



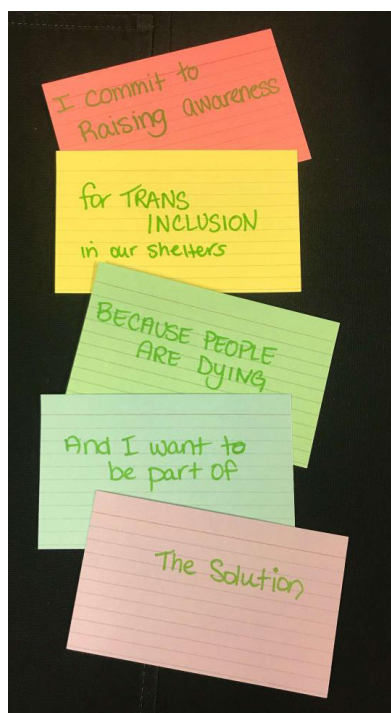
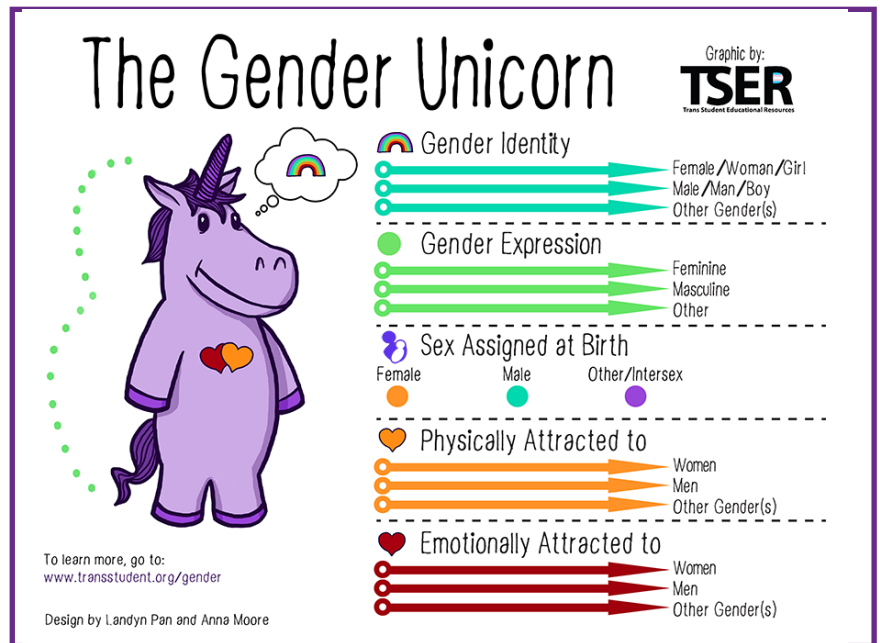
Community of Practice: Supporting Trans Women in VAW Shelters

Who Are Trans Women?

Trans women are women who were assigned male identity at birth. They may or may not be on hormone replacement therapy and they may or may not have had surgical procedures. Trans women are as diverse in their appearance, presentation, and sexuality as any other group of people. Trans women are women.

Trans people face high rates of violence:

- A survey of 923 trans youth from all 10 provinces and one territory found that 70% have been sexually harassed. More than 1/3 of teenage participants aged 14-18 had been physically threatened or injured in the past year.¹
- Among those surveyed, transgender individuals were twice as likely to report experiencing IPV in their lifetimes compared to cisgender women and four times as likely as cisgender men.²
- Racialized and Indigenous trans women and 2-spirit people and those living with disabilities often face more discrimination than white, able-bodied trans women.



46% of shelters and transition houses have served trans, gender fluid, or intersex people.³

Violence against women (VAW) shelters and transition houses are becoming more inclusive of trans women because of:

- Recognition that trans women are women
- Requests for help from trans women and feedback from the community
- The reality of violence and homicide in trans women's lives
- The lack of other safe spaces for trans women
- Recognition that they may have been serving trans women for years without knowing it, and a desire to be a safe place for trans women whether or not they disclose
- Human rights standards that mandate inclusion

“What is a woman’s most immediate need? If it’s violence and they are a woman, they belong with us.”

In 2018, Women’s Shelters Canada held a Community of Practice (COP) on Supporting Trans Women in VAW shelters.

Women’s Shelters Canada is a member-guided non-regulatory body with a mandate to share knowledge under the direction of our Advisory Council. We value the autonomy of shelters to set their own policies, while building awareness of the overall trajectories of change across the VAW shelter and transition house sector. We strive to facilitate the exchange of knowledge between shelters, so that organizations across the country can learn from each other and, through this process, strengthen their work and the sector as a whole.

WSC organized a Community of Practice on Supporting Trans Women in VAW Shelters in response to (1) recent legal changes (see box) that affirmed gender identity and expression as grounds protected from discrimination and (2) shifts within the sector as VAW shelters and transition houses grapple with how to better serve trans women and gender diverse people (see page 1).

Over a two-day period in May 2018, eight participants from VAW shelters across the country came together with two co-facilitators to share their progress, challenges, and lessons learned in the process of making their shelters more inclusive. The discussions during the COP were wide-ranging, covering the work they have done so far, the challenges they continue to face, and what is needed to move forward. Participants worked together to identify numerous promising practices and useful resources, some of which are listed below. Detailed descriptions of each participating shelter’s experiences and challenges in this area of work are available as [case studies on WSC’s website](#). Overall, the COP was an opportunity to foster a community of practitioners who are leading change in this area and generate resources that could support other shelters interested in making similar changes.

Trans Rights are Human Rights: Legal Context

In 2017, the Parliament of Canada debated and passed Bill C-16. [Bill C-16](#) amends the Canadian Human Rights Act to include “gender identity or expression” as grounds protected from discrimination, just like it protects grounds such as race, religion, age, and sexual orientation. The bill passed the legislative process in the House of Commons and the Senate, and became law upon receiving Royal Assent on June 19, 2017, coming into force immediately. Provincially, all human rights codes also include gender identity and expression.

Current Approaches to Trans Inclusion in the VAW Shelter Sector

The VAW sector grew out of a feminist desire to address the impact of domestic violence on women and, ultimately, end violence against women. Although some shelters feel that broadening the focus to include transgender people could undermine shelters’ ability to focus on women’s spaces and needs, many more shelters are trying to become more inclusive of trans women out of a recognition that trans women are women and that all women affected by violence should have access to their services.

The result is that there is currently a spectrum of approaches to gender inclusion across the VAW shelter sector, ranging from shelters that explicitly include cis women, trans women, and non-binary people; to shelters that are working ad hoc with diverse women in need of safety and are still developing policies to improve trans inclusion; to shelters that focus only on cis women.

“Historically, intersex and gender queer people went to women’s spaces because they were safer spaces to be in.”



Results from the Community of Practice

During the Community of Practice, participants discussed the work that they have done at their shelters and transition houses to better support trans women and gender diverse survivors. Through these discussions, participants generated the following list of promising practices to share with other VAW shelters and transition houses. They also developed a resource list, which follows on page 5. Additionally, through a series of follow-up conversations, WSC and several COP participants created case studies that profile the work being done in a more detailed manner ([available on our website](#)).

Promising Practices for Supporting and Including Trans Women at Shelters and Transition Houses

Intake

- Ask all potential residents about medical treatment and medication requirements
- Provide comfort items such as slippers and blankets
- Ask all potential residents their preferred pronouns rather than assuming. This indicates to all residents that it is an open space, and presents an opportunity to have conversations about gender diversity with all residents.
- Ask how you can increase feelings of safety
- Ask about their needs in a holistic way: supply needs, physical needs, and emotional needs

“People in crisis recognize people in crisis.”

Physical Space

- When re-designing space, create space for individuals that is comparable to a home setting, rather than a space that feels industrial
- Have a breakout space for private discussion
- Have open and visible LGBTQ symbols, including the trans flag



Residents

- Create opportunities for education and conversation with all residents
- Use inclusive intake forms to set the tone for all residents
- Reaffirm inclusive principles at regular resident meetings
- Be proactive in terms of setting expectations of inclusion; don't wait to respond to conflict or discomfort

Community

- Speak about being an inclusive environment with your community
- Reflect diversity in your outreach material

Funders

- Encourage funders to consider intersectionality and inclusion in the information and reporting they request. Is the information collection process trans-inclusive?
- Suggest reporting methods that meet information requirements without outing anyone

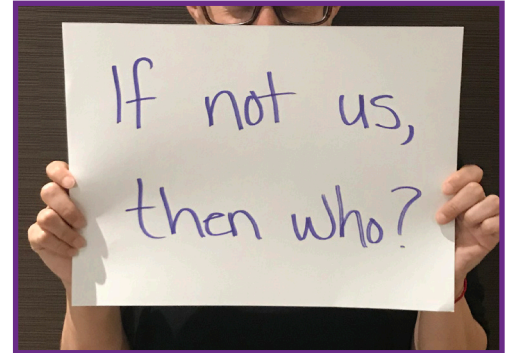
“One of the biggest shifts for us was experiencing how okay the other women in shelter were with it. We've had a number of women who have gone through [the shelter] very early in their transition and it was so not an issue.”

Staff and Board

- Build intentional, non-tokenistic representation: does your staff look like the people you work with?
- Look at hiring practices and where you post your recruitment opportunities
- Update all policies with an eye to inclusion: residents, human resources, intake, etc.
- Ensure staff email signatures include pronouns
- Provide staff with wallet reference cards regarding terminology

Prevention and Education

- Build partnerships in the community
- Ensure public education efforts reflect trans community experiences
- Educate Board members and staff – leadership drives change
- Create safe spaces to connect and invite people to the table



Promising Practices for Responding to Resistance

COP participants shared that they have sometimes faced resistance in their efforts to become more inclusive. This resistance can come from within the shelter or from within the broader community. Overall, participants agreed that providing education and space to ask questions is a central part of disarming resistance and supporting people to overcome their concerns. More information on participants' approaches to education can be found in the case studies.

Here are some of the responses COP participants use when they encounter resistance:

- We are women-serving organizations and we need to serve all women
- Women are diverse – we should not be limiting diversity
- We have an ethical responsibility to help and do no harm
- What are people afraid of? Ask what the real issue is and address that
- All people are deserving of respect, support, and safety
- Remember: people are dying

“Better training helps calm fears and raise confidence.”

What's Needed

COP participants identified the following actions as important steps in improving inclusion at VAW shelters and transition houses:

- More gatherings that focus on gender diversity and trans inclusion
- More networking
- Moderation in social media to hold people accountable
- Call in (rather than out) people who are in your circle (especially if you are privileged or an ally)
- Teaching how people can care and advocate in little ways
- Better training for health care professionals

“Just knowing that someone sees you is enough to help a lot of our youth stay safe.”



“Opening space doesn't mean that you have to change your mandate.”

Resources

Participants at the COP developed the following list of resources for individuals and organizations seeking more information. It can also be useful to reach out to local trans and LGBTQ2S+ organizations in your community.



Resources for Training and Education

- [Canadian Centre for Gender and Sexual Diversity: Definitions and Key Terms](#)
- [The Genderbread Person](#): Free online resource for understanding gender identity, gender expression, and anatomical sex
- [It's Pronounced Metrosexual!](#): Free online resource for social justice, gender, and sexuality
- [OAITH Training Hub](#): Free online courses

Resources for VAW Shelters

- [Female to Male Safer Shelter Project](#) (focuses on homeless shelters)
- [Safer Transitions Pamphlet](#)
- [Sheltering Transgender Women](#): Providing Welcoming Services (from the United States)
- [Where am I going to go?](#) Intersectional approaches to ending LGBTQ2S youth homelessness in Canada and the US
- [YW Calgary Practice Framework](#)
- [YWCA Regina Policy Manual](#)

Human Rights Codes and Standards

- [Canada Human Rights Act](#)

Learn more about what COP participants are doing to make their shelters and transition houses more inclusive. [Case studies are available on our website.](#)

Women's Shelters Canada brings together 14 provincial and territorial shelter organizations. We work as a unified voice to collaborate, educate, and innovate for systemic change that ends violence against women, making Canada a model for safety in the world.

Find us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram [@endvawnetwork](#)



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Shelters and
Transition Houses
United to End Violence
Against Women

¹ Veale J., Saewyc E., Frohard-Dourlent H., Dobson S., Clark B., & the Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey Research Group. (2015). "Being Safe, Being Me: Results of the Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey." Vancouver, BC: Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable Youth Centre, School of Nursing, University of British Columbia. Available: http://apsc-saravyc.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2018/03/SARAVYC_Trans-Youth-Health-Report_EN_Final_Web2.pdf.

² In this report, the authors did not distinguish between trans women and trans men; "transgender" was one category that respondents could select regarding their gender identity. See Wathen, N., MacGregor, J., & MacQuarrie, B. with the Canadian Labour Congress. (2014). "Can Work be Safe, When Home Isn't? Initial Findings of a Pan-Canadian Survey on Domestic Violence and the Workplace". London, ON: Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women and Children. Available online at http://canadianlabour.ca/sites/default/files/media/dvwork_survey_report_2014_enr.pdf.

³ Women's Shelters Canada. (2018). "Mapping VAW Shelters and Transition Houses: Initial Findings of a National Survey." Available: <https://endvaw.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Mapping-VAW-Shelters-2018.pdf>.