



# Improving Shelter Experience For Indigenous Women

## Research Brief



Circling Buffalo Inc.



University of Manitoba

For more details on the study, access our full report here

### Intimate partner violence (IPV) disproportionately impacts Indigenous women in Manitoba.

- Indigenous women experience higher rates of IPV and more severe forms of IPV, such as strangulation or intimate partner homicide.
- As a result, Indigenous women access women's shelters for support at high rates.

### Barriers can make it difficult to access shelters or negatively impact experiences while staying there.

- Such as discrimination, a lack of culturally safe services, and the geographic isolation of many Indigenous communities

### These barriers underscore the need to enhance shelter services to support the safety and wellbeing of Indigenous women.

To understand and improve the experiences of Indigenous women seeking help for IPV at shelters across Manitoba, RESOLVE Manitoba and Circling Buffalo Inc. developed a research study titled *Improving Shelter Experience for Indigenous Women*. In this brief, we share findings from the study to help inform research.

## Project Overview

### Goals:

- Learn about Indigenous survivors' experiences accessing and staying at women's shelters.
- Understand Indigenous and non-Indigenous service provider experiences facilitating Indigenous women's access and stay at women's shelters
- Identify ways that shelter services, programs, and policies could be improved to better meet the needs of Indigenous women who experience violence from their partners

### Steps:

- Survivors and service providers were invited to share their experiences and perspectives in one-on-one conversations (interviews).
- 12 Indigenous survivors and 12 service providers working closely with Indigenous communities participated.
- All interviews were recorded and transcribed, then entered into qualitative analysis software (Dedoose) for coding.
- After organizing and coding, we looked closely at the stories shared by our participants to understand the main patterns and themes in their experiences.

## Results

### What Survivors Told Us

- **Stories of Abuse:** physical abuse; emotional or psychological abuse; verbal abuse; financial abuse; coercive control; substance use coercion.
- **Stories About Shelters :** survivors accessed shelters in various locations and various types of shelters
- **Shelter Services:** cultural supports, counselling, transportation services, child support, clothing, employment income support, housing and legal assistance.
- **Challenges and Difficulties Faced When Staying in Shelter:** navigating difficult emotions after abuse; limited staff supports; racism; homophobia/transphobia; discrimination; lack of awareness on Indigenous cultures in shelters; having to follow to shelter rules they did not find useful.
- **Shelter Experiences:** mostly positive experiences; one neutral; one negative.
- **Type of Help-Seeking:** Informal help-seeking (family members; friends; Elders; co-workers; community); formal help-seeking (police; Chief and Council; counselling and substance use services; hospital); no or limited help-seeking.
- **Barriers to Seeking Supports:** previous negative experiences; shame and stigma; transportation; difficulties reaching and locating shelters; shelters' limited capacity.
- **Factors Affecting Their Access to Shelter:** having a safe and peaceful environment; accessibility (close proximity to residence and resources, financial coverage); previous positive experiences.

## What Service Providers Told Us

- **Shelter Information:** service providers worked at two types of shelters: Indigenous Rural or Non-Indigenous Urban.
- **Shelter Services:** cultural supports, counselling, hygiene kits, and facilitating access to additional supports/services.
- **Challenges & Barriers Survivors Face:** navigating feelings of loneliness; adapting to shelter rules; obtaining housing; shelter policy limitations; substance withdrawal symptoms; transportation; accessing income assistance; difficulties contacting shelters.
- **Challenges Staff Face:** lack of addiction resources and support services on reserves and in rural communities; challenges obtaining housing and social assistance for survivors; difficulties supporting older male children with disabilities; safety risks encountered at work and in their personal lives due to their work; experiences with emotional fatigue due to their role.
- **Shelter Policy and Administration:** intake, referral and transfer procedures; shelter criteria and instances where individuals were not eligible for service; experiences networking with other social service sectors; funding needs.

## What Could Be Better (Participant Recommendations)

### *Expanding Shelter Resources, Supports, & Services*

- Referrals to additional resources, supports, and services (and navigators to aid in accessing services);
- Gender-inclusive supports
- Mental health and addictions support
- Supports for perpetrators
- Supports for people with disabilities
- Evening and weekend activities
- Materials and infrastructure

### *Offering Cultural Services for Indigenous Survivors*

- Access to Elders (specifically female Elders, grannies or aunties)
- Sharing circles (including spaces to reflect on dreams)
- Ceremonies and cultural gatherings (full moon ceremonies, pow wows, jingle dress classes)
- Beading and art-based services
- Language classes
- Smudging

### *Addressing Staffing Shortages and Knowledge Gaps*

- Address understaffing
- Hire staff with lived experience
- Provide training on cultural sensitivity & Indigenous history
- Practice patience and support in relationships

### *Longer Shelter Stays and Transitional Housing*

- 60-day limit on shelter stays should be extended to 90-days
- IPV survivors should be prioritized for social housing under Manitoba Housing programs

### *Increased Education and Outreach*

- To increase awareness about shelter services in Indigenous communities
- To recruit potential shelter employees

### *Referrals and Collaboration Amongst IPV Services*

- Cross-sector referrals needed to connect survivors with services
- Partnerships needed to fill service provision gaps

## Lessons and Insights for Researchers

### **Research approaches must be flexible and responsive to the needs and experiences of participants**

#### *Clearly define and explain concepts*

- Some participants were unfamiliar with the term 'cultural safety'

#### *Be mindful of questions that may be upsetting or insensitive*

- One participant found questions about current/former places of residence upsetting, as they were experiencing homelessness

#### *Recognize and account for factors that may complicate completing interviews*

- Some participants were hesitant or unable to participate because they were dealing with the impacts of wildfires, or because the subject matter was too difficult to discuss

#### *Meet participants where they are at*

- Prioritize and accommodate their schedule, accessibility needs, comfort level, safety, and wellness

### Areas for future research

#### *Longer Shelter Stays and Transitional Housing*

- Examining the implications of shelters' current 60-day limit, highlighting the barriers and challenges both service providers and survivors face.
- Examining pathways to housing for survivors after leaving shelter.

#### *Fostering Trust and Connections with Service Providers*

- Exploring how trust is built and hindered between survivors and service providers

#### *Strengthening Collaboration*

- Developing more coordinated and collaborative care pathways for survivors.