

Open Doors Project

What Women Using Homeless Shelter Services Had to Say

“When I was in the hospital, the social worker said you are at risk of homelessness and that was in December. And it was in February that I was here. It was just that quick—that close.”

“I had CFS on my case, and they said that if I didn’t get a place they would apprehend the children. I said, “Well, I’m not harming them. They’re not in danger.” She said by not having a place I was putting them in danger.”

“Mine was probably the women’s shelter—I was denied being there because I was not being abused and I said, well I could go back to my ex and then come back. That was sort of a joke, but she didn’t think it was funny.”

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“The shelter is closed 1 to 3. Those downtown people are kicked out all day long. Even me, I’ve got work, but I have to go out, even when I was sick. I’ve got nothing to do during that time. Where do I go? I got no money. I can’t go to the day centre drop in or the Salvation Army. No bus passes, no transportation, only where you can walk. It’s minus 30 today. I guess we’re lucky. We only have 3 hours outside.”

“It couldn’t be worse than where I was. Like, it’s way better here than sleeping on a hard cot in a homeless shelter. I’ve been sleeping on one of those for 2 months straight. Those hard cots with hardly no blankets and no padding. It’s pretty much like sleeping on the floor.”

What Women Said

You can't get a mental health worker because of long waiting lists. There is an 8-month waiting list for rehab. And I said, "I'm not waiting that long. It's either right now, or..."

"Also you don't get any transportation help. If the resources are away from this area, then how do you get there? I've walked over the bridge so many times a week. Most of the things that I do are over on that side of the river."

What Women Said

“When I first came to Brandon and I was living in my car, I made a phone call and I said, I don’t have a home. I’m living in my car. She said, “You’re dealing with a crisis. But you’re not being abused, right?” She said, “Unfortunately because this is a women’s shelter, we are dealing with women who are being abused.” Lots of the Staff in those shelters don’t understand that being homeless and in the circumstances we are in is a form of abuse.”

And then again, you had to be physically abused to get in. There is a very fine line between physical and psychological abuse. Only if there are very extenuating circumstances will they let you come in if you haven’t been physically abused.

What Women Said

“We don’t have social worker, advocate, or counselor. We’re stuck in a hard place. We need someone here who will advocate for us, to help us get out of this place.

We really need someone who is on our side and is helping us every step of the way.”

“I have a bad back and also I was having a lot of pain in my leg—Thursday, Friday, Saturday. So Sunday, I said I would go to out-patient. But I couldn’t get permission to get a cab because “it wasn’t an emergency.” What’s an emergency? Do you need to have your throat cut? It’s like my pain wasn’t legitimate. There’s no buses in this city on Sunday.”

What Women Said

“I did get money for my medication... but it was a nasty process to go through. The woman I talked to said, “You don’t qualify.” I said, “Yes I do. I want to talk to someone above you, because this is what I get one month to live on.”

“Trying to get the kids registered in school is hard when you are living in a shelter. The kids can’t go to school until they have an address. They say the shelter is not an address they can put on file. I have 3 kids that should be in school, but they have been out of school for almost a month now. It’s hard me trying to get stuff done (go to meetings, go to appointments, go look at places) with all the kids.”

What Women Using Homeless Shelter Services Said

“Addictions, mental health is not understood. There’s a zero tolerance for it when it comes to social programs. It’s like they have the attitude, “You got yourself into this mess. Now get yourself out.”

“How to change the staff? They can be prejudiced. Where else can we go? What else can we do? Of course we drink. What else can we do? And then we get booted out into the cold.”

“I was abused 30 years. I asked the worker if I could go to Iqaluit, but he said no. You have too many family there and you will end up drinking too much. So I ended up stuck here. I lost my children due to drinking. I’ve been here since 1995. I thought I found the right person, but he was the wrong man, so I got evicted. I lost my children because of him and I owe a lot of arrears too.”

Someone to appeal to for help. Moral support, counseling, someone who understands, what you went through. How are you supposed to talk to a person who's never gone through what you experience?

“I’ve been here about a year. I was in a relationship that was out of hand, lots of drinking and abuse. I wanted to settle down. I need to be able to be there for my kids. They’re older; they’re on their own now. I used to live here. I have a daughter here. So I came back here. It’s quieter and I can relax. I don’t want to live in a rooming house. So my worker recommended here. The housing worker at Access Centre got me a place but before that I wasn’t having a place. I got counseling from a Mental Health worker, etc. I began to understand everything I was putting myself through and my trauma history growing up in an alcoholic family. I have a granddaughter now, and that makes me want to be healthier. I want to be there for her. I’m trying to get my life on track.”

What Women Using Homeless Shelter Services Said

“Don’t be so biased. Have more resources, more outreach people to help clients. Understand the person who’s coming in from that kind of situation. Have staff who can say, I’ve been there. I know what you guys are going through. Staff need to be nonjudgmental and have compassion, be able to compromise, and have humility.”

“You fall through the cracks, too because when you leave these places, even if they say they will follow up, they don’t. It gets back to there’s only so many people who are there to help with all the people with mental health, with addiction, who are living on the streets, etc.—that need help”

What Women Using Homeless Shelter Services Said

“Just to have a support group once a week, run by women who have that experience. Once a week is good, just to get together and share resources (like a list of doctors, for example) and ideas because we are all going through the same thing. Like there are lots of resources out there, but it all depends on who knows the resources and how to get them.”

What Women Said

“We’re doing productive chores all morning. You get sweaty when you work like that. It would be nice to be able to freshen up. If I have a job interview this afternoon, I can’t take a shower before I go out. When I lived in the tent, I couldn’t come here to take a shower. It’s for residents only.”

“After my gall bladder surgery I couldn’t stay here because I couldn’t do dishes for 30 people. So I pretended to be an alcoholic to get in there. It was good to have a safe place to stay.”

“When you think about a Women’s Centre, you automatically think that there are women in there cooking, sewing, baking—traditional, you know. Margaret keeps asking, “How do we make money?” I said, well we get all these bananas, etc. We could do baking and sell them to businesses. Or sewing, if we got the supplies, we could make one item to sell for the Centre and one for us. But she says no. She’s not going to start something that no one will keep up with. Darn it. Let us try.”

What Women Said

“And then being here, they give us so many rules and you have to abide by the rules. You get a room but if you are gone too many nights, you lose the room. There is so much ridiculous contraband (alcohol and drugs) going on in the rooms. We get a nasty environment, not only with the staff, but with each other. We blame each other.”

“It’s not home. It’s a roof over your head. It doesn’t necessarily have to do with the staff, it just not home. If you want to get up in the middle of the night and have something to eat, you can’t.

We long to be able to lock our own door without worrying or without some harping at for forgetting something, or whether you’ve had a shower or made a phone call, or...”

What Women Using Homeless Shelter Services Said

“I don’t mean to keep making comparisons, but for instance at transition house, you have a key to your door. You can come and go until 11 pm. You can go back to bed for a nap if you want to. You can have a little TV in your room. However, you always have to be with your kids wherever they go. So, if they went downstairs and I was upstairs, I had to go down.”

What Women Said

“Well, there’s 2 bunk beds down where we are and there’s 7 of us. But it’s a place to sleep and for our kids to stay and not get taken away by CFS. And I have that over me. So I have to find a place. I need to find a place! Desperation has just set in. I’ll take anything anywhere.”

“I have to get my ID before I can get disabilities pensions. I went to Housing First—they have an ID clinic. It still takes 6 to 8 weeks for your birth certificate and I need that to get my marriage certificate before I get either of the disabilities. That puts a barrier for housing, because how are you going to get the money to put down first and last month’s rent—or even the first.”