

Shelter Services

Intimate Partner Violence, Traumatic Brain Injury and Shelter Services in Canada



Definitions

Shelter Services	Frontline supports that provide, emergency housing, crisis intervention, and longer-term transition housing for survivors of violence. Often shelters are the first point of contact after trauma, yet many staff lack the training and resources to identify hidden injuries such as traumatic brain injury (TBI).
Screening Tools	Brief instruments used to identify potential TBI injury concerns in non-clinical settings. The HELPS tool, for example, flags possible brain injury histories among survivors. The Domestic Violence Safety Assessment Tool (DVSAT) can help identify TBI, mental health and substance misuse among survivors in shelter. While not diagnostic, such tools help providers recognize invisible injuries and connect individuals to further support.

Overview

Shelter services are a critical but under-resourced point of contact for IPV-TBI survivors in Canada. Despite high rates of probable TBI among shelter residents, brain injuries are rarely identified or accommodated. Gaps in training, screening, and funding leave many survivors without the support they need.

Recommendations for Reform

- Mandatory, trauma-informed TBI training for staff (e.g., CATT-WSW)
- Widespread adoption of accessible screening tools like HELPS
- Sensory-friendly environments and neurodiverse accommodations
- Increased funding and intersectoral partnerships (e.g., with neurologists and mental health providers)

Themes and Issues

- **Shelter Staff Capacity and Training Gaps:** Many shelter workers have basic awareness of IPV-TBI, but few feel confident identifying or supporting survivors with brain injuries. Screening rates are low, and post-screening protocols are lacking (Campbell et al., 2024; Nicol et al., 2021), leading to symptoms such as fatigue or memory loss being misinterpreted as noncompliance.
- **Environmental Challenges for Survivors with TBI:** Shelter environments can worsen TBI symptoms, including sound and light sensitivity, leaving survivors feeling overwhelmed or labelled as “difficult.” Despite high rates of probable TBI among shelter residents (Oakley et al., 2021), formal diagnoses and accommodations remain rare.
- **Tools for screening:** The HELPS screening tool is brief and well-suited for use in shelter settings but remains underused. The CATT-WSW (Concussion Awareness Training Tool for Women’s Support Workers) improves staff knowledge and confidence in responding to TBI.
- **Structural and Policy Barriers:** Chronic underfunding, inconsistent standards, and high staff turnover limit shelters’ capacity to support survivors with complex needs. Indigenous and rural shelters face additional barriers, including staffing shortages and a lack of TBI-sensitive services (Maxwell, 2024; Beattie & Hutchins, 2015). Outcome-driven funding fails to account for TBI’s long-term, invisible impacts.

Scan the QR code to learn more about our project!

This document was developed with the assistance of AI (OpenAI’s ChatGPT) for drafting and phrasing, based on our literature review findings

