

WOMEN'S HOUSING PLANNING COLLABORATIVE (WHPC)

**EMERGENCY PLANNING FOR SERVICES
FOR SINGLE WOMEN EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS**

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1.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Purpose of the Report

This report is the result of a consultation process initiated by the City of Hamilton (Housing Division) and involving the Women's Housing Planning Collaborative (WHPC). WHPC exists to develop, coordinate, advocate for and facilitate a gender specific, comprehensive and seamless system of services to meet these stated needs. WHPC members and other key stakeholders were asked to provide recommendations on how to best address the needs of single women experiencing homelessness, a particularly acute question as 10 emergency shelter beds in the system are slated to close on May 31, 2015.

The City of Hamilton agreed in November 2013 to provide just under \$250,000 in funding to install and support ten emergency shelter beds for women at Mary's Place. The ten beds supported by the City of Hamilton were to be made available from December 1st, 2013, to May 31st, 2015, with the understanding that they would be a short-term, temporary solution only.

With the May 31st, 2015 deadline fast approaching, the Women's Housing Planning Collaborative (WHPC) and the City of Hamilton contracted the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton (SPRC) to compile a report on how best to move forward to ensure the needs of single women experiencing homelessness were addressed. The goals of this work, as articulated in the Terms of Reference between the City of Hamilton and the Women's Housing Planning Collaborative, are to propose an approach for addressing the housing and homelessness needs of single women experiencing homelessness in Hamilton and to support the implementation of a solution for addressing the housing and homelessness needs of single women experiencing homelessness.

Recommendations have been provided based on results of visioning meetings, focus groups for women with lived experience, and data collection from service organizations.

1.2 Historical Context and Financial Investment

Numerous efforts have been undertaken over the past 20 years to address the needs of single homeless women in Hamilton. Mary's Place opened in 1995 as Hamilton's first emergency shelter dedicated to serving single homeless women and had nine regular beds and one overflow bed, all of which were consistently filled. A variety of responses have emerged since then to address the needs of single homeless women. Somerville House was created by Good Shepherd in 1999 and provided 10 beds for intensive, extended temporary housing for women but had to close in 2010 due to a lack of funding. Mats had also been provided for the Wesley Centre until 2010 and for the program Out of the Cold, which provided mats in churches during the winter months until 2011. Six regular beds and two overflow beds were also made available at Womankind, an addiction withdrawal management and treatment facility, and arrangements were also made with the Violence Against Women Shelters to provide services to single homeless women when space was available.

When Mary's Place moved into its new facility in December, 2010, it expanded to 20 beds. The City of Hamilton hoped that this additional space would provide adequate shelter spaces for single homeless women in Hamilton, although there were concerns that the expansion to 20 beds would not be a solution when considering the closure of Somerville House and the loss of the beds at Wesley. As with its predecessor, the new Mary's Place has been experiencing increased demand along with the other shelters that serve single homeless women, particularly given the closing of Somerville House and the removal of the mats at Wesley.

In 2012, \$495,256 was invested from the federal Homelessness Partnering Strategy for Honouring the Circle through the Native Women's Centre. The bulk of this funding is for capital costs with only \$90,000 being provided for staffing. Honouring the Circle provides transitional housing to single homeless women as well as women with children.

In 2013, \$810,540 was provided to Good Shepherd Centres in conjunction with the YWCA, Native Women's Centre, Phoenix Place and SPRC through the federal Homelessness Partnering Strategy for the Supporting Our Sisters (S.O.S.) program. This funding was initially limited to two years. The program provides a comprehensive service system response for women at risk of and experiencing homelessness through a mobile, trauma informed case management team that supports women to move from emergency shelters/VAW to the most appropriate form of housing that will meet their needs. Since its inception, 254 women have been served through S.O.S. and 88% remained housed as of September 30, 2013. The S.O.S. program was recently approved in January 2015 for \$563,440 worth of funding from HPS & CHPI.

In January 2013, \$133,600 was provided to Mary's Place for additional shelter workers because the shelter was consistently operating over capacity, but without the resources to assist the additional women. With funding for the additional shelter workers, the number of overflow beds was increased to three beds. The shelter workers also provide support to help women to leave the shelter and move more quickly to permanent housing. In 2013, an average of ten women per month were being housed which is double the amount in 2012.

On April 15, 2013, Council directed staff to provide \$250,000 to the YWCA for their Transitional Living Program. YWCA Hamilton provides a Transitional Living Program at 75 MacNab Street South that provides safe and affordable housing for 65 at risk women who struggle with the impacts of poverty, homelessness and violence. The one-time funding provided additional staffing supports to better meet the needs of the residents. Previously, HPS funding under Supporting Our Sisters (S.O.S.) provided one staff person on site at any given time and the additional funding allowed for one more staff person to increase the ability to work with residents. Prior to HPS, staffing for nights and some weekends was limited to only a security guard.

The City of Hamilton provided funding for 10 temporary beds at Mary's Place from December, 2013 to May 31, 2015. These beds have been consistently full and women are still turned away on a regular basis.

1.3 The Current Picture

Despite the investments outlined above and those currently being made through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) and the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative, there is still a crisis situation in Hamilton's women's housing system. That crisis is growing dire due to changes in the landscape that have taken place even since this consultation began in October 2014.

Changes to the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) funding and subsequent competition for a smaller pie of homelessness prevention funding meant an application that would have supported transitional housing and supports at the YWCA and Honouring the Circle was not fully funded. This has threatened the existence of the 45 beds at HTC after March 31, 2015. While the YWCA received enough funding to remain open and support its current number of beds, the investment is incomplete, leaving women without meals and sparse supports.

More recently, it was announced that Phoenix Place (10 beds including 3 single women), which provides Second Stage Housing for women, is facing the reality of having to close their doors in August 2015 if more funding is not secured meaning the loss of five more beds from the system. (Phoenix Place does not fit the current requirements for HPS funding.)

The following chart indicates programs and agencies specifically addressing women's homelessness that will be receiving HPS support over the next four years. It is important to note that the allocations do not necessarily reflect the full amount that was requested by the organization as exemplified above.

Table 1. HPS funded programs specifically addressing women's homelessness in Hamilton, 2015-218.

Program	Agency	Funding Allocation
Supporting Our Sisters (S.O.S.)	Good Shepherd	\$563,440
Transitional Housing for Women	Hamilton YWCA	\$251,418
No Wrong Door – A Collaborative Response to Women Experiencing Homelessness in Hamilton	Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton (SPRC)	\$29,899

1.4 Increasing Pressures on the Women's Shelter System: A System in Crisis

In Hamilton, there are currently only 26 permanent beds for single women experiencing homelessness. There is one dedicated women's shelter, Mary's Place, Good Shepherd, with 20 permanent beds (currently an additional temporary 10 beds). There are an additional six dedicated shelter beds at withdrawal and treatment facility, Womankind Addiction Service, St. Joseph's Health Sciences. These beds are all funded by the City of Hamilton.

There are an additional 133 Violence Against Women (VAW) shelter beds and the City purchases additional overflow beds from these four provincially funded shelters when needed¹. The demand for shelter beds for homeless women has been growing exponentially in recent years, with the City using the overflow capacity at VAW shelters 107 times in 2011, which rose to 797 times in 2013. The increase in demand for shelter beds for single women is not unique to Hamilton as this trend is seen across the province (Kreps & Hendry, 2013).

1.5 Women's Transitional Housing in Peril

Transitional Housing is an essential part of Hamilton's women's homelessness system, with currently 90 single women living in one of three residential programs (YWCA, Honouring the Circle and Phoenix Place). While many of the women choose this housing to assist them with increasing their independence and skills to make a successful move into permanent housing, it is important to note that some women are in this housing because of a lack of options.

Now due to changes in the Homelessness Partnering Strategy funding and less funds available for homelessness prevention, only the YWCA has secured funding to ensure those beds can

¹ With the exception of Interval House Hamilton, which only serves women fleeing domestic violence.

stay open after March 2015. Losing any of the 45 beds at HTC or 10 at Phoenix Place will make the situation dire for homeless women in Hamilton.

One of the precursors to the current crisis in women's shelter capacity was the closure of Somerville House in 2010. Somerville House was a 10-bed transitional program that served 20 women a year and had an 80% success rate for women at discharge to access permanent housing, women who would now be defined as chronically or episodically homeless. Service providers at the time repeatedly said that the closure of Somerville would create a significant pressure point.

In 2011, the City of Hamilton funded an additional 10 emergency shelter beds in the newly opened Mary's Place. However, going from 10 to 20 beds at the time did not solve the problem and even with the additional 10 temporary overflow beds (bringing the total number of beds to 30) Mary's Place continues to turn away an average of 50 unique women per month.

The imminent closure of HTC and Phoenix Place poses a significant threat to the state of homelessness for women in Hamilton. Despite the new federal funding focus on Housing First (described below), WHPC members believe the City must act to sustain the capacity in the system that currently exists, including the transitional living programs. WHPC members also strongly support that both the emergency shelter and transitional programs need to offer a similar quality of service with enough support to be able to provide food and staff support so women have the tools they need to move to permanent housing.

1.6 Impact of Housing First service rules on women's homelessness in Hamilton

In April 2015, many programs aiming to reduce homelessness in Canada will be transformed to fit the new funding model and directives of the country's largest homelessness funding body, the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS). The majority of HPS funding will be dedicated to the Housing First model of homelessness reduction, a model that has already been in use in Hamilton for almost a decade. Housing First principles are incorporated into the Supporting Our Sisters Program (S.O.S.) serving homeless women in Hamilton.

However, the new HPS directives will further destabilize Hamilton's women's homelessness system in at least two ways. First, the reduced funding for homelessness prevention is threatening the closure of Honouring the Circle transitional housing program (20 beds for single women, 25 for women with children), as described above. Second, the strict definition set by HPS means that only women who meet specific criteria for "chronically" or "episodically" homeless will be eligible to receive services from the S.O.S. intensive case management team. Because women who are in transitional housing are not considered 'homeless enough' by HPS definitions, they are not eligible for Housing First services until at least 90% of all "chronically" or "episodically" homeless people in Hamilton have been housed.

The application of bureaucratic rules to women's complex journeys in and out of homelessness will be a barrier for them to regain stable housing. Women in transitional housing are not in stable housing situations; they are only provisionally accommodated and are included in the Canadian Definition of Homelessness², yet they will no longer be eligible for S.O.S. services.

While other women gain enough skills and independence from transitional housing programs to move to housing and maintain housing without further support, the statistical overview of the first 33 months of the SOS program show that among women in transitional housing, 15%

² <http://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/COHhomelessdefinition-1pager.pdf>

exited to a situation of homelessness and that 9% of women currently in transitional housing returned after moving to regular or supportive housing. WHPC members point out that these women are exactly the homeless individuals who need more support, not less, to regain housing stability. In addition, WHPC members point out that women who are homeless more often avoid shelters or unsheltered situations than homeless men, so few women are likely to fit the “chronically” or “episodically” homeless HPS definitions.

Even before the new Housing First service rules take effect, anecdotally WHPC service providers reported at least two women who decided to leave transitional housing when their homeless status changed at four months in order to access S.O.S services. They made these choices, despite not having access to stable housing.

WHPC members suggested the perverse incentive created by the new Housing First rules need to be responded to by ensuring there are services available for women with complex needs but who do not meet the requirements for Intensive Case Management. These women need enhanced supports in order to exit transitional housing and to find and stay established in permanent housing.

2.0 EMERGENCY AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN SHELTER DATA

2.1 Data on Shelter Stays and Turnaways

In order to better understand the extent of capacity constraints on emergency shelters, along with key reasons why women are being turned away (particularly if the shelter is not at capacity), service organizations were contacted to provide numbers for the month December 2014.

Table 1. Shelter Stays and Turnaway Data for December 2014

	Emergency Shelters for Women		Violence Against Women Shelters			
	Mary's Place (Good Shepherd)	Womankind	Inasmuch House (Mission Services)	Interval House of Hamilton	Martha House (Good Shepherd)	Native Women's Centre
Beds	30	6	37	22	15	12
Total stays	70	15	38	28	25	13
Total turnaways	131	29	64	12	157	97
% of turnaways due to full capacity	82%	97%	73%	75%	72%	99%
% of turnaways due to reasons other than full capacity	18%	3%	27%	25%	28%	1%
Average turnaways per night	4.2	0.9	2.1	0.4	5.1	3.1
Unique women turned away during month	46	29	64	12	Unknown	Unknown
Average number of times per month individual woman was turned away	2.8	1	1	1	Unknown	Unknown

The turnaway data in Table 1 shows that both the Emergency Shelters for Women and VAW systems are operating beyond capacity and have significant turnaways. VAW service providers have indicated that a significant part of their over capacity is due to the service that most VAW shelters provide by offering shelter not just to women fleeing domestic violence, but also to homeless women (overflow beds funded by the City of Hamilton). The turnaway data also indicates the shelter system for homeless women continues to be in crisis situation even after increasing the capacity of Mary's Place from 20 to 30 beds.

For women fleeing violence, the VAW shelters each have protocols to ensure that even if a woman is turned away due to full capacity, they will help her find a safe place to stay.

"We never turn away a woman fleeing violence if she is in immediate danger. We will find her a shelter in Hamilton, in hotel referrals through city, and/or shelter in another area (we cover transportation). If a woman is residing at another shelter and seeking space we'll ask her to call back until space becomes available, but if safety is not the concern and we are full we will ask her to call all shelters until space becomes available (all shelters do this). The pattern is that women are in more and more desperate situations with more complex mental health/co-morbidity concerns, substance use. Women are coming to expect institutional support because they cannot make it on their own with OW and housing rates." – Clare Freeman, Interval House

While violence is experienced by many homeless women, they may not be fleeing immediate violence or do not identify that violence is putting them at risk when requesting shelter (due to trust issues or violence being a normal part of everyday life) there are fewer shelter spaces available for them.

Shelters also provided an overview of reasons for the total 103 turnaways they reported for reasons listed as "other", i.e. not due to full capacity. For Mary's Place, women would often call with children that would result in a turnaway, at which point staff would assist those women in securing space elsewhere. At Martha House the key reasons for "other" turnaways were that single women would call for space but the particular units had no availability (this was listed as a different turnaway reason than being at capacity), or due to potential behaviours that would not be appropriate for a shelter where children are present. Despite best attempts to make accommodations, there was frequently no ability to provide shelter to the women.

Womankind, which is firstly an addiction service, found their "other" turnaways often had to do with an inability to meet the women's needs. These women presented with complexities making it difficult for Womankind to adequately address their housing needs as their shelter beds are only funded for minimal staffing (i.e., "hot and a cot"). In these instances, Womankind would attempt to coordinate with other shelters, like Mary's Place, to find a place for the women. Womankind has successfully accommodated women with very complex needs but the challenge is having the person-power to help women find housing when they have limited capacity to participate in the process.

The majority of other turnaways for Inasmuch was due to women not meeting their criteria. The Native Women's Centre explained that the "other" turnaways were solely reflective of *"households whom have supports and are seeking housing in their current Municipality"* but are still calling the shelter, at which point they are referred back to their hometown.

Table 2 shows the calculations used to estimate the necessary size and capacity of the Emergency Shelters for the Women's system in order to accommodate the current rate of turnaways and ensure all homeless women who seek shelter can find a bed when they need it. The estimate generated is that an additional 19.5 beds, beyond the 10 extra beds currently funded at Mary's Place, would help stabilize the system. However, this number was determined prior to the HPS funding that cut Honouring the Circle and before the news that Phoenix Place is at imminent risk of closure. These beds would only stabilize the system with existing resources in place.

Table 2. Estimate of additional beds needed in current Emergency Shelters for Women system based on December 2014 shelter stay and turnaway data

A	Permanent beds at Mary's Place and Womankind	26
B	Additional temporary beds at Mary's Place (Expiring May 31 st , 2015)	10
C	Current single women's shelter capacity (excluding overflow beds at VAW shelters)	36
D	Combined stays at Mary's Place and Womankind	85
E	Turnaways at Mary's Place (assumes that the 29 women turned away at Womankind also request shelter at Mary's Place)	131
F	Unique women turned away at Mary's Place	46
G	Unique turnaways as a proportion of stays ($E \div D$)	54%
H	Estimated number of additional beds needed to serve unique women turned away at Mary's Place ($F * C$)	19.5
I	Total additional beds needed beyond permanent beds ($H + C$)	29.5

Analysis of the shelter turnaway data shows the need for up to 30 additional shelter beds (including the 10 current temporary beds at Mary's Place), which could be met by creating a whole new shelter for single women. WHPC members believe there is room within the current system for at least a portion of the demonstrated need instead of building a new shelter. There is, however, a strong sentiment among WHPC service providers that responding to the rising demand for shelter for homeless women by simply providing additional shelter beds is not a comprehensive solution. As indicated by their vision and supported by years of evidence, the solution to homelessness is more affordable housing with supports, not additional shelter beds.

However, WHPC members also indicate that the rising cost of rent and waitlists for affordable housing in Hamilton means that housing is not in easy reach for most homeless women. They acknowledge that the current high rate of turnaways must be met at least in the short term by some additional shelter beds and implementation of some services to bridge women out of shelter and transitional housing into the community. If Honouring the Circle, and/or Phoenix place close, the need for additional shelter beds will become even more acute.

3.0 FOCUS GROUPS FOR WOMEN WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE

3.1 Focus group findings

Three focus groups were held between December 2014 and January 2015 with the Supporting Our Sisters (S.O.S.) Advisory Committee, the Woman Abuse Working Group (WAWG) Survivors, and a group of women in the Transitional Living Program at the YWCA. The first two focus groups had between 4-8 participants each, and the third focus group had 11 participants, for a total of just over 20 participants. A more detailed synopsis of each focus group's findings is included in Appendix 1. In order to effectively determine top concerns and priorities for women with lived experience, all focus group responses were grouped by theme. Core themes arising from the focus groups included the shared feelings of negativity and depression following turnaway; value of choice and assistance during moments of transition; perceived safety of staying on the street vs. in public housing; financial constraints and realities despite assistance; the impact of shelter staff positivity; and various common recommendations on how to best address the needs of single women experiencing homelessness in Hamilton.

Turnaway Experiences

Women were asked about their experiences in being turned away, particularly about how they felt, where they went, and the reasons they had been turned away. Most women from the focus groups explained that they had been turned away due to lack of space, but that the shelter was often not their first choice of place to go to when homeless. For those that could, preference was given to finding family that could house them temporarily. One respondent made it clear, however, that this is not the case for all women, explaining that *"Family was the last place I wanted to go."* With respect to their experiences of being turned away, women felt disheartened and inclined to give up. Another respondent elaborated, *"it's important to make sure that women can take the first step [of getting into shelter] and have a second step to housing after a shelter stay, otherwise you begin to give up."* She went on to explain that she had seen many women turn to dangerous situations of sex work and/or drug use in order to numb the feeling.

Giving Women Choice and Assistance for Transitions

Some women went on to elaborate that, even in instances where they had been allowed to stay at a shelter, the short-term stay requirements meant that they were occasionally *"kicked out"* and felt that they had *"nowhere to go"*. When asked to elaborate, three different women explained experiences with being unable to effectively transition from shelter into housing. Anxiety attacks and overwhelming panic were common experiences of these women, and many expressed uncertainty as to why they would be asked to leave when the shelter *"knows the number one priority why I'm here,"* and that priority had an influence in the shelter's ability to retain the women. Part of the issue was around the rigidity of rules concerning the ability for shelters or transitional housing locations to save spaces if a woman needed to leave temporarily for an uncertain amount of time. The women all understood that this might be a requirement, and that they wanted to respect the shelters and staff at the shelters, but that *"the exit strategy needs to be more humane"*. Many explained that simply giving a few alternate options, and presenting the options in a respectful manner, would make a positive difference in their experience and ability to recover and take the next step towards housing.

This recommendation was reinforced by a woman who had a particularly negative experience in seeking affordable housing. She explained that she had called the city and *"was laughed at"* by the staff when asking questions, that *"options weren't offered"* and that it was *"just as bad between transitional housing to housing as homeless to shelter"*. She went on to say that having a negative experience during these transitional steps was particularly harmful in terms of staying motivated and moving forward. Other women highlighted the importance of having assistance at

two very specific times: 1) when living as part of the *“working poor”* before the point of crisis (preventative assistance), and 2) when moving from the shelter into housing, or from one living accommodation to the next. One of the women elaborated that despite saving up to purchase furniture for her living space, she was required to move quickly to a new location and had no ability to move her furniture: *“I have to literally throw away things, cut up new things I’d saved up so much to buy.”* Having assistance at both of these points was considered very important by women across all the focus groups.

Staying on the Street Sometimes Perceived as Safer

Many women, particularly those from the YWCA focus group, explained that staying on the street, or *“sleeping on a bench”*, seemed like a safer option than accepting some of the housing options. When asked to explain more, the women described some of the housing options as *“unsafe”* due to location, the crowd of people it attracted, drugs, or *“bed bugs and other pests”*. At least five women explained that they would actively avoid housing if one of the *“unsafe”* places was the only option given. One woman explained, *“Government housing is no good.”* Instead, they would turn to street benches (some tried to stay with family, but more described seeking a resting place outside). Other women explained that if housing was not an option due to the perceived lack of safety, they would occasionally lie to try and meet the eligibility requirements of shelters to ensure they had a bed. For instance, one woman felt pressured to lie and say that she was *“at risk of using [drugs/substances] again”* in order to gain access to the shelter, because *“they wouldn’t let me in otherwise”*. She felt she needed to try saying this as a last-resort, before finding a place on a park bench.

Staff Make a Positive Difference

One overwhelming similarity across all focus groups was the reason behind positive shelter experiences. As one woman explained, *“you don’t want to go to the shelter”,* but once there *“it’s the staff that’s so great, 90% of them ... most of them aren’t there for the money.”* Women who had had positive interactions with staff said that it was the case workers and support staff who had made a difference in their life. Many tried to return to shelters because they knew the staff were particularly good; this was often mentioned for case workers at the YWCA and Good Shepherd. One woman also mentioned that the Native Women’s Centre had been particularly helpful when she sought shelter there. Having supportive, positive staff was motivating for the women and gave them hope. In contrast, negative attitudes from staff or city workers could incite jarring emotional responses in the women. One woman described her attempts at calling city housing in regards to affordable housing options, and said she *“was laughed at”* for her questions and left feeling so upset she ended up *“crying for a long time afterwards.”* Others explained that a *“closed door tells us you’re not approachable”* and that *“women in crisis need to have an approachable person.”* Women who had positive experiences with staff perceived their ability to move into housing as more manageable, because they felt supported. When *“staff had time”* and *“kept [women] there until [they were] in the right state of mind”* the women were more at ease and felt more confident in their abilities to overcome obstacles. They emphasized the importance of *“not [being] just a number”* and being treated as a unique person. They felt that someone believed in them, and that made a positive difference.

Financial Supports Unable to Cover Costs

All three focus groups mentioned that the current financial assistance was unable to adequately cover living costs. One woman explained that *“women over 60 who’ve never been married”* are in a particularly difficult situation, as less supports are available to them. She described how she was, *“at one point paying \$550.00 in rent, and living on \$600,”* leaving \$50 monthly for food. The experience was *“an awakening”* and a *“different world”* from what the woman had known before. She expressed that, despite the high costs of living and the inability for financial supports like

OW and ODSP to support these costs while she looked for work, *“you really need to have a cave for yourself”* and placed high value on having a space to live. Having a living space was considered by her, and many of the other women at the focus groups, to be particularly important because not having steady living could bring on anxiety and would prompt some women to *“get sick”* to the point where they were unable to find work. Anxiety was described as paralyzing and hard to overcome. Finding jobs and overcoming other obstacles were increasingly difficult if the women were unable to financially afford steady living. These experiences were compounded for women over 60 because, as another woman described, *“If you’re not on ODSP/OW, and you’re over 60 or 64, you don’t have a [support] worker,”* so that particular group of women would receive little (if any) financial assistance and no support to help them moving forward.

3.2 Recommendations from Women with Lived Experience

Many recommendations on how to best assist women experiencing housing and homelessness issues came up during the focus groups. The following were agreed upon by some women in all focus groups:

Make Information Widely Accessible (Offline)

All of the women agreed that finding information to navigate the system was difficult and that *“there is nobody out there filling that need.”* One woman explained that, *“you have to know the system before you fall through the cracks [to know what to do], but you need to fall through the cracks to know the system.”* Others in the same focus group expressed that women need access to shelter and support information before they experience homelessness, because by the time they are homeless it is too late and they are left to learn the system by speaking to other women experiencing homelessness. Many went on to say that, even though the information is online, *“having it online is of no use when you don’t have a computer or internet.”* They stressed the importance of billboards or central advertising spaces with large-print information. Women also like the idea of having someone central to call. One went on to explain that, *“In Toronto it’s all in one spot – you call one place. Here you’re given a bunch of different numbers and they all ask you to call each other in circles.”* Others added that city staff *“gotta get out of [their] offices”* and that with their work hours *“7am-3pm”* mean that the women *“never see them”*. Some women tried calling services like Intac, but felt that *“they never call back”* and it was *“hard to find a free phone.”* The experience was described as exasperating, confusing, and depressing. When asked how they managed to navigate the system personally, at least 6 women stated that *“talking to people in line for the food bank”* and lines for other services was the best place to learn about what was available. That said, the women stressed that they should be able to access this information without seeking it out from other women experiencing homelessness.

Provide Options and Choices for Women Making the Next Steps

Women explained that having choice, particularly at time of exit or entry to a shelter, was crucial for personal dignity and maintaining hope. They highlighted, through many personal stories, how having choice made them feel *“more in control”* of what was about to happen, and gave them the ability to overcome the anxiety brought on by being offered a *“take it or leave it situation.”* Moreover, there was agreement that some of these options and choices for supports and living should be made known to the working poor and those who have yet to experience homelessness in order to provide preventative assistance.

Conversion of Vacant Buildings into City Housing and Shelters

Many of the women were focused on increasing affordable housing available to single women. This was particularly important to older women (seniors) and women dealing with mental health issues or anxiety that required quiet, solo living in a larger setting (i.e.: not an apartment). Some of the ideas on how to convert the vacant buildings were very creative, including a “*Habitat for Hamilton*” project that would use Women In Skilled Trades (WIST) and new immigrants with architectural, engineering, and construction backgrounds to assist in bringing the houses up to code. This particular idea focused on how the opportunity would be “win-win” because it provided new immigrants as well as women in skilled trades with the chance to increase their experience. The rationale used was that the City of Hamilton would complete an inspection regardless of who fixed the houses, so having a program running could be a low-cost way of improving the vacant buildings and converting them into city housing and shelter spaces.

Peer Support System for Women with Lived Experience

The YWCA Transitional Living Program and S.O.S. Advisory Committee focus groups both mentioned the importance of women with lived experience helping other women newly experiencing homelessness. Both groups highlighted that a peer system could be created, whereby women experiencing homelessness would have (in addition to shelter supports) a friend who could assist them in understanding their options and how to navigate the system and services provided. Some of the women explained that this support could also help with check-ins and follow-ups once women had moved into affordable housing. They described how the follow-up and check-in was particularly important for women who have experienced homelessness and instability, “*especially given depression*” that could set in. They also emphasized that any check-in or follow-up needed to be conducted “*after a few months... not after a few weeks*” because women would be unable to adequately tell whether things were going okay after only a few weeks.

Alignment Between Focus Group participants and WHPC

The ideas brought forward align well with what WHPC discussed through their visioning meeting and subsequent brainstorming sessions for potential solutions, but the women’s stories also highlight some gaps that should be considered more carefully. In particular, the notion of choice and autonomy during key transitional moments (e.g.: moments of entry and exit), and the need for those choices to be better options than staying on the street, especially for them to be perceived as better options.

4.0 KEY FINDINGS

The results from the research on turnaways, the focus groups of women with lived experience, and the discussions with the participating members of the Women's Housing Planning Collaborative aligned under the following key findings.

Hamilton's current system for women experiencing homelessness has strengths that need to be built upon

Despite the fragmentary funding and high caseload, service providers and staff provide high quality services that achieve excellent outcomes for a majority of women experiencing homelessness in Hamilton. It is clear service providers know how to deliver service that is responsive however, financial restraints lead to cases where the ideal response is not always possible.

Provision of Support During Transitions & Preventative Supports for Women At-Risk

Gaps exist in the provision of transitional support with respect to helping women make the jump from experiencing homelessness to staying in a shelter or moving from a shelter or transitional housing into permanent housing. Increasing support, not only to locate housing, but especially in the physical and emotional aspects of moving, would be valuable. These supports could be extended to women at risk of experiencing homelessness by providing more comprehensive and widely available information on services available. Another aspect of these supports could involve peer-to-peer or woman-to-woman supports (as recommended by focus group participants), that would help with the emotional struggles by having someone to relate to during these times of transition.

Choice and Options for Increased Morale and Dignity

Choice and perceived ability to participate in decision making played a key role in maintaining morale and hope in single women. Feeling in control of their futures, or at least being given the opportunity to choose their next step (even if all of the options were unfavourable), had a very positive effect on women. In contrast, lack of choice and options made women feel that exiting shelters and/or moving living locations felt *"inhumane."* This could be a potentially low-cost change that could be made through staff and support worker training, with respect to presentation of options and finding inclusive ways to involve the women in the planning of their futures.

Comprehensive, One-Stop Information Provision

The availability of centralized, comprehensive information offline was a big concern, as many women did not have access to library computers or personal computers and internet. Having a 'one-stop' hotline or triage (as brainstormed in the WHPC sessions) would be a valuable medium/long-term opportunity that could also result in women moving through the system more effectively (knowing where to go, what supports are available, how to make those 'next steps').

Addressing Eligibility Barriers to Shelter & Housing Access

Women also highlighted the importance of providing information for single, senior (older) women and single women with mental health issues and incorporating these women in decision making processes to ensure they *"don't fall through the cracks"* and are not left unassisted due to their age and single-status. Eligibility barriers also need to be reconsidered and perhaps made more flexible to address the pressing needs of single women. This may also help alleviate the issue of single women feeling pressured to lie in order to meet the eligibility requirements of shelters, particularly given that the pressure on and needs of these women are still very much real and they still require great support (even if they are unable to meet all eligibility requirements).

More Affordable Housing

Longer-term solutions that would help address capacity issues identified by both WHPC and the focus groups included the conversion of vacant buildings and run-down city housing into working, affordable housing. Ways to go about this particular goal differed, but the overall perception that it would be one of the most effective long-term solutions was common to all participants (from Service Organizations to women with lived experience).

Higher Social Assistance Rates

The existing rates of Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program do not meet the needs of those who need them, particularly single women experiencing homelessness. They have not kept up with increased costs of living, especially the average rents in Hamilton. Higher social assistance rates were recognized by both the WHPC and the focus groups as highly important in order to enable women to access affordable housing and remain housed.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Women's Housing Planning Collaborative (WHPC) has determined a number of short-, medium-, and long-term recommendations for the City of Hamilton to address in order to best address the needs of single women experiencing homelessness, particularly given the demonstrated high demand for affordable housing and shelter beds. The WHPC has been clear that their mission is to plan for the provision of faster, equitable access to affordable and safe housing with differentiated supports for each woman, and easier transitions from shelters to housing, where no woman is turned away. The WHPC envisions a system that empowers women by giving them choices and provides them with hope for the future. Fitting within this mission, the following recommendations are advised.

5.1 Short-Term Recommendations

1. Addition of Emergency Shelter Beds with Supports

Key Issue: Loss of ten emergency shelter beds at Mary's Place on May 31st, 2015, and shelter turnaway findings show that Hamilton's shelter system for single women experiencing homelessness needs at least 29.5 additional beds to respond to current demonstrated need. This shows the potential requirement for a new 30 bed shelter for single women in Hamilton. In addition, in April 2015, the S.O.S. mobile intensive case management team will no longer be funded to serve women leaving transitional housing or women in shelters who do not fit the definition of chronically or episodically homeless, even if they are at risk of imminent homelessness. The changes in funding will also leave transitional housing at Honouring the Circle and the YWCA with major cuts, putting at least 45 beds at risk of closure. YWCA has the minimum funding required to stay open but it is not adequate enough to provide the necessary services to move women more quickly into permanent housing.

Recommendation:

The existing ten temporary emergency shelter beds should be continued with an additional 10 beds added within the current system (for a total of 20 beds) to better meet the growing need for emergency shelter for single homeless women in Hamilton. (See Table 2, p. 8)

2. Maintain Funding for Existing Transitional Housing

Key Issue: Since October 2014 when WHPC was asked to consider solutions to the end of the 10 emergency shelter beds at Mary's Place, the landscape has changed in the women's housing system. Honouring the Circle was cut from the HPS funding grants and Phoenix Place announced its financial resources will only last until August 2015.

Recommendation: Ensure the financial stability of existing resources in the women's housing system, particularly the transitional housing pieces which are a crucial element to many women seeking permanent housing. This will necessitate some advocacy work with the provincial government to ensure they understand the critical need for their investment.

3. Ensure Adequate Staff Supports for Women in Emergency Shelter/Transitional Housing

Key Issue: Women currently experience multiple transitions and change of case management support as they move from emergency shelter to transitional housing to permanent or supportive housing. Each move brings additional stress and anxiety for women and disrupts their stability and support networks. Many women who don't fit the requirements of the Housing

First model (chronically or episodically homeless) and who have been in transitional housing for an longer period of time, are falling through the cracks and not receiving support to move along the housing continuum. This inability to receive the S.O.S. supports means that they often struggle to move into affordable housing and choose to leave and re-enter shelters to access supports, or they stay for longer periods in transitional housing. This was made clear in the focus groups with women with lived experience.

Recommendation: Along with adequate staffing for basic emergency shelter beds at each location, a mobile team of housing workers is needed to help single women in shelters and transitional housing access housing more quickly. A minimum of five mobile housing workers would provide dedicated service to single homeless women at Mary's Place, Womankind, Honouring the Circle, YWCA, and Inasmuch House. These workers would be integrated alongside the S.O.S. Housing First mobile team employed by Good Shepherd. This mobile team would provide housing service to women no matter which shelter they choose and would be structured to ensure that the workers are not pulled into daily operations work at each shelter.

5.2 Medium-Term Recommendations

1. Development and Testing of Centralized Bed-Use Allocation (Triage & Database)

Key Issue: Women struggle with calling multiple locations and are requesting a more centralized system. Women seeking shelter are often in crisis and each additional step to find a bed increases the risk that they may give up and be left with unsafe options for shelter. Police, EMS and other service providers have also expressed the need for a more centralized model. There are psychological repercussions and damage to morale that happen when a woman is turned away at shelter.

Recommendation: Investigate the development of a centralized system for shelter and transitional housing bed allocation so that the standard emergency shelter beds are used before overflow beds. By creating a resourced centralized system, the women are able to receive assistance regardless of which shelter they approach ('no wrong door') and more tailored information on where to go next if the shelter they approached was not a best-fit.

This has the potential to reduce the number of overflow beds being used at any given shelter on any given night. The experiences of agencies and women experiencing homelessness with a centralized bed allocation system can be used to inform the VAW shelter providers as they investigate a similar model to meet the needs of their clients in the VAW system.

2. Expansion of Withdrawal Support Services Team (Womankind) & Designated Beds for Addiction

Key Issue: Other than at Womankind, frontline workers at emergency shelters do not have the expertise to triage the health needs of a woman who arrives to seek shelter or return to a shelter under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol. Withdrawal from substances must be supervised by trained staff due to the high risk of death or complications. Some women using substances currently do not access shelter or withdrawal beds at Womankind and prefer a "regular shelter" because of the stigma associated with choosing to go to an addiction treatment facility. Women presenting under the influence of substances could be alternatively managed in a shelter other than Womankind with the addition of specialized seconded staff. Womankind has been providing withdrawal management expertise to Notre Dame House youth clients through the provision of addiction staff at the shelter from 9:30 pm to 2:30 am. Prior to this partnership

(which includes Alternatives for Youth for supporting youth after immediate withdrawal), 100% of intoxicated clients at Notre-Dame House were sent to Emergency Rooms as there was no safe withdrawal possible at Notre-Dame. The LHIN has funded the program as part of their emergency diversion strategy and the program has almost completely eliminated emergency room use for withdrawal among this population of clients. This highly successful partnership model could be implemented with women using emergency shelter beds and possibly transitional housing facilities as well.

Recommendation: The Women's Housing Planning Collaborative recommends that the City of Hamilton ask the LHIN to fund the expansion of this team to assist homeless women, along with the designation of bed(s) for withdrawal management at one other shelter. This specialized withdrawal management staff would be able to triage women onsite to determine if a woman needs immediate specialized care at ER or Womankind, or if she can be supported through withdrawal within the shelter at a designated bed. The partnership would include ADGS to offer support to women after the initial withdrawal stage.

3. Provide Interim Housing Options with Supports

Key Issue: There is a need for interim housing that has supports, is low-barrier, with a high degree of privacy. It is also crucial to respond to women's needs when they are discharged from institutions.

Recommendation: The WHPC recommends identifying and supporting interim housing options to address immediate capacity issues to accommodate women in shelters. Women housed in these options would need to be supported through mobile case workers (i.e. S.O.S. mobile case workers).

5.3 Long-Term Recommendations

1. Develop Affordable Housing Stock that Meets the Unique Needs of Women

Key Issue: As indicated by the WHPC vision and supported by years of evidence, the solution to homelessness is more affordable housing not additional shelter beds. There is currently a lack of affordable housing and a great need to help women transition into homes with supports, and housing options that cultivate a culture of community and peer support. This is particularly crucial given that some women require women-only housing opportunities or housing opportunities with supports.

Recommendation: New Affordable Housing Stock for Women with Mobile Supports in Identified Clusters of Vacant City Housing Hamilton or Rent-Geared-to-Income Units: Create an inventory of vacant units throughout the City of Hamilton and determine which clusters could be converted into affordable housing communities. Support workers can be hired through existing agencies, like the S.O.S. mobile workers, to assist women living there. Besides staff support there should also be access to transportation and day programs.

2. Reorganize Hamilton's Domiciliary Hostels/Residential Care Facilities System to Provide Better Supportive Housing Options for Women

Key Issue: The current RCF funding model has led to a variety of disparate and disconnected facilities that do not collaborate to offer a system of adequate supportive housing in Hamilton. In

addition, many women in these supportive housing facilities have experienced assault and exploitation rendering some RCFs an unsafe housing option for homeless women.

Recommendation: The WHPC recommends that the City of Hamilton transform the funding model of RCFs to ensure higher quality housing, more transparency and accountability to the clients they serve and system integration with other housing and shelter providers. In addition, RCFs should provide safe mixed gender housing and more woman-only housing to better meet the needs of women who need supportive housing in Hamilton.

3. Develop Robust Community & Peer-to-Peer Supports

Key Issue: Once housed, women frequently lose supports and are unable to, or not comfortable enough to, effectively navigate and integrate into their neighbourhoods. There is a great need for these housed women to have community and supports.

Recommendation: The WHPC recommends the piloting of robust community and peer-to-peer supports for women both in shelters/transitional/interim housing and in affordable housing. This recommendation involves better synergy and coordination between service organizations and community groups/organizations (e.g.: Neighbourhood Associations and planning teams) to provide information to women about safe, welcoming engagement and socializing opportunities in their communities. The recommendation also involves developing a peer-to-peer network for women who have experienced homelessness and who are now in affordable housing so that these women can feel better supported by one another. These supports are crucial for improving morale and reducing the risk of women relapsing into a state of homelessness.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The number of single women experiencing homelessness in Hamilton is increasing and responding to their needs must be a priority for this community. Based on monthly turnaway data, women will be turned away approximately 600 times at women's shelters over the course of a year. That translates to 500 a month, up from the 300 women per month as reported by the Social Planning and Research Council only three years ago.

As a short-term resolution to the upcoming closure of ten emergency shelter beds on May 31st, 2015, at Mary's Place, the redistribution of these ten beds alongside the addition of eight new beds and the allocation of supports for all of the beds is highly recommended by the Women's Housing Planning Collaborative and supported through the focus group conversations with women who have lived experience of homelessness.

That said the long-term goal of increasing the availability of safe, equitable, and affordable housing for single women should be a constant priority as systemic capacity issues at emergency shelters will only be addressed through the provision of affordable housing. Moreover, there are many medium-term goals that can help alleviate pressure on the system by increasing information awareness and providing support that increases the dignity, morale, and hope of women in need of housing. A more robustly funded system can provide better opportunities for women to move along the housing continuum with positive outcomes.