Ontario Shelter Research Project

Presentation to the
Ontario Ministry of Community & Social Services
November 16, 2012

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Goals of this presentation

- Tell you who we are
- Establish the need for a more comprehensive evaluation approach for women's shelters
- Describe what we did and what we found
- Set the stage for the next phase of our work – evaluating Ontario's shelters

Research Committee

- Michele Hansen, Project Lead, Huron Women's Shelter
- Clare Freeman, Interval House of Hamilton
- Kate Wiggins, Women's Community House, London
- Linda Ense, Native Women's Centre, Hamilton
- Barb MacQuarrie, Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, Western University
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- Nora Angles, Barbara Schlifer Clinic, Toronto
- Ann Armstrong, Gillian's Place, St. Catherines
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- Pam Cross, Legal Consultant,
- Amanda Dale, Woman Abuse Council of Toronto
- Katheryn Eggert, Women's Resource Centre, Strathroy
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- Gayle Montgomery, Ontario Works, Lambton County
- Marianne Park, Social Services Consultant, Woodstock
- Maureen Reid, Children's Aid Society of London and Middlesex
- Brenda Thomas, Children's Aid Society, Native Services Branch
- Diana Tikasz, Sexual Assault & Domestic Violence Care Centre, Hamilton
- Liz Westcott, Green Haven Shelter, Orillia
- Deb Zweep, Faye Peterson Transition House, Thunder Bay

Knowledge Gaps

❖ Lack of research-based evidence about what shelters do and how well they do it.

❖ Previous evaluations have not always focused on outcomes of most importance to women or included the unique expertise and experience of the sector.

Project Goals

- <u>Develop Evidence</u>: about shelter services and their effectiveness in improving the lives of abused women and their children;

- <u>Be Relevant:</u> to the first hand knowledge and experiences of women, shelter workers and those in related sectors;

- <u>Inform the System</u>: identify the unique contributions made by shelters to support abused women and their children and where this fits in the broader system of helping agencies;

Goals, cont.

- <u>Share Results</u>: build-in knowledge exchange and communication strategies targeting stakeholders across Ontario;

- <u>Develop Capacity</u>: familiarize the shelter sector with research approaches, the value of evidence-informed evaluation, and effective use of research results to inform practice.
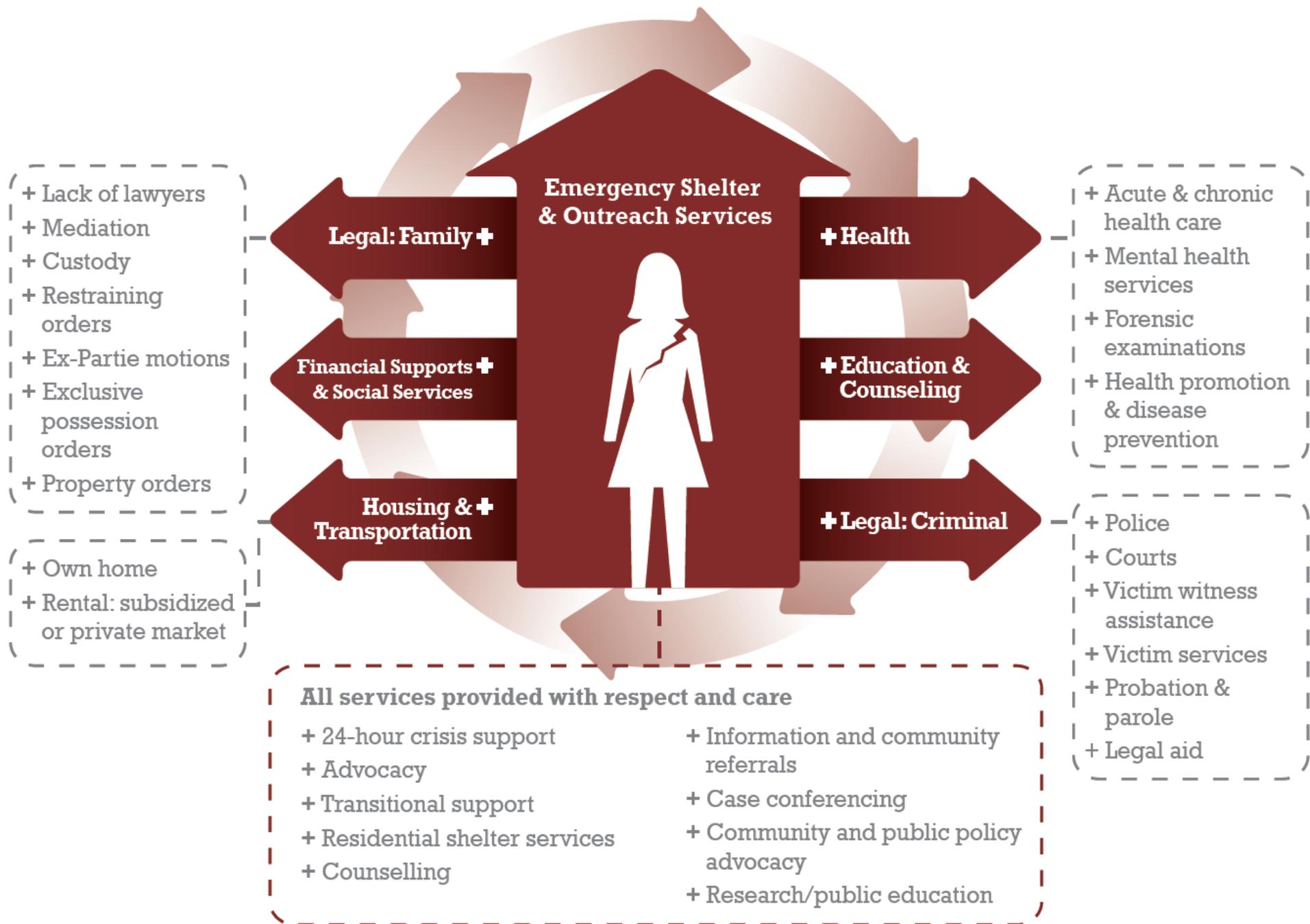
Key Questions

- ❖ What programs & services do shelters offer? (Phase 1)
  - ▪ regional/cultural differences?
- ❖ What kinds of expertise do shelter staff provide? How can these inform our evaluation? (Phase 1)
- ❖ How do shelter services relate to other community-based services for abused women? (Phase 1)
- ❖ What impact do shelters have in the lives of abused women? (Phase 2, forthcoming)

Shelters as System Navigation Hubs

Ontario's shelters

- are a safe place for women and children during crisis, available in 122 communities covering the province

- provide "navigation and linkage" functions to help women access services they need for themselves and their children

Model of the **Central Role of Shelters** in **Abused Women's Help-Seeking**

Emergency Shelter & Outreach Services

Legal: Family ✚

+ Lack of lawyers
+ Mediation
+ Custody
+ Restraining orders
+ Ex-Partie motions
+ Exclusive possession orders
+ Property orders

Financial Supports ✚ & Social Services

Housing & ✚ Transportation

+ Own home
+ Rental: subsidized or private market

✚ Health

+ Acute & chronic health care
+ Mental health services
+ Forensic examinations
+ Health promotion & disease prevention

✚ Education & Counseling

✚ Legal: Criminal

+ Police
+ Courts
+ Victim witness assistance
+ Victim services
+ Probation & parole
+ Legal aid

All services provided with respect and care

+ 24-hour crisis support
+ Advocacy
+ Transitional support
+ Residential shelter services
+ Counselling

+ Information and community referrals
+ Case conferencing
+ Community and public policy advocacy
+ Research/public education

For **Women with Children,** add to the above

+ Child Protection →
- + Children's Aid Society
- + *Child and Family Services Act*
- + Shelter protocols

+ Board of Education →
- + Change in schools
- + Board of Education protocols

+ Child Health →
- + Acute & chronic health care
- + Counseling
- + Parenting support

For **Women New to Canada,** add to the above

+ Legal: Immigration →
- + Status in Jeopardy if sponsored
- + Language barriers
- + Cultural differences

From an original concept of Clare Freeman, 2004

What we did (Phase 1)

- Surveyed / Interviewed **68** Shelter Executive Directors
- Interviewed **41** shelter Staff members
- Interviewed **75** shelter Clients
- Interviewed **80** service providers from the broader social service sector
  - **Representing 4 RABA regions, plus shelters serving Aboriginal people**
  - **Conducted by telephone, online, in person, individually and in groups**

Shelters Provide More Than Just A Bed!

What we found

WHAT Shelters Provide

1. Safe Refuge
2. Material Support
3. Information and System Navigation Support
   - **provide information; accompany to meetings; help understand rules, policies and outcomes; help work through options; develop plans**
4. Counseling, Education and Support for Self-efficacy
   - **New perspectives, new skills**

HOW they provide it

- ❖ Services are provided with "**care and respect**" and with emotional support
- ❖ Shelter workers create and maintain "connectedness" with women, and between women and other services
  - ▪ "**connecting and correcting**"
- ❖ Shelters give women and their children "time to heal" and support her across time
  - ▪ **healing is a process, not an event**
- ❖ They help women access supports after leaving shelter, and encourage them to stay linked for ongoing support
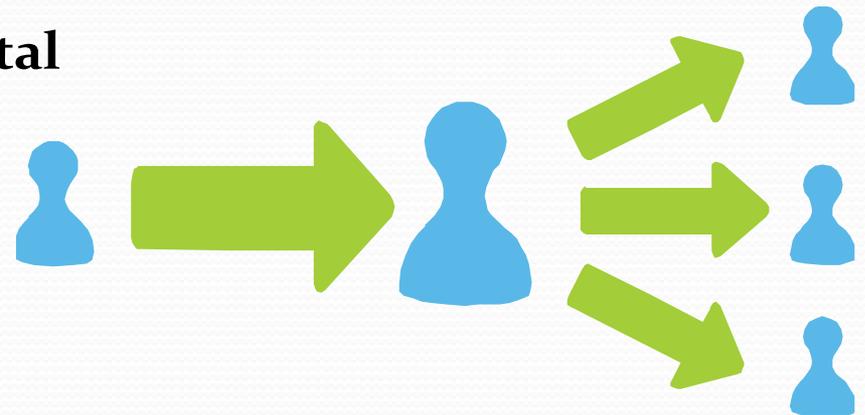
Changing lives for the better

You know, I'm the happiest I've been now. I can't believe how happy we are and I didn't think that it was possible because I just...didn't think I could do it on my own. I'm really glad that I was able to do what I did through the shelter, and I just appreciate everything that they did to help us because it's changed our lives for the better, for sure. (client)

Increasing capacity to manage

❖ Women become able to navigate multiple helping systems, and this greater individual capacity can increase women's ability to contribute to their families and their communities

  ▪ **new skills and knowledge, mastery & self-efficacy**

  ▪ **"organizational literacy"**

  ▪ **social and community capital**

"Listen…guide"

Having somebody listen for the first time was amazing. Knowing that the safety net was there after and if I didn't know which direction to go in to fix things, they would sort of guide me, in, 'okay, this is the services you want, this is what you need.' So it wasn't even the safety net of knowing I could come back, but knowing that there was somebody to call that will point you in the right direction when you need it. (client)

Context is key

- shelters that provide service primarily for aboriginal communities emphasize a 'whole family' approach that takes into account the damaging impact of historical oppression

- shelters located in rural and remote communities often respond to a wide range of issues because there are no other services nearby, placing extra stress on small shelters with few staff (> need for volunteers)

- any method of evaluation must take such contextual differences into account

Invisible work is still work

- the intensive time commitment that shelter staff make to link women to other needed services related to their needs (and those of their children) is significant

- this often includes more than just a link, but also support in understanding options and making decisions

- any method of evaluation needs to account for this (current count-oriented indicators generally do not)

Barriers to providing services (EDs)

- women's poverty and lack of income support
- inadequate funding of shelters and services
- lack of availability/access to existing services in the community, especially affordable housing
- complexity and lack of effectiveness of legal system
- **lack of knowledge and awareness, by actors in the broader system, of**
  - **the needs of abused women and their children**
  - **what shelters do**

How the broader sector sees shelters and their work

- Shelter services are essential for those fleeing violence
- Most have a good understanding of the range of services shelters provide
- Concerned that shelters are sometimes 'full' and unable to take women in, even in crisis; shelter admission criteria may turn away women with complex problems (e.g., mental health & addictions).
- The question of <u>responsibility</u> for providing shelter and support to abused women and their children was a key theme among all respondents (shelter and non-shelter)
  - unresolved policy issue
  - inter-agency protocols, when they exist, are seen as very useful

Current Accountability and Evaluation Metrics

- The new 'data elements' that shelters are reporting to MCSS are massive in scope; though they do attempt to capture a wider range of shelter services, including 13 service types, this is still limited
- There is a huge difference in the capacity of individual shelters to accurately collect and report data
- There is no standardized data collection system provided by the province
- **The current data collection does not reflect what our research has told us about the value of the work of women's shelters.**

What do evaluation approaches need to factor in?

- Healing from trauma is a process that usually leaves women with ongoing needs for various kinds of services across time; re-using shelters, should not be seen as "recidivism"

- Shelters need flexibility in their mandates to include vulnerable women who have a lifetime history of various kinds of abuse (e.g., Aboriginal historical trauma)

- True assessment of the full nature, scope and value of paid and volunteer labour is needed, and of shelters' necessary 'work-arounds' to deal with chronic over-capacity and gaps in the broader social service landscape

Phase II – Evaluation strategy

Any method of assessing the quality and effectiveness of shelter services must:

- take into consideration the different contexts in which shelters operate (urban, rural, remote, Aboriginal)

- the particular circumstances of the women who use them (children, multiple traumas, mental health)

- the value and impact of emotional support, system navigation, creating and maintaining connectedness, and providing "care"

Next steps

- Create and pilot a shelter evaluation approach that is:
  - Evidence- and theory-informed to account for the broad range of things that shelters do, and <u>how</u> they do them
  - Woman-focused to account for the things that matter most to women and their children
  - Modular/flexible to account for the variations in shelters' contexts - "one size doesn't fit all"
- Find funding / partners

Saving and reclaiming lives

There was a few people in here [shelter] that saved my life, I would not have survived without their understanding and empathy. I mean anybody can say, "You know what, you're not alone, it's ok. But it takes a special kind of person to make that stick, and they were willing to do that as many times as I needed to hear it. And that, you know, you're worth it and you're not this worthless piece of junk that has been discarded. You deserve to be safe. And having somebody reinforce that daily was huge for me because I'd never had it… (client)