



Elizabeth Fry Toronto's SHOW: Securing Housing Options for Women

A Position Paper to Support the Need and the Identification of an Effective Solution

May 2015¹

“In the journey towards a new life, the period of time immediately following release from prison has been found to be [the] most challenging” as well as the most critical to successful reintegration into the society.² It is at that juncture that positive change can ensue.³

Introduction to Elizabeth Fry Toronto's SHOW

In November 2012, Elizabeth Fry Toronto undertook a detailed needs assessment and environmental scan for the purpose of identifying the key issues, including those identified by our stakeholders, to be addressed by the organization on a go-forward basis. Our stakeholders could not be more clear - the lack of housing options and associated support services for our women, particularly for women leaving correctional facilities, women with complex needs, and Aboriginal women, constitute a major gap in much needed services that must be filled. In addition, in April 2014 a detailed Housing Needs Assessment Report: Facilitating Access to Housing for Criminalized Women in Toronto was produced by Elizabeth Fry Toronto. This report outlined the unique needs of women in-conflict with the law and identified some possible collaborative recommendations. With the support of our stakeholders, Elizabeth Fry Toronto is firmly committed to filling this gap and, with that goal in mind, has enthusiastically undertaken its new strategy “Securing Housing Options for Women”.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the academic literature that supports our belief as to the need for, and anticipated beneficial outcomes of, the provision of housing options and related services that meet the unique needs of our women.

¹ Elizabeth Fry Toronto is grateful to, and wishes to acknowledge, Ines Ferreira, recipient of a Master's Degree in Criminology from the University of Toronto, who prepared this position paper for Elizabeth Fry Toronto on a volunteer basis.

² Gobeil, Renée. “*Staying out: Women's perceptions of challenges and protective factors in community reintegration*” (Research Report No. R-201). Ottawa, Canada: Correctional Service Canada, 2008.

³ Michalsen, Venezia. “A Cell of One's Own? Incarceration and Other Turning Points in Women's Journeys to Desistance.” *International Journal of Offenders Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 2013, 1-20.

Breaking the Cycle that Negatively Impacts our Women

Any approach to identifying housing-related solutions for our women must start with an understanding of the lived experiences of these women, and how they found themselves in conflict with the law and in need of special housing assistance as a result of that conflict. Any solution must take into account the unique, and often traumatic, experiences of these women, and must be sensitive to their realities.

The involvement of women in the criminal justice system has largely been as crime victims, rather than as perpetrators. While women comprise half of the victims of violent crime, they represent a minority of offenders. Not surprisingly, women are the most common victims of sexual assault and “other sexual violations” (representing 87% and 80% of incidents, respectively). Other offences committed primarily against women include forcible confinement and related offences (76%), criminal harassment (76%), and threatening and harassing phone calls (68%). According to the 2009 General Social Survey (GSS), approximately 6% of women report having experienced spousal violence by a current or former partner in the past five years.⁴

By comparison, according to the GSS, Aboriginal women reporting spousal violence was double that of non-Aboriginal women (15%). Aboriginal women were also two times more likely (34%) to report having experienced emotional or financial abuse than non-Aboriginal women (17%). GSS data also suggest that Aboriginal women experience more serious forms of spousal violence than their non-Aboriginal counterparts.⁵

The statistics on women as offenders paint a bleak picture of their personal histories. Data obtained from Statistics Canada show that incarcerated women are on average younger, more likely to be single, less likely to have a high school diploma, and more likely to be unemployed than women in the Canadian population. Among women in the reporting provincial institutions, 50% did not complete secondary school, whereas 43% had a high school diploma and 12% had completed some post-secondary education. In contrast, 2006 Census data show that less than 15% of women over the age of 25 did not complete secondary school, 25% had a high school diploma, and 61% reported having completed some post-secondary education. Among the reporting jurisdictions, less than one quarter of women (24%) reported being employed full or part-time at the time of their admission to provincial custody compared to 58% in the general population in 2006.⁶

⁴ Mahony, Tina Hotton. “*Women in Canada: A Gender-Based Statistical Report - Women and the Criminal Justice System.*” Statistics Canada. April 1, 2011.

⁵ Perreault, Samuel and Brennan, Shannon. “*Criminal Victimization in Canada, 2009.*” Statistics Canada. General Social Survey (GSS), 2009.

⁶ *Women and the Criminal Justice System.* Statistics Canada. April 1, 2011.



Moreover, the data suggests that, for the most part, female perpetrators have previously been victims of crime and/or survivors of abusive relationships. Relatedly, it has been well documented that many women in Canada develop substance abuse issues as a maladaptive coping strategy in reaction to experiences of sexual and physical abuse⁷. Unresolved traumas of abuse not only lead to addiction but also impede on social functioning and employment.⁸ As addiction becomes a numbing agent to deal with women's victimization histories, women tend to find ways to support these addictions. In Canadian courts, the most common offences for which females were accused were theft under 500 and assault.⁹

Imprisonment thus appears to be the consequence of severe and repeated trauma in the lives of women and closely connected to the trauma associated with sexual, emotional and physical abuse and domestic violence prior to incarceration.¹⁰ According to Gilfus, incarcerated women often described their introduction into street crime as the best available option for escape from physical and sexual violence. The most common crimes are: running away from home, use of drugs, and the illegal street work required to survive as a runaway. Women's responses to victimization and women's relational identities are seen as factors that both motivate women's criminal activities.¹¹

Once admitted into custody, the needs of offenders are evaluated for rehabilitative purposes. Almost all female offenders in provincial custody had multiple needs identified. Nearly all female inmates had substance abuse problems (94%), employment issues (81%) and community functioning trouble (79%). In federal institutions, the most commonly identified needs included personal/emotional problems (82%), employment, substance use, and social interactions (74%).¹²

Incarcerated women who presented histories of substance abuse and mental health diagnoses, were less likely to be employed or to receive financial, housing, or social support from their extended family upon release from prison; they were also more likely to be homeless and to re-offend.^{13,14} According to a study in Toronto, 20% of women leaving jail are homeless.¹⁵ Without support systems and a safe environment upon release of criminalized women, their chances of successful re-integration are severely reduced.

⁷ Matheson, Flora I et al., "A Call for Help: Women Offenders' Reflections on Trauma Care." *Women & Criminal Justice*, 2015, 1-15.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Women and the Criminal Justice System." Statistics Canada. April 1, 2011.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Gilfus, Mary E. "From Victims to Survivors to Offenders." *Women & Criminal Justice*: 63-89.

¹² Women and the Criminal Justice System." Statistics Canada. April 1, 2011.

¹³ Benda, B. B. "Gender Differences In Life-Course Theory Of Recidivism: A Survival Analysis." *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 2005, 325-42.

¹⁴ Mallik-Kane, Kamala, and Christy A. Visher. "Health and Prisoner Reentry: How Physical, Mental, and Substance Abuse Conditions Shape the Process of Reintegration." *Urban Institute: Justice Policy Center*, 2008.



Homeless women are at an increased risk of violence and assault, sexual exploitation and abuse^{16,17}, and are less likely to use the shelter system¹⁸. Indeed, many women will go to lengths to avoid the shelter system, including staying in dangerous and unhealthy relationships and/or making arrangements to move in with a partner (even when that situation is unsafe) rather than submit to the incredible risk of violence and exploitation that many women associate with shelter experiences.¹⁹

Without a safe and stable environment for women that connects them to coordinated access to care, women are at risk for alcohol and drug relapse and cycling back into the prison system. A national study of women participating in substance abuse programming in the Canadian federal prison system found that 41.3% of women returned to prison in the first year after their release.²⁰

It is very apparent that our women suffer from abuse and trauma, cycle into drug and alcohol use as a coping mechanism, are ill-prepared for the work-force, and lack support to break this cycle. Our women are also mothers, daughters, sisters, grandmothers and wives who, with assistance that truly recognizes and focuses on their lived experiences and the best path forward for them, will be successful. With that, the cycle will be broken.

An Economic Analysis Supports Positive Change

In today's difficult economic environment, Elizabeth Fry Toronto recognizes that times are tough and tax and charity dollars ought not be squandered. Elizabeth Fry Toronto believes that those dollars are not currently being used as effectively as they could be, both in terms of current rehabilitation efforts and post-incarceration housing. Elizabeth Fry Toronto is committed to a path forward that is respectful of the funds dedicated to our women by ensuring that those funds are spent in support of programs uniquely

¹⁵ Pedlar, A. et al., "Uncertain Futures: Women Leaving Prison and Re-entering the Community" Waterloo, Ontario: University of Waterloo. Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies. 2008.

¹⁶ Gaetz, Stephen A. *Coming of Age: Reimagining the Response to Youth Homelessness in Canada*. Toronto: The Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press, 2014.

¹⁷ Paradis, E., Mosher, J. "Take the Story, Take the Needs, and DO Something": Grassroots Women's Priorities for Community-Based Participatory Research and Action on Homelessness, 2012. (Toronto: The Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press).

¹⁸ Refers to the various mixed gender and gender specific emergency and temporary shelter housing options that may be available but are often full; some shelters do not accept women who are currently involved in the criminal justice system or have a criminal history; transitional housing offers housing for increased periods of time, from months to years, and moves beyond basic survival needs, often through supportive treatment and life skill training

¹⁹ Gaetz, Stephen et al., *The State of Homelessness in Canada, 2013*. (Toronto: The Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press).

²⁰ Matheson, Flora I. et al., "*Women Offender Substance Abuse Programming & Community Integration*. (Report No. R-202)." Ottawa, Canada: Correction Service Canada, 2009.

tailored to the needs of our women. We seek a change in approach that will improve our women's housing situations while at the same time reduce the associated costs.

In Prison Rehabilitative Programs are Not Working

It costs over \$210,000 to incarcerate one woman for one year in federal prison, which is about \$600 per day.²¹ This annual figure rises to \$260,000 for women exhibiting complex mental health needs. While in prison, inmates with the most extensive needs have the most limited access to programs.²² High needs often mean that inmates are held in high security settings and are deemed 'high level risk' thus their health, education, employment and substance abuse concerns are often unmet.²³

In theory, time spent in prison is designed to address the unmet needs that contribute to crime so that offenders are better equipped to re-enter society and lead constructive, pro-social lives. However, in reality, prisons are ill equipped to serve this purposes and most often rehabilitation is left to programs outside of the institutionalization setting.

According to a large body of research on the pervasiveness of trauma in the female prison population, screening and treatment for trauma is not widespread in correctional settings.²⁴ Studies on the reintegration experiences of women leaving prison showed that trauma emerged as a major facet of the women's lives, although questions about trauma were not included in the interview protocol.²⁵ These women also spoke about problems gaining access to interventions that directly address the complex and interconnected personal needs of trauma exposure, mental illness, and addictions.²⁶

Even when traditional in-prison treatment approaches that focus on substance dependence to help women understand the relationship between alcohol-drug use and their criminality are effective, they fail to address the link between trauma and substance use.²⁷

A new report by Canada's auditor general, Michael Ferguson, concludes that prisoners are not being properly prepared for release and re-integration. Specifically, offenders are not being engaged by

²¹ Rogers, Brynn and Hutchison, Jessica. *"From Prison to a Place Called Home – Recommendations from a Forum for Federally Sentenced Women"*, March 2012.

²² Blaney, Hon. Steven. *"Overcoming Barriers to Community Reintegration"* Annual Report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator. Government of Canada, 2014.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *"Women Offender Substance Abuse Programming & Community Integration."* CSC, 2009.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "A Call for Help: Women Offenders' Reflections on Trauma Care." 2015, 1-15.

²⁷ Ibid.

Correctional Services Canada (“CSC”) in rehabilitation programs soon enough so that programs are completed before the person in custody is first eligible for conditional release. A staggering 65 percent of offenders do not complete their rehabilitation programs before they become eligible for parole.²⁸

The auditor also found that CSC has not developed guidelines to determine which prisoners have the highest need to be engaged in correctional interventions such as employment training and education.²⁹

As a result of these limitations, women are poorly prepared to exit prison and to successfully re-integrate back into a productive life “on the outside”. Upon exiting prisons, the supportive options are not much better.

Post-Incarceration Options are Severely Lacking

Upon release, women face the challenge of securing safe and affordable housing. With very little resources available to women, obtaining housing is further compounded by many interconnected problems such as lack of education, lack of suitable employment, substance use issues, previous homelessness, and various mental health issues.³⁰

Normally only those on conditional release have access to halfway houses, and once they have completed their time at the halfway house, they are released into the community with no further supports, including the mental health and substance use counselling that was available to them during their time at the halfway house.³¹

While some women are fortunate to gain access to transitional housing, like the Phyllis Haslam Residence at Elizabeth Fry Toronto, such as a halfway house, these are typically only temporary arrangements, and most women are ultimately on their own to find secure long term housing that they can afford.³² Subsidized and social housing is available not only to women leaving prison, but other people as well, which makes it very difficult for federally sentenced women to access and obtain.

²⁸ Whittington, Les. “Canada’s Prisoners Aren’t Being Prepared Properly for Release, Auditor General Warns.” *The Toronto Star*, April 28, 2015. Accessed May 1, 2015. <http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2015/04/28/prisoners-not-being-prepared-for-release-says-canadas-auditor-general.html>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Griffiths, C.T. (.T., 1948-. (2010). In rd ed (Ed.), *Canadian correction* (Toronto: Nelson Education) and Zorzi R., Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (eds.) (Ottawa Ont.: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation).

³¹ Zorzi R., Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (eds.) (Ottawa Ont.: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation).

³² Richie, Beth E. “Challenges Incarcerated Women Face as They Return to Their Communities: Findings from Life History Interviews.” *Crime & Delinquency* 47, no. 3 (2001): 368-89.

Life in shelters is far from ideal, and living conditions are often described as similar to those in traditional asylums.³³ Many women leaving jail describe shelters as worse than jail suggesting that shelters are not designed for criminalized women.³⁴ In fact, one study indicated that attitudes of workers and the organizational structure of shelters might create a context favourable to violent behaviour among users.³⁵ Thus, many women go to great lengths to avoid the shelter system, including staying in dangerous and unhealthy relationships and/or making arrangements to move in with a partner (even when that situation is unsafe) rather than submit to the incredible risk of violence and exploitation on the streets.

The barriers for returning prisoners to federally subsidized and administered housing generally fall into two categories: (1) scarcity of housing stock, and (2) formal and informal regulations and prejudices that restrict tenancy.³⁶ Additional obstacles include criminal background checks, addiction and mental illness. If subsidized housing cannot be obtained, people leaving prison then have no choice but to turn to private housing such as rental units, however, there are many challenges associated with the private market, including affordability, improper personal documentation, stigma of criminal history, and associated community objection due to public safety issues.³⁷

Fostering a meaningful release plan will help women, and, in particular, mothers, leave prison with the best chance of successfully rebuilding their relationships. Planning for release means securing a suitable and safe place to live, defining a job search strategy or enrolment in an educational/vocation program, applying to any needed treatment programs, and having a source of income. When women are released with a bus ticket and map to the homeless shelter, their chances of success are low.

It is Less Expensive to Assist our Women to Find a Home

In 2007, the Sheldon Chumir Foundation estimated that the emergency response to homelessness costs taxpayers from \$4.5-\$6 billion annually. This figure includes the cost of emergency shelters, social

³³ Hurtubise, Roch et al. Shelters for the Homeless: Learning from Research. In: Hulchanski, J. David; Campsie, Philippa; Chau, Shirley; Hwang, Stephen; Paradis, Emily (eds.) *Finding Home: Policy Options for Addressing Homelessness in Canada* (e-book), Chapter 1.2. Toronto: Cities Centre, University of Toronto. 2009.

³⁴ Elizabeth Fry Toronto. “*Housing Needs Assessment: Facilitating Access to Housing Criminalized Women in Toronto*”. Toronto, Ontario, April 2014.

³⁵ Liebow, Elliot. *Tell Them Who I Am: The Lives of Homeless Women*. New York: Free Press, 1993.

³⁶ Roman, C.G. and Travis, J. (2004), *Taking Stock: Housing, Homelessness and Prisoner Re-entry*. (Paper prepared for the Fannie Mae Foundation).

³⁷ Berman, J. (2005), *Woman offender transition and re-entry: Gender responsive approaches to transitioning woman offenders from prison to the community*. (Washington, DC: Center for Effective Public Policy).



services, health care and corrections. The updated figure for the annual cost of homelessness to the Canadian economy is \$7.05 billion dollars.

In the Wellesley Institute's *Blueprint to End Homelessness* (2007), Shapcott argued that the average monthly costs of housing people while they are homeless are \$1,932 for a shelter bed, \$4,333 for provincial jail, or \$10,900 for a hospital bed. This can be compared with the average monthly cost to the City of Toronto for rent supplements (\$701) or social housing (\$199.92).

Homelessness is expensive because we cycle people through expensive public systems and increasingly costly and uncoordinated emergency services systems. By shifting focus to permanent solutions, we have the opportunity to reduce the long-term cost of homelessness and make more efficient and effective use of public resources.

Permanent Solutions – Housing First Initiative

The Government of Canada has prioritized Housing First as a key strategy to reduce homelessness in its Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS). A Housing First approach focuses on moving people who are experiencing chronic or episodic homelessness as rapidly as possible from the street or emergency shelters into permanent housing with supports to maintain housing stability.³⁸

The Housing First approach is a proven, evidence-based model that will deliver better results for the most vulnerable and those that are chronically homeless. One of the most notable examples is the Mental Health Commission's "housing first" pilot program in Montreal. A month after the program began, nearly all of the 280 participants were housed in permanent accommodations and two years later, almost 80 per cent of those participants are still housed. These outcomes are also consistent with the results of projects in France and Finland.³⁹

It is well documented that chronic homelessness is a challenge that is complicated by social issues like addiction and mental health. Safe, stable housing is an essential element in addressing homelessness and the problems that can often come with it. A Housing First approach has proven to reduce chronic

³⁸ "Housing First." Employment and Social Development Canada. January 28, 2014. http://www.esdc.gc.ca/eng/communities/homelessness/housing_first/.shtml.

³⁹ Eric Latimer, Daniel Rabouin, Christian Méthot, Christopher McAll, Angela Ly, Henri Dorvil, Anne Crocker, Laurence Roy, Daniel Poremski, Jean-Pierre Bonin, Marie-Josée Fleury & Erika Braithwaite (2014). *At Home/Chez Soi Project: Montréal Site Final Report*. Calgary, AB: Mental Health Commission of Canada. Retrieved from: <http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca>

homelessness -- giving people a place to live first, and then providing the help they need to stabilize their lives.

Programs can Succeed, with Immeasurable Social Benefit

Community reintegration is a process that involves a series of concurrent social, behavioral, and cognitive changes: developing a positive social support network; abstention from substance use; gaining employment skills; avoiding drug-using areas, former drug-using acquaintances and family members; acknowledging the need for community-based treatment, and interpersonal commitment to engage in a pro-social life and become a fully contributing member of the community.⁴⁰

In reality, life after prison means juggling work, appointments for drug testing, employment training, substance abuse treatment, meetings with parole officers, and parental commitments.⁴¹ With few financial resources at their disposal these women often have difficulty meeting these challenges. They also live with the constant risk of losing their freedom if they are noncompliant with their parole conditions.⁴² These multiple and competing demands can set women up for failure.⁴³

Continuity of services and resources has been shown to be paramount to successful re-integration. For programs to be successful with women offenders there must be an awareness of gender differences, and opportunity to address additional social needs such as housing and childcare and continuity of care.⁴⁴

Positioned appropriately, our women can and will find success, and immeasurable social benefits – to their children, to their spouses, to their parents, to their extended family, and their respective futures, and to their community – will result.

⁴⁰ As cited in Doherty, Sherri, Pamela Forrester, Amanda Brazil, and Flora I. Matheson. “Finding Their Way: Conditions for Successful Reintegration Among Women Offenders.” *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 2014, 562-86.

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Richie, Beth E. “Challenges Incarcerated Women Face as They Return to Their Communities: Findings from Life History Interviews.” *Crime & Delinquency* 47, no. 3 (2001): 368-89.

⁴³ “Finding Their Way: Conditions for Successful Reintegration Among Women Offenders.” *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 2014

⁴⁴ Kassebaum, Gene G. *Survival on Parole: A Study of Post-prison Adjustment and the Risk of Returning to Prison in the State of Hawaii*. Honolulu: Attorney General, State of Hawaii, 1999.

Remember the Children

At least 25,000 children each year across Canada have an incarcerated mother, becoming silent secondary victims. Children with incarcerated mothers are:

- 4 times as likely to be suspended from school
- 3 times more likely to be chronically absent from class
- 4 times as likely to fail classes
- 36 % more likely to drop out of school
- are more likely to experience residential instability and separation from siblings
- are more likely to be uncertain about their futures.

Encouraging meaningful contact between children and mothers will keep the bond strong and help smooth family reunification. In a study conducted by Voices for Children, few incarcerated mothers reported that their children had visited the prison. Reasons that were given included not wanting their children entering a prison, the visiting arrangements were not nice for children, the children lived too far away and transportation was difficult or too expensive, and the current caregiver did not believe they should visit.⁴⁵

According to the same study, the *impact of the separation caused by incarceration* is arguably the most salient for children. Children who are separated from their mothers express their frustration in maladaptive ways. Without making efforts to bring together criminalized mothers and their children, the most vulnerable groups in our communities, children are at higher risk for a troubled adolescence and may increasingly turn to crime, as they get older.⁴⁶

Helping women avoid re-involvement with the justice system will ultimately be the best way to help their children. A spectrum of services is required, including educational or vocational programs; health care; mental health services; addictions treatment; woman abuse advocacy; sexual assault/abuse survivor advocacy and treatment; a livable level of social assistance; fair access to disability pensions for those who qualify; legal aid; child protection services and family support; and community-based correctional

⁴⁵ Cunningham, Alison J., and Linda L. Baker. "Invisible Victims: The Children of Women in Prison" In *Waiting for Mommy Giving a Voice to the Hidden Victims of Imprisonment*. London, Ontario: Centre for Children and Families in the Justice Systems, 2003.

⁴⁶ Ibid.



services. In the correctional system, programs should be gender-responsive, designed for women and mothers alike.⁴⁷

Social, economic and political realities contribute to women's experience of inequity in our society. The intersection of gender, race, class and sexuality has resulted in women's higher levels of poverty, and sexual abuse, racial discrimination, family breakdown, limited education, unemployment, mental health and addiction challenges. These realities define society's expectations of women's roles including motherhood and lead to marginalities and victimization that represent the predominant reality of women in conflict with the law. The criminalization of survival strategies characterizes the experience of many women who are in conflict with the law. Incarceration further marginalizes these women, and increases the risk of re-entry into the criminal justice system.

Elizabeth Fry Toronto places women's experiences and their life contexts at the centre of its work. When women understand and can access appropriate information, tools and supports they have more options to move forward in their lives and can avoid further conflict with the law. With supports, criminalized women are empowered to sustain positive changes in their lives, and to become actively engaged in their communities. With a better understanding of the issues that criminalized women face, key stakeholders, including policymakers and funders, will be better equipped to support alternatives to incarceration leading to a decrease in criminalization of women⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ Ibid; "Women Offender Substance Abuse Programming & Community Integration." CSC, 2009; Elizabeth Fry Toronto. "Housing Needs Assessment: Facilitating Access to Housing Criminalized Women in Toronto". Toronto, Ontario, April 2014.

⁴⁸ Adapted from the Stages of Livelihood (Canadian Women's Foundation and Eko Nomos)