

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

RESEARCH
STUDY

USE OF HOTELS AS TEMPORARY HOUSING

WHAT WE DID

We examined the use of hotels (and motels) as temporary housing by domestic violence shelters during the COVID-19 pandemic. We spoke to more than 50 people in total, including women staying in shelters, shelter staff, and shelter directors/leaders.

WHAT WE FOUND

Hotels played a critical role during the pandemic in providing space for women and their children, who would otherwise have been turned away from shelter due to various COVID-19 restrictions. Participants reported benefits and drawbacks to these temporary housing solutions. Here are some of our main findings, with examples from participants:

SAFETY CONCERNS

"There's still women that are bringing men back to the motel, which is a problem... some of them are their abusive partners."

(staff member)

DIFFICULT DECISIONS

"...is the woman, is this a good fit for the motel? ... Because one staff may determine one thing and another staff may perceive the situation differently, so I think that's where it felt inconsistent."

(staff member)

LACK OF CONNECTION

"She [i.e., the client in the hotel] felt disconnected from supports. She felt that... she was almost abandoned..."

(staff member)

GREATER AUTONOMY

"I kind of feel like I can breathe again. I don't have anybody pushing me around or bugging me."

(client)

LIMITED SPACE & PRIVACY

"It is hard on me and my three kids, because it's just too crowded..."

(client)

WHAT WE RECOMMEND

For government/policy/funding audiences:

1. Be aware that using hotel rooms as emergency shelter does not meet important basic needs, including safety, for women escaping violence; they are not a replacement for domestic violence shelters.
2. Many of the hotels used were far from grocery stores and other basic necessities. It cost women more to stay in hotels than in shelter, and daily stipends (e.g., for transportation) were often not enough to cover costs. Having to leave to shop also presents safety risks.
3. The size of the community should be considered when offering financial supports to shelters to find hotels or other temporary options. Risks may be greater in smaller communities where it's difficult to find places to safely house women and their children.

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

4. Strategize how to manage expectations of hotel partners and clients. Using hotels as an alternative to traditional emergency shelters caused friction between some shelters and hotels. Establishing good relationships with hotel management can help ensure better service for women and their children.
5. Consider the location of temporary housing, including its proximity to needed services and amenities, transit hubs, and areas that may make some women feel unsafe (e.g., where they may encounter their abuser or other triggering situations).
6. If possible, offer women a pre-vetted list of options to be more responsive to their needs. Shelter staff should determine whether adequate security is in place and also prepare hotel staff for potentially unsafe situations. Ideally, the shelter will also use a hotel room to provide support and counseling during specific times of day.

For the general public, including the media:

7. Keep the public informed through traditional and social media about changes to services. This will help women, and those who support them, stay informed about available options. Some women were hesitant to enter shelter, not knowing what to expect, and with frequently-changing policies, staff could not confidently provide this information.
8. Provide a list of supports and services available for those in-shelter versus those in hotels to help women make the best choice for their unique situation. While hotels offer women more autonomy than do shelters (e.g., they can come and go, pets are allowed), this is offset by less direct service/counseling opportunities and fewer safety measures in place.

For more information:

- <https://gtvincubator.uwo.ca/vawservicespandemic/>
- Mantler, T., Veenendaal, J., & Wathen, C. N. (2021). Exploring the use of Hotels as Temporary Housing by Domestic Violence Shelters During COVID-19. *International Journal on Homelessness*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.5206/ijoh.2021.1.13642>