DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SHELTERS AND HOMELESSNESS

Domestic abuse shelters are often called upon to serve women who are homeless and do not present with current domestic abuse issues. This is especially common in smaller communities where there are fewer resources for women experiencing homelessness. Shelters’ priority for service is women and children fleeing violence, women fleeing violence and other women in crisis (typically experiencing homelessness). Recent research has indicated that linkages between homelessness and domestic abuse are high. It is likely that many of the women who access services and present as homeless women have been impacted by domestic violence at some point in their lives. It is important to be aware of the connection between the two issues.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- To understand the linkages between homelessness and domestic abuse

SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM:

- There have been attempts to count the number of homeless people in Canada but there is no official government data on homelessness (National Homelessness Initiative, 2004).

- There is also a lack of consensus regarding the definition of homelessness. The definition of homelessness adopted by the United Nations in the International Year of Homeless states that homeless people include “those living in dwellings that do not meet the basic criteria considered essential for health and human and social development, including secure occupancy, protection against bad weather, personal security, as well as access to sanitary facilities and potable water, education, work and shelter services (Begin et al, 1999, p. 4).

- According to the National Homeless Initiative (2004) “homelessness is considered to be any person, family, or household that has no fixed address or security of housing tenure”. Begin points out that statistics gathered according to this definition do not represent the seriousness of the homelessness situation in Canada because large numbers of individuals are living in unsafe housing circumstances.

- Research on the relationship between family violence and homelessness is still in an early stage of development. It is only recently that the two topics have been discussed together.

- Studies in Canada have found histories of family violence to be common among homeless individuals, especially amongst youth and women and these studies indicate that family violence is more common amongst the homeless than among the non-homeless (Neal, 2004; Novac et al, 2002).

- A recent Canadian study stated that family violence is one of the main causes of homelessness among families. For more than 40% of the 59 homeless families interviewed in 10 major cities
across Canada, family violence was one of the factors identified causing individuals to leave their homes (Social Planning and Research Council of B.C., 2003).

- According to the 2003 Statistics Canada Statistical Profile on Family Violence (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics 2003), in a snapshot survey taken on April 15, 2002, 73% of the women and 84% of the children admitted to family violence shelters across the country were fleeing abusive situations. It is likely that others had histories of family violence.

- The 2002 Calgary homelessness study determined that running from an abusive relationship was the reason given for homelessness by 29% of the absolute homeless women and 37% of the relatively homeless women (Gardiner and Cairns, 2002). Absolute homelessness is defined as the literal or visible homelessness and “applies to people living on the street with no physical shelter of their own, e.g. sleeping in temporary shelters or in locations not meant for human habitation (also know as “sleeping rough”)”. Relative homelessness refers to hidden or concealed homelessness and “applies to people living in spaces that do not meet minimum standards. That is, they lack adequate protection from the elements, access to safe water and sanitation, secure tenure, personal safety, affordability and access to employment, education and health care.” (p 1).

- Women are especially at risk for becoming homeless due to intimate partner violence. Many women are more likely to be in relationships where they are financially dependent on a partner. If they leave the relationship, she is often at risk of being homeless (Tessler et al, 2001).

- Neal (2004) reports that certain populations of women are at risk for homelessness, including Aboriginal women, both on and off reserves, unemployed and low income women with employment limitations, women with substance abuse issues, women with disabilities who lack support, women discharged from mental health facilities, women who have experienced physical or sexual violence, and women such as sex trade workers who live in impoverished and unsafe environments.

- According to Begin et al (1999) “families most at risk are those in which domestic violence prevails” (p 21).

- Tutty et al (2007) state that “although we have tended to treat homeless women and abused women as separate and distinct populations, the literature suggests considerable overlaps in both their experiences and their needs, housing being a key consideration” (p. 3).

- Neal (2004) stresses that homelessness is not simply a housing issue but it is a multi-dimensional problem related to conditions of impoverishment.
• Wesley and Wright (2005) state that the relationship between intimate partner violence and homelessness for women is complex in that there is a multitude of issues woman are confronted with. The homeless women in their study reported that their relationships “contributed to diminishing resources, social exclusion, economic vulnerability and eventual homelessness for the women (p. 1099).

• Stainbrook & Hornik (2006) suggest that the needs of women with children in homeless shelters are similar to their counterparts in domestic violence shelters. The two groups have similar rates of mental health issues, substance abuse problems and lifetime rates of victimization and trauma.

**AN IDEA TO THINK ABOUT**

**IMPLICATIONS FOR SERVICE PROVISION**

Research indicates that family violence may trigger a series of moves, yet may not be the immediate reason for contacting a domestic abuse shelter (Novac et al, 2002). Many women will first go to a friends or a family member before accessing a shelter. When a woman contacts a shelter and inquires about space she may be given low priority for admittance because she is not directly leaving an abusive situation. She may not readily talk about the abuse unless asked. This information points to the importance of exploring women’s situations when they call requesting space. It is helpful to ask questions about what lead to her being homeless. Where has she been staying for the past few months? What was her last permanent address? Has she been impacted by domestic abuse as an adult woman? As a child? It may appear that she is safe for the moment because she is staying with a family member or a friend. While friends and family can provide support, they usually do not have knowledge or expertise in the area of domestic abuse. Many women are better served by accessing shelter support whether as a resident in a shelter or by connecting with either a follow-up or an outreach counselor. Taking time to access women’s situations can be a very significant step in supporting women to work towards more safety and stability in their lives.

The literature indicates that homeless women are more vulnerable to violence. Shelters can play a significant role in assisting homeless women to access supports in the community including housing resources which may in turn decrease the possibility of them experiencing violence once they leave the shelter. If a shelter is unable to accept a homeless woman into the shelter, it is important to try to connect her to services in the community that support homeless women.
THROUGH HER EYES

CASE EXAMPLE #1:

Cathy left a five year abusive relationship and stayed with a friend for a couple of weeks. Her friend lives in subsidized housing, therefore Cathy was not able to stay permanently with her. Cathy then moved in with her sister and her husband and 4 children. The family lives in a small three bedroom bungalow and Cathy had to sleep on the living room couch. After three weeks, Cathy found she needed her own space. Cathy had not worked during the time she had lived with her partner and did not have access to any funds. She tried applying for Income Supports but because she did not have a rent report she was not eligible. Cathy finally called a domestic violence shelter looking for assistance. The shelter was full when Cathy called. Cathy was feeling very desperate and went to a shelter for the homeless. Cathy felt very unsafe there as the shelter was for both women and men. Cathy was experiencing nightmares and startled easily. Cathy talked to one of the staff about her fears but the staff was not knowledgeable about issues of trauma and domestic violence and was unsure of how to support Cathy. She did encourage Cathy to continue to call the domestic violence shelter to determine if there was space. Cathy was eventually able to get into the shelter.

CASE EXAMPLE #2:

Linda and her three children had been homeless for about 6 months before seeking support from a domestic violence shelter. Linda left a 15 year marriage after her partner’s violent outbursts became more frequent. Initially when she left the relationship she went to live with her mom and dad in another city. She knew that this would be temporary as her parents lived in a small apartment. Linda needed to make frequent trips back to the town where she had lived with her partner in order to meet with her lawyer and to attend court. She had applied for and received an interim order giving her custody of the children and had filed for divorce. Linda decided to leave the children with her parents while she tried to get herself established. Linda stayed with various friends for a night or two. Sometimes she splurged and spent an occasional night in a hotel. Eventually her savings were gone and the divorce proceedings continued. Linda finally sought assistance from the local women’s shelter.

REFERENCES:

Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics 2003  www.statcan.gc.ca/cgi-bin/IPS/display?cat_num=85F0033M.


