



MANITOBA ASSOCIATION
OF WOMEN'S SHELTERS



Provincial & Federal Shelter Symposium

- November 20 & 21, 2024 -



Funded by

WAGE Manitoba and WAGE Canada through the
National Action Plan and Indigenous Services Canada.

About the Symposium

Our first Shelter Symposium, Empower, Connect, Inspire: Building the Future through Shelter Collaboration, was held on November 20 and 21, 2024 in Winnipeg, Manitoba.



+20 Manitoba family violence shelters present at the Symposium

The symposium addressed shelters' ongoing challenges regarding the following topics:

- **Fundraising**
- **Mental Health and Substance Abuse**
- **Shelter-to-shelter transfers**
- **Culture Shock**
- **Data Collection**
- **Indigenous Wellness**

Following this event, participants have started forming working groups to brainstorm solutions for each area and maintain the momentum and connections.

Although there was much to discuss, **these key takeaways** from the Symposium can help both local and federal shelters enhance their operations and ensure long-term sustainability:





Tsungai Mvingi – MAWS Provincial Coordinator

Fundraising and Donations

In this space, shelters explored best practices for building trust with donors, such as being transparent about how funds are used, sharing impactful stories, and expressing genuine gratitude. This presentation provided strategies to ensure fundraising efforts align with shelters' mission and values, fostering trust and making a lasting impact on our communities.

- Many shelters struggle with **registration complexities** and face barriers because of their **geographic location**.
- Rural communities often struggle with **internet connectivity**.
- Understanding the **differences between federal and provincial** shelters regarding registration as a non-profit is crucial for securing the proper support.
- An effective strategy through **social media** can lead to increased donations.
- The importance of **using data to balance soliciting donations** without compromising core funding, reinforcing accountability and transparency.

“

As shelters continue to navigate these challenges, one vital theme was the need for ongoing advocacy.

Shelters must collaborate to raise awareness of their struggles and push for policies and long-term funding models supporting their sustainability.

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Amber Merucci –
MAWS Project Specialist

Mental Health: Intake, Medication, and Advisories

Mental health challenges are at the forefront of shelter services discussions, especially when assessing eligibility, managing client safety, and ensuring effective referrals to specialized care.

The Symposium shed light on the nuanced and sometimes complex decisions shelters face when mental health concerns are part of the equation.

Leading with Compassionate, Person-Centered Care

Key strategies can help shelters provide better care for clients with mental health conditions: adopting a case-by-case approach, ensuring proper referrals, creating trauma-informed advisories, and working to build stronger community partnerships.

Shelter services must remain **flexible and responsive** to client's needs, recognizing the importance of mental health in providing holistic support.

Through **collaboration, continued training, and a commitment to cultural sensitivity**, shelters can better serve those who need them most and help to ensure that all individuals are treated with dignity, respect, and care.

Having a regional unified approach to clients whose mental health negatively impacts their stay IS helpful, considering differences and limitations in community, resources, demographics, logistics, accessibility, and staffing.

Indigenous Wellness Approaches

The Conversation Circle, led by Elder Marilyn Hart-Murdock from FNHC, provided valuable insights into Indigenous healing and wellness methods. It emphasized the importance of understanding one's traditional name, tribe, and community and encouraged people to reconnect with their cultural roots as part of the healing process.

This session reminded everyone that wellness is deeply tied to cultural identity and that respecting traditional practices is vital in creating supportive, holistic care.

Mapping Shelter-to-Shelter Transfers



Shelter-to-shelter transfers are crucial for individuals fleeing domestic violence. The exercise revealed the complex factors contributing to transfers: safety concerns, capacity issues, medical requirements, and even legal or housing factors.

One significant finding was the **involvement of various stakeholders in the process:** shelter staff, transportation providers, government, medical services, and Indigenous organizations.

Despite collaboration, the transfer process faces several challenges.

Logistical issues: coordinating transport, dealing with weather conditions, communication barriers, resource limitations (insufficient funding and equipment), and safety concerns for clients and staff.

Systemic issues: discrimination and cultural challenges mainly affect Indigenous and immigrant women.



The Need for FASD Training

During the Symposium, one of the discussions was the importance of training shelter staff in Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) awareness. FASD can significantly impact an individual's behaviour, decision-making, and ability to navigate systems, and shelters must understand and support individuals with this condition.

- However, a specialized bus fleet for shelter transfers was also emphasized, particularly in Manitoba's northern and southern regions.
- The challenges of organizing transfers between shelters due to funding limitations require advocacy and follow-up.
- Additionally, there is a call for a unified vacancy list, including information on provincial and federal shelter availability, to streamline the process for individuals seeking refuge.
- Another conversation focused on the discrimination Indigenous women often face when accessing provincial shelters.

Based on the mapping session, these are some of the following recommendations proposed:

- **Create a unified database for real-time shelter availability**
- **Create a transport team for both federal and provincial shelters**
- **Implement a secure, reliable communication channel between shelters**
- **Ensure all shelters have access to vehicles and staff for transport**
- **Foster partnerships between shelters, law enforcement, and community organizations**
- **Create a more detailed vacancy report, including pet acceptance and age restrictions**



**Katina Cochrane – First Nation
Healing Centre Director**

Culture Shock & Transit Experience with Shelter Living

Roaming with Buffalo: Culture Shock and Transient Experience with Shelter Living poignantly explored women’s emotional and cultural obstacles when moving from one shelter to another. The act of constantly shifting—often with children and belongings—can feel dehumanizing, mainly when the person is displaced from their land and culture.

- Many Indigenous women face added layers of trauma as they transition from remote communities to urban centers, where they may experience **culture shock, disconnection, and a sense of being trapped** in the city with no way to return home.
- For women in shelters, this disconnection is often **compounded by feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt**. The shelter environment may require them to freely ask for things they once could access—such as food, clothing, or basic needs—creating an emotional barrier that further erodes their sense of self-worth.
- For many Indigenous women, there is also the challenge of **navigating a system that may be steeped in cultural misunderstanding** or outright racism, leading to further isolation and disempowerment.

Shelters that do not offer culturally relevant practices, like the ability to cook meals for one’s family or the feeling of belonging in a space, can make the experience even more traumatic.

Legal and Illegal Substances: Cannabis, Alcohol, and Illicit Drugs

One crucial question: How can shelters assess eligibility and discharge decisions when individuals disclose alcohol, cannabis, or illicit drug use?



While shelters have policies about not allowing substances on-site, the trauma-informed approach suggests that shelters should instead offer referrals to other services, to support individuals in their recovery without further traumatizing them.

How do we determine if a discharge is needed and trauma-informed?

When discharging due to being under the influence, **discharging to cells does not benefit anyone and is traumatizing for many**. What happens when there is nowhere to refer someone to? Is calling the police due to substance use a trauma-informed approach? We must find an alternative location/service instead of jail.

Clients must ask staff for **prescription medications whenever needed**. Does this approach significantly impact individual agency and autonomy?

There is also a need to address **systemic issues** in “dry reserves” and the stripping away of agency for Indigenous individuals dealing with alcohol use, especially in contrast to how other populations are treated in similar situations.

**Are we expecting too much of our staff?
How do we build staff capacity with high turnover?**



Kendra Nixon – University of Manitoba

The Role of Data Collection

This session discussed the crucial role of data collection in shelters.

The speaker emphasized how collecting demographic and service utilization data can help improve shelter operations, safety and care for survivors. Also, the importance of **integrating Indigenous worldviews into data collection and adapting tools to reflect holistic wellness** rather than just Western metrics.

- When collected thoughtfully and ethically, data allows shelters to track trends, understand client needs, and improve service delivery and staff training.
- However, challenges such as reluctance to share information, resource constraints, and the lack of proper staff training persist.
- Addressing these barriers, especially in rural or remote communities, remains critical to ensuring that shelters are as effective as possible in supporting their clients.

Some aspects to consider for shelter data collection:

- **Tools and surveys must be adapted to include questions that reflect Indigenous experiences, such as intergenerational trauma and systemic discrimination.**
- **Consult with your community to ensure it aligns with their needs and values. Use more qualitative data, such as storytelling, to capture clients' experiences.**

Stay or Go Activity

This activity offered an **immersive, interactive experience** that forced participants to make difficult decisions about staying in or leaving an abusive relationship.

The emotional impact was palpable. Participants, visibly affected by the decisions they had to make, engaged in a debriefing session where they could process their emotional journeys.

Elder Marilyn Hart-Murdock was available to offer further support, highlighting the importance of providing **culturally sensitive debriefs and emotional care** for those in trauma-heavy environments.



Jennifer, Emily & April – N-NFCS

Social Justice and Burnout



Angela Braun –
Genesis House Exec. Director

This session focused on **vicarious trauma and burnout**, which are common challenges for frontline shelter workers. Vikki Reynolds' workbook was referenced to guide participants in reflecting **on the core of their work and how they can avoid burnout.**

Reynolds emphasized the importance of building supportive, "enmeshed" client relationships while ensuring staff support. A "Zone of Fabulousness," where collective care and mutual support among colleagues are prioritized, emerged as a key concept.

By fostering connections between staff, removing silos, and offering accountability, shelters can resist burnout and improve service delivery, contributing to collective sustainability.



**Tsungai Mvingi – MAWS
Provincial Coordinator**

Conversation Circle: Wellness and Retention

The conversation centred on caring for the staff's emotional and physical well-being. Creating spaces for staff to relax, recharge, and bond with colleagues is vital to maintaining their energy and engagement in the work.

Below are some of the practices that shelters apply towards wellness and retention:

For Staff

- Wellness check once per week.
- A day off to do things together.
- Open communication and support in any situation in their personal lives.
- Wellness days.
- Meet the board.
- A snack/coffee bar or candy jar.
- A weekend retreat with yoga.

For EDs

- Read, listen to music, drive.
- Play video games.
- Meditate, work out.
- Walk and focus on family.
- Have an alone space and cry.
- Share time with pets.
- Cook, have a glass of wine.
- Get your nails done
- Go to therapy.

Cry For Help Performance

A compelling and emotionally charged narrative, exposing the harsh realities faced by vulnerable women. The act of multiple "passersby" placing oversized name tags with stigmatizing labels around a woman's neck symbolized the weight of societal judgment, while the "police" ignored her cries for help.

Through its powerful imagery and raw emotion, the piece urged audiences to reflect on the struggles of marginalized individuals and the urgent need for collective action and empathy.

Moving Forward: Building More Resilient & Supportive Systems



As the Symposium concluded, it was clear that much work remains to be done to improve shelter services, from increasing staff training to enhancing communication and resource sharing between shelters.

As shelters evolve, the call for better coordination, more funding, and a deeper understanding of trauma will help ensure individuals find safety and a sense of dignity, respect, and belonging in the shelter system. By embracing these changes, we can create a system that genuinely supports healing, recovery, and the empowerment of those in need.



Survey Feedback

The Symposium was highly appreciated, with participants valuing **content, networking opportunities, and overall organization.**

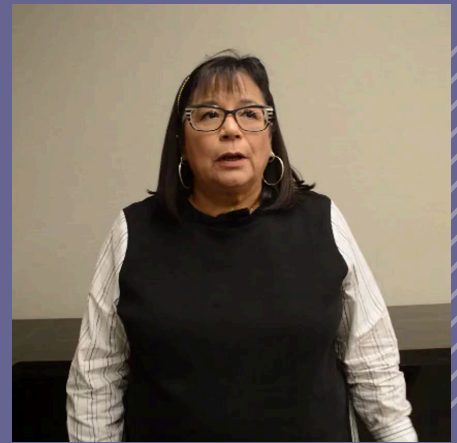
To further improve participant satisfaction, future events can incorporate **suggested topics** such as racism, harm reduction and prevention, shelter systems and program structuring. In addition to the topics, include more **interactive components**, such as icebreakers and **balance information density**, especially around data presentations.



Survivor's Hope
Crisis Centre



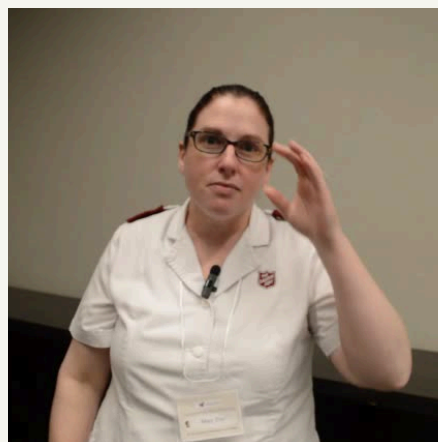
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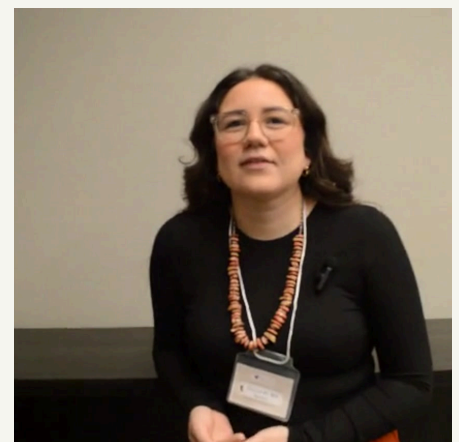
Thompson
Crisis Centre



Parkland
Crisis Centre



The Salvation Army
Winnipeg Centre Of Hope



First Nation
Healing Centre

We thank you for your ongoing support of our Symposium



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- Kendra Nixon
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- Emily Begin
- April Pine

Concept and coordination

- MAWS Board
- Tsungai Muvingi
- Amber Merucci
- Sally Ogoe
- Maria Paz
- Anthony Leong

Manitoba Association of Women's Shelters

c/o Box 389, Winkler,
Manitoba, Canada
204-960-6995
www.maws.mb.ca
maws@maws.mb.ca



**Providing a unified voice for those affected
by gender-based violence in Manitoba.**

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 **maws_mb**

 **maws_mb**

 **mawsmanitoba**

www.maws.mb.ca