

Justice System Involvement in the Context of Homelessness and Housing Insecurity Among Women in Thunder Bay

Stephanie Campbell, Lakehead University; Rebecca Schiff, Lakehead University; Mary Kozorys, Elizabeth Fry Society North Western Ontario; Helle Moeller, Lakehead University; Deborah Scharf, Lakehead University



ABOUT US

Elizabeth Fry Society Northwestern Ontario is a vibrant charitable organization that supports and advocates for women in prison, women transitioning back into the community, and women at risk of criminalization. We work to provide integrated programs and support services that best meet the needs of women and their families, with the goal of building healthy communities and reducing incarceration.

We conduct partnered research to help us identify ways to better support women in the community and understand barriers that face them in our region.

Background and approach to the research

- Elizabeth Fry Society of NWO identification of housing needs for women they work with
- Contacted lead researcher and developed research team and advisory board
- John Howard Society, Thunder Bay Shelter House, Alpha Court Community Mental Health and Addictions Services, Thunder Bay Correctional Centre, Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services, Bora Laskin Faculty of Law at Lakehead University, Nishnawbe Aski Nation, Kinna-aweya Legal Clinic, Thunder Bay Crime Prevention Committee, Canadian Mental Health Association, and Lakehead Social Planning Council
- Developed research proposal and applied for funding from the Law Foundation of Ontario

Objectives

- 1.) Assess the degree to which homelessness and housing insecurity affect criminal justice system involvement for women in Thunder Bay, with particular consideration of Indigenous women
- 2.) Identify housing, social, mental health and legal support needs for housing insecure women involved with the criminal justice system
- 3.) Identify evidence-based approaches/promising practices/innovations for providing gender-sensitive and culturally-relevant housing, social, and legal support for women

Methods

Environmental scan
Bail Court monitoring
Online survey with defense and duty counsel
Focus groups
Women in the Thunder Bay Correctional Centre
Women in community with current / previous involvement with justice system
Service providers
Individual interviews
Women recently released
Legal professionals

Participants & Bail Monitoring

- **25** women involved with criminal justice system for interviews and focus groups
- **75%** self identify as Indigenous women; **20%** Ojibwe as first language
- Most single; **80%** with children
- **45%** no high school; **30%** with post secondary; **19%** high school education
- **88%** with mental health, addictions, or chronic physical health conditions
- **16** service providers and legal professionals

Law student monitored the bail courts for two time periods in July/August 2018

95 women attended bail court

For **32** women (~**30%**), housing had a direct impact on bail hearing

Of these **32**, **47%** did not have housing available to them

FINDINGS



Survey with defense & duty counsel

1. Reported that many female clients are underhoused; affects bail planning
2. Impacts of not getting bail:
 - losing custody of children, housing, employment, income
 - reduced access to mental health and substance use treatment services
 - subject to violence and stress associated with imprisonment
1. Lack of stable housing identified as a significant contributor to recidivism

Interviews & focus groups

3 Major Themes Identified:

1. Barriers to Obtaining/Maintaining Housing
2. Effects of Housing Insecurity/Homelessness on Women
3. Identified Needs/ Preferences

Barriers to Obtaining/Maintaining Housing



1. Discrimination

Criminal history, background checks, race, income source

2. Financial barriers

Cost of first and last month rent, utility connection, moving costs

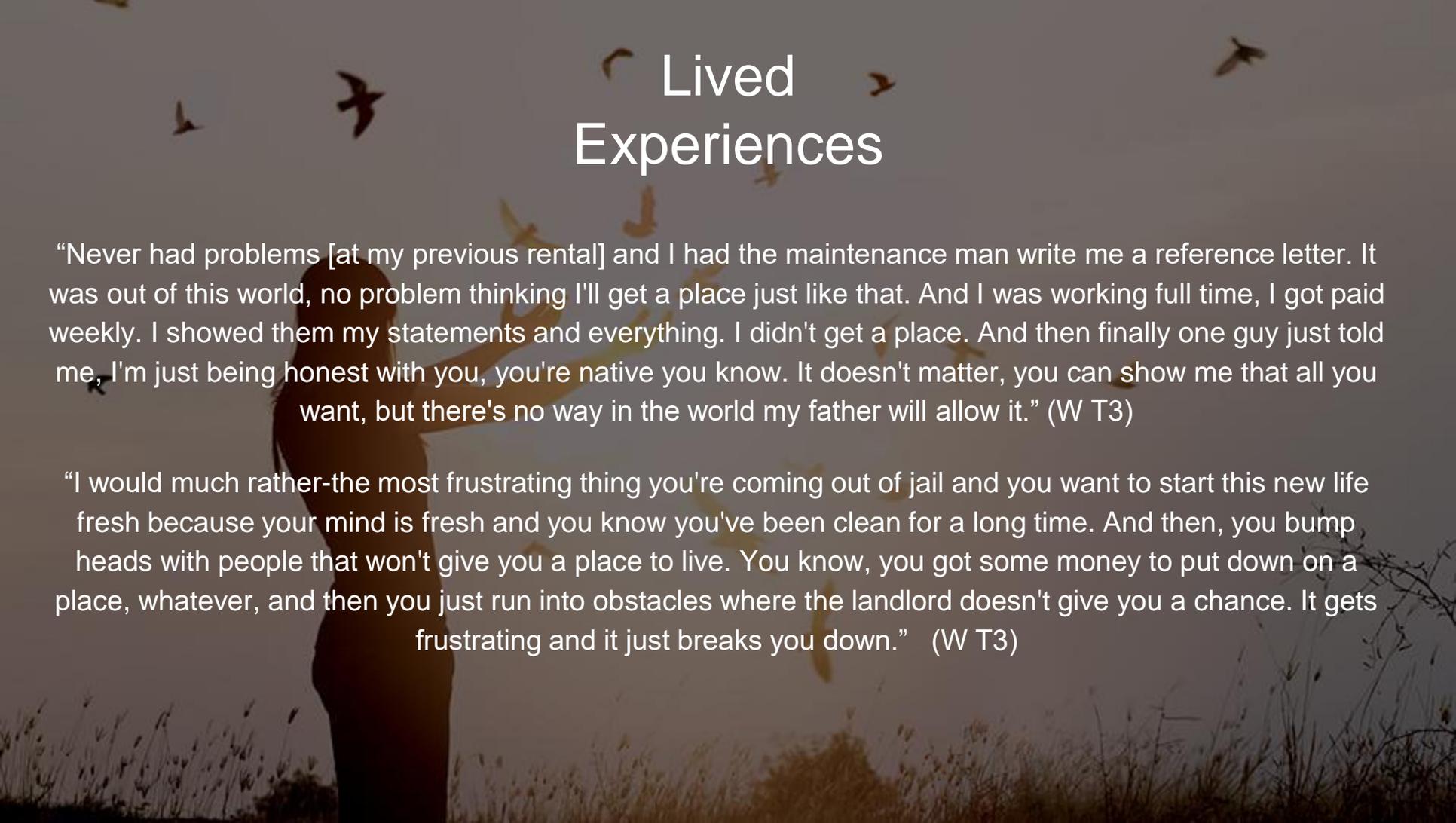
Issues related to previous arrears

Delays in receiving assistance (e.g. replacing identification)

3. Availability

Lack of affordable housing/ rental options

Lack of transitional options exclusively for women



Lived Experiences

“Never had problems [at my previous rental] and I had the maintenance man write me a reference letter. It was out of this world, no problem thinking I'll get a place just like that. And I was working full time, I got paid weekly. I showed them my statements and everything. I didn't get a place. And then finally one guy just told me, I'm just being honest with you, you're native you know. It doesn't matter, you can show me that all you want, but there's no way in the world my father will allow it.” (W T3)

“I would much rather-the most frustrating thing you're coming out of jail and you want to start this new life fresh because your mind is fresh and you know you've been clean for a long time. And then, you bump heads with people that won't give you a place to live. You know, you got some money to put down on a place, whatever, and then you just run into obstacles where the landlord doesn't give you a chance. It gets frustrating and it just breaks you down.” (W T3)

Effects of Homelessness Housing Insecurity on Women



1. Relation to recidivism

“They [homeless people] do not have the ability to leave situations like we do. For example to take a break or get privacy to recover from our own issues or stress of the day.” (LP T15)

2. Relation to addiction

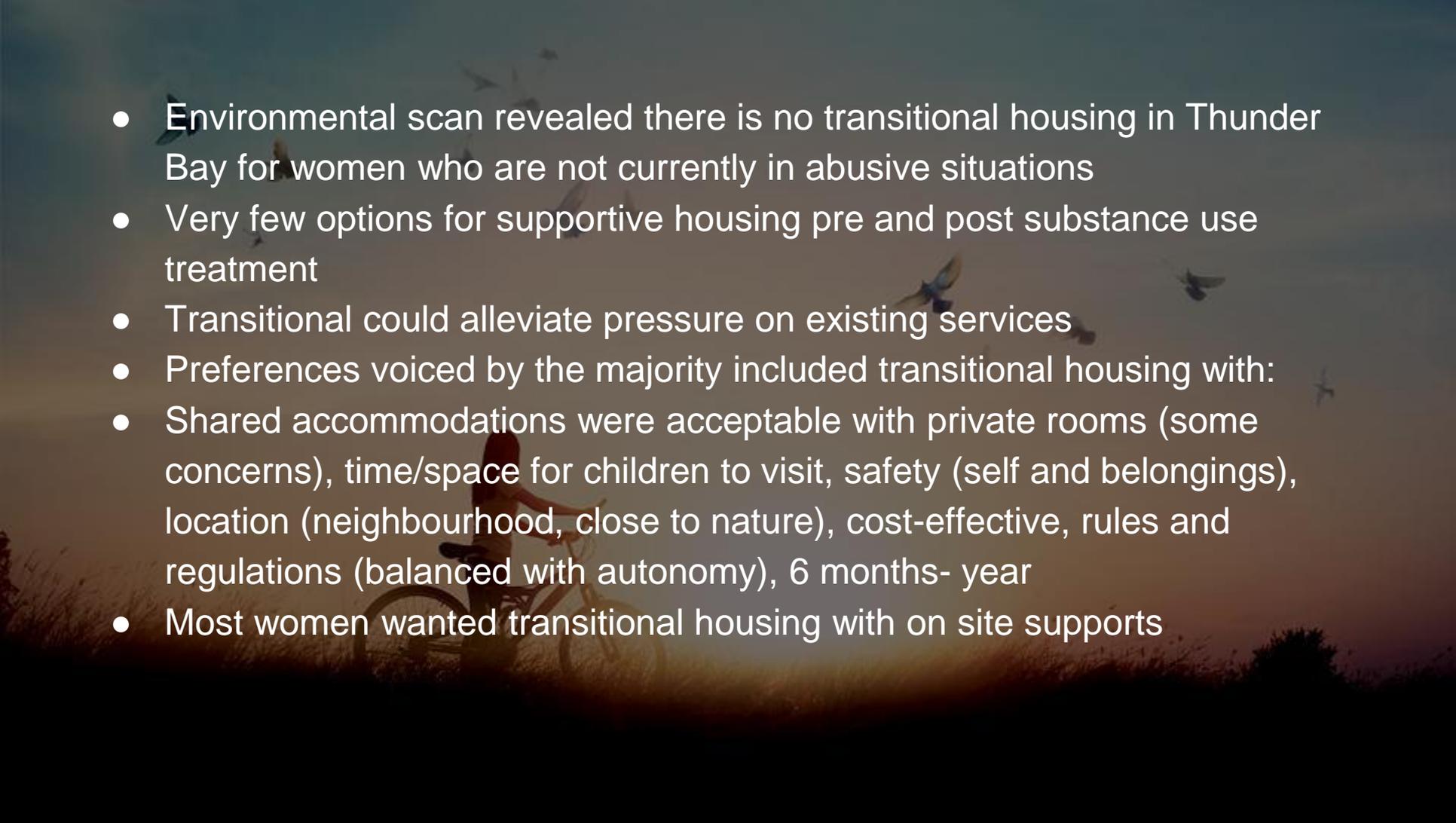
“While I was in the treatment program [post release] I did good - but afterwards coming back to no home - I get frustrated - in order to deal with frustration I smoke crack.” (W T2)

3. Safety

“Women are being taken advantage of for not having housing and being subjected to undertaking criminal activities in order to support having a place to stay. Back to that, being able to maybe stay with somebody but some of the conditions to do that, you might have to go get yourself involved in sex work or be dealing drugs, using substances, you know a whole host of those things.” (SP T13)

Needs and Recommendations for Housing and Supports



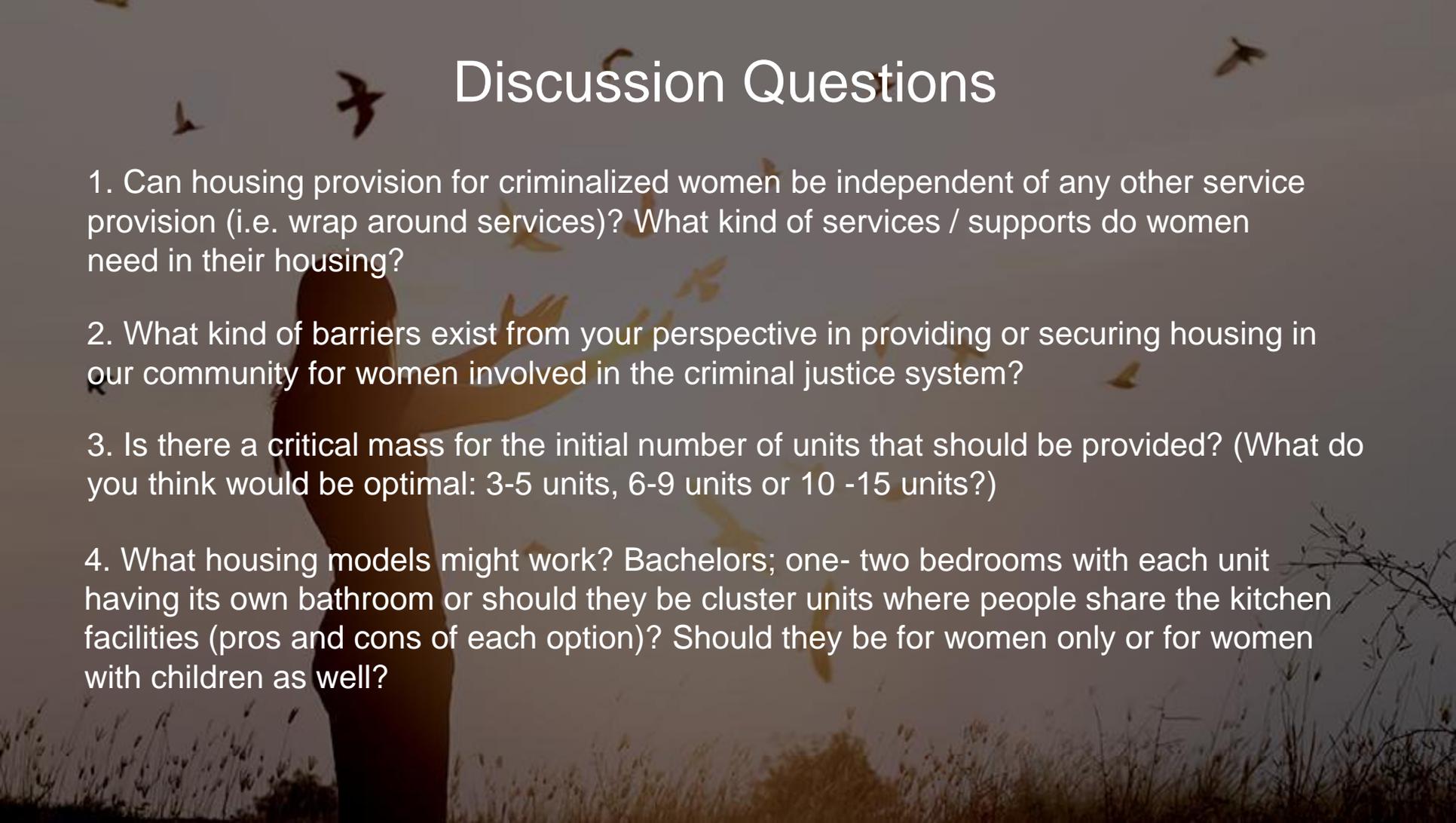
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- A person is riding a bicycle in a field at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue, with several birds flying. The person is in the center, slightly to the left, and is wearing a red top. The bicycle is dark. The field is filled with tall grasses, some of which are in the foreground, creating a sense of depth. The overall mood is peaceful and serene.
- Environmental scan revealed there is no transitional housing in Thunder Bay for women who are not currently in abusive situations
 - Very few options for supportive housing pre and post substance use treatment
 - Transitional could alleviate pressure on existing services
 - Preferences voiced by the majority included transitional housing with:
 - Shared accommodations were acceptable with private rooms (some concerns), time/space for children to visit, safety (self and belongings), location (neighbourhood, close to nature), cost-effective, rules and regulations (balanced with autonomy), 6 months- year
 - Most women wanted transitional housing with on site supports

Conclusions



1. Homelessness and housing insecurity is an issue for women in Thunder Bay
2. Associated with recidivism, threats to substance use recovery and safety
3. Need for transitional housing that caters to the unique gender and cultural specific needs of women in Thunder Bay who are criminally-involved
4. Emphasis on family, dealing with intergenerational trauma, over-representation in jails, fleeing unsafe situations
5. Mental health and addiction services as a key component in this relationship
6. Housing is the foundation for wellness; must strive to meet this basic need first

Discussion Questions



1. Can housing provision for criminalized women be independent of any other service provision (i.e. wrap around services)? What kind of services / supports do women need in their housing?
2. What kind of barriers exist from your perspective in providing or securing housing in our community for women involved in the criminal justice system?
3. Is there a critical mass for the initial number of units that should be provided? (What do you think would be optimal: 3-5 units, 6-9 units or 10 -15 units?)
4. What housing models might work? Bachelors; one- two bedrooms with each unit having its own bathroom or should they be cluster units where people share the kitchen facilities (pros and cons of each option)? Should they be for women only or for women with children as well?

Funding provided by:



Elizabeth Fry Society

212 Miles Street E, Unit 210
Thunder Bay, Ontario
P7C 1J6

info@efsnwo.com

(807) 623-1319

1-888-885-4072 (Toll Free)

