

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Violence Against Women Services

RESEARCH
STUDY

CARE INTERACTIONS IN WOMEN'S SHELTERS

WHAT WE DID

We examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the provision of care in women's shelters in Ontario. We spoke to more than 50 people in total, including women using shelter services, shelter staff, and shelter directors/leaders.

WHAT WE FOUND

The pandemic challenged longstanding values that guide work in women's shelters. Pandemic guidelines, such as physical distancing, masking, and closures of communal spaces, though intended to slow the spread of the virus, created barriers to care, such as making it hard for women, children and staff to form therapeutic and supportive connections, and sometimes re-traumatizing clients. Despite the challenges, staff and leaders used creative ways to provide quality care. The findings are organized by three interconnected themes with example quotes below.

CHALLENGES TO CORE VALUES

"You feel like you're babysitting, and just from like a feminist perspective it's so not empowering to a woman at all to be like, 'OK, well I'll come with you to do this and do that' ... it just felt so oppressive."
(staff member)

"Isolation is counterintuitive to the work that we do. Our entire purpose and job, besides safety and options and all, is to break the isolation... All of a sudden, isolation is the defining moment of 2020."
(executive director)

CHALLENGES PROVIDING CARE

"We're not allowed to be hands-on with [children] because of COVID, so, when they run up and try to hug me or ask me to carry them, I have to say no."
(staff member)

"The work, it just isn't the same. There's nothing like sitting in a room with someone and they get it, or you know that you're truly being heard versus on the phone with somebody."
(staff member)

STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING QUALITY CARE

"I've got one staff [member] who drives around with two lawn chairs in her trunk... you bring them a coffee and sit in a lawn chair, you get to the depth of what's really happening."
(executive director)

"One of the child workers... would come around with... a whole bunch of activities to follow and fun sort of things, and that was very helpful to kind of break up the day and give us something to actually look forward to..."
(client)

WHAT WE RECOMMEND

For government/policy/funding audiences:

1. Help-seeking for violence, and especially emergency shelter stays, often activate a range of needs for families, including safe and affordable housing, physical and mental health supports, income stability, criminal justice and family legal supports, schooling changes or accommodations, etc. These require enhanced system navigation and service access, while prioritizing physical and emotional safety. The role of VAW services, and the important inter-connections with/among other social services, must be better understood by policymakers and funders to ensure pandemic and other crisis-related guidelines do not worsen gaps in an already fragmented and under-valued sector.
2. Government and public health agencies need to work closely with VAW services to ensure that guidelines in times of crisis do not conflict with the kind of care provided in shelters. Changes must be grounded in core values, not be retraumatizing to women and children, and promote physical, cultural and emotional safety, including finding ways to allow clients and staff to engage meaningfully and clients to interact with one another informally.

For the broader social services sector:

3. Coordination and cooperation among agencies and services needs improvement, both in the context of an ongoing crisis, and for post-crisis planning. Closures in one part of the system, for example, housing or income support offices, have serious impacts on the length of shelter stays. Services should communicate early and often to reduce service disruption.

For the violence against women services sector, including organizational leaders and staff:

4. New service models, while useful to many, must be developed and supported in ways that are accessible and equitable, including resources for sustainability (e.g., internet connectivity, computer hardware upgrades). For example, technology-facilitated interactions, when stable internet access or private spaces to have these conversations are unavailable, cannot meet the needs of all women; in-person options, including shelter stays, will always be required.
5. Communal spaces in shelters need to be able to operate in at least some capacity during times of crisis. More research and funding is needed to support VAW services to create spaces that do not compromise the level of therapeutic care historically provided in shelters.

For the general public, including media:

6. Shelters are a key pathway to safety and well-being for many women, and their children, experiencing partner violence.
7. There must be a broad understanding of the important, and sometimes invisible, work done in shelters; forming connections and receiving emotional support are key parts of the shelter experience for women and their children, and crucial to healing from trauma. COVID-19-specific service changes disrupted relationship building, particularly for children, who couldn't play with children from other families or get comfort, hugs, or care from staff.

For more information:

- <https://gtvincubator.uwo.ca/vawservicespandemic/>
- Burd, C., McLean, I., MacGregor, J. C. D., Mantler, T., Veenendaal, J., Wathen, C. N., & The Violence Against Women Services in a Pandemic Team. "Our services are not the same": The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on care interactions in women's shelters. *Under review*.