

Learning Lessons from a Pandemic: Building Knowledge on Disaster Preparedness and Gender-Based Violence



What you need to know

Evidence overwhelmingly indicates that the severity and incidence of GBV increases during disasters and prolonged crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. GBV shelters provide essential services, without which women and children are left at an increased risk of prolonged exposure to violence.

Terms

Gender-based violence (GBV)

Shelter refers to GBV shelters, transition and second-stage houses. *Staff* includes front-line staff, managers and/or executive directors of shelters or transition houses. The traumatic impact of anti-violence work is referred to as *secondary traumatic stress*.

What is this research about?

This national study is meant to inform ongoing work related to GBV shelters’ responses to disaster and crisis management—with a particular focus on lessons being learned during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What did the researchers do?

In this qualitative study, interviews were conducted with provincial and territorial shelter networking organizations to explore the impact of the pandemic on the shelters’ ability to respond. Similarities and differences from shelter networking organizations of the four Canadian regions were explored. Given the complexity and prolonged nature of COVID-19, implications for service provision were also addressed.

Ten participants were interviewed along with one written submission. Interviews illuminated the experiences of shelters and shelter staff. Similarities and differences between the pandemic and previous disasters were discussed. The information collected will contribute to ongoing disaster planning and preparedness.

Themes

- Safety**
- Stay-at-home messages led to lack of safety
 - Heightened severity of abuse, custody and visitation challenges, isolation and access to services contributed to lack of safety
 - Personal safety and risk posed by the pandemic

- Staffing**
- Staff shortages and high turnover
 - Changes in staffing models due to the pandemic and job uncertainty
 - Increased experiences of secondary traumatic stress

- Resources**
- Confusion about resources and shortages (i.e., what/where/how to find)
 - Fundraising challenges and lack of spending flexibility with government funding
 - Resource challenges from lack of GBV work knowledge, sheltering role and logistics

- Govt. Relations**
- Increased risk from lack of consistent and informed communication within and between regions
 - Increased importance of provincial/territorial networking organizations
 - Increased advocacy for GBV sector work and joint advocacy identified as effective practices

- Service Delivery Adaptations**
- **Time:** Protocols and practices to address risk posed by COVID-19 impacted contact with service users
 - **Technology:** Made continued service delivery possible; Provided greater access; Pushed sector towards greater tech use; Posed language and confidentiality/privacy barriers for contact with service users and between staff and shelters; Decreased personal connections
 - **Physical Changes:** Required to increase independent living spaces

Figure 1. Themes resulting from qualitative interviews with networking organizations

What did the researchers find?

Recognizing differences between the various Canadian regions and the experiences of rural, remote and distant shelters, the themes that emerged included safety, staffing, resources, government relations and service delivery adaptations (Figure 1).

Key Recommendations

1. Develop an action plan

Action plan should address:

- Regional practices
- Communication
- GBV work as essential
- Inclusion of GBV shelter users as vulnerable populations
- Definitions of congregate care to include GBV shelters
- Supply chain systems to ensure supplies/equipment for essential workers and vulnerable populations

2. Develop a staffing plan to capacity building and sustainability

Staffing plan should address the need for:

- Professional staff
- Short-term/contract and long-term staffing and succession planning
- Compensation/benefits for GBV staff experiencing secondary traumatic stress/burnout while providing services to vulnerable populations

3. Develop funding models that support a healthy and responsive sector

Funding models should:

- Expand services to support increased access to GBV shelter outreach services delivered online/remotely
- Design/renovate physical shelter spaces to support independent living
- Increase spending flexibility
- Ensure ongoing support for shelter network organizations
- Reduce GBV shelters' reliance on donations

Figure 2. Key Recommendations

How can you use this research?

In a national emergency, there needs to be consistent decision-making and accountability. These recommendations are intended to contribute to disaster planning and emergency preparedness, whether for a natural disaster or prolonged crisis such as a pandemic. These recommendations will also contribute to the GBV sector's ability to build capacity to continue serving the communities and families who rely on the essential services they provide. Increased awareness about the services provided by GBV shelters is needed. Without exception, participants talked about the need for the public, government contacts and community professionals to understand the work of the sector and the values that frame the work.

Limitations of the research

Data collection for this study occurred largely between the third and fourth waves of COVID-19. Lessons learned may continue, and potentially be different, once there is an opportunity to recover and reflect on processes, policies and protocols. Participants were representing their member organizations and programs, therefore, are reflective of the collective experience of the region or territory and may not fully represent the experiences of individual shelters.

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