

## Chapter 19

### Housing Homeless Women in Toronto

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The situation of the homeless has steadily worsened in Toronto over the past decade. Metropolitan Toronto is a city with a current population of nearly three million. Estimates of the number of homeless people in Toronto now range from 15,000 to 20,000. This article will take a brief look at the reasons women become homeless and at some of the housing which has been built by the nonprofit housing sector in an attempt to address the needs of the homeless. It examines how the needs of homeless women differ from homeless men and how their housing needs may differ.

The information is based on several years' work in an emergency shelter for women; on work in the housing field; on feedback from the women who have been housed; and on 23 interviews with founders and early staff of nine nonprofit housing projects in Toronto. It is part of an ongoing research project which will analyze the effectiveness of various approaches to providing housing. Although numerous definitions of homelessness have been put forward, the focus for this discussion is on those women who have frequently used the hostel system, have resided on the street, or have been in contact with social service agencies because of continuing housing problems.

#### How Women Become Homeless

Women arrive in the shelter system for a number of reasons. For some the cause is primarily economic—high rents, low income, and a great scarcity of affordable housing. Others are fleeing abuse either by a partner or parents. In the past few years an increasing number of refugees have arrived at women's shelters—particularly from Ethiopia and Somalia. Still others have come through the mental health system and ended up on the street. For many it is a combination of factors, but the majority will have experienced abuse at some point in their lives. In this they may not be different from the population of women at large, but their difficulties are compounded by poverty and lack of affordable housing.

An American researcher, Maxine Harris, interviewed a number of homeless women in the U.S. for her book *Sisters of the Shadow*. She states that

perhaps the most startling psychological characteristic of many homeless women is their profound sense of alienation. Many of the women interviewed had lost large portions of their own life stories. They either could not remember things that had happened to them or had dissociated

themselves from particularly painful elements of their personal histories.... [A]lienation from self is not the only recurring theme in the psychological profiles of homeless women. Equally important is the almost pervasive history of abuse. Many of these women were victims of child abuse, of incest within their home, of abuse by spouses, and once they became homeless, of physical abuse and rape on the streets.

These findings coincide with the experiences of people who work with the homeless population in Toronto. A former worker at a project known as Streetcity stated that nearly all the women living there had histories of abuse and the large majority of them had a history in the mental health system or current mental health problems.

Men, on the other hand (perhaps also victims of childhood abuse, although this is not documented as clearly as for women), arrive on the street by a different route. They are commonly seen to go through a cycle of lost jobs and alcoholism. They are far more likely to encounter the criminal justice system and be labeled by it. Thus, often it is women who have been institutionalized by the mental health system and men who have been incarcerated who end up on the streets. Although the majority of women in hostels do not have connections with men in the hostel system, housing developers put these two groups together when developing projects. This has become a major topic of debate in women's services in Toronto: Should these two populations be housed together when their histories and issues are so different?

### **Traditional Response to Homelessness**

Hostels have been the traditional institutional response to homelessness in Canada. Local governments, religious institutions, and nonprofit organizations have all sought to serve this population by providing hostels of various types. Men's and women's hostels have approached the issue from a different philosophical basis and their history of providing service to men and women is also distinctly different. Hostels for men were developed in the late 1800s in response to a growing migrant work force of single males moving from farms into the cities for work. Dormitory style accommodation was provided by the churches for men who were between jobs or suffering from illness. Only the most basic necessities were provided and this tradition has continued to the present day.

Women have traditionally been more bound by familial ties and less likely to live alone. It is only recently, with the growing awareness of the needs of abused women, street youth, and the deinstitutionalization of women from mental health facilities, that the need for shelters for women has been recognized. In the 1970s and 1980s several shelters for women were opened in Toronto and the surrounding area. A number of these were based on feminist principles and one of their basic goals was to empower women. The shelters were usually situated in large houses and services such as supportive counseling, child care, and referrals were provided. The feminist shelters are generally more wholistic in their approach to providing service than men's shelters, and create a supportive atmosphere rather than providing only a bed and food.

In the early 1980s the issue of homelessness came to be recognized as an urgent problem by both the municipal and provincial governments. As a result of the policy of deinstitutionalization, thousands of people who had spent years in psychiatric facilities were released into the community. Community services for this population were extremely limited and many ended up on the street or in rundown boarding homes. In response to this crisis, the provincial government funded a number of nonprofit agencies to open group homes. In spite of this effort, a large number of psychiatric survivors remained homeless due to the stringent admission criteria of the group homes and their emphasis on communal living, a situation many did not desire. To maintain their housing, people were required to attend programs. To a certain degree they continue to be perceived as ill. Other factors such as the gentrification of downtown Toronto and the subsequent loss of hundreds of rooming houses, and skyrocketing rents contributed to a massive increase in the homeless population.

### **The Non-profit Response**

In 1983, Homes First Society opened 90 Shuter Street, the first building to provide affordable housing for singles with low income. It was seen as the "wedge" which forced the provincial Ministry of Housing to acknowledge that affordable housing should be available to people based on income, not on a special need or disability. It was also a relatively inexpensive method to providing housing. 90 Shuter is shared housing, based on the rooming house model. It is a ten-story high-rise

which houses 77 people in apartments shared by groups of four or five.

Homes First was the first nonprofit to introduce "facilitative management," a method which promotes the development of community spirit within a project and facilitates people working through issues and coming to a resolution regarding factors pertinent to the running of the building. Facilitative managers are meant to promote community living rather than to assist people with individual problems. Emphasis is placed on the separation of housing and support services. However, in the absence of adequate support services, facilitative managers face a difficult role when they are unable to provide individual support.

It is important that support services be separate from housing, that tenants be clear about their rights and that the role of the housing management is clear. Too often the support needs of people determine their housing or make them ineligible for it. What has become evident is that for many the provision of housing is not enough. Once people have settled, perhaps for the first time in years, other issues often come up such as memories of childhood sexual abuse, addiction problems, and the need for training and employment programs. The lack of support services for women becomes overwhelmingly apparent when women are housed.

Since 1983 a number of nonprofit housing developers have built a variety of housing projects of both shared housing and self-contained units. These have ranged from refurbishing an old post office warehouse to encompass a "72-unit town," which is set up with streets and stores within the warehouse, to traditional apartment units. Rather than discuss the particulars of the various projects, the focus of this paper is on some of the issues that have arisen during the development process and since the buildings have opened: on elements which seem to work well and which don't. This is not to suggest specific answers but rather to highlight some of the issues which require careful thought and planning before a project is built.

The areas we will focus on are:

- Community development and community participation
- Project size
- Shared versus self-contained units
- Tenant selection
- Tenant mix
- Safety issues and violence
- Women's housing needs

## **Community Development and Community Participation**

Several of the projects in Toronto employed community development staff prior to the opening of the housing. The extent of the community development process varied from holding a few community information sessions to a series of in-depth meetings in which potential residents worked through a number of issues regarding grievances, security and procedures for residents meetings. Those projects which had the opportunity to have several community meetings, to have tenants get to know one another beforehand and to make decisions regarding rules and policies seemed to have a smoother transition period once the project opened. For others, the initial six months were often chaotic with frequent altercations between residents and a general lack of security for everyone. Staff spoke of being afraid while on the job and unclear about their roles and responsibilities. The tenants were similarly confused. Sometimes it was only when the situations became extremely volatile that the tenants came together as a group to set their own rules and procedures. Often women were not brought into the development process until later. This exacerbated any power differentials between the male and female tenants, since men were more comfortable in speaking up at meetings and used to being in control on the street.

For some women the process of community development was intimidating and required attendance at meetings, which made the housing unattainable. For someone who is homeless, the wait for housing may seem endless when the need is immediate, and the prospect of interviews and meetings may be too threatening.

## **Project Size**

In general, smaller projects seem to run more smoothly. It is difficult to specify an optimum number of units, but projects with fewer than twenty units were most content with their size and those with over 70 units felt that their size was a problem.

## **Shared versus Self-Contained Units**

The large congregate living projects in Toronto are based on the rooming-house model and are a form of high-rise rooming house. This model is most familiar to men and has been developed by the men's shelter network. The overwhelming majority of women express a need for self-contained units. Again, shared accommodation is seen to work best with smaller projects and

for women when they do not see it as permanent housing.

### **Tenant Selection**

The projects in Toronto select their tenants through a variety of methods. In shared units, tenants make the final selection of who will move in when a vacancy arises. In buildings where the units are self-contained, this is usually decided by the housing provider based on factors of income or referrals from support agencies. Some housing providers have screened out people who they feel will require too much support, while others have focused exclusively on those who have been denied housing for many years.

### **Tenant Mix**

Tenant selection and tenant mix are closely related. Several staff have suggested that a community mixed in age, family size, and background provides more balance and a wider range of views. Having criteria which specify a wide mix resolves some of the dilemmas of tenant selection.

The government of Ontario is moving more toward projects which also reflect a mix of income. While this is a commendable goal, the urgent housing needs of the homeless must not be lost in an attempt to provide a mixed community.

### **Safety Issues and Violence**

One might suppose that violence would be more frequent in shared units due to the increased contact and possibility for conflict, but this has not been borne out by experience. Violence in the various projects has come primarily from two sources: violent male partners and incidents related to drug trafficking.

In many of the projects the initial six months were tumultuous. Many projects did not have procedures and policies in place. Neither tenants nor staff knew how to handle incidents of violence, verbal abuse, and discrimination. By the time procedures were established and some evictions had taken place, other residents had begun to leave because they couldn't tolerate the environment and were too frightened or intimidated to speak out against the perpetrators of the violence. Women were usually the ones to leave for this reason. Women were also sometimes forced to leave because of a violent male partner.

While some housing providers see this initial settling-in period as inevitable, others see it as unnecessary and ultimately unfair to the tenants. A thorough community development process seems to make the settling-in period smoother.

### **Women's Housing Needs**

There appears to be a need for affirmative action projects for homeless women, in which they would be the population first consulted regarding a new project. It would then be their decision whether to have a women's-only project, or to have a mixed one in which they would determine the mix (perhaps greater than 50% women). They could also then choose the population of men they wished to have housed with them and whether the tenants would be referred from a hostel, community center, or another group.

The possibility of involving women first would empower women. It would offset the street code of men making decisions for women who are not accustomed to this role. If the women were the first involved in a project, a more equitable division of power might evolve at later stages.

### **Questions For New Housing Projects**

Learning from the experiences described in this paper, we have developed the following list of issues which need to be addressed to ensure a successful project.

1. How to balance the usefulness of community development with the needs of women who are not able or willing to participate in such a process?
2. What style of management is to be used?
3. How to balance security of tenure with the needs of other residents if accommodation is shared?
4. What is a healthy mix in size of unit and tenants?
5. What support services can be provided?
6. What responsibility do housing providers have for safety?
7. Who can't be housed?

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