

A LITTLE KINDNESS WOULD GO A LONG WAY
**A STUDY OF WOMEN'S
HOMELESSNESS IN THE YUKON**
TERRITORIAL REPORT

Prepared for
The Yukon Status of Women Council

March 2007

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Research Partners Yukon Status of Women Council Kaushee's Place Women's Transition Home	Report Writers Charlotte Hrenchuk Judie Bopp
Yukon Researcher Charlotte Hrenchuk Yukon Status of Women Council	Principal Researcher Judie Bopp, Ph.D. Four Worlds Development Centre

Disclaimer

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Yukon Status of Women Council

503 Hanson Street
 Whitehorse Yukon Y1A 1Y9
 Canada
Tel. 1-867-667-4637
Fax. 1-867-667-7004

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“A Little Kindness would go a Long Way” is the result of a project funded by the Federal Homelessness Initiative. Additional funding in the Yukon was provided by the Crime Prevention Action Fund, the Yukon Women's Directorate, the Whitehorse PSAC Women's Committee and the Yukon Federation of Labour. It is the result of coalition of women's organizations in the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut that wanted to understand the scope and dynamics of women's homelessness in their own territory and the commonalities across the North. The Yukon Status of Women Council built on work begun in 2004 by the *Strong Women's Voices – Rural Choices* report which highlighted lack of housing as a concern for rural Yukon women. In the fall of 2004, women from the Yukon, NWT and Nunavut met to discuss housing issues in the North with the Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation. Women's homelessness emerged as an issue of joint importance and concern. Since the realities of life in the North differ from those in southern Canada, research undertaken in the North by Northerners was necessary. The partners wanted to dispel the myth that there is no homelessness in the North. The stories that emerged painted a grim picture of homelessness that is largely hidden, easily overlooked.

Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with homeless women, women at risk of homelessness and service providers in three communities in the Yukon, Teslin, Whitehorse and Dawson City. Community members interviewed women in the two rural communities. Women's moving and eloquent stories were captured on tape to give life and meaning to the facts. The resulting data was grouped into categories and analyzed by themes. The categories that emerged were: determinants of homelessness, impacts of homelessness, the policies and bureaucratic practices related to homelessness and the service environment.

Now the picture has been painted, Northerners can move to change it. Recommendations were made by all involved with the project, homeless women, service providers and the Yukon Status of Women Council. Recommendations range from those that address systemic issues, to changes in policy, to shifts in attitudes and understanding of women who find themselves homeless and above all, for a little kindness.

WHY RESEARCH ON WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS IN THE NORTH IS SO IMPORTANT

According to a National Anti-Poverty Association report (Neal, 2004), women are among the fastest growing groups in the homeless and at-risk population. This study of homeless women in three cities (Ottawa, Halifax and Vancouver) found that most of the women were without adequate access to an income that could provide housing when it was needed and were victims of violence at one time in their lives. Most of the women in the NAPO study also had a personal history of child physical and/or sexual abuse and/or adult abuse from intimate partners. Fleeing their homes was often a self-protection strategy to escape from various kinds of harm.

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These findings are reinforced by Wiebe and Keirstead's 2004 study entitled *Surviving on Hope is not Enough: Women's Health, Poverty, Justice and Income Support in Manitoba*. Twenty-six of the twenty-eight respondents in this study reported that income support payments in that province do not provide enough resources to rent a safe or healthy place to live.¹ As a result they endure infestations of pests such as mice, lice and cockroaches; continual sewage backup and leaky pipes; and mildew and other types of poor air quality. They live in buildings in which homicide and other types of violence occur. They have to take money from their health care, food and clothing allowances to make their rent payments. The seriousness of these issues is compounded by the fact that most of these women have children in their care.

A poignant fact that emerged from "A Little Kindness would go a Long Way" is that all women in Canada's North are at risk of becoming homeless.

The picture of women's homelessness presented by Canadian studies such as these, as well as other recent reports about the situation across the country (e.g. Hightower and Hightower 2004, Seychuk 2004, Mearns 2004, Petit et al. 2005, Finton and Kramer 2005, CERA 2002, Carter and Polevychok 2004, Jackson 2004, Bennetts and Green 2004, to cite a sample), offers a strong counterpoint to the stereotype of homelessness as people (predominantly men) with severe addictions and mental health challenges living rough on the streets. Homelessness, as we hear from the stories shared by the women who participated in *A Little Kindness Would go a Long Way*, can just as well be the lot of a newly separated or divorced working woman living hand-to-mouth in a Whitehorse hotel room, or an elderly woman living in the shelter in Yellowknife who has left her home in a small community to escape fifty years of abuse at the hands of her partner, or a single woman and her young son sleeping in the closet of a relative's one-bedroom apartment that already houses eight other people and is the site of frequent all-night parties.

It is clear that no one would want this situation to continue.

The poignant fact that emerged from *A Little Kindness Would go a Long Way* is that all women in Canada's North are at risk of homelessness. A small change in their circumstances can jeopardize the fragile structure of their lives that allows them to meet their basic needs. Thousands of women and their children in the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut are already experiencing either absolute homelessness (i.e. living on the street or in an emergency shelter) or hidden homelessness (living in a situation that is unsafe, unhealthy and/or insecure).

Although everyone living in the North recognizes that housing is a "big problem", few realize the full extent of the problem as it impacts women and children and few understand the complex constellation of factors, many of which go well beyond the shortage of housing stock, that

¹ One of the other two women lived in a shelter and therefore did not make rent payments. The other lived in a home owned by her parents, and her rent was, therefore, subsidized by them.

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conspire to maintain this state of affairs. Those who do not live in the North have even less awareness about the despair and day-to-day suffering of these fellow Canadians. It is clear that no one would want this situation to continue. Efforts to make a change have however, generally been piecemeal and inadequate. A couple of emergency shelters, life skills classes, craft projects, small adjustments to employment support or housing policy, sensitivity training for police and justice personnel, while all valuable in themselves, have proven insufficient to address an issue that continues to worsen. Those most closely associated with women's homelessness in the North agree that what are needed are concerted and sustained efforts by a broad range of social actors.

A comprehensive research study related to women's homelessness in the North has the potential to address several of the barriers that currently prevent more effective action. First, accurate and comprehensive information is an indispensable tool for change efforts. Mearns argues that "more and better information about Aboriginal homelessness, family violence, and the gendered nature of both is needed, and urgently so" (2004:1). A clear map of the determinants of women's homelessness in the North that takes into account factors in the personal and family life of women; the social, political, cultural and economic life of their communities; and the policy and practice environment of government and voluntary sector services is critical for the development of an effective theory of change. As long as critical information is isolated in bits and pieces within the information systems of dozens of agencies and as long as it is isolated from the essential knowledge that homeless women have about this issues, it cannot really inform effective change.

People need to be given the opportunity to encounter the reality of homeless among Northern women and their children so that they can reflect on whether or not we can tolerate such suffering in a society that prides itself on compassion and that values justice.

Second, the story of women and homelessness in the North must to be told in such a way that it will inspire political and social will for action. Information is never enough to produce change. Hearts need to be touched. People need to be given the opportunity to encounter the reality of homeless among Northern women and their children so that they can reflect on whether or not we can tolerate such suffering in a society that prides itself on compassion and that values justice. Research is one way to give voice to women whose experience has so far remained on the "margins" of society. *A Little Kindness Would go a Long Way* is dedicated to achieving these aims.

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DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT THE HOMELESS WOMEN WHO PARTICIPATED IN THIS STUDY

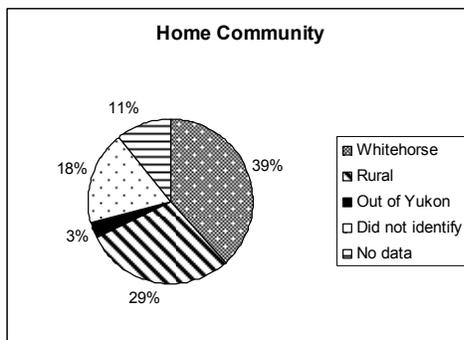
The following demographic information was gathered from the homeless women who participated in focus groups or gave interviews.

- Ethnic/cultural background
- Education level
- Number of children
- Age
- Source of income
- Health challenges

The information has been compiled as follows. It is important to remember that this information does not pretend to be statistically accurate since the women could choose not to volunteer the information. Clearly, women who are living in shelters or transitional housing were easier to access than those whose homelessness is more “hidden”. As well, this information is skewed toward women living in the larger urban centers (no matter what their home communities may be) rather than those who are currently living in more isolated locations. Despite these shortcomings, the data provides an interesting and informative picture of the range of women who find themselves homeless.

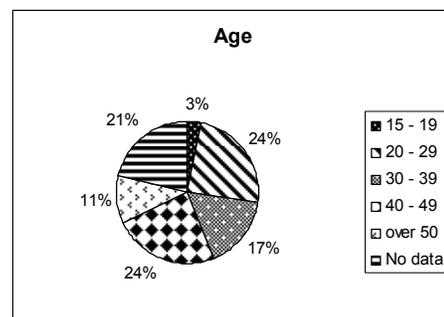
The women were all homeless at the time of this study. Most of them were cycling through the different phases of homelessness. For example, they might currently be living in a shelter but the following week, they could be living rough on the streets, then spend a few days with relatives or friends, end up trading sex for shelter, then because of abuse, end up aback in the shelter. Variations of this pattern were the norm for many of the participants.

Total number of women interviewed in the Yukon: 66



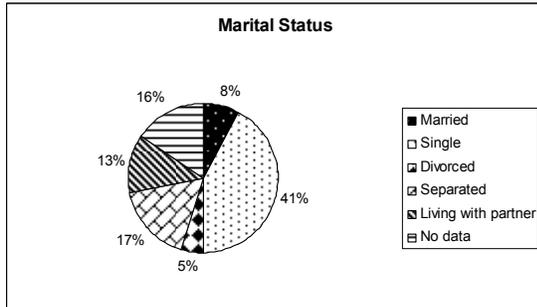
This information shatters some of the myths associated with homelessness. Of the women that provided the requested information, 39% were from Whitehorse and 29% were from a rural community. Homelessness is not just an urban phenomenon. As the narratives will illustrate, rural women face greater housing challenges than urban women.

41% of women were in the 30 – 49 year old age group, prime earning years for most people. Once out of the job market, it is more difficult at this age to obtain a well paid job. Without an address and phone number, it is difficult to obtain any kind of job.



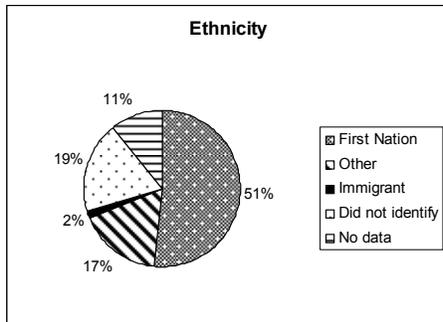
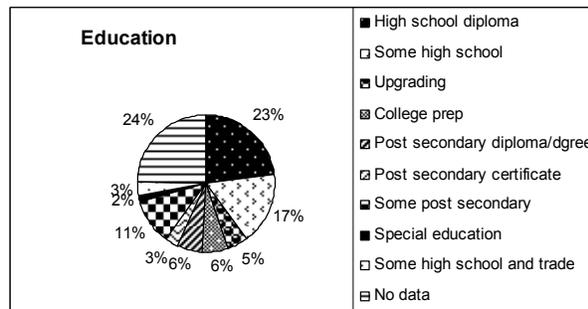
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24% were in the 20 – 29 year old age groups, a time when women are building their careers or starting families. An equal number of women were in the 20 – 29 year old and 40 – 49 year old groups. Beginning life as an adult and mid-life seem to be difficult periods as the anthologies of women’s stories will illustrate.



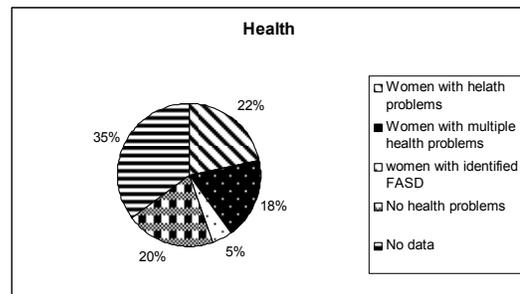
63% were on their own without a partner. The majority of women were single. Clearly, it is more difficult for lone women to find adequate housing.

23% had a high school diploma and 20% had some post secondary education. A total of 43% had an adequate education. Homeless women are not all high school dropouts.

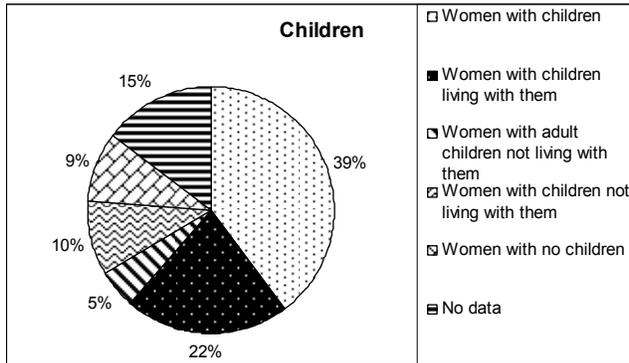


51% of participants identified themselves as First Nation and 11% identified themselves as “other”. However, 19% did not identify their ethnicity. The researcher’s perceptions were that about half the participants were First Nation and half non-First Nation women.

Over half of the women who said they had children had their children with them; one quarter did not. This fits with the Canadian trend that women and children are the fastest growing category of the homeless (Neal, 2004). It does not fit with the stereotypical bag lady image.



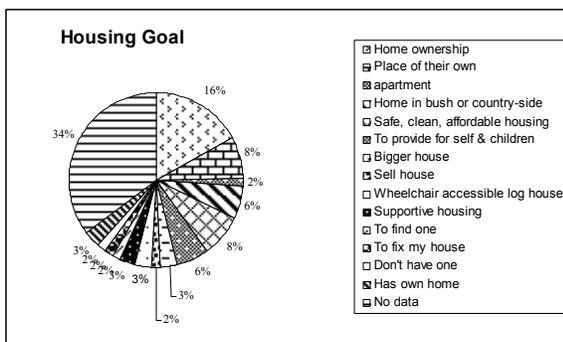
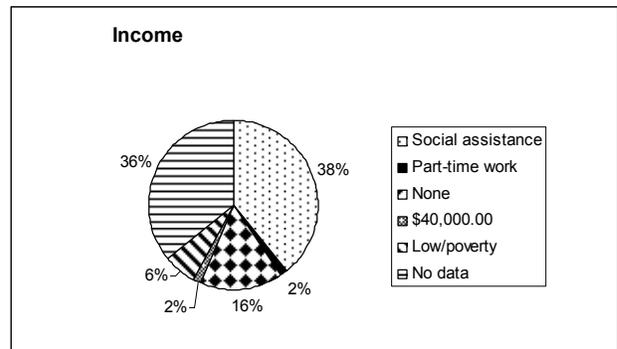
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45% of women who responded to the health questions had health problems. 18% had multiple health problems. These women are more vulnerable and have fewer resources to cope with homelessness. Clearly, our social safety net is failing these women. For some, health problems can be a result of homelessness.

For some, their health problems are worsened by poverty and homelessness. The stress that homelessness places on women, as well as poor diet, mould and unsanitary, unsafe housing conditions, all contribute to ill health.

38% of women interviewed who stated their source of income were on social assistance. 36% of the participants were reluctant to reveal their source of income. Shockingly, 16% stated they had no source of income at all.



All women wanted different and better housing than they had at present. 24% had various types of home ownership as a goal and no way to achieve this dream.

RECOMMENDATIONS SPECIFIC TO THE YUKON

These demographics indicate that homelessness is a complex, dynamic problem that can not be explained away through myths and stereotypes. How these various factors interact is detailed in the women's narratives. Homeless women are not all derelicts who can not take care of their children. It is a rural as well as urban problem. Homelessness can happen to anyone given the wrong set of circumstances and/or poor health.

Homeless women are experts on the issue. As seen in previous sections, many have cycled in and out of homelessness more than once and given the status quo, expect to do so again. They know what has worked for them in the past and what hasn't. Some spoke with clarity about the systemic nature of homelessness and the systemic solutions needed. Some were too angry, hurt or despondent to get beyond their immediate needs. Most had concrete recommendations: more safe, decent, low cost housing and higher social assistance rates to enable women to get on their feet quickly and with dignity. All wanted their voices to be heard and validated; their ideas recognized, adopted and acted upon. Homeless women don't have the luxury of time to wait.

Housing needs to be a shared responsibility between all four levels of government to ensure that women have access to housing where ever they are in the Yukon.

What the **Federal Government** can do:

- Require the Territory to end the clawback of the National Child Benefit Supplement.
- Include the voluntary sector working in the housing field around the housing table.
- Create a national housing policy that includes women's needs throughout her life cycle.
- Raise and index the shelter allowance for women receiving social assistance from the Department of Indian Affairs.
- Create an objective appeal board for clients receiving Social Assistance from the Department of Indian Affairs.
- Change the reliance on per capita based funding formula for housing and homelessness funding to one based on need and which reflects the higher costs of housing in the North.

What the **Territorial Government** can do:

- End the clawback of the National Child Benefit Supplement and other clawbacks to social assistance (ie. bingo winnings, gifts, children's earned income).
- Include the voluntary sector working in the housing field around the housing table.
- Adopt a system of portable rent supplements based on need not on access to social housing units.
- Raise and index to inflation the shelter allowance for social assistance recipients.
- Give equal access to Schedule 2 benefits to all Social Assistance recipients as soon as they qualify for assistance, including a transportation allowance for dependent children.

- Build and maintain an emergency shelter for women.
- Increase the amount of supported, independent living units, including the needs of the working poor.
- Revise the Landlord and Tenant Act to include the rights of tenants and end discrimination based on income, children and race.
- Establish a housing registry serving low income people.
- Increase the amount of low cost, social housing stock and invest in the maintenance of existing stock.
- Fund supported second stage housing units for women leaving abusive relationships.
- Institute methods of gender disaggregated data collection for government and agencies.
- Explore the option of a Guaranteed Livable Income.
- Explore the option of a shelter with managed alcohol program.
- Yukon Housing provide a tenant worker to teach tenancy skills.

What the **Municipal Government** can do:

- Improve the public transportation system to accommodate the needs of women and children, such as providing weekend and evening service, service to the Canada Games Centre and Yukon College.
- Examine, improve and expand the Handibus service.
- Include safe, decent low income housing in the renewal of the downtown core. Gentrification and downtown renewal needs to include space for low-income women and families.
- Enact and enforce bylaws regarding housing standards within the City.
- Contribute to solutions to homelessness, especially when low income people are displaced by the gentrification process.
- Include all citizens, including the homeless and low income people, in the scope of city planning through contributing to the construction of an emergency shelter for youth and an emergency shelter for women and children.

What **rural communities** can do:

- Increase the amount of safe, affordable, decent and available housing in rural communities.
- Explore the idea of housing units in Whitehorse for First Nation women.
- Increase the amount of housing available for single mothers and single women.

What the **voluntary sector** can do:

- Increase cooperation and sharing of resources within the voluntary sector around issues of homelessness, including joint proposals building on the creativity and strength of each provider to address the needs of marginalized women.

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- Explore the option of integrated case management which would provide homeless women with the supports they need to move from high need to greater independence.
- Provide outreach workers specifically to reach homeless women and reduce barriers to service.
- Keep more detailed demographic data disaggregated by gender and statistics on the housing status of clients.

What the private sector can do:

- Financial institutions need to develop programs to provide mortgages to low income women enabling them to achieve the goal of homeownership.
- Financial institutions need to provide micro-credit and banking services to meet the needs of homeless and low-income women.
- Institute methods of gender disaggregated data collection for agencies.

The following recommendations reflect the voices of homeless women participants and service providers interviewed in the Yukon. Homeless women are the experts on their situation and were full of ideas for positive changes that would help them and other homeless people. Their marginalization has prevented their opinions and recommendations from being solicited and heard. “A Little Kindness Would Go a Long Way” includes these recommendations in women’s own words as requested by participants.

Recommendation made by homeless women and service providers fell into the following **theme headings:**

- Housing services
- Food
- Advocacy
- Skills training
- Income
- Participation of client group
- Education/prevention
- Specialized supports

1. Housing Services

“I don’t know what kind of reality the government has here, but I think there should be a couple of buildings that are built for people that need to get on their feet.”

Summary

Homeless women had many practical recommendations for helpful housing services. They were eager to talk about something many of them have given a lot of thought. They are the experts

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on their circumstances yet are rarely consulted. They understand the dynamics of homelessness and know what would truly assist them. Many women would like to see more housing for single parents and single people - a hostel, a half-way house, and above all, an emergency shelter for women. It is truly astonishing that there is no emergency shelter for women in the territory. Women would like to see more social and second stage housing built in different areas of the city and a housing advocate to help find and secure appropriate housing.

Systemic and policy changes are necessary. A short-term solution is to decrease rent for low income people in the private and social housing markets and shorten waiting lists. Particularly, the unforgivable debt policy of housing authorities needs to be changed. It penalizes women for their partner's behaviour, further victimizing abused women, and prevents women from accessing more affordable housing. A cap needs to be put on the amount of rent that can be charged for subsidized housing. Many of these recommendations would not be difficult to implement by agencies and governments. What is needed is a commitment to change and to the basic human rights of the homeless.

Voices of Homeless Women

I think that women should have more options concerning shelters. We need a residence for women who are in my situation, who haven't experienced violence and don't have their kids with them and need a place to stay until they get something worked out. I know there is Kaushee's but it is mainly geared to women who have experienced violence. I need help too. What about a little building with eight rooms in a building where they can share the kitchen like that High Country Inn used to be? And there could be an apartment building for older women who need to get on their feet. Why not have it like a community where they support each other and protect each other, where they have their own little spaces. I think everybody's entitled to their own little space. This is my sanity. If I didn't have this, I probably would have committed suicide by now.

So I really think they should set up an apartment building for people that are homeless. Like a temporary thing where you can stay there for a couple of months until you find a place, a more permanent place and then you can move on and let someone else have the spot. We need something secure, safe, affordable and clean. We need a half-way house. There are a lot of women who have experienced addiction and go on to treatment and then it's now what? They end up back where they were before they went to treatment. And it could be for people taking day treatment too and women coming from jail, from hospitals or from wherever. There have to be the resources there. I don't know why the town just can't have a vision. It's not a huge town.

Women need places to go so you don't have to live on the street anymore, especially when it's so cold out, so cold. I've stayed in some pretty raunchy places just to be some place warm. How many places I just left, left all my stuff, just left everything. I think there should be a place for women that don't have any money, that have no place to call their own. They should have a

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place to go that's safe so they don't have men that are trying to rape them or women trying to hurt them or they have to put out their bodies for the night. If they actually opened a place so they can crash with blankets and beds and showers and soap, just for the night. Like I say, we need a hostel. In Alaska they have a place that you either have to work or pay two dollars a night. You can sign up for a chore. It's pretty good. There needs to be something for women who have absolutely no desire to be preached at in exchange for a roof over their head. We also need a drop-in centre during the day. It's stupid that there's no place to go. I got pretty tired of wandering around trying to stay warm and it just made me feel worse, want to drink.

And Kaushee's needs to be expanded so women could stay longer and more women could go. I've been turned away from there because it was full and that was a truly horrible feeling even though I got a hotel for the night. There needs to be more second stage apartments with more room for women with children. They could be in different parts of the city.

Women in need of housing would be really helped by housing downtown that is safe, affordable, and quiet with no wild parties and screaming kids. This would be really good for women with no transportation which most homeless women don't have, unless they are living in their vehicle. Basically dropping the high cost of housing for low income people would do it. And the Landlord and Tenant Act needs to be changed for sure.

I really think that it needs to be taken into consideration that a lot of women out there are single parents. There should be housing for women only, for single women and women and children. The women should not have to live with the drug dealers in the same building. There should be low cost housing for single women and more housing for single parents. Like I said before, a place where women are safe and secure and affordable; an apartment where they can have agency staff to help us. This would be good for women with disabilities too. And for people who have reached a point where they decide, oh I can't deal with society any more, I'm going to go live in a tent. Well, have a place to go. We need support and a little kindness.

And those housing agencies need shorter waiting lists, a flexible and responsive system based on variable needs. They should change it so you don't need a damage deposit cause we don't get it back anyways. And what they really need to do is change the unforgivable debts policy of housing authorities from damage or non-payment of rent. They should have a payment plan to pay back money owing. If you have people who are willing to pay you off, why can't you do a payment plan? They should have a minimum payment we could pay when we can't pay the whole amount. This would help not getting evicted. Also there should be a ceiling on the amount of rent they can charge. If I got a good job and I lived in Yukon Housing, my rent would go way up. So if you're trying to better yourself and make some money, all the money you would save to get out of the hole you'd been in, you have to dish out. Once you're down, you can never get up. And there should be low interest loans for women. Even if I had a trailer, I could get ahead.

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The housing authorities need to eliminate all these rules that keep people out and on the streets like people with disabilities. They need places to live with people to help them out. There's one apartment building. That's not enough. There are lots of people who can't get into these other housing things. People have a right to have a place to live no matter what. It's a basic human right.

Voices of Service Providers

Service providers echoed homeless women in their recommendations. They called for an emergency shelter for women and children. Ideas ranged from a “flop house”, a house for the inebriate, somewhere safe for women in any condition to sleep to a supported environment. *“You know, if you're homeless and you have to go through all these hoops to find a place, they're not capable of that I don't think, especially if you're dealing with drugs or alcohol, or even if you're not. I mean, you're so down there, you just want a safe place to lay your head down. I think that something like that would be wonderful thing.”* Rural women need an affordable place in Whitehorse where they can go stay when they come to the city for medical and dental reasons or for court or addiction treatment.

A main recommendation was for supported facilities for a variety of women. Service providers recommended a half-way house for women needing addiction treatment, leaving treatment, or coming from jail. *“We need a safe, non-judgmental place to allow women to stabilize. Then they may be in a place to access other services.”* They want Kaushee's Place expanded and more second stage housing units available with infrastructure to provide a continuum of care into low-cost housing. They recommended that second stage housing be supported and teach healthy parenting and healthy relationship workshops. The housing authorities need to have a priority housing policy in place for women leaving abusive situations. For those women leaving the street, *“a transition place is needed, a big tent or a cabin to make the changes into society, a little house for people to learn how to live in a house.”*

Youth need an emergency shelter and long-term housing that is supported, such as the one the Blue Feather Society operated for a few months. Some workers recommended better supports for families so that youth are not taken into care and at risk for homelessness. They want supported independent living accommodation for those with disabilities and mental health issues. We need housing for families and single people as well. As noted above, single women are at the end of the line for housing services unless they are pregnant leaving them vulnerable to victimization. *“I would really like to see a residence like in Yellowknife with transitional housing for women and families, that doesn't have really narrow criteria, with lots of support right in the building.”*

A majority of service providers recommended more low-cost housing, subsidized housing, and not so-called affordable housing at market rental rates. *“I strongly believe in cooperative housing and the idea of decent housing that's non-profit.”* Like homeless women, they believe that housing authorities should institute a policy of forgivable debt. *“If people owe money to Whitehorse*

Housing, then they cannot get back in there until they pay it off. And that is a challenge to a lot of people, cause where do they get the money to pay it off? Or if they had some way of making a contract to work on paying it gradually, it would be more helpful.” One worker recommended the Habitat for Humanity approach because it allows people to keep their dignity.

2. Food

“I don’t know about you, but all my people were kitchen people and they did amazing things out of the kitchen.”

Summary

Women recommended systemic changes to service providers’ requirements and an increase in social assistance rates which have not been raised since 1992. They are not even indexed to the cost of living. An increase in rates would enable women to feed themselves and their families more nutritiously throughout the month. Women would like a real food bank, not just emergency food available once a month. Several women recommended a community kitchen. With a firm commitment to food security, these recommendations could become a reality in Whitehorse

Voices of Homeless Women

Up the SA rates, that’s what I say. And change all those requirements that service providers have that keep women from being able to afford decent food. While we’re waiting around for them to do that, we need a real food bank - one with fresh stuff and food that’s not past the expiry date. Maybe more food banks in different areas of town instead of just downtown because not all women or men have the money to come downtown. I would think food banks could be spread. Or if not, get somebody from the Salvation Army to bring up a bit of food to a certain area to where it can be dispersed.

And how about a community kitchen where we can cook? Just like women coming together in a kitchen and making food and communicating and spending the time to do it right. It really builds a lot of good energy for moving forward in other areas. It should be a nice sized, well-equipped kitchen for women that are having a hard time. That’s probably a feasible thing that could be done.

Voices of Service Providers

Service providers recommended the creation of a community kitchen. Their other recommendations were intertwined with recommendations regarding income security, raising the rates to provide adequate food and ending the struggle between eating and shelter.

3. Advocacy

“Having a peer advocate, someone who’s been there and back.”

Summary

Homeless women know they need help with navigating the system, knowing their rights, finding and securing housing and general support. They spoke highly of the Women’s Advocate at the Victoria Faulkner Women’s Centre and a great proportion of women interviewed had used the service. Marginalized women cannot be expected to become part of the mainstream and advocate for themselves and their children without help. More women’s advocates are a necessity to get women off the streets and couches and out of sub-standard housing.

Voices of Homeless Women

I think what would help me out would be someone to help find something, affordable housing. They could set up meetings for people who don’t have contact numbers; could have a worker to call and say you have an appointment to meet this person, look at housing, to see about income or stuff like that. You could leave your information with them and landlords around Whitehorse would know and they could say they have this place available and they could refer to this worker or something. Social services and DIA don’t help with this.

The women’s shelter is great but we need someone who is trained in mediation and conflict resolution to help us. Kaushee’s could also use a justice worker and a social worker right in the transition home. More time at Kaushee’s would help too. If the stay was extended we could get more help from these workers to get on our feet again.

We need women’s advocates to go to DIA with women so they know their rights and aren’t treated like bums. And for DIA to go with women to look at housing and tell landlords they can’t turn us down because we’re on SA. We need a service for women who don’t know their rights; we need another women’s advocate. That would be someone you could talk to about this and that. And for youth, a peer advocate. Women could use one of those too, someone who’s been there and back.

We need a huge building with two floors for the half-way house or whatever you want to call it, with an essential kitchen for communal living. And if people need help with whatever, getting to their appointments or trying to find work or all kinds of things, there would be social programs set up within the building. So easy to do something like that. And we need way more workers who could help people in need. These are things that would help me and homeless women like me.

Voices of Service Providers

Recommendations for advocacy involved filling gaps and augmenting existing services. *“We need case management around all issues contributing to someone’s homelessness. Women can’t deal with all agencies on their own. Too overwhelming. They need advocacy.”* As the number of homeless women and women at risk of homelessness grow, so does the need for advocacy. *“There is a need for help and advocacy with housing issues.”* There is no such person at present. Workers emphasized the importance of someone accompanying a woman looking for housing; to help women leaving jail find appropriate accommodation; to pressure environmental health about unsanitary living conditions; to help with landlord and tenant matters. A housing advocate would enable women to get back on their feet and contribute to stable housing for Yukon women.

4. Skills Training

“They could start like, support groups to make them feel better about themselves.”

Summary

Homeless women want training to increase their skills, self esteem and employability. Youth recommended training for jobs and in finding jobs. One quarter of women interviewed had not finished high school. After being homeless for any length of time, women need assistance to get back on their feet emotionally as well as financially. Being homeless negatively affects a woman’s sense of self worth and the marginalization by society she has experienced is often internalized. This makes it harder to leave the street where she is accepted and has friendship and support. Women want and deserve programs to raise their self-esteem, to help them have the strength and confidence to get off the street. Society has to demonstrate acceptance and offer a respectful, dignified way forward.

Voice of Homeless Women

Homeless women don’t get treated with respect. They need to be taught self dependency skills. They could start support groups to make them feel better about themselves; teach self confidence skills and self defense.

I was in this program and after the program was done, the people running the program were going to be out of work until the next program started. Well, there you go. They could keep these people working and train more people or run these self esteem courses too, job search courses. And if women could stay at Kaushee’s longer, they could get more help. Cause none of these courses are offered in a month or workshops that they need to attend to get back on their feet. If they could stay there, or there was a place to go like we said, and take everything they need, they would have an easier time of it.

And for youth, my sister said she wants to do it by herself. But it's frustrating cause she's young and doesn't know how. But she's rebellious and wants to be independent. So she does need some training in how to do things like get a job. She says she wants more opportunities to occupy her time. That wouldn't be so hard to do.

Voices of Service Providers

Service providers recommended training in household maintenance and management, getting security deposits back, and in childcare and relationship building. They would like to see more supported employment programs. Mentoring in employment and in childcare was another idea. *"If we can put some supports in place for that family, most people are going to learn. And if they don't learn, their kids will learn, so at least the next generation will have more skills."* *"I see a lot of people that have great potential. If they had some mentorship for a period of time, they could be successful and productive."*

5. Income

"Up the SA rate."

Summary

A unanimous recommendation was to increase social assistance rates. Story after story illustrated the inability of women to live on rates that have not changed since 1992. The cost of living has escalated tremendously in the ensuing time period. The cost of housing continues to soar as fuel prices rise and the cost of building materials escalates. It is unrealistic to expect women, single or with children, to live on the current rates. Women's homelessness would decrease noticeably if social assistance rates were raised to a living rate. Not only would life be more comfortable, but it would be easier for women to get back on their feet and off social assistance. The vast majority of women interviewed were not interested in malingering on social assistance. They would much rather be independent and take pride in their accomplishments.

Voice of Homeless Women

The whole social assistance thing needs to be changed, DIA and any of these agencies that are giving the help. Not giving enough monetary help for one thing. Like the bar is way too low; that creates problems, stressful problems for people. Increase the social assistance rates.

There should be jobs for youth, youth worker jobs or mature youth that need jobs or an opportunity. We need more jobs for women to be trained on the job and for people coming out of college, so they don't need to be worried about money and where it is going to come from. I think that would be a good idea.

Voices of Service Providers

In response to the question what would help, this response is typical. *“Social assistance rates raised; people are still hungry and homeless.”* Service providers suggested that YTG look at their rates every three years or so. *“Rates aren’t indexed to inflation. Rates haven’t changed in ten years. The cost of living has gone sky high. A single person gets about \$1,000.00 per month which includes food, shelter, utilities and fuel. Fuel allowances have not changed enough.”* Since DIA follows the lead of YTG, reviewing and raising YTG rates would benefit all Yukon women. Workers also recommended that women have access to benefits for a while after they get a job and before they are totally cut off. Raising rates would assist women with food security and allow women to be adequately housed.

Several service providers suggested that the government look at its own income, its general revenue and make different decisions on where the money goes. More needs to go to social issues and less to infrastructure.

6. Participation of Client Group

“Ask the people what they need.”

Summary

Homeless, marginalized women do not feel heard, respected or included. The women interviewed were intelligent, thinking people who are homeless for a complex variety of reasons. The first step for any programs addressing their needs is including them in a meaningful way. The degree of inclusion would be determined by their capacity to participate and by how fundamental their needs. Absolutely homeless women need a home and food security first. Then they might have the luxury to think about their other needs. For maximum success, any program must be participatory. All women interviewed had thoughtful and creative recommendations, the desire to help others and the wish to be included. They did not wish to be passive recipients of services or charity.

Voices of Homeless Women

The only way to get youth interested is if there is something to challenge us, a new experience, not just looking through another person’s words about how something is done. We want to do things with our friends and we want to be involved.

Mothers could live together; protect each other, baby sit for each other. Just ask us, we’ll tell you what we need. Ask the people what they need. It’s hard for the government or agencies to make decisions when they don’t know what women want to do, right? They need to know what our lives are like. Well, how are they going to know if they don’t ask us? It would make sense and would make us feel better. We all have some pretty good ideas about what would help. I don’t want people just doing things for me. I’m not stupid. I’m poor and I have problems, but I’m not stupid.

Voices of Service Providers

Service providers emphasized the need for homeless women to be involved in making policies and decisions that affect their lives. *“But it starts by asking people what they need, what are the problems, what they like. Let’s not build something that’s not going to be used. It’s important for agencies and services to build something that the people want.”* Women also need to be involved in running services. *“We need an emergency shelter for women. Could be run by women... Could be a resource centre for women. Have the women themselves do the work, for example the laundry. Needs to be developed without religion involved. When religion is involved, the shelter/services come with a cost. Needs to be a place which is empowering for women, a place to be safe and accepted for where they’re at.”*

7. Education and Prevention

“People are homeless in our community and they just choose to ignore it.”

Summary

Society’s indifference or punitive attitude toward homelessness is contributing to the problem. Women were quite clear about this. They recommended that people be made aware of the reality of homeless women’s lives, the extent of the problem, and that preventative programs be put in place.

Voice of Homeless Women

It’s great that people are seeing that there is homelessness in the Yukon right now. What we need is maybe more training for the help and more ways to show people that women are homeless. People are homeless in our community and they just choose to ignore it. Nothing will change unless people are educated.

I have an idea for young girls. Girls who are selling drugs and hooking take the bus. You know those bus ads? They could make some to educate girls about the women’s centres. Then they would know where they could go for help and support.

Voices of Service Providers

Recommendations for education and training varied from suggestions for training for homeless women, for the general public and for policy makers. For homeless women, service providers recommended tenants’ seminars, information sessions on available services and resources, training in parenting, healthy relationships, household maintenance and management. What is needed are education and training programs that translate into behaviour change. *“People make changes in one area of their life after/when having success in another. Provide and encourage employment training and people will become more self-sufficient and will no longer rely on others for accommodation.”*

Prevention recommendations included having older youth who are doing well mentor younger children. Accessible, affordable childcare was recommended. Emphasis needs to be placed on looking at children in elementary school and addressing the problems then with support. *“But to break the cycle more awareness has to be created, so it all boils down to what is acceptable.”*

Workers said that public awareness needs to be created, especially regarding women’s homelessness. Then the community would be more interested in solving the problem. It was suggested that government bureaucrats spend a full day at agencies that serve the homeless so that the homeless would have a face and the issue be meaningful.

8. Specialized Supports

“So they should have a place where you can take your family.”

Summary

There are definite gaps in service that need to be filled. Specialized supports for youth, families and people with disabilities and mental health issues were recommended. They are more vulnerable and have distinctive needs that are not included in general programs and services.

Voices of Homeless Women

I’ll tell you what I think. There is a lack of self esteem and a lot of drinking because you don’t really have anyplace to turn. Support would be a big thing and learning about ways to do things. And instead of separating your family if you have to go to a shelter, there should be a place for the whole family, and you could stay together and get help. Or if it’s for women, there should be people to help with whatever.

There should be more for disabled people and women with mental health problems. I’ve seen lots of women with problems on the street. They really need support to stay off the street and get along in life. I mean people with physical disabilities and the ones with difficulties learning or FASD or who are slow. There’s not enough out there for them and they end up not able to cope and end up homeless.

Youth want a place for younger kids to grow and learn a little bit more from older youth or people who have been through the same situation. I could have used a place like that. Kids don’t want to talk about something to somebody who hasn’t been there cause “you don’t know what I’m talking about man; you have not been there”. They’re very rebellious. We need a youth shelter and there could be help and counselors and information about jobs and housing and whatever. Cause each and every one of us is looking for an opportunity. And we just need a little push or an opportunity cause we won’t really go looking for it.

Camps are another good idea with lots of outdoor things to do like canoeing, dog sledding, or go travel around all over the mountains. Some of us are reaching way out there, but we are stuck here. It keeps us so anxious and people are always trying to get that same feeling from alcohol or

drugs, you name it. So get some funds and some counselors and get some camps going. Once you get them interested with the activities, then you learn about all that educational system and stuff in the end. That's what you want, isn't it?

Voices of Service Providers

Service providers unanimously recommended supported programs: supported independent living, supported employment, supported second stage housing, supported halfway house for addiction treatment aftercare and women leaving jail or the street, supported seniors' housing, supported youth housing, and supported housing for those with mental health issues, cognitive and physical disabilities and peer support. *"Have them all together in their own little community to support each other. And see them all the way through. You don't want to just get them through so many cracks and then they're on their own. You still have to be there for them....They can cut the strings themselves too."*

Some workers recommended twenty-four hour support for very disabled women and argued that *"we are paying for it anyway"*. Workers recommended more supports for families in trouble. *"I think the focus should be how do I help this child re-establish a relationship with his family? How do I help that family become healthy? We need to put resources into building strong families not separating them."*

One service provider had this vision: *"Fifty acres up the Mayo Road with twelve log cabins on it and one big main house. You come to the main house for your meals but you have your own cabin to live in. You don't show up and I come and get you...Everything is in that main house and there are day programs, hunting, fishing, hiking, canoeing, knitting, weaving, the works. There should be a change of attitude of DIA and Adult Services."*

Another aspect of support that was discussed is the support available for service providers. There is nothing formal set up. Service providers find informal support with each other and feel a sense of satisfaction when they have helped someone. They spoke of the necessity of working together, especially in the North where there are few financial resources to draw from. *"We need to work together collaboratively. We don't have enough pots of money or resources in the territory and I think that's the only thing that's going to help."*