

# THIS IS NOT HOME



## PROJECT SUMMARY



THE VICTORIA FAULKNER  
**WOMEN'S CENTRE**

Come Together. Find Support. Take Action.

**SISITERING**



# Introduction

All women (cis and trans) and gender-diverse people have a human right to safe and dignified homes in Canada. Women and gender-diverse people who are multiply marginalized face unique barriers to accessing emergency shelter, housing and housing support.

Low-barrier, gender-focused drop-in programs play an important role in meeting the basic needs of this population, and provide accessible and meaningful forms of support, social connection and community.

Our goal was to gather lessons learned from low-barrier, gender-specific drop-in programs and participants who access these services, and use this knowledge to contribute to the creation of appropriate, accessible, secure, and self-determined housing and support options for women and gender-diverse people.

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

*This is Not Home* is a community-based, participatory research project that brings together gender-focused, low-barrier drop-in programs serving multiply-marginalized women (cis and trans) and gender-diverse people experiencing homelessness and housing precarity from across Canada.



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Sistering (Toronto, ON)

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My Sister's Place (London ON)

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Willow's Place, Mission Services (Hamilton ON)

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A Safe Place (Whitehorse YK)

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West Central Women's Resource Centre  
(Winnipeg MN)

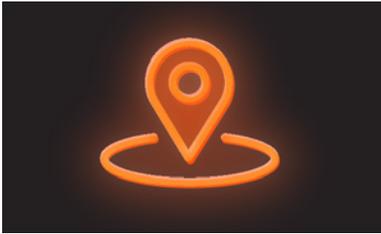
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Downtown Eastside Women's Centre  
(Vancouver BC)

Program managers, front-line staff, member-researchers (women and gender-diverse people with lived experience of homelessness and housing precarity) and program participants from each research site all played vital roles in our partnership.

Our project aims to learn from the models of practice and service-delivery informing gender-specific, low-barrier drop-in programs, and from the lived expertise of the women and gender-diverse people who access these programs at all levels of the project.

## OUR RESEARCH ACTIVITIES INCLUDED:



**Research Site Questionnaire** which was completed by senior leadership and program staff at low-barrier drop-in sites, which focused on learning more about the daily routines and features of gender-focused, low-barrier drop-in programs, the sites' roles in their local settings, and challenges impacting service delivery.



**Collecting administrative data** over the course of six months (March - August 2020). Research sites collected administrative data with respect to the numbers and demographics of service users, as well as service needs, housing circumstances and health status. This included counting how many meals were served daily, how many harm-reduction kits were given out, and how many service-users accessed the space.



**Focus groups** were conducted with over 100 front-line staff and program participants. The purpose of the focus groups was to learn more about the role of the drop-in program in supporting participants' housing stability and access to services, as well as learning more about the barriers to services faced by participants. Staff and service users made recommendations for low-barrier drop-ins, and for other services, programs and policies affecting women and gender-diverse people experiencing homelessness and housing precarity.



**Participant Survey** was conducted with 225 women and gender-diverse people at all six of the research sites. The survey tool was developed through a collaborative and participatory process with member researchers, lived experts, service providers and implemented in partnership with the Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network. It included: demographics, history of housing and homelessness, current housing circumstance, service use and needs, health status and perspectives on low-barrier drop-ins and other services.

# Key Results

**Gender-focused, low-barrier drop-in programs play a vital role in the lives of multiply-marginalized women (cis and trans) and gender-diverse people experiencing homelessness and housing precarity.**

Low barrier drop-in spaces provide a full range of programs and supports in one place including: access to basic needs, social connection, Indigenous ceremony, case management supports, access to health-care, employment, art, skill-building, social enterprise etc.

*Over 65%* of participants shared that they were able to get the help they needed through accessing the drop-in space; *57% reported that the drop-in space was somewhere they felt safe, accepted and like they belonged!*

One of our key lessons learned was that low barrier, gender-focused drop-in programs play an important role in fostering meaningful forms of community, connection and social inclusion. Despite providing an important role facilitating access to basic needs and meaningful social connection for multiply-marginalized women and gender-diverse people, *all six of our research sites reported difficulties securing long-term, sustainable funding.*

"It feels like home. It is a place filled with compassion...Cozy and comfortable... always someone there to help you in the moment. It gives a lot of women purpose."

- Participant

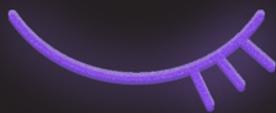


## Multiply-marginalized women (cis and trans) and gender-diverse people accessing low-barrier drop-in programs face significant barriers to accessing shelter, health-care, housing and other mainstream supports.

*A lack of trauma-informed, accessible and gender-specific programming coupled with structural oppression creates unique barriers for multiply-marginalized women and gender-diverse people when attempting to access housing and support services.*

"If you are not known by a place like Willow's, you could just disappear."

- Participant



### WE SURVEYED 225 PARTICIPANTS OF LOW-BARRIER DROP-IN PROGRAMS AND FOUND:

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**99%** of participants experience at least one disability, and **55%** of participants report living with three or more disabilities.

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**76%** of participants are survivors of abuse or trauma.

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**48%** of participants reported mental health challenges.

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**42%** of participants reported issues with substance use and addiction.

Many participants shared that experiences of intersecting trauma, mental health challenges and ongoing issues relating to addiction led to being barred and/or restricted from accessing shelters and other types of support services.

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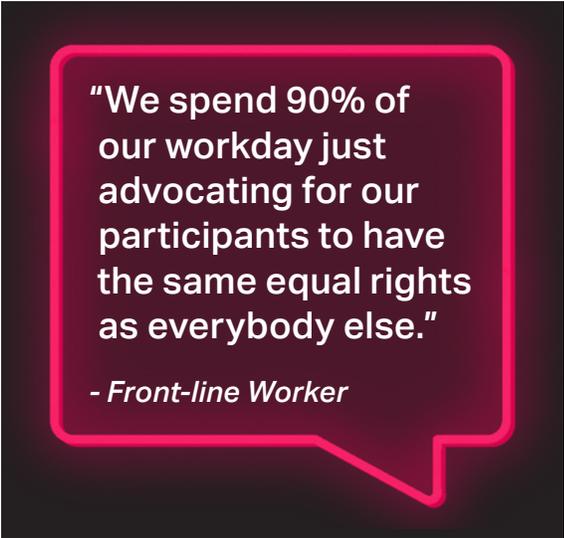
**24%** of participants shared feeling discriminated against when accessing other services.

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**18%** reported being kicked out of supportive housing program where they were staying and/or barred from an emergency shelter.

Drop-in programs play an important role in supporting women (cis and trans) and gender-diverse people experiencing homelessness, facilitating housing access, and providing support that contributes to housing stability.

*All of the research sites played an important role in supporting women and gender-diverse people through housing transitions, whether they were housed or experiencing homelessness.*



"We spend 90% of our workday just advocating for our participants to have the same equal rights as everybody else."

*- Front-line Worker*

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**84%** of participants had been homeless at some point during their lives, and **79%** had experienced homelessness in the past year.

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When asked about current experience of housing and homelessness, **53%** of participants reported having their own place to live, while **47%** of participants did not currently have their own place to live.

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Of those who had been homeless in the past year, half had been homeless for six or more months.

**Drop-in spaces support women and gender-diverse people experiencing homelessness by:** providing the support and services needed to survive homelessness, including access to a safe, warm place to rest and sleep, meet basic needs such as meals, showers and laundry, and access harm-reduction supplies and other services.

**Drop-in spaces support women and gender-diverse people who are looking for housing by:** assisting with housing searches, stabilizing landlord relationships, accessing housing subsidies, connecting to other types of housing support and building capacities for living independently in the community.

**Drop-in spaces support women and gender-diverse people who are precariously housed by:** helping to compensate for unaffordable and unsafe housing which includes providing access to other basic needs such as; food security, laundry, providing toiletries (menstrual products), providing a space for community-building and social connection, to counter isolation and provide respite from abuse.

**Drop-in spaces play an important role in micro- and macro-advocacy for multiply-marginalized women and gender-diverse people,** including advocating for individual participants' rights to housing and support; and engaging in larger advocacy campaigns to challenge root causes of structural oppression.

## **Relational, trauma-informed and low-barrier models of practice work to create meaningful and accessible spaces for multiply marginalized women (cis and trans) and gender-diverse people.**

**Research sites shared similar models of practice and philosophies underpinning low-barrier service delivery, including:** harm-reduction, inclusivity, non-punitive (minimizing barriers and restrictions); while prioritizing relational and trauma-informed connection and providing a place of safety.

Low-barrier drop-in programs and services prioritize participatory approaches to leadership, decision-making, service delivery, programming and support. Programs and services are developed based on input from participants and participants draw on their lived experience to support each other in informal ways as well as through formal peer support programs, such as harm-reduction. Through *This is Not Home* we also learned that many low-barrier drop-ins prioritize lived expertise when hiring frontline workers. Unlike other supports and services which tend to be time-limited and conditional, drop-in programs offer long-term connection with program participants, with no time limit or discharge date. Participants are supported through various life stages, and different housing circumstances.

Staff expressed this relational support as *"walking beside women."* Program participants referred to drop-in spaces and their connections there; using terms such as, *"home base," "home away from home"* and *"like family."*

By implementing harm-reduction and trauma-informed practices, women and gender-diverse people who often face barriers to accessing housing, shelter and other services are well supported by low-barrier drop-in spaces.

# Expected Outcomes and Implications for the Housing and Homelessness Sectors:

*This is Not Home* has led to enhanced capacity within the low-barrier, gender-focused drop-in sector by collectively advancing the interests of multiply-marginalized women and gender-diverse people through research and policy advocacy centred around improving access to housing and supports.



## KEY IMPACTS INCLUDE:

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Developing a community of practice for low-barrier, gender-focused drop-in programs.

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Learning about models of inclusive, accessible and low-barrier service delivery.

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Discussing key challenges facing organizations and the participants that access drop-in spaces.

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Gathering key knowledge that will be widely shared across the housing and homelessness sector, the Violence Against Women sector, and with housing policy-makers to ensure the perspectives and unique needs of multiply-marginalized women and gender diverse people are prioritized in policy, programming and service delivery.

This project aims to inform evidence-based programs and policy development to ensure that National Housing Strategy programs, and other programs and policies in the housing and homelessness sector, are accessible and responsive to the needs of multiply-marginalized women and gender-diverse people. The lessons learned throughout *This is Not Home* will be built upon during our second phase *Creating Home Together* and used to inform a prototype of low-barrier housing and support to meet the needs of multiply-marginalized women and gender diverse people experiencing homelessness.

# Key Recommendations

*This is Not Home* generated a number of important recommendations to increase the capacity of gender-focused drop-in programs, and to ensure multiply-marginalized women and gender-diverse people have access to housing and supports.

These recommendations focused on organizational policy and practices; policy change at local and provincial levels of governments and recommendations to inform the directives of the National Housing Strategy through the federal government; and to ensure the right to housing for women and gender-diverse people who are multiply-marginalized.



## ORGANIZATIONAL:

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**1. Improving accessibility of services, shelters, and housing programs:** Our research confirmed that women and gender-diverse people who are multiply-marginalized face barriers to accessing other drop-ins and shelters.

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**2. Meet participants where they are at:** In order to improve accessibility, services should consider ways to minimize barriers and bureaucratic requirements such as wait lists, admissibility criteria, intake procedures, and time limits.

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**3. Employ strength-based, trauma-informed, relational and harm-reduction approaches:** Services aiming to improve their accessibility must respect people's rights, dignity, autonomy, strengths, and skills, and avoid a deficit framework that treats people as problems to be fixed.

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**4. Foster inclusion, safety & community:** All services should affirm and celebrate diversity. Staff, participants, and peers agreed that it is important to implement anti-racism, anti-oppression, and trans-inclusion guidelines for staff and participants.



## IMPROVING LOW-BARRIER, GENDER FOCUSED DROP-INS:

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**5. Enhanced staff capacity:** Across all six research sites increases to staff capacity (including more staff on shift at any given time, additional resources, crisis debriefing, training and capacity building opportunities) were recommended.

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**6. Foster peer leadership:** Increase the capacity of peers and program participants to influence organizational policy, lead programs and participate in decision-making within low-barrier drop-in spaces, including paid roles and peer-led programming.

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**7. Ongoing holistic support using gender-specific, harm-reduction and relational models of service delivery:** A key recommendation is to continue offering holistic, unconditional and ongoing support to program participants.

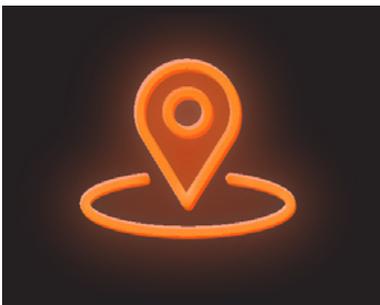
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**8. Increased outreach:** Drop-ins must conduct more outreach to ensure participants know about all the services available.

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**9. Advocate for the rights of women and gender diverse people:** Advocacy is a key function of low-barrier, gender-focused drop-ins, as women and gender-diverse people encounter discrimination, stigma, and exclusion in housing, services, and public systems.

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## CREATE NEW MODELS OF HOUSING AND SUPPORT:

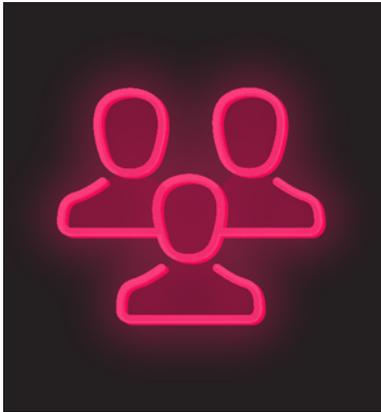
Phase Two of this project, *Creating Home Together*, will apply the learnings from *This is Not Home* to the creation of models for permanent housing and services that build on the promising approaches of low-barrier, gender-focused drop-ins.

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**10. Housing must be affordable, accessible and appropriate:** The long-term solution is to address the too-small, inadequate, inaccessible, and unaffordable housing stock in Canada.

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**11. Housing should provide basic needs and community-building:** Participants want homes that foster a community, connection, growth, and learning. Programming recommendations include communal therapeutic arts and crafts; and community gardens or kitchens where participants can grow, cook and eat food together.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENTS:

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**12. Fund low-barrier, gender-focused housing, shelters, and services:** Provincial and territorial governments must significantly increase their investments in permanent supportive housing, especially gender-focused housing that is low-barrier, trauma-informed, culturally-appropriate, and accessible for persons with disabilities.

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**13. Increase social assistance rates and facilitate access to disability support:** Social assistance rates fall below the cost of housing and basic needs in every province and territory, and this is a key driver of homelessness and housing instability for women and gender-diverse people across Canada.

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**14. Improve support for tenants:** The shortage of rent-geared-to-income and supportive housing leaves most women and gender-diverse people to rely on the rental market, where many encounter discrimination, poor housing conditions, unaffordable rents, unlawful landlord behaviour, and eviction.

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**15. Increased participation of multiply-marginalized women and gender-diverse people in local and provincial decision-making:** There is a need for increased participation and inclusion of the voices and perspectives of multiply-marginalized women and gender-diverse people across local and provincial stakeholder groups where decisions are being made.

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**16. Respect encampments, expand shelter hotel programs and create housing:** In order to provide safer options for people living outside, workers and participants strongly recommended the expansion of shelter hotel programs. A gender-focused hotel program that fostered community among residents and provided wrap-around supports was identified as a best practice in this regard.



## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE NATIONAL HOUSING STRATEGY (NHS):

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**17. Commit to ending all forms of homelessness by 2030, and align programs and investments to achieve this:** To effectively respond to homelessness among women and gender-diverse people, the NHS must commit to ending all forms of homelessness by 2030, and work closely with women and gender-diverse people and the organizations that serve them to design and fund programs that can accomplish this.

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**18. Track NHS investments and outcomes using intersectional, gender-based data and human rights criteria:** To ensure that the NHS makes good on its commitment to dedicate **25%** of investments to women and girls, and to improve housing outcomes for its target groups, it must collect and track disaggregated, intersectional gender-based data.

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**19. Support provinces, territories, and municipalities to uphold the rights of women and gender-diverse people facing homelessness:** The federal government must take a leadership role in ending homelessness for multiply-marginalized women and gender-diverse people. It can use its leadership role and spending powers to ensure that other orders of government take the necessary actions.

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**20. Expand the Rapid Housing Initiative to enable the acquisition and development of deeply affordable, non-profit housing:** The Rapid Housing Initiative has demonstrated that it is possible to create thousands of new units of deeply affordable housing in less than a year. This successful initiative should be scaled-up, with gender-based and intersectional targets, to enable municipalities and non-profits to build new modular homes, acquire disused non-residential buildings such as hotels, and buy privately-owned rental buildings to keep them affordable in perpetuity.

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**21. Build capacity for low-barrier, gender-focused organizations to transition from homelessness services to housing provision:** Drop-ins and the women and gender-diverse people they serve, know what is needed to create housing and service models that will really work to end homelessness. But most of these organizations face a steep learning curve and capacity gap in moving from emergency service provision to housing operation. The NHS should work with these organizations and their members to build the knowledge, capacity, skills, networks and funding they will need to realize their visions for inclusive, accessible, culturally-appropriate, low-barrier homes and communities.

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# Project Team

*This is Not Home* brought together a diverse range of stakeholders who had expert knowledge on gender-specific drop-in spaces. Women, both cis and trans, along with gender-diverse individuals with lived expertise on homelessness and housing, played key roles throughout all levels and phases of the project as expert advisors, project staff, member-researchers and as participants.

## PROJECT LEADS:

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Aoife Mallon, Sistering (Toronto), project lead, research site

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Emily Paradis, research lead

## CONTRIBUTORS:

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Alison Armstrong        Kaitlin Schwan

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Kate Allan

## COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH SITES: GENDER SPECIFIC, LOW BARRIER DROP-IN PROGRAMS

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Sistering (Toronto, ON)

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My Sister's Place (London ON)

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Willow's Place, Mission Services (Hamilton ON)

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Victoria Faulkner Women's Centre (Whitehorse YK)

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West Central Women's Resource Centre (Winnipeg MB)

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Downtown Eastside Women's Centre (Vancouver BC)

## ADVISORY PARTNERS:

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Atira Women's Resource Society

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Campaign 2000

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DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN) Canada

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Yukon Status of Women

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*And other advisory and knowledge translation partners with subject matter and policy expertise*

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## KNOWLEDGE TRANSLATION PARTNERS:

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