share her story with other women:

Just bringing all kinds of women together from all walks of life all different stories and sharing. I’m excited about our pictures being out there and being seen. To the appropriate people you know. It’s real and it’s, I, I’m happy I’m part of this group. I really feel empowered by it and I look forward to coming here.

Otter made many comments about being ready and wanting to give back: “I’d like to give back, to do something to return everything that’s been given to me.” She also stated that she “likes to encourage other women that are at MDH.” Heather agreed, stating, “I know, MDH has done a lot for me. I’d like to give something back. Especially for the women that are in there. I don’t have a lot to give but I’ve got hope. I can give them that.” Colette added:

I’m still somewhat my sister’s keeper. That’s why I enjoy getting involved in all of the, or certainly as much of the events as I can that we do because I want the best for all of those women. If I can be part of enriching their lives...they certainly enrich mine. If I can be part of enriching their lives then I want to do that.

Otter described the benefit of giving back:

I think it's part of healing too. When you're going through your own issues, your own trauma or whatever it is you're going through, it really helps to take your mind off it to extend a hand to somebody else. It builds your inner strength when you know that you're given a part of yourself to someone you barely know. It really helps other women when you're going through it you know, being positive towards each other. That helped when I was there for sure.

Others expressed they wanted to make changes to services and policies. Carrie stated, "I think this could go somewhere, we could have a voice, we could be up there with those policy makers. I want to keep this going. I want to have our voice heard." And, for Colette:

For me ultimately (Buffy St. Marie's) message was don't wait on somebody else to do it. Don't - if it's not on somebody's agenda don't wait around, put it on the agenda yourself...if it's not on the menu, cook it yourself!

This chapter presented the findings from the thematic data analysis. As revealed, six main themes were discovered encompassing transitional and permanent housing, stereotypes of homelessness, pathways into homelessness, the journey from homelessness to housing and the healing journey. The next chapter will examine some of the findings with the current academic literature, explore the impact of the findings on services, and provide recommendations.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this project was to determine the role, if any, transitional housing has in ending homelessness for women. It also sought to explore whether there is something unique about women's experiences of homelessness and pathways into homelessness that can inform how the Housing First model is translated into practice. This project offered the unique opportunity not only to evaluate women's experiences in transitional housing, but also to examine their experiences once they had been permanently housed. The objective of this final chapter is to briefly discuss the key findings of the research and revisit the literature on women's pathways and experiences with homelessness in order to provide recommendations with respect to community housing services for women.

WOMEN'S UNIQUE EXPERIENCES WITH HOMELESSNESS

The most evidently unique pathway into homelessness for women is that of fleeing domestic violence. As Sev'er (2002) points out, this is a path "travelled almost exclusively by women" (p. 309). Women who flee violent men are often without financial resources and find themselves with few options (Dale, 2008; Tutty, 2006; Sev'er, 2002). These experiences, coupled with poverty and limited options, drive women into domestic violence shelters and homelessness programs where unique needs related to safety and trauma arise. However, as Tutty et al. (2009) assert "the association between men's violence against women and the women's subsequent homelessness tends to be ignored" (p. 14).

Interestingly, safety was rarely mentioned by women in this study as important in transitional housing. This is in contrast to other literature citing safety as paramount in services for homeless women (Schiff & Waegemakers Schiff, 2010; Tutty et al., 2009; Walsh et al., 2010; Walsh, Rutherford & Kuzmak, 2009). Issues of safety were largely absent in the current study, likely because YWCA Mary Dover House is strictly a women-only program and provides numerous security measures. Literature that reports safety as a critical component of homeless services for women are in the context of co-ed homeless shelters where women with traumatic histories are easily triggered by male residents, and many women feel unsafe and at times, threatened or even victimized (Evans & Forsyth, 2003; Scott, 2008; Walsh et al., 2010; Whitzman, 2006). It is within this context that women are quick to identify the need for safety and security from males. This finding is reiterated, in that, once the women in this study moved to permanent housing, where males were allowed to visit and stay short-term without program control, issues of safety re-emerged.

One of the most interesting tensions to emerge from the data was the trade-off between safety and rules/restrictions. Consistent with other research (DeWard, 2010; Melbin, Sullican & Cain, 2003) participants in our study felt that some of the rules in transitional housing limited their freedom and made them feel untrustworthy. However, our study extends the existing literature by examining the feelings and perceptions of women once they have moved into permanent housing. Our results suggest that, once permanently housed, the women struggle with the trade-off between the rules that kept them safe in transitional housing with those of living as an adult in the community, and the accompanying realities and responsibilities of this freedom.

There was disagreement for example, amongst the women about the appropriate level of regulation in their apartment building. This discussion emerged after an incident of domestic violence occurred in the building. Some women expressed not wanting to be exposed to violence and abuse because of personal histories and the potential for re-traumatization. This led into a debate amongst the women that centred on how the rules that keep them safe are also the ones that keep them from being an independent and

autonomous adult. Living in the community comes with certain realities for women with histories of violence and abuse, realities that the rules and regulations of transitional housing can eliminate or at least mitigate.

These study findings suggest that the Housing First model, which places homeless individuals directly into community housing, may not be a viable or desirable option for women with histories of trauma and abuse. Past research has shown that violence is pervasive in the lives of homeless women; a staggering 92% of homeless women experience severe physical and/or sexual assault at some point in their lives (Shapcott, 2007). Given the high prevalence rate of abuse among homeless women, some of the assumptions surrounding the Housing First model may be flawed. Specifically, Housing First is based on the assumption that once women are provided permanent housing, they will then be able to attend to higher level needs and issues when given support. However, the research suggests that survivors of abuse and other trauma also need “privacy, control, and safety ...if they are to succeed in residential placements” (Harris, 1994, p. 4). Unfortunately, in most permanent housing arrangements, residents have little control over who is allowed into the building, potentially leading to feelings of insecurity and fear for survivors of abuse and, in some cases, further victimization.

Recommendation 1: The YWCA and other homeless serving agencies should strongly consider further development of women-only permanent housing buildings and programs.

THE ROLE OF TRANSITIONAL HOUSING

SUPPORT

Study findings suggest that there are key aspects of transitional housing that assist women in exiting homelessness successfully and sustainably. The participants in our study mentioned the counsellors and the 24 hour support as one significant element of transitional housing. For many, this involved accessing needed support or resources at any time, day or night. Just knowing someone was always around and available offered some women a sense of security. 24 hour access to resources and support has been documented for women exiting homelessness as important in other studies (Walsh et al., 2010; Washington, 2002).

Women described receiving guidance and direction, and being heard as fundamental aspects of effective support and counselling in the transitional program. Some of the women in this study credited individual staff for helping turn their life around, suggesting the development of strong, respectful, supportive relationships with staff is critical in transitioning from homelessness to permanent housing for some women. This finding is in contrast to the work of Tucker et al. (2009), which examined the personal networks of homeless women residing in temporary shelters. In this study, women reported low levels of overall support from service providers and their relationships with staff were characterized by “low emotional closeness and short duration” (p. 137). Women and staff however may have been unable to develop deeper relationships due to the short-term nature of the program in Tucker’s study. Transitional housing, or longer-term supportive housing, may have the capacity to facilitate the building of deeper, more meaningful relationships between women residents and staff members. Walsh et al. (2010), through qualitative interviews with 76 women, found that the quality of relationships between staff and clients was a determining factor in whether women perceived their shelter experience as successful. Other studies have likewise noted the importance of supportive counsellors for women exiting homelessness (Lindsey, 1996; Melbin, Sullivan & Cain, 2003; Schiff & Waegemakers Schiff, 2010).

Many of the women in our study also recognized the need for continued support once permanently housed. However, the type and intensity of support required and desired varied for each woman, reflecting the heterogeneity within the larger community and indicating a need for tailored programming. For example, support options that might be appropriate for women with less or no trauma history may not be adequate for women with significant past trauma. Panzer, Philip, and Hayward (2000) suggest that, due to complicated treatment needs, women who have experienced chronic traumatization are less likely to respond to traditional domestic violence counselling and move quickly from a shelter to pursue safe, independent living.

Consistent with findings from this study, immigrant women also may require unique support and services surrounding language and employment barriers (Thurston et al., 2006; Fluery, 2007; Picot, 2008) and First Nations women may desire alternative methods of support that incorporate traditional, spiritual and cultural customs (Duran 2006; Gone 2010; LaFromboise et al., 1990; Schiff & Waegemakers Schiff, 2010; Walsh, Rutherford, & Kuzmak, 2009).

Tailored programming is consistent with the Pathways' Housing First model (Tsemberis, 1999) which provides individualized service plans and access to an interdisciplinary team of professionals 24/7. Unfortunately, a review of the literature suggests that these very aspects of the Pathways' Housing First prototype have been eliminated or reduced in some new Housing First programs. Therefore, one must be cautious in evaluating programs that claim to be Housing First but that have neglected to implement some of the elements. Further research is needed to determine which elements of the Pathways' Housing First model are essential to its success for diverse groups, especially women.

Recommendation 2: Housing First programs that support homeless women need to facilitate the building of stronger staff/client relationships based in respect and dignity.

Recommendation 3: Housing First programs must recognize the need for tailored programming for homeless women, especially those with histories of trauma, immigrant women and Aboriginal women.

TIME

Findings from this study suggest that the programming models in transitional housing provide women needed "time" - time to rest and recover emotionally from various traumas, find appropriate resources such as schooling and addictions treatment, and secure appropriate and safe housing. The domestic violence literature supports a need for time; it has been documented that women fleeing domestic violence need longer-term supportive housing for recovery (Melbin, Sullivan & Cain, 2003; Tutty, et al., 2009; Tutty, 2006). In the present study however, the women who expressed that time was necessary were not only those fleeing domestic violence, suggesting that women with other pathways into homelessness also require supported time to heal and recover. Time also facilitates the development of relationships that are nurtured between other women residents and staff. Emergency and short-term programs are unable to offer the necessary time to develop these relationships, while permanent housing in the community may offer time, but has limited opportunity for community development and relationship building with support staff and other women.

COMMUNITY OF WOMEN

A community of women was another very important aspect of transitional housing identified by participants in this study. Women in the project emphasized the value of being surrounded and supported by other women with similar experiences who could understand them. They spoke of being supported

while also supporting, encouraging and helping others. Fostering a community among homeless women may serve to increase feelings of belonging and acceptance in the face of community stereotypes, stigmatization and isolation (Rokach, 2005). Although literature specifically identifying women's communities as an important component of transitional housing programs is unavailable, some studies have cited the importance of interpersonal positive relationships, social ties and larger social networks for homeless people (Dordick, 1996; Padgett, Henwood, Drake & Abrams, 2008; Rokach, 2005; Tucker et al., 2009; Wolf Klitzing, 2004).

The absence of opportunity to create a community of women became a major deficit of the permanent housing program according to the women in this study. This occurred despite the fact that all but one of the women in the present study moved into and currently reside in the same building. The women expressed that they lost the opportunity to come together informally, without staff, and as a community because of limited or restricted communal space within their apartment building. Services that provide both transitional and permanent housing programming for women should consider how to facilitate building community. This needs to be a mixture of both formal and informal opportunities within which women have space to create their own community. Specifically, the YWCA's Community Housing Program should consider the creation of a common room in their permanent housing buildings; one that is easily accessible to the women without staff.

Related to this sense of community was the concept of giving back and being "my sister's keeper." Once women were permanently housed and stable, they expressed the desire to become involved in activism and helping other women. While the notion of giving back hasn't been adequately explored in literature examining transitional housing facilities, it is consistent with the Transtheoretical Model's social liberation concept (Prochaska, Johnson & Lee, 1998). That is, the idea that an important part of behaviour change is shifting therapeutic focus from one's own problems to a broader awareness of social issues (Olson, Jason, Ferrari & Hutcheson, 2005). According to Jason, Schober and Olson (2008), the "emphasis is placed on helping others who are facing similar problems, and this emphasis both contributes to the well being of the individual helping as well others" (p. 74). Additional research is needed to examine the importance of the process of giving back and regaining roles for homeless populations, specifically for women.

The results from this study suggest this process of giving back might be especially important for women, as helping others, for some, allowed them to regain what they felt were lost roles. According to the participants in this study, women have expected societal gender roles including that of mother, wife, homemaker, and caregiver and as a result, homeless women endure even greater stigma and shame due to an inability to fulfill these roles. Of particular note are the rigid gender role expectations in many immigrant communities which act to further obscure and marginalize immigrant homeless women. This concept, in particular around gender roles, was not found in the homelessness literature, warranting further research.

Recommendation 4: The YWCA and other community housing programs serving women need to foster the creation and maintenance of informal community – for instance, by including communal spaces in the design of their buildings.

Recommendation 5: The YWCA and other homeless serving agencies should look at developing ways for formerly homeless women to get involved and participate in programming and service development. Examples could be mentorship, peer-support, and advisory committees.

SUMMARY OF THE ROLE OF TRANSITIONAL HOUSING

It is through the interplay of the above components that the role of transitional housing in ending homelessness for women is revealed. Our research confirms that these elements must be offered in concert in order to make a significant difference in the lives of homeless women. For example, it is not time alone that is meaningful for women, it is having time within a safe environment that also offers 24 hour access to resources, support and counselling, while being surrounded by a community of women where one feels a sense of belonging, support and acceptance. The unique combination of having time and quality support from both counsellors and other women was identified as the fundamental aspect of transitional housing for women; and for some in this project, without which, they would not have been as successful. Although moving directly from homelessness to permanent housing (as under the Housing First model) may be effective for some homeless women, findings from this study demonstrate that this may not be the case for all. As the trajectories into homelessness are complex and diverse for women, so too are the pathways exiting homelessness.

Recommendation 6: Housing First programs should recognize and encompass the positive elements provided by transitional housing and examine how to preserve safety, support, time and a community of women.

Recommendation 7: The homelessness sector should continue to support transitional and supportive housing options for women.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this project was two-fold. First, we sought to understand whether there were any gender differences that could potentially impact the application of the Housing First service model and second, to determine what value, if any, the experience of transitional housing had in ending homelessness for a group of women. Ultimately, developing recommendations for community housing services for women and expanding the literature on women and homelessness.

The findings of this study should be considered within the limitations of the research. All the women who participated were formally housed in the YWCA Mary Dover House program, creating limitations on the generalizability of the findings to other groups of women and programs. Further, only nine women participated – a relatively small sample size. However, even though we elicited a small group of women, we were fortunate in that this group of women had diverse representation – including immigrant women and First Nations women. A final strength of this project was the zero attrition rate.

In closing, the greatest challenge lies in determining how to preserve and facilitate the elements of support, time, safety and community of women in the Housing First context. Transitional and supportive housing clearly have an important role to play in ending homelessness for some women. These types of programs are critical and need to be maintained at some level. Regardless, until more affordable, appropriate and safe housing stock is available in Calgary, all sources of housing, including emergency and transitional shelters, are required in order to respond to the enormity of homelessness.

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APPENDIX

WORKSHOP 1: This workshop was at the place of permanent housing and included a general orientation to the project, introductions of the facilitation team, a review of the purpose of the project and workshops, and a brief explanation of the photovoice methodology. Consent forms were discussed and any questions regarding consent were answered. The participants completed demographic questionnaires once they completed the consents. They were also provided with a list of low cost referrals.

WORKSHOP 2: This workshop occurred at the non-profit location. General orientation to the project was again provided similar to workshop 1. Two guests from a different photovoice project and a research assistant that had conducted a previous photovoice project attended this meeting and shared their experiences and final product. The members of the research team handed out cameras, cases and batteries to the group and some time was spent learning how to use these.

WORKSHOP 3: Introductions for any new group attendees occurred. At this workshop we had the majority of participants, most having heard of the project by word of mouth. Consent forms were discussed by a researcher with any new attendees in a separate room outside of larger group. New attendees filled out demographic questionnaires and received cameras. A photographer did a brief PowerPoint show in which she shared her images and gave some tips about photography. One of the researchers shared a few pictures and we discussed these pictures as a group as an ice-breaker for future group members sharing photographs. The group discussed and established a set of ground rules. A more in-depth overview of photovoice occurred with an emphasis on how photovoice can act as a tool to capture women's experiences with transitional housing. The participants had time to practice with their cameras.

WORKSHOP 4: A researcher talked about what it felt like to share her pictures. Two participants who felt ready shared and discussed their pictures. The group talked about photo consent forms, and the researchers discussed the "All Our Sisters Conference" in London, Ontario and the possibility of one woman attending this conference.

WORKSHOP 5: Ground rules were re-visited and discussed. Discussion of how the photography process and project was going to date occurred which was followed with sharing of images from participants. Researcher met one-on-one with the participants who shared their photos the previous week and discussed the captions that had been created from the transcription. Researcher worked towards ensuring that the captions accurately reflected what the participant wanted to say.

During this workshop the participants were provided with the five focused questions on cue cards designed to help the participants further focus their images as described above.

WORKSHOP 6: Sharing of images from participants continued with a focus on describing the images that represented experiences with transitional housing ending homelessness. Questions provided the previous week were discussed as a group. The members of the research team met one-on-one with the participants who shared their photos the previous week and discussed the captions that had been created from the transcription.

WORKSHOP 7: Sharing of images from those who had not previously shared. Researcher met one-on-one with the participants who shared their photos the previous week and discussed the captions that had been created from the transcription. Discussion of transitional housing and experiences with homelessness continued.

WORKSHOP 8: The remaining individuals who had not shared photos do so. Members of the research team re-visited the consent forms and explored how people would like to be identified with their photographs and discussion. Members of the research team met one-on-one with the participants who shared their photos the previous week and discussed the captions that had been created from the transcription. Researcher ensured the captions accurately reflected what the participant wanted to say.

WORKSHOPS 9 AND 10: During these workshops any questions regarding consent and identification were discussed with the participants. The group also focused on dissemination activities. Opportunities to get involved in community events and speak at various engagements were discussed.