Surfacing Our Strengths: Co-creating Strategic Solutions with Women+ At Risk of Violence and Homelessness

The Challenge

The Invitation

How might we co-develop equitable, safe and culturally supportive responses to the housing needs of women+ who have been/are at risk of experiencing violence and homelessness in Greater Victoria?

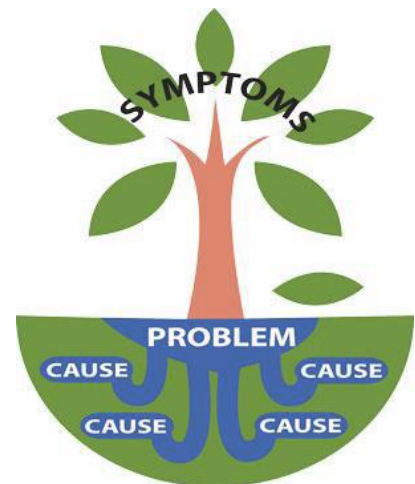How might we co-develop solutions in a way that protects the dignity and cultural identity of women+?

What is a Housing Solutions Lab?

The Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness (GVCEH) and the Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness are inviting others to join them in an 18 month 'housing solutions lab'. Together we will focus on honouring and centring the voices of women+ with lived experiences of homelessness and violence in order to listen, learn, co-develop and implement new solutions that address health, well-being and housing challenges for this population. SHIFT Collaborative is supporting the lab process.

A Solutions Lab, or "Social Innovation Lab" as they are often called, is a unique approach to addressing complex and deeply rooted social challenges (such as racism, stigma, or affordable housing) by creating a safe space for diverse stakeholders from different sectors, communities and perspectives to experiment and learn together. Lab participants and partners work together to co-develop and test new solutions or approaches that can help address and transform the conditions that are giving rise to the problem at hand.
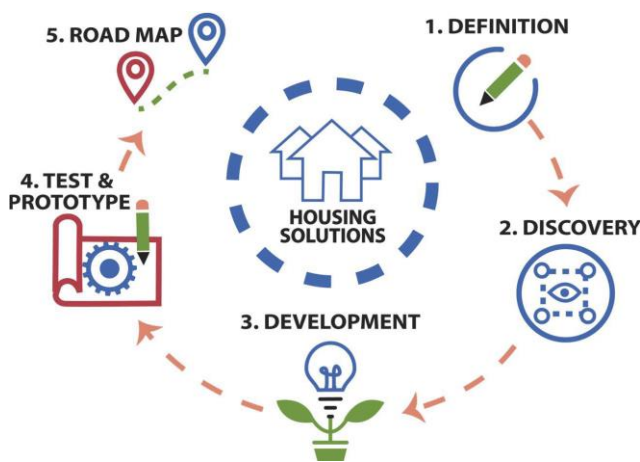
Solutions labs focus on:
- **Engaging diverse perspectives and roles**, especially those who are most impacted by the issue (i.e. community members with lived experience), and other types of knowledge holders.
- **Co-creation, not consultation**: Solutions need to be owned to be accepted by everyone who will play a part in their implementation, which demands co-creation with everyone involved.
- Generating ideas, processes, actions and projects that can **address root causes** (not just symptoms).
- **Learning by doing**—testing out solutions, observing what happens, learning and adapting.
- Using **participatory and creative** "hands-on" methods and engagement.
- **Building capacity** of those involved to increase trust, deepen relationships, and take action together

What does a Solutions Lab look like in practice?

We don't yet know what the solutions are for developing equitable, safe and culturally supportive responses to the housing needs of women+ who have been/are at risk of experiencing violence and homelessness in Greater Victoria area.

This process is about deepening our shared understanding of the challenges, coming up with ideas, testing out what works, and letting go of what doesn't. Over 18 months we are inviting communities and partners from diverse sectors to join us in these five phases to generate new and innovative solutions to address the housing needs of women+ who have been/are at risk of experiencing violence and homelessness in Greater Victoria.

1. DEFINITION: planning, finding partners and resources
2. DISCOVERY: bringing communities, women+ with lived/living experience, and stakeholders together to learn about the issues facing women+ fleeing violence
3. DEVELOPMENT: Communities, women+ with lived/living experience, and stakeholders dig into what was learned and design potential solutions
4. TEST & PROTOTYPE: potential solutions are tested
5. ROAD MAP: the most viable solutions are translated into action plans that all partners support

For more information on the **Surfacing Our Strengths Solutions** Lab see our **website**.

The Challenge

Violence plays a pivotal role in experiences of homelessness for women, and especially for Indigenous women due to the ongoing impacts of colonialism. The homelessness-serving sector and violence against women (VAW) sector currently operate quite separately, presenting challenges to providing responsive, person-centred and culturally appropriate supports and housing options. Women's Shelters Canada notes that, "while there is a general recognition of the link between violence against women (VAW), housing, and homelessness, the VAW shelter sector has had limited involvement with the housing and homelessness sectors.[1]" As a result, many women+ are "poorly served by both, or not served by either – especially Indigenous women and others with multiple marginalizations"[2].

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[1] Maki, K. (2017). Housing, Homelessness, and Violence Against Women: A Discussion Paper. Women's Shelters Canada: Ottawa. ON. Retrieved from http://endvaw.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Housing-Homelessness-and-VAW-Discussion-Paper-Aug-2017.pdf

[2] Maki, K. (2017). Housing, Homelessness, and Violence Against Women: A Discussion Paper. Women's Shelters Canada: Ottawa. ON. Retrieved from http://endvaw.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Housing-Homelessness-and-VAW-Discussion-Paper-Aug-2017.pdf

This project will strive to create the conditions in which all peoples enjoy full protection and guarantees against all forms of violence and discrimination.[3]

Some Background on the Challenge

Every six days a **woman** in Canada is **killed** by her **intimate partner**.
https://www.homelesshub.ca/blog/ending-homelessness-women-and-children-affected-intimate-partner-violence%C2%A0

There were over **107,000 victims of police-reported intimate-partner violence** (IPV) in Canada in **2019**. For 660 victims of IPV, a firearm was present. **Women** accounted for **almost 8 in 10 victims of all IPV incidents** and they were **even more likely to be the victim** in the 660 IPV incidents where a **firearm** was present.
Government of Canada legislation targets intimate-partner violence: News release (March 4, 2021)

Aboriginal (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) **women and children** were **overrepresented** in **residential facilities for victims of abuse**, with Aboriginal women and children **represented 5 and 3 times higher, respectively**, in these facilities compared to their representation in the Canadian population.
https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-002-x/2019001/article/00007-eng.pdf?st=jLxYqgCF

In 2017/2018, there were **552 residential facilities for victims of abuse** operating across Canada that saw **over 68,000 admissions** in the previous year, the **vast majority being women (60.3%)** and their accompanying **children (39.6%)**.
https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-002-x/2019001/article/00007-eng.pdf?st=jLxYqgCF

On an average day, Violence Against Women (VAW) **shelters** across Canada **turn away almost 1,000 women and their children**.[4]

On a **single day** (April 18, 2018) **669 women**, **236** accompanying **children**, and 6 men were **turned away** from **domestic violence shelters** across Canada.
https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/190417/dq190417d-eng.htm

7% of women in Canada have experienced **hidden homelessness** at some point in their lives.[5]
https://www150.statcan.gc.ca

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[3] This project honours Article 22 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which commits to ensuring that Indigenous women and children enjoy the full protection and guarantees against all forms of violence and discrimination.

[4] Schwan, K., Versteegh, A., Perri, M., Caplan, R., Baig, K., Dej, E., Jenkinson, J., Brais, H., Eiboff, F., & Pahlevan Chaleshtari, T. (2020). *The State of Women's Housing Need & Homelessness in Canada: Key Findings.* Hache, A., Nelson, A., Kratochvil, E., & Malenfant, J. (Eds). Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

[5] Rodrigue, S. (2016). *Hidden homelessness in Canada.* Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 75-006-X. Ottawa. Retrieved from https://www150.statcan.gc.ca

British Columbia

Seven Women in British Columbia Killed Due to Femicide in the Past Seven Weeks (Mar 26, 2021 | Battered Women's Support Services, Events)

<div align="right">https://www.bwss.org/seven-women-in-british-columbia-killed-due-to-femicide-in-the-past-seven-weeks/</div>

Only **4% of women** are able to leave transition houses for **an affordable home** in BC. While approximately 25% find housing (mostly beyond their means), about **75% remain temporarily sheltered** or return to their abuser.

<div align="right">https://bcsth.ca/housingproviders/</div>

Vancouver Island, BC

One hundred percent of the Indigenous women in Victoria's "Priority One" cohort – individuals experiencing chronic homelessness who have not experienced increases in housing stability or program participation within the existing intervention landscape – cited intimate partner violence as the key reason for their housing loss.

<div align="right">Captured from data collected from a supportive house on Vancouver Island</div>

Victoria, BC

Victoria's 2020 Point-in-Time (PiT) Count found that **33%** of its homeless survey respondents identified as **female**, the proportion of women experiencing homelessness is likely higher, but not currently captured by conventional approaches.

2.2% identified as **another gender identity** (other gender identities include two-spirit, trans female/trans woman, trans male/trans man, and others)

Further, **Indigenous women** experience disproportionate rates of homelessness; among those identifying as Indigenous, **44%** were women.

<div align="right">https://www.crd.bc.ca/docs/default-source/housing-pdf/housing-planning-and-programs/crd-pit-count-2020-community-report-2020-07-31.pdf</div>

Victoria's 2020 Point-in-Time (PiT) Count found that **families with children** experiencing homelessness account for **30 (3.5%)** of respondents, including **42 children/dependents**.

One quarter (32) of the 42 dependent children were **under the age of 16**.

50% of children under 16 stayed with parents in **transitional housing**, **28%** were **unsheltered or slept in vehicles.**

<div align="right">https://www.crd.bc.ca/docs/default-source/housing-pdf/housing-planning-and-programs/crd-pit-count-2020-community-report-2020-07-31.pdf</div>

In Victoria, in 2019, there was
- one women's shelter (**19.0% of shelter beds**)
- one family shelter (**1.5% of shelter beds**)

<div align="right">https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/homelessness/publications-bulletins/shelter-capacity-2019.html</div>

Sooke, BC

Victoria's 2020 Point-in-Time (PiT) Count found of those identifying as homeless in Sooke
- 64.9% (24) male and 27% (10) female,
- 11% (4) identify as LQBTQS2+, and
- 41% (15) identify as Indigenous, which was higher than the general group of survey respondents of at 35%

<div align="right">https://www.crd.bc.ca/docs/default-source/housing-pdf/housing-planning-and-programs/crd-pit-count-2020-community-report-2020-07-31.pdf</div>

Sheltering, Temporary, and Transitional Housing in the Greater Victoria Region

Emergency Sheltering for women experiencing or at risk of violence

Victoria, BC

Sandy Merriman House (Victoria Cool Aid Society)

Next Steps Transitional Shelter (Victoria Cool Aid Society)

Victoria Women's Transition House (Victoria Women's Transition House Society)

Transition Houses/Safe Homes for women experiencing or at risk of violence

Victoria, BC

The Cridge Transition House for Women (Cridge Centre for the Family)

Older Women's Safe Home (Victoria Women's Transition House Society)

Sooke, BC

Annie's Place (Sooke Transition House Society)

Salt Spring Island, BC

Salt Spring Island Transition House (Islanders Working Against Violence)

Second- & third-stage housing for women experiencing or at risk of violence

Victoria, BC

Margaret Laurence House (Greater Victoria Women's Shelter Society)

The Cridge Supportive Transitional Housing (Cridge Centre for the Family)

SpeqƏɳéutxw (SPAKEN) House (Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness)

Third Stage Housing (Victoria Women's Transition House Society)

Rosalie's Village (Society of Saint Vincent de Paul Vancouver Island)

Salt Spring Island, BC

The Cedars (Islanders Working Against Violence)

Key Intersecting Influences

Together with secondary research and engagement with the Leadership Team, the discovery phase resulted in the identification of some of the **main influences on women+ at risk of violence and homeless**.

Figure 1: Key Influencing factors for women+ at risk of violence & homelessness

Through secondary research, interviews, and focus groups we identified 10 at-risk populations of women+. Women+ in these populations face higher risk of violence and homelessness. Further, they experience significant barriers to access housing and support services.
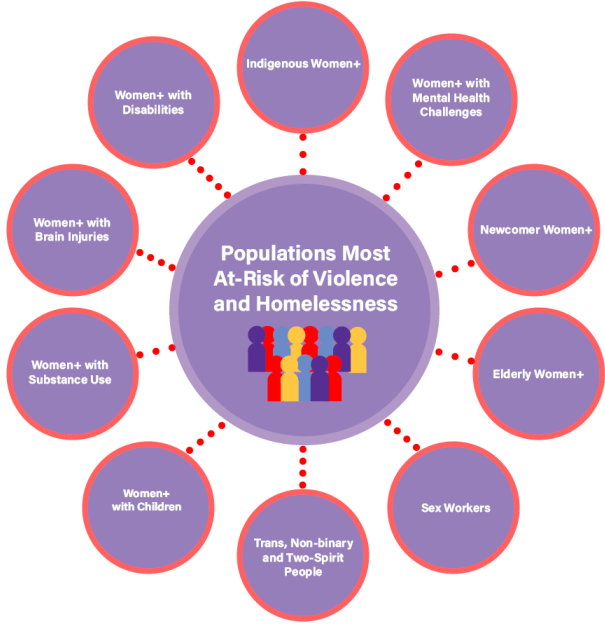

Figure 2: Women+ At-Risk Populations

Key Themes from the Discovery Phase
The issues surrounding women+ fleeing violence are multifaceted and intersectional. There are links between the lack of housing, homelessness, poverty, economic insecurity, colonization, racism, ableism, child intervention, and violence against women (VAW) that make this a '**wicked problem**'.

1. Populations Most At-Risk of Violence & Homelessness
   The most common named populations at greatest risk of violence and homelessness were:
   - Indigenous Women+
   - Women with Mental Health Challenges
   - Women with Substance Use Issues
   - Women with children
   - Newcomers
   - Other populations at risk named
   - Senior women+
   - Youth aging out of care
   - Sex Workers
   - Trans, Non-binary, 2 spirited

2. Availability of Affordable Appropriate Housing

The lack of affordable housing stock has hit a critical point in this region

Need for Continuum of Housing for Women+ at Risk of Violence

- Emergency Shelters
- Transition Houses
- 2nd Stage Housing
- Long Term Subsidized Housing
- Indigenous-Led Housing

Other Considerations

- Competition for Limited Spaces
- References to Access Housing
- Housing for Men and Abusers
- Pets

3. Financial Barriers

Gender based violence also often involves financial abuse

4. Racism, Discrimination, Stigma & Hidden Homelessness

Women+ are the 'invisible homeless', women+ with children even more so. Women will couch surf, stay with friends or family and are not counted as part of 'homeless' population

Overall, there is a stigmatizing narrative around homelessness, especially during COVID; there is a certain type of homeless population that is much more visible

5. Access, Availability & Awareness of Supports

Access to supports

Longer term Supports

Coordinated Multidisciplinary Supports

6. Gaps in Policy, Plans & Strategies

Gender based violence also often involves financial abuse

7. Barriers to Collaboration & Coordination Across the System

Gender based violence also often involves financial abuse

Lack of coordination/integration in jurisdictions, services, and data collection

Details

- Lack of support for transitioning between stages of housing
- Need for collaboration between VAW and homelessness sectors, as well as between social housing and social support agencies
- Contradictions between systems (e.g. social assistance, social housing, child welfare)
- National Housing Strategy insufficiently reflects a gender-based analysis

Examples

- Women may struggle with adapting to rules and either independent or communal living arrangements
- Apprehension of children by child welfare may lead to a reduction or loss of housing allowance through social assistance

Invisible homelessness

Details

- Leads to underestimation in data, a lack of suitable responses, and ineligibility for homeless services

Examples

- Women in VAW shelters are not counted in homelessness data
- Women are ineligible for housing supports/services if they are not considered chronically homeless

Intersectionality

Details

- Recognizing links between the lack of housing, homelessness, poverty, economic insecurity, colonization, racism, ableism, child intervention, and violence against women (VAW)
- Discrimination in social policies, social services, and the labour market
- Feminization of poverty
- Intersection of violence, mental health & substance use issues that is often not acknowledged or supported

Examples

- Indigenous women and girls comprise 5% of the population in Canada, but 36% of those who were killed by violence (Women's Shelters Canada 2020)
- One-quarter of Black women in Canada live below the poverty line (Schwan et al. 2017)
- Unemployment rates among Black women were twice the rate of non-racialized women (12.2% vs 6.4%), even though labour participation was higher (Schwan et al. 2017)
- In the General Toronto Area (GTA) in 2016, working poverty amongst Black women was indicated at 10.5%, more than twice the rates for white male workers (4.8%) and white female workers (4.7%) (Schwan et al. 2017)
- Child welfare policies that construe poverty as neglect
- Overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system

Eligibility criteria

Details

- At best restrictive, at worst perpetuates trauma and stigma
- Bureaucratic barriers

Examples

- Rules that exclude people with complex needs and health concerns
- SPDAT and VI-SPDAT tools disadvantage women because they do not account for their circumstances and needs
- Proof of cohabitation may be inaccessible to women
- Abstinence rules prohibit people who use substances

Cycles of violence and precarity

Details

- Lack of housing supports and options traps women in abusive relationships or homelessness

Examples

- 1 in 5 women who are able to access VAW shelters return to live with their abusers
- Many women have nowhere to go after leaving shelters

Lack of long-term affordable, adequate, and appropriate housing (social housing + private market)

Details
- Long wait times are a matter of life and death

Examples
- Women-led households comprised 28% of people experiencing core housing need in 2016 (Schwan et al. 2020)

Overwhelmed and unsuitable emergency services

Details
- Shelters are designed to be short-term
- Lack of trauma-informed, culturally appropriate, and client-centred approaches

Examples
- On an average day, VAW shelters across Canada turn away almost 1,000 women and their children (Schwan et al. 2020)

Choice/autonomy and flexibility

Details
- Women should be able to choose where they want to live and what supports they need, which promotes feelings of self-sufficiency and empowerment
- Programs should be flexible and tailored to the specific needs of individual clients

Examples
- The Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WSCADV) pilot project allows clients to determine the supports that they require
- The Ontario government's Portable Housing Benefit promotes flexibility, mobility, and choice by linking rent subsidies to individuals and families rather than specific housing units

Promising Practices and Models

Our Mission

To lovingly provide culturally supportive, affordable housing and services that end Aboriginal homelessness on Vancouver Island.

Speqәɳéutxw (SPAKEN) House

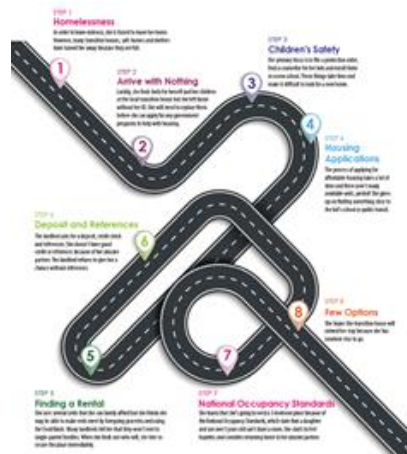Speqәɳéutxw (SPAKEN) House opened in August 2020 and offers culturally supportive housing and services to 22 Indigenous women experiencing homelessness, with priority given to those fleeing violence.
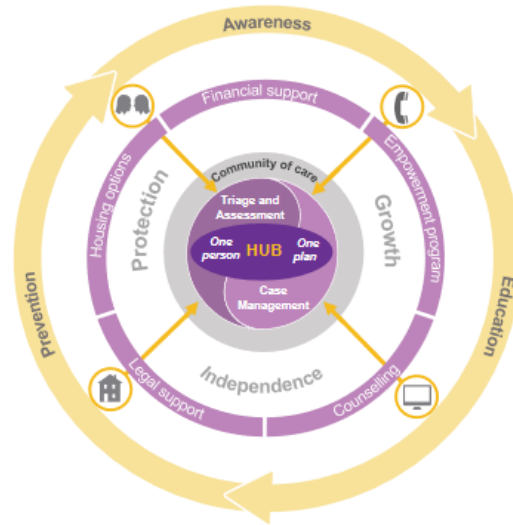

The **Getting Home** Project: Overcoming Barriers to Housing after Violence is a three-year, community-based project, focusing on reducing barriers to safe, secure and affordable housing for women and their children experiencing violence in BC.

first steps

First Steps Housing Project Inc.

Thrive [6]was a 6-month project with homeless and other service providers in the Saint John, New Brunswick region
piloted and assessed existing resources available to women and children fleeing violence
created a model to streamline services and provide more comprehensive and integrated support, with a view to prevent homelessness in an urban rural context.

To learn more or to participate in the **Surfacing Our Strengths Solutions Lab**, please email:

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Funding

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6 Thrive was funded by the Government of Canada's Homelessness Partnering Strategy's Innovative Solutions to Homelessness program.