



***Transitions:  
Moving from Shelter  
to Social Housing***

***Community Strategies  
Spring 2001***



# ***Transitions: Moving From Shelter to Social Housing***

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Calgary Native Women's Shelter



Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter



YWCA Sheriff King Family Violence Prevention Centre

We also appreciate the assistance of Cal Homes and Calgary Housing Authority staff who helped us design the study, provided relevant data, and spoke to us about their concerns and issues in providing the best and most accessible service to their clients.

Finally, we owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the women who came forward, individually and in discussion groups, to talk with us about their experiences with social housing. We were constantly amazed by their courage, their tenacity, and their desire to establish a better life for themselves. Their diversity demonstrated that domestic violence knows no boundaries and can affect us all.



## Executive Summary



In 1996, a study was conducted by the City of Calgary, Community and Social Development Department<sup>1</sup>, to determine residential support needs for women moving from emergency shelter to social housing. This is often a difficult transition. Women who fail to make a successful adjustment often return to shelter agencies, abusive spouses or other undesirable housing arrangements. This proves to be costly both for the women involved and for the social housing agencies and it affects as many as one third of the women making this transition.

Past research has indicated that factors which lead to unsuccessful transitions include lack of security, lack of supports for independent living, unemployment, and unsuitable housing. In order to better understand and expand on these issues, and develop more effective intervention strategies, we spoke with women referred to social housing from women's emergency shelters, outreach workers at the shelters, and social housing agency staff. We asked about factors that influenced the breakdown, factors which fostered successful adjustment, and supports required to ease the transition.

Confirming past research, we found that social and instrumental support, a positive change in status, good employment or training opportunities, a safe and secure environment, good maintenance in the housing units, affordable costs, a responsive or supportive housing system, emotional support, and a good standard of housing made the transition from the shelter to social housing easier for women. Not surprisingly, the things which made a smooth transition hard for these women, was a lack of many of the things that made it easy, but also included systemic discrimination and concerns for their children. All three groups interviewed highlighted many of the same concerns.

On 2001 April 1 the City of Calgary announced the merger of the two social housing agencies, Calhomes Properties Ltd. and the Calgary Housing Authority. Together they now form the Calgary Housing Company. Given this new entity's commitment to social integration, increasing local decision making, encouraging innovative approaches to meet housing needs, improving client access to special housing services, and providing effective and efficient delivery of special housing needs, it seems timely to release the findings from the 1996 report.

The report relies on the words of the stakeholders themselves to convey the demands facing these women, and speaks to the need for social housing to be re-examined as to its responsiveness to this client group. In a climate of overflowing shelters and a limited housing market, there are many challenges facing outreach workers, social housing staff, and women who are struggling to leave a life of abuse. There are no "quick fix" solutions due to the complexity of the issues outlined below. But by continuing to work together and building on actions already initiated, social housing and women's emergency staff, along with other concerned service providers, can

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<sup>1</sup> Now Community Strategies Business Unit



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develop a system that will optimize a successful transitional outcome for these women. Seven issues are identified, followed by a brief explanation of each and a recommendation for action.

***ISSUE:*** *Supports for women in transition are often uncoordinated and fragmented.*

A case management approach for women leaving shelter to enter social housing needs to be developed. Women leaving abusive situations are often seen as a homogeneous group and are provided with a standard set of supports which do not reflect the enormous diversity which underlies this category.

**Recommendation 1: An individualized, holistic and integrated support system needs to be designed for women in transition. This involves bringing together service providers working with the individual and, if applicable, her children, to provide a seamless and comprehensive support network.**

***ISSUE:*** *A more systematic process needs to be designed to ensure that each woman has the support of an advocate who can help her negotiate the system, remain safe, and attend to issues that she may be too overwhelmed to consider.*

By providing more outreach workers to advocate for women, we could increase successful transitions from the shelter thereby reducing the number of women returning to shelters, and thus, the number of women being turned away

**Recommendation 2: Budget new funding dollars to increase outreach staff at women's emergency shelters to act as advocates for women leaving shelter for social housing.**

***ISSUE:*** *Social assistance funding has decreased in the last few years and many cuts have occurred to medical, childcare, moving, etc. allowances. These cuts have made it harder for women leaving abusive situations to make ends meet.*

It is apparent from a variety of studies that Supports for Independence (SFI) funding is not adequate, especially for single parent families. Recently, the Alberta government has noted that it is decreasing the welfare load while ignoring the seemingly concomitant rise in the number of children living in poverty. The connection between these two figures needs to be explored, especially in light of recent initiatives to end child poverty and the large body of evidence attesting to the impact of poverty on health, learning and social adjustment outcomes.

In addition, women who can not meet their rent requirements may leave social housing to return to an abusive spouse or shelter agencies.

**Recommendation 3: Advocacy is required to persuade the provincial government to re-examine its funding decisions and cutbacks in order to avoid incurring larger costs down the road, for example, in the areas of health care, education, and the criminal justice system.**

*ISSUE: Women in transition to independent living often find that full-time employment immediately brings to bear costs which negatively impact the transition from social assistance to employment.*

Upon securing a full-time job, tenants in social housing immediately experience rent increases equal to 30% of income. At the same time, medical and child care allowances formerly available on social assistance are gone. This increase does not provide them with an opportunity to save for market accommodation. Many are struggling to pay off back debts and the new debts that working entails, e.g., appropriate clothing, transportation, etc. Single women with children are a very important segment of this population and need better access to child care so that they can pursue training and employment opportunities that will help them improve their lives. Given these concerns, some time is required to make a positive move from social assistance to employment income.

**Recommendation 4: A grace period of a few months needs to be instituted to allow women in transition to gather the resources for independent living. This may mean advocacy on the part of social housing agencies to ask that provincial legislation in this regard be revisited. The goal would be to ensure that social housing rents remain affordable for tenants moving directly from social assistance to employment income.**

*ISSUE: Social housing agencies assign priority housing to women leaving shelter. However, shelter agency staff and prospective tenants are not clear on how the priority system works.*

Respondents in this study needed a better understanding of who receives priority for social housing and how they can better access the system. Single women without children were especially concerned about the discrimination they perceived they faced from social housing staff.

**Recommendation 5: Social housing agencies need to better articulate their priority system for shelter agency staff and clients.**

**Recommendation 6: Social housing and Women's Emergency Shelter agencies, along with other stakeholders, need to develop an action plan to work more effectively with single women to ensure that their accommodation needs are better met.**



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***ISSUE:*** *Women leaving abusive situations have an attenuated need for some of the things many of us take for granted in our communities. These include good access to transportation and other facilities, as well as safety and security for them and their children.*

**Recommendation 7: Develop a comprehensive plan for assessing the suitability and standard of social housing for women leaving abusive situations. Such an assessment would consider placement, safety, design, accessibility and community development components. The assessment would become part of the case management plan.**

***ISSUE:*** *Very little systematic research has been done on the impact of moving from family home to shelter to social housing on children of women fleeing domestic abuse. However, the effects are often visible in the child's disruptive and/or violent behaviour which creates added stress in an already untenable situation.*

More work is needed to understand the impact of transition on children, and more social supports in the form of counselling are required.

**Recommendation 8: Develop partnerships between children's services agencies and women's emergency shelters to begin to design a holistic approach to helping children through the transition process. This would include helping mothers develop the skills to work with children who are demonstrating aggressive behaviour, and developing strategies to ensure that families are not fragmented even further.**



## **Transitions: Moving from Shelter to Social Housing**

On 2001 April 1 the City of Calgary announced the merger of two non-profit housing agencies, Calhomes Properties Ltd. and the Calgary Housing Authority to form the Calgary Housing Company. Given this new entity's commitment to social integration, increasing local decision making, encouraging innovative approaches to meet housing needs, improving client access to special housing services, and providing effective and efficient delivery of special housing needs, it seems timely to release the findings from a study conducted in 1996 around social housing issues.

While the research is four years old, the special needs of women moving from shelter to social housing as outlined in this report, may serve to inform the Calgary Housing Company as it examines and determines its new policies and procedures. While some things have changed in the social housing field, (e.g., a new transitional housing project in Ogden) much has not. In fact, the booming economy has created more pressure on social housing as an influx of people enter the city looking for work and accommodation. Builders in Calgary are having a hard time keeping up with demand and shelters are at capacity with more people waiting to be admitted (Canada West Foundation, 2000). All of this while poverty and homelessness are a growing concern in Calgary in an environment of a severe shortage of affordable housing and low-rent accommodation (Canada West Foundation, 2000).

### **Background**

In 1996, the City of Calgary Community and Social Development Department (now Community Strategies) received funding from the Innovative/Preventive Funding Program to conduct a pilot project which would determine cost-benefit savings and generate guidelines for effective residential support services to higher risk tenants of social housing. The goals were to identify and actively reach out to these tenants, develop and implement early interventions and support, stabilize women in social housing, and generate guidelines for effective and efficient housing support services.

In working on this project, it was observed that some women who leave emergency women's shelters to enter social housing are not always successful making the adjustment. This proves to be costly both for the women involved and the social housing agencies. From January 1995 through December 1996, 35% (n=26) of the 75 women who had moved from shelter to Calhome properties had left in less than six months. While some of these women may have moved to market housing, it is more probable, given the research, that most either returned to their abusive partner, to shelter, or to family and friends. Similarly, Calgary Housing Authority found that 37% (n=28) of their 75 tenants in 1996 left before six months. Some were evicted due to rent arrears or nuisance behaviour.



The cost to the shelters is \$80.34 per day (cost for one client) and the minimum cost of tenancy breakdown to social housing agencies is \$200.00 per tenant. This amount fluctuates depending on damage or cleaning costs. Given the latter figure and the estimation that a third of women ( $n \approx 28$ ) moving from shelter to social housing per year experience tenancy breakdown within six months, the cost to social housing agencies is \$5600.00/year. While the actual dollars and cents of breakdown do not seem overly large, the hidden social costs are immeasurable for the woman, her children and society. These intangible costs may impact health, education, employment, and the criminal justice system in the long run.

## **Findings from Past Research**

Past research with shelter agencies suggests a number of possible reasons for the breakdown (see Data Base Subcommittee, 1994; Social Research Unit, 1996). While not all of them speak to social housing, they are illustrative of the range of challenges these women face including:

- Women who have been abused are often reluctant to live in integrated settings (with men in the same complexes). They have a strong need for a secure and physically safe environment.
- There are no on-going supports in place to foster independent living especially for women with mental disabilities. This may require on-going counselling, landlord mediation, social service advocacy or assistance with survival needs (e.g., food, clothing).<sup>2</sup>
- Monitoring to ensure medication is taken is unavailable.
- Women are unemployed and/or require job training or upgrading to be employable (Tutty, 1992).
- Stresses of single-parenting and visitations by ex-partners (Smillie, 1991).

Other problems noted in two case studies done by the Community and Social Development Residential Support Services worker are (Corporate memorandum, November 5, 1996):

- Suites are unsuitable for immediate occupancy (dirty, broken appliances, inadequate plumbing).
- Difficulty getting suites maintained.

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<sup>2</sup>

Some of this support is currently provided by a shelter outreach worker (Tutty, 1992).



- High noise levels.
- Women are placed in accommodation rather than being given a choice of possible locations.

These findings are supported in a longitudinal study of 97 women (see Tutty, Rothery, Cox & Richardson, 1995) and in the current research study.

## **Exploring the Calgary Experience**

In order to determine the scope of the problem and explore further the reasons for unsuccessful outcomes, a research study was conducted to examine:

- the number and demographic characteristics of women affected
- what factors influence breakdown in housing
- what factors foster successful adjustment
- what kinds of supports would make the transition easier

Data was collected from several sources:

- women referred to social housing from women's emergency shelters
- outreach workers at women's emergency shelters
- statistics gathered by social housing agencies
- social housing agency staff
- existing literature

The aim of the research was to help develop more effective intervention strategies to improve outcomes for these women and social housing agencies, and to identify service gaps in order to find ways to address these.

## **Methodology and Method**

Given the exploratory nature of this research and the intent to understand the experience of women moving from shelter to social housing, the methodology underlying the project was qualitative and mainly qualitative methods were used to analyze the data. This allowed us to examine the issues, and the meanings attached to them, from our participants' points of view.

Staff from Callhomes were interested in the outcome of this research, and thus, volunteered a list of clients who had been both short-term (six months or less) and long-term (6 months+) tenants. We had hoped to follow-up on these women through their outreach workers so that we could hear from women who had both positive and negative transition experiences.



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However, in meeting with outreach workers from women's emergency shelters, it was apparent that, for a number of considerations including privacy, safety and security, trust, and confidentiality, this method of contact would prove untenable. It was decided that the outreach workers would inform the women with whom they were in contact about the research and encourage their participation either through a written survey (see Appendix 1), one to one interviews, or focus groups. To further encourage participation, women invited to focus groups were provided with free child-care, bus tokens, and \$10.00 for their participation.

Despite these measures to encourage participation, we found the women to be very difficult to contact. Thirteen women agreed to be interviewed but we only succeeded in actually interviewing seven, while two others completed a written survey.

Even though they had volunteered, and, according to the outreach workers, were anxious to convey their experiences with social housing, these women did not seem very interested in speaking with us and it was only through persistent phone calling that we managed to schedule interviews with them. Four of the women scheduled were not home when we arrived at the appointed time and place. These women were phoned again in an attempt to reschedule. One did not want to go ahead, one cancelled again without notice, one arrived and was very willing to talk, and one met with us but seemed very nervous and uncomfortable.

In addition to the one to one interviews, we held a focus group at the Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter. This was attended by 10 women and 3 outreach workers. As such, in all, we had participation from 22 women (7 interviewees, 5 who completed the written survey, and 10 focus group participants). These women came from many different socio-economic backgrounds, from lower to upper middle-income. Their ages ranged from early 20s to mid 60s with most in their 20s and 30s. Some had a university education, others grade school. Some had children, some were expecting, and some had no children. Most participants were Canadian born, but at least three were newcomers to Canada and three were Aboriginal. Thus, once again, we have evidence that domestic abuse knows no demographic or geographic boundaries.

In order to ensure that we obtained a holistic view of women's experience moving from shelter to social housing, we conducted a focus group with five outreach workers from the three major emergency shelters (Native Women's, Calgary Women's Emergency, and Sheriff King), and one with four staff (two each) from Calhome Properties and Calgary Housing Authority.

All of the interviews and focus groups were taped. These, along with the written surveys, were transcribed and subjected to content analysis. The two researchers worked in isolation from each other to establish a qualitative measure of reliability in developing the content themes for the following discussion.



However, before entering into a discussion of the women's experiences, it is important to discuss a possible bias contained therein. The difficulties we had meeting with these women pose some questions. Was there some kind of power dynamic at play here? Undoubtedly there was, given that the two researchers were well-educated, white, middle-class, employed women who were part of the bureaucratic "system". Did these women feel for some reason that they had to agree to participate in the study to please their outreach worker or the researchers?

That they avoided us rather than saying no suggests that they did. Did our persistence in trying to reschedule the interviews threaten them? What pressure were the ones we actually interviewed under in terms of our power relationships, especially those who were recent immigrants? And given that many women expressed concern that no matter what they said, nothing would change, did this perception influence participation?

There are no final answers to these questions. They are raised to serve as a cautionary note to our interpretation of these data. To ensure confidentiality, the women we interviewed are identified by a single letter in brackets after their comments and the women who submitted written surveys are distinguished by AS1 through AS5. Comments of outreach workers and social housing staff are indicated by AOW and ASH respectively, and focus group participants are denoted by AFG.

## **Results**

Social and instrumental support, a positive change in status, good employment or training opportunities, a safe and secure environment, good maintenance in the housing units, affordable costs, a responsive or supportive housing system, emotional support, and a good standard of housing are the things that made the transition from the shelter to social housing easier for women. Not surprisingly, the things which made a smooth transition hard for these women, was a lack of many of the things that made it easy, but also included systemic discrimination and concerns for their children. And, it is interesting that all three groups of respondents; women, outreach workers, and social housing staff, highlighted many of the same concerns. At the top of the list was the need for good social support.

***Social Support*** - Brown and Ziefert (1990) write that safe relationships are as critical as safe shelter in reconnecting women to community. All of the women credited their outreach worker with providing invaluable social support. When ties with family and community are severed and life is moving at warp speed, these women need the strength and support of others to help get on with their lives. Many find themselves on their own for the first time, lonely and unable to cope with the burdens of independent living.



One area in which outreach workers were often called upon to help, was in dealing with a seemingly inflexible social housing system. Eviction notices were a problem for some women overwhelming their already hectic lives. For others, just getting into social housing was difficult. Outreach workers have the experience to advise and/or intervene.

*We could not get the whole amount in rent right away and if it wasn't for the shelter intervening we would have ended up living in our car because they [Calgary Housing] just don't care. We had to get a hold of somebody at the city and one of the ladies at the shelter talked to them on our behalf. Other than that they were just going to come and evict us... (A)*

*I've tried to get into Calhomes before and I know it can take some time if you're not in the Shelter. In Shelter, it took about 3 or 4 days. With the counsellors there they act so fast. (P)*

*I tell them, [regarding Calgary Housing], you should go up there and present yourself well. Tell them the biggest story of your life... I tell them to assert themselves. If you want a certain area of the city tell them. Tell them what you are going to do and express why. (OW)*

The women we spoke with were fairly articulate and resourceful, yet they still had difficulty dealing with the social housing system. Both social housing staff and the outreach workers pointed out that many other women were less able to manage. Outreach workers often play an important role in mentoring these women and in helping them to develop life skills.

*I have one client that has never cashed a check, that had never gone for groceries by herself, that had never had any money in pocket to do anything with. Never paid a phone bill, never done anything like that, never handled any of the money or bills. So for her It's a real learning process right from the beginning. And sure she made a lot of mistakes and was even fearful to try some of those things. She eventually was able to do it. But it takes a long time. (OW)*

The Women in Need Society's (WINS) parenting programmes were also applauded for helping women to build life skills. Everyone we consulted (the women, outreach workers, and social housing staff) praised the programmes.

*There's a drop-in group on parenting... I find it a wonderful thing because it teaches people how to be open and to express the way we feel. (P)*

*The programme that WIN has going... I think that's an excellent programme. It's in some of the complexes... Women in Need, Parent Child Drop In. (OW)*



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One woman was particularly pleased to find a place with quality onsite child care where she could socialize with other women and have some free time away from her children.

*They [WIN] have there a certain amount of adults per child, I think, so they have the proper care and they watch the littlest ones to the biggest ones. They have little tiny babies there and everything. It is so good... I couldn't believe it... They are so fabulous and the ladies that are in there are so friendly, they really are. (FG)*

Women have only three weeks in shelter before they are moved out to market or transitional housing. In this time, they are expected to find ways to cope with drastically altered living conditions and social ties. Often cut off from family and friends, they find themselves very lonely, in need of human support to help them through these very rough times. All the women we talked to praised their outreach workers for their support, but some women neither have nor keep in touch with an outreach worker, and so it is expected that their experience would be even more poignant than that expressed by two women:

*I am really feeling very lonely. I don't have anybody really. I have got a couple of family members but they're too busy and I am finding... My god I need a friend! ...My children are my life right now and I can't deal with that because I can't go out on my own. I can't even do something like going and getting my teeth done ...and I am just finding I don't have anybody to talk to and I really wish I would have a friend. (FG)*

*Well, I was lonely when I first came into my apartment, especially from being in the Shelter where there's always somebody around... I changed my life a lot and I got rid of a lot of my friends that kept me meeting the jerks. I've had to change all that so I was basically alone then... (J)*

And sometimes this loneliness leads to counterproductive behaviour as noted by social housing staff:

*Too often the women's loneliness leads them to call their ex-partner, the relationship and the circle of violence starts again and then we are getting complaints about fighting, about noise... (SH)*

One woman was reluctant to seek support from an outreach worker because the person she had originally dealt with was no longer with the Shelter.

*That's part of the reason that I stopped going. The thought of repeating everything even though they could look over my files. I've already started putting that in the past so I don't want to have to come and bring it all back up to the surface. I've dealt with it, It's over and bringing it up could put a halt on my plans... I [don't] want to get stuck back into the whys. (J)*



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So it appears that sometimes failure to connect with others for social support may be a matter of wanting to get on with one's life rather than merely isolation or lack of opportunity. Liebow (1993) noted that there is a deep resentment felt by women in shelter at always having to answer often very personal questions over and over again. He observes that this may be the price of powerlessness.

Social housing staff thought that for many of these women, not asking for help was a matter of pride, a desire to deal with whatever the consequences may be in order to save face, because they may be afraid that they are making themselves look idiotic by asking these questions. They want to be able to say, "look, I survived, I got myself out of this situation and I'm going to make it". This points to an unfortunate irony between the need for strength and independence to succeed, and the need to swallow one's pride in order to survive.

*There is one lady I know that lives in a complex too. She has so much pride... I know you came from a good family and blah blah blah but you know hey you kind of just turn it off for a while and just get what you can get, and then when you are better off, you know you don't have to worry... it is survival... (G)*

Currently, women are expected to call the outreach workers should they need help (although the outreach workers indicated that they may informally drop by). Social housing staff thought that the women need to be encouraged to avail themselves of the support from outreach workers without having to call. They wanted adequate supports in terms of shelter staff and follow-up built in to ensure this. They also felt that these women and their children lacked role models in the community, and have an inadequate knowledge of the resources that may be available to them.

***Instrumental Support*** - We refer to supports like furniture or assistance with moving as instrumental supports. Most of us would agree that moving is stressful and exhausting even at the best of times. Women who had some assistance with moving and with setting up their home counted themselves among the lucky few.

*I don't know how they expect people to save money to be able to transfer. Like with me, I work in [the NW] and I was living in [the NE]... which really didn't make any sense... and if it wasn't for my dad giving me the money I would never have been able to move... (A)*

*Bethany Home Society was really nice and gave me an alarm system. They've been really supportive. ...Sheriff King was really nice and gave me almost all the furniture you see. Because Social Services doesn't assist with furniture anymore. They used to. They used to really be great... (L)*

Because few had access to a car or truck, moving became a costly and cumbersome expense.



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*Problem was there was no assistance in helping me move. ...Because I was in a long-term shelter for battered women, Social Services won't pay the damage deposit. If I was coming out of a short term they would have... You know, just moving was a total nightmare. Cause I had to hire movers. I get \$579/month and had to pay \$325 damage deposit, \$189 in rent, and \$150 for the movers. So, ... I didn't have money for food that month. It was even worse than usual. (L)*

We often heard that women had trouble obtaining adequate food for their needs, and many times sacrificed eating properly in order to ensure that other bills were paid.

*Since I have been on my own I always make sure I have money for the rent before food or anything... because they don't care and so it's better to go to the food bank and have the money for the rent rather than buy food and then not have enough money for the rent... (A)*

*On Social Assistance it's very hard, because the money they give is \$379/month and It's very difficult to make ends meet. I thought maybe I was the only one but we are so many of us. We have the rent \$136/month and then I have my utility, \$21-23 /month, phone \$27-30, and the cable and the rest of the money I have to buy food. Its really hard especially when you're pregnant, It's a nightmare. You want to eat this and that. You want to eat so much food and you can't make it. It's very hard. Anyway, you have to survive. (P)*

*Another thing, living on that little bit of money, either poverty working wage or social assistance, is the calibre of food that they're eating and they're always sick. (OW)*

**Change in Status** - Novac, Brown and Bourbonnais (1996) report that women in Alberta must be extremely desperate to leave an abusive situation as the alternatives are so bleak (p. 36). Low welfare rates and lack of adequate and affordable housing encourage women to stay in abusive relationships. They are forced to choose between safety and the economic certainty of their current lifestyle. From victim to hero, women who leave violent situations have the courage and strength to change their lives.

*I've been to shelter and now I started living here and I've been really content and never felt like this before.*

*I didn't really mean to be a single mother but now I'm doing it and I can do it and it gives me a really good feeling. And living here kind of secures that feeling. (M)  
I ... found out I'm much stronger than before. It's a really big step for me [but] I did it. So I feel so great about it, I'm glad cause I can take care myself with living like this. I'm very satisfied now. (S1)*



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We often forget that women who flee an abusive situation experience a loss of status or lifestyle. Yet to protect themselves they must leave and enter into a system and standard of living which is alien to them.. As one woman said, AI had a nice house and a good job... I had everything. This loss is very upsetting.

*I worked all the time here and there, odd jobs. I never really lived on welfare. I didn't really know what welfare was...I was so ashamed. (G)*

*Who's going to leave a nice house to go live in a sewer with no furniture and no food and nothing? Nobody. (L)*

They also believed that because of their circumstances, people in the system looked down on them. They felt that there was no understanding of the change in status they were experiencing, rather, they were just looked upon as worthless.

*When you are low income and you can't afford a regular place to rent... when the people you have to deal with aren't.. low income housing aren't very sympathetic and aren't very friendly and the one lady that I was dealing with for a long time [at Calgary Housing], she was just not very nice and she wasn't very sympathetic and it really made it hard... If you don't have the rent on time or whatever, as far as they are concerned, you are just evicted...*

*They were going to evict us. They didn't care, but we could not get the whole amount in rent right away and if it wasn't for the shelter intervening we would have ended up living in our car because they just didn't care. They don't realize because I was never low income before. I have always been middle income all my life except for the last three years... So I don't think people that are middle income or high income realize what it is like to be low income... We tried to reason with them and tell them it was supposed to come the month before and we had no money and all that... I don't think that was very fair... I don't think they are very realistic in what they expected... (A)*

For women who are newcomers to Canada, the change in status, from unmet expectations to non-recognition of foreign credentials, can lead to disappointment, drinking and abuse as one woman in our study found.

For the most part, we spoke to women who had formerly experienced privilege, and so, keenly felt the change in how they were treated by others, but regardless of former circumstances, it is clear that more effort is needed to treat all women moving from shelter to social housing with respect and afford them their dignity.

***Employment Issues*** - All of the women we spoke to wanted to work or wanted to increase their skills to obtain a good job. But often they did not receive the support they required to do so.



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*I found being on social assistance, if they would offer me some real training I would take it... Really you can't get ahead on social assistance... I know they have apprenticeship and everything for unemployment but once you hit social assistance you have nowhere else to go. Please train me, I am ready, I am willing, you know! (FG)*

A report on workfare programmes in Ontario and the United States (Dooley, 1995) noted that poor women have difficulty taking advantage of these or other employment programmes due to child care responsibilities and discrimination. For women with children, the expense of child support can often preclude them from seeking out training or employment opportunities. And rarely do these programmes provide child care as part of their package. Single mothers living in poor neighbourhoods may feel a need to constantly supervise their children for fear for their safety. Many of our respondents spoke to this issue as we will see later. The isolation they experience in not knowing their neighbours and resources in their communities also prevents them from having someone with whom they can leave their children should they have a job interview.

Finally, children from abused backgrounds often have significant emotional needs that place high demands on their mothers. Women are pulled between their family ethic and their work ethic.

In terms of discrimination beyond lack of access to child care, programmes aimed at supporting self-sufficiency among women rarely address the barriers to employment women face including sexism, racism and classism. Poor women may be subject to more workplace abuse as they can not afford to lose their jobs regardless of working conditions. And, in terms of training, women may be steered into sex-typed occupations that are poorly paid. As one woman in our study found, even though she took training in a well-paying, traditionally male occupation, when she and the other women in her class did their practicum, they were given filing to do rather than the work for which they had been trained.

*I graduated from autoparts last year and didn't get the job. They want grade 12. I spent 400 hours, did job placement and it comes out to nothing. Most of [the people] class aren't working; 1 or 2 out of 7 working. (P)*

Even those trying to obtain higher education had trouble. *Well some of them have big student loans because of circumstances that forced them to drop out - whatever is happening in their lives - it was not their choice but they didn't complete their course or whatever that they had the loan for, but then that black balls them for another one. But Social Services won't let you take any type of programme... you're better off on student finance cause you have coffee money when you're on student finance. You don't when you're on welfare. ...But I also have women in positions where they were actually worse off... I had one woman who was going through the programme*



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*with one semester to finish and they withdrew her student funding so she couldn't finish it. So she was left owing for stuff that was unfinished and really it wasn't her fault that she had to quit. They just stopped providing funding for her midstream... And she dropped out... She had to. (OW)*

Despite their desire to pursue better outcomes for themselves and/or their children, the women in our study found the process frustrating. It seemed that there were so many obstacles to face in trying to become self-sufficient, that their already over-taxed resources were insufficient to overcome the many barriers in their way.

**Systemic Discrimination** - An undercurrent of perceived differential treatment was apparent throughout our interviews, particularly with women of colour and Aboriginal women. And it wasn't only the social housing system at fault, but other systems as well:

*They're using kids, children to interpret, and these children become protectors of mom. So tell your mom if this doesn't happen we're going to evict her. [The child may not tell mom because s/he does not want to scare her]. I went there one day [to a Vietnamese client's home] ... and going through the translator, I found out that her power was due to be cut off that day. Through the translator,... she said, "But I'm going to pay it next week"... So then I get on the phone to utilities and she [the clerk] said, "Well, I did speak to her son". Her son was 10 years old! He's not going to tell mom that. (OW).*

*I have a friend ... that lives in the apartment... she is having the same problem [getting help from social housing staff]... I don't know... because we are Natives, because she is a Native too eh? ... She has cockroaches in her place and they know and they won't remove... she said she told them to transfer her and they told her she had to be there for eight months. I told her to do something about it... she had cockroaches... they gave her the run-around. And I know this is because we are Natives. (FG)*

Are these differences due to a lack of basic life skills as asserted by social housing, or are they due to an inability to adjust to or understand other cultural values and behaviours? The answer is probably a little of both.

*Then there's the other thing. They get a mother and two children into housing and then all of a sudden the relatives come from hither and yon and they all move in. You get this call from Calgary Housing or Calhomes, "Did you know?" or "How come you let them?" Or else, you get...where they do move out with, say two or three children, but circumstances change where maybe they end up with one. Well, right away they need less room than what they've got and there isn't anything available that would be appropriate for their new family size so they're in big trouble and they're no longer on the priority list... I don't think they have the monopoly on it...*



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*but I know it does happen a lot with the Native population... It's very family oriented... so they can't say I'm sorry you can't come live with me because I got a nice house". Even if they wanted to they can't. I mean emotionally and so... What's housing response to those situations? Get em out of there because you don't want to get too many people in there. If they don't get them out they will get notice. (OW)*

Findings from Calgary's Streets Speaks Survey (The Street Speaks, 1997, p. 6) show similar difficulties arising from a lack of sensitivity and understanding regarding Native cultures. Jay, a young Native man, was asked about the events or circumstances that caused him to be homeless. His comments were not specific to social housing but reflect a broader problem with housing

*Yes, many different causes, lack of money, lack of damage deposit and me, I have a drug and alcohol problem. At times I was having parties and stuff and got kicked out but I usually got my damage [deposit] back. But a lot of landlords were rip-off artists. And a lot of it was racism too because I'm Native. So when I had family over they always complained "Oh look at the Indians living there. "So I was accused on many occasions of having people living at my house and it's not true - they weren't living there, they were just visiting for the day, not for weeks or months and I don't think other people understand that. Also, I'm a very caring person and when I do have my own house if somebody is homeless like that - I tend to keep a lot of people, like I'll help people out.*

No-one is suggesting that this discrimination is conscious. Rather, it is systemic, buried in policies and practises that were designed to serve a more homogeneous population. As Joubert (1989) noted, linguistic and cultural barriers, combined with limited bureaucratic experience and socialization, make non-dominant ethnoracial consumers more vulnerable to bureaucratic disempowerment. They neither know what their rights are, nor how to advocate for these as they are unaware of the proper bureaucratic channels of appeal, should such an appeal process exist. Furthermore, they must be aware that an injustice has occurred. In this study, women of colour, particularly the few immigrant women to whom we spoke, were so grateful for any assistance whatsoever, they were reluctant to speak about any of their concerns around discrimination.

**Safety and Security** - Herman (1992) states that the first stage in recovering from the trauma of domestic abuse is to move from unpredictable danger to reliable safety (p. 155). Women told us how important it was to finally feel safe.

*I am more content. I feel really comfortable. I don't have to worry about anybody breaking into my house or coming and getting mad at me or anything and it feels so comfortable, so nice and peaceful ... (G)*



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*After living in social housing, I found out it helps me to build up my self-esteem. I feel so peaceful and very comfortable the way that I live now. It helped me to grow up more. Because it totally separated my personal life with my abuser. Really gives me a lot of private life. I do feel free for my life. I can think more clearly... [re shared accommodation] I feel so safe with lot of people living with me. I don't feel in danger anymore. (S1)*

Unfortunately, many women leave the shelter for social housing complexes where security measures are poor and neighbours are loud and scary. This type of environment can delay the healing process. Outreach workers did point to one complex that was particularly good in terms of security measures and a general sense of safety.

*Baker House is good... they don't just let you in whereas at Southview, any buzzer will let you in... I actually don't feel that bad about sending someone to Baker for safety sake... There's always two or three elderly gentlemen sitting in the lobby that kind of keep an eye on things... They watch you boy. (OW)*

But all of the women we talked to lived in fear to a greater or lesser degree: Fear of their former partners, fear of the neighbourhood, fear of the neighbours, fear for their kids.

*A few friends [other abused women] are already dead, already got killed... He [my husband] said if you take the kids away, I'll hunt you down and get them back. You know, you can never get away... I worry about my husband. He knows where I live and I see him drive by. He's a good shot. (L)*

*On the other side of the units, there are parties, noise and cops. It's scary and disturbing. (G)*

Outreach workers acknowledged this fear and pointed out how some of the social housing complexes exacerbate it through poor security measures and unsafe conditions.

*There is a danger of staying there without a phone. Other than us not getting in the door. The partner comes and he's in the door and they can't even phone the police... Or if they're afraid. There's nobody they can call in an emergency situation... I have one woman in the Southview place that's actually quite afraid to let her kids go out... there's sometimes quarrels and stuff like that. She says, "I turn off the lights and we pretend we're not home so that nobody will come and knock on our door for help". I'm thinking, you turn off the light in your apartment....that's not right. There's some at MacDougall Court that are feeling that way too.*



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*They're scared to go out... And Shaganappi.... But when you go to Southview... I go in there, I just square my shoulders stick my head up and just walk like a big lady cause you've got to have some guts to go through there, you really do. (OW)*

*A lot of these [complexes], if [clients] don't have phones you can't get in. You stand and yell for a while or you go all the way down the list of buzzers and see if somebody will let you into the building... When you go to Southview, any buzzer will let you in... There's a lot of people in social housing that do not have telephones. That's a reality and all of these buzzers are connected to telephones. No phone, no access... Who's got \$100 to put a deposit down? (OW)*

There was even some recognition that ethnic tensions can give rise to feelings of fear and insecurity.

*I've got an Ethiopian client there who is basically afraid because most of [the tenants] are Sudanese. The Sudanese don't get along with the Ethiopians... It's just a horrible racial mix. (OW)*

These fears take their toll daily and are heightened by the recent number of high profile deaths of women at the hands of abusers whom they thought they left behind. The women in this study are well aware that the system has a poor record of protecting women from violence as noted by one woman:

*I feel like nobody cares about what happens to me... People think they have rights. They don't have any rights. It's all an illusion.*

**Maintenance** - A few women were very positive about the quality of maintenance service they received. Their request to have something fixed was dealt with in a friendly, timely and effective manner.

*(How do you like your apartment?) I really love it. It's a beautiful place... No problem with Calhomes... (Have you needed things fixed?) Ya, I've needed stuff to be fixed. Only small things. To tell you the truth they didn't give me a hard time. When I reported it, the next day everything was fixed... They really do the best they can. (P)*

*I had to change my number once and [the resident manager] keyed that in as soon as I told him that I had a new phone number. So he keyed it in downstairs so it would access up here. We say Hi to each other in the halls. It's great. I have no problems. He's really nice. (J)*

Quality maintenance like this not only ensures the safety of the premise, but also shows respect for tenants; that they deserve to live in decent places. The impression we got was that the resident manager was key to a good or bad experience in this regard.



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The few women that had a satisfactory response to their maintenance concerns, all spoke of having a good relationship with the resident manager of the social housing complex. Unfortunately, most women reported negative experiences with maintenance. Sometimes it was difficult to get someone to come, or if a maintenance person did come, things would not be properly fixed and they'd have to call again.

*They are very good about coming to try to fix things. One day my ceiling was leaking and I phoned and they sent a plumber. He supposedly fixed it and then he went away and next day, worse problems. Different plumber came and said the previous guy did it all wrong. So he did all this stuff and now I have no hot water and I am scared to even call... Every time they come it just makes everything worse. I used to have lots of hot water and I didn't have this dripping continually. I am scared [to call them again] of what will happen next... [of] making the problem worse. It's already a lot worse than it ever was. (L)*

*Outdoor maintenance was a particular problem as the women did not have access to a lawnmower or even a snow shovel, and could not afford to purchase these.*

*Everyone is responsible for their own lawn but there is no lawnmower provided. (G)*

And again, the outreach workers recognized that sometimes poor maintenance posed safety hazards.

*[At Southview] lots of the buzzers don't work. I've got one client I had to stand out in the parking lot and yell... She's been there for 6 months I think and they keep promising to fix the buzzer but... (OW)*

These experiences support those noted by the Community and Social Development Department's Residential Support worker in a report dated November 5, 1996. The worker, in trying to find housing for a client, found the first unit to which they were referred filthy and unsuitable for occupation. Calhones offered the client another suite but it too proved to be, according to the worker, "the most disgusting suite I've ever been in". Calhones was again contacted and agreed to have the suite cleaned. This took a week and the woman paid that week's rent for accommodation in which she was unable to live. The support worker said that once the client did move in, a great deal of cleaning was still required and she had a broken stove, fridge and toilet, windows that didn't lock, and a telephone line that didn't work. The support worker called Calhones maintenance three times but the only thing fixed was the stove. Despite these problems, the leasing agent told the support worker that it was highly unlikely that the client would be transferred.



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**Costs** - One of the greatest challenges for the women was to make ends meet on Social Assistance. This takes a lot of skill especially for pregnant women and those with small children. Still, women appreciated that there was some financial support available to them.

*I'm really in need right now and Social Assistance is there for me. There's not much for them to offer many people. I have a shelter, a roof over my head and food on the table. I think It's ok. It's not like you're not getting anything at all. (P)*

*There was lots of support... being able to use help from social assistance for a while especially at the time of change... I had to be able to be there for the kids. (S4)*

Everyone agreed that it was possible to live on Social Assistance under ordinary circumstances, that is, if you do not have to pay for extras such as a damage deposit or court costs. There were more complaints about having to pay a damage deposit than about any other cost. None of the women had the money up front so they had to pay the deposit in installments out of their regular Social Assistance dollars. This meant the first few months in social housing were even leaner than usual. Those women who had moved to social housing directly from the shelter were fortunate not to have to pay a damage deposit which made the transition a lot easier, but the number of participants in this situation were surprisingly few.

Some were already living in social housing and had transferred to another area of the city, and at least one woman was coming directly from a long-term shelter.<sup>3</sup>

Most could get by while on assistance, but as soon as they got a good paying job and came off assistance, the rent was raised. There was no opportunity to get on their feet before they started paying higher rents.

*Well in fact they [social housing] had jacked it [the rent] up to a level where I thought she could get market housing cheaper... They do that on purpose... What is really difficult now is you either stay in this sometimes substandard housing, or pay market value cause you can't get anything else... I heard that for Shaganappi Village too. (OW)*

*I'm now thinking about moving. The reason why is that I used to pay \$189 for this place and that's a steal deal. And now they raised my rent up to \$600 and I make \$1750 gross, take home would be \$1470 a month minus*

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<sup>3</sup>

According to policy, Alberta Family and Social Services (AFSS) only covers damage deposits for those women moving directly from the shelters. However, in practice, there is some flexibility. Under some circumstances, AFFS will provide damage deposits to women who are not coming directly from a shelter but who are fleeing violent situations. (Personal communication with Susan Easton, Alberta Family and Social Services, February 1998).



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*\$600 and not to mention I still need to use daycare on a full time basis. That's going to be roughly \$1000 right there, rent and daycare, in a month. So, now I'm thinking of looking into someplace cheaper. It won't be two bedroom but we can't be fussy... It's kind of sad to see that the rent goes up so high and I can't really afford to live. You can't really win... It's almost simpler to budget my money better when I was on assistance than now. Because there was support all the time. The rent was way cheaper and subsidy for daycare is way higher.*

*My paycheck went right there... Other than [having a friend who will provide inexpensive child care] we couldn't afford any groceries for this month. So, I decided to send my little guy to his daddy for the month of August and I can crash almost anywhere... I really didn't think [of complaining or inquiring]. They told me my estimated rent is going to be \$600 from now on. Then I froze right there, OK, I better find a cheaper place to live in. (M)*

Social housing staff confirmed that when people left social assistance, the rent is adjusted according to 30% of their income immediately. This is a provincial regulation that they thought could be revisited and reopened for discussion. They also noted that sometimes the rents decrease but then we wouldn't be complaining".

Other expenses included medical, cleaning, child care, transportation, utilities, and moving, expenses, as well as legal fees. Prioritizing all these items on a limited income was difficult even for the women we interviewed who were highly skilled, let alone those for whom managing household expenses was a unfamiliar task. Social housing staff and outreach workers noted that many of these women come from a controlling environment where the man has always looked after the finances. They have not had an opportunity to learn budgeting skills. As we saw earlier, oftentimes proper nutrition is sacrificed to meet other financial obligations.

**Housing System** - The outreach workers had some positive feelings about the social housing system; both Calhomes and Calgary Housing.

*I find, for the most part, once you're a tenant, Calhomes... will be very accommodating... Once you are a tenant, I find they really try to keep you there. To keep you housed. Unless it's really over the top and I haven't seen that... They are really accommodating. I mean, I had clients that have gone down there and I'm thinking if I was running the housing they'd probably be out. But they really bend over to try and accommodate.*

*The one woman I did have evicted, Calhomes really had no choice at that point. They had given her leeway, upon leeway, upon leeway but it just wasn't happening... They try to understand the circumstances.*



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*The biggest problem is getting something that's suitable... And it's getting tougher and tougher. (OW)*

Despite this, there were many complaints and concerns. Social housing staff were seen to be rude, unsympathetic and patronizing. Anyone who has encountered social housing's voice mail system can see that it takes some skill, and considerable patience, just to get to speak with someone. It is not surprising that most of the women found the system frustrating and, at times, overwhelming.

*You are afraid to ask for anything [from Calgary Housing due to rude staff]... Because you are low income they expect you to live in really yucky places... they looked like slums to me. (A)*

*I also found that the agency employees [Calhomes] showed little or no sympathy for single women... I felt that if a home were available that I had better take it, even if it were not suitable or I would be passed over. (S2)*

Outreach workers were concerned that there was some discrimination in terms of choice of housing for women leaving shelters. Often they feel these women are sent to the poorer complexes, or complexes that are so isolated they present unique problems for this clientele.

*Our clients aren't being offered a choice... Right now, I'm getting more people out in Ranchlands and out in that area. We used to always go to Shaganappi... I did for a while but now almost all without exception, they are going to Southwood ... It seems to go in cycles. That there are certain complexes they seem to focus on at some point. I don't know why... Lately, I've been getting them into Lake MacKenzie and Shaunessy. Which is good... I was like that too but not now... These are very distant and very isolated communities. The clients which I've had have had a lot of issues around that... On going to MacKenzie cause there's no grocery shopping... And you have to have a car that runs... The bus connections are god awful and the buses don't even start Saturday and Sunday until 11. Isolated and transportation is a real problem. (OWs)*

*I do find that, oftentimes, if a women is very articulate, she'll get a much better place than somebody that their grammar's poor and they don't present as well and it's really discriminatory... A lot of women coming out of the shelter are not able to articulate their concerns. There's too much fear and they've lost some of the skills of doing that... And they're not given the opportunity. Some of the people that work for social housing are very abrupt and very....Ok, if you're not here at 10 o'clock and if you don't want it you go back on the bottom of the list. Bye. (OW)*



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*Well, there are so many nice places in Calgary Housing but none of our clients get to go there... part of it, in all fairness, could be that people rarely leave it because it's so nice so the vacancy rate may be lower. (OW)*

Outreach workers also felt that this streaming may be due to a fear on social housing's part of damages that may result should an abusive partner harass the tenant, although they had rarely heard of this happening.

*My biggest beef is the cleanliness and the garbage and the ghettoization... And I do think sometimes that women are ghettoized just because she's an abused women. We'll put her in one of these ghettos with all the rest of the ghettoized people... I just found a really nice Calhomes complex right by Mount Royal College. It's all brand new... I bet no one here has anyone there... I'm not going to say It's deliberate but that's what happens... I think they're afraid that a partner's going to come back and trash these places which sometimes happens... In my experience I haven't had it happen that much where a partner has come back and caused major damage in terms of the housing itself. He may have caused emotional and lots of other things in her life but not necessarily damage to the property. (OW)*

Another point of contention for the women and outreach workers was over eviction notices. These seemed to be sent with little thought as to the impact such a notice might have on the tenant, or to the circumstances that may have led to a late payment of rent.

*Calgary Housing will give you eviction notices. Their clients don't know that they're just red flags. They phone in a panic, "I got an eviction notice". That sure sends them into a tailspin. (OW)*

*If [the system] could just think for a moment before it reacts, and it may be too cumbersome of a system, but you know I think of the man hours and the paperwork in terms of generating all of that stuff [e.g, eviction notices] that maybe they would be saving a lot of money if maybe they just waited for a minute before they reacted... More personalization... I [also] see clients getting very threatening letters from Social Services. (OW)*

*[Re: working and being subsidized by income security] You have to wait til you get your last paycheck for the month in order to submit your time sheet or your report card to social assistance. Now by the time you send it out of course your rent is late.*

*...So every month [this client] gets an eviction notice. ...She's explained [her situation] to them and they say this is just the way it's done. If your rent is not paid by x' date, all the eviction notices are sent out. ...That follows them too when they go to find another place. ...It's on your record. Chronically late. (OW)*



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Social housing staff were surprised by this perception. They said that they spent a lot of time going over the terms of the lease and what it meant with each tenant, but felt that perhaps when people are in crisis, emotions interfere with logical thinking and that when their minds are on other things such as moving, the information may “go in one ear and out the other”.

There seemed to be some historical animosity between shelter and social housing staff, but both recognized that they need to work together more effectively in order to better serve their clients. And some social housing staff indicated that they were now working much more closely with the outreach workers.

For the most part, the women in our study were uncomfortable saying anything negative about the social housing agencies. The researchers felt, from the undertone of the interviews, that there was a positive bias in terms of not "dissing" the folks that provided your shelter. And, they were very grateful for shelter of any kind.

But many of the women talked about the lack of consistency with move-in inspections and both they and outreach workers felt there needed to be a better system in place to protect the tenants from the differing standards of the move in/out inspectors.

*When you are moving into these places and it is not very consistent. Like they did a move-in inspection at this place. The fellow was really laid back and the windows weren't clean...Then when I moved out of the other place like I cleaned it all and I could not afford to pay for rug shampooers so did not shampoo the rugs so they are going to be taking \$80 out of my damage deposit for that....by the time I move from this place it might be a completely different fellow who is going to check it. He might be real particular like that guy [at the last place] and I might get blamed for all the cigarette burns on the linoleum. And I don't smoke. (A)*

It seems that much more collaboration is needed between the shelters and social housing to ensure a responsive and fair housing system.

***Emotional Support*** - Women, whether deciding to leave an abusive situation, leaving shelter, or in transition, especially in the early stages, are often overwhelmed by the magnitude of the hurdles facing them and their own precarious emotional state. But, they were all struggling valiantly to work through these and find a more centred and stable place.

*I try to feel connected to the community but at the same time I feel like nobody cares what happens to me and people just think I whine and complain all the time. (L)*

*I was getting so depressed... I was feeling so worthless like I was going downhill... I did not know where to go what to do. I didn't really have a plan. I was just fed up with my life like I was just totally fed up. (G)*



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*I fought the idea from leaving/charging ex-spouse and having my child fatherless as I wanted to avoid going on [public] assistance... having to live in subsidized housing, for my mental picture of this was horrible. I did what I could to avoid all as long as I could til there was no more fight left in me for my rights or my child's. I couldn't do it anymore... (S5)*

*I was scared, tired physically and mentally exhausted from not eating/sleeping and the stress levels for my child and I were at the extreme. While in shelter my son was upset, vomiting continuously and it was very difficult for him to adjust. I found myself [in shelter] with demands of chores. Dishes for who knows how many to wash. It was not even much over 24 hrs of being there. (S5)*

Counselling was very important in helping women to overcome the trauma of domestic abuse.

*Seeking counselling, sorting out all the mess and having someone tell me that It's OK to need or want something, a build of trust which led me to contacting the shelter because I knew I couldn't do it anymore and our experience was wrong, it was abusive. And [a shelter outreach worker] had validated all my feelings and experiences with my ex-husband as abusive, for I had felt that maybe, just maybe, he had just cause for treating us the way he did and the fault was mine. (S5)*

*It's gotten into my head that I deserve this, that I deserve to be treated this way... So it was important for me to go and have that therapy again. (L)*

Women also sought counselling from the shelter in their struggle to stay grounded amidst the whirl of changes in their lives, the isolation and the poverty. That they cope at all, given the power of these feelings, is testament to their strength and courage.

**Standard of Housing** - Many of the women were very pleased with the standard of their housing, citing such things as a well maintained structure, cleanliness, amenities like laundry, convenience of location, and good neighbours.

*I got lucky finding a place... I've got no complaints. I love the location cause I'm going to be attending [school] in the fall so it's a quick bus trip. It's what I wanted. I didn't want to live with [women in shelter] anymore. I wanted to be on my own and I got lucky finding a place. A lot of bachelor suites don't come up that often. My washer and dryer always work... It is free and it's on the same floor... (J)*

*Likes the townhouse [2 bedroom]. Very thankful to get the place. Lucked out because it was all newly painted with new fridge and stove.....had just been restored after a fire. (G)*



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*The neighbours around here have been really good. One lady came up to my door and introduced herself to me and welcomed me to the neighbourhood which I've never had in my life before. And the lady next door, she gave me a plant as a house-warming gift. Her and her husband welcomed me and there was another fellow a couple of doors down - I had to borrow his screwdriver the day I was moving in - and he welcomed me to the neighbourhood. They're really nice. I think it's going to be a really nice community. (A)*

However, not everyone in the study enjoyed such good fortune. They were placed in filthy, unsafe and dangerous conditions, and often were not allowed to preview the rental accommodation before moving in.

*Once I had chosen a home without seeing inside, ...had me cleaning everything before I could unpack. There were no light bulbs; fridge and stove were not working; urine on toilet seat; vomit on floor behind toilet; basement was filled with cat food, faeces and vomit; yard had furniture and broken glass in it. The stuff I could see in the yard. They had told me the yard would be cleaned. It wasn't and I did not know the rest until move in day. ...I had 3 days to clean and prepare a home for my child and all I had anticipated was unpacking. I was ill, exhausted and the stress from the transition was horrible. (S5)*

*They [the clients] look at another place, one that's not available, or they won't actually see the inside. Or the one they look at is even different from the one they actually move into... When people move in, I've had this happen, where their standard of clean and Calgary Housing or Calhomes or whatever... is very different. And I've had people totally beside themselves saying "This is not clean, this is disgusting." And I've had people with the skills to be able to deal with that and other people just quietly clean it. A lot of it boils down to your life being in chaos... So, practically they clean it. They don't make any waves, they just get down on their hands and knees and scrub... I've gone into places that Calgary Housing or Calhomes said were clean and can honestly say I don't know whose standards those were but they weren't Mr. Clean's that's for sure... But they're tough on you when you move out. That's a different story. (OW)*

The lack of cleanliness was a huge issue. Many of the women had had bugs, "there were animals [bugs] in the fridge and elsewhere" (K). But lack of sanitary conditions went beyond the home itself and extended to the outdoor environment.

*[Shaganappi] Have you ever tripped over the old tampons and stuff while you're walking down the street? ...It's a dive. ...The playground is full of broken glass. ...Kids can't even play. ...In effect, the water taps don't work and there're bugs and the light switches don't work. (OW)*



*I have only one thing to say is that if I do move it'll never be back into another sub-housing unit. Its been horrible to live here and at least when I move it'll be a god send to them because my home will never be in the condition it was when I moved in, therefore the next tenant hopefully will not experience anything of what I did. (S5)*

*I never understood that there were ghettos in Calgary. There are... There are ghettos in Calgary. Yes, there are... What I would define as a ghetto... Southview is a ghetto. There is garbage everywhere. It's a concrete jungle. (OW)*

Asking low income people, especially those already traumatized by violence, to live in sub-standard, unclean, and hazardous environments, is not only repugnant, but morally corrupt.

**Children's Issues** - One area that emerged throughout our conversations with all groups, was the impact domestic abuse and, subsequently, housing transition has on children in these situations. Social housing staff noted the need to recognize that these children have mental health issues and need as much counselling and assistance in the transitional phase as do their mothers. They also raised the concern that teenage male children are not always admitted to shelters. Sometimes these youths end up at drop-in centres. One woman was very happy with the Native Women's shelter because they involved her kids and offered a support group for them which really makes a difference.

For the women in the study, one of the big issues was child care and difficulty in finding adequate, accommodation with their children. One woman had a lot to say on this issue at different points in her interview.

*That option was given to me [shared accommodation] and I had two children. To share with somebody who also had children and I didn't think that would be very appropriate because everybody has different views on discipline and you know, if I disciplined your child, it might not be appropriate for you. Then you would start World War III. (FG)*

*The bachelor suite which really wasn't big enough for me because I wanted to get my boy back and the court was going to give me more time because when you have a bachelor suite, they would not give him. So I only get him on Saturdays until I get a bigger place. (FG)*

*Finding housing with kids period is hard, really. Especially if you are a single woman. A lot of people look at a single woman.. they seem to penalize you... for having children, like to be single... like it is something wrong with us. And I say, "Well, gee, I could have an abortion couldn't I have?" (FG)*



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*I know there are some co-ops that have families for day care... I am not too sure how they work, but I do know I have talked to other people and they had co-ops that have child care and ... stuff like that, anything would help us you know. (FG)*

*I tried [to attend a counselling session at the shelter]. They say they provide child care but when I came here last week, they did not have child care for my youngest daughter. She is 4.5 months old... I really wanted to go to that meeting... I was very disappointed when I left. I was almost in tears when I left. (FG)*

Safety was also a concern:

*As soon as they [the women] get a job, they're living in these ghettoized places. Who is going to look after the children? That becomes a problem. Do your kids come home into this environment by themselves? And you don't really trust your neighbours. If you don't go out and mix with your neighbours. If you're scared to do that how are you going to find someone to look after your children? ...So you keep your 14 year old daughter home from school to babysit. ...Or you go somewhere else and mom gets done her job at 10 or 10:30 at night and you have to get the kids up from another area and drag them home. (OW)*

Another issue was the emotional problems some children were having. Mothers did not have the skills or often the energy to deal with their own upheaval as well as the often overwhelming problems of their children.

*They have been showing a lot of behavioural problems... I can't leave them with anybody because they just will not go with anybody else so I have not just suffered through being in a shelter, but my children have as well.*

*My daughter ...she is not dealing with this at all... She is in grade 1. She hates school. You go through an hour and a half of fighting every morning.*

*Really, screaming, yelling. She throws things at me. Every morning since we moved in September, every morning, no fail. As soon as you say, AOK, get ready for school, that's it. (FG)*

*My daughter is very outgoing, enjoys playing with other kids. She makes friends very easily. ...children in my building have threatened to beat her up and she is very hurt by that, she just doesn't understand how children can be so mean and hurtful because she is not...used to being treated that way... I have tried to tell her that some of the children in our complex... are very angry, they have been treated not very nicely by somebody that they really love and care about and they are taking it out on the other kids and on people around them. I don't know how to explain this to her so she understands, she is only 5. I don't allow her to play with those kids anymore. We just make sure we are out til supper time, come home, eat supper.*



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*She is ready for bed and goes to bed. I don't have her play out. On weekends we are always out busy doing something so she doesn't have a chance to intermingle. (FG)*

*[re: trying to find counselling for her children] Six months waiting list to the Children's Hospital and around three months for the health clinics. They just can't deal with children, they don't know how to deal with our children's problems... pass on that kind of information to the professional schools... junior high and senior high guidance counsellors... so that the kids can have somebody to talk to because you've got to nip their violence or their attitude now, before it develops into them being delinquents, or robbing cars or whatever. You have got to help them now and help them deal with their problems before it festers into something that you can't control. There is nothing for children... all day and all night and nobody bothers. (FG)*

Finally, a couple of the women expressed interest in babysitting in their homes or even operating other businesses, but were not allowed to do so. They felt that this would allow them some flexibility and extra income.

*If I can babysit at home right? ...No, I am not allowed. He [the residential manager] said no business, not allowed... So just needing some opportunities to be able to do some home-based businesses of ours. It would definitely cut down on your child care cost because a lot of times you are just working for the child care. What's the point? (FG)*

### **Recommendations - Supports Required**

Embedded in the discussion and interview quotes so far, is a sub-text of the kinds of supports women need to make a successful transition from shelter, to social housing, and eventually, to independent living. Nevertheless, social housing staff, outreach workers and the women all had specific suggestions for supports required in the areas of: (1) case management; (2) advocacy; (3) incidental costs; (4) transition to full employment; (5) social housing system priorities; (6) systemic discrimination (7) standard of housing; and (8) children. Recommendations are put forth after a general discussion in each of these areas.

**Case Management** - Outreach workers and social housing staff saw the need to look at individual cases more holistically and start to develop a case plan right from the start.

*We should start planning when an individual comes to a shelter. While we are dealing with the alternative crisis issues start right then dealing with the longer term planning...to housing...support. So by the time the person has been through [the shelter]... and... trying to get priority housing...[there is a] plan in place. For what we find is ...7 or 8 issues that have to be dealt with.*



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*There may be that many different support agencies working for that family. Those things have to be coordinated. (SH)*

However, both groups of service providers recognized the difficulty of this kind of follow-up given the lack of resources and the inability to access those who do not ask for help.

*We would like to see more outreach workers. There seems to be a philosophy, and I will say it's only a perception, but if an individual doesn't ask for support, the agency says ethically I am not having to do with this person. But often the people who need the help most, in our humble opinion, are the ones that need to be [contacted]. We see the role of outreach to be a continual process...on the progress of the individual to ensure that there is help in transition. (SH)*

*It's scary cause you get a referral that some worker fills out and it's written on there, "She'll call you when she gets an address" or something like that. ... I have a million in my box. Or else you get one with a phone number and you phone the number and they say, "No, she was here the other day but we don't know where she went". So they're moving from friend to friend... They want the outreach service but we can't track them because they don't know where they are. They say, "yes I want the outreach, I need the support...as soon as I get a permanent spot". (OW)*

It is apparent from this study, that in order for women to make a successful transition, they require support in a variety of areas and at a number of levels. One quote by an outreach worker really summed up the multiple challenges facing these women:

*I think they have all these things going on in their life and they just freeze. It's overwhelming... They're overwhelmed with everything and sometimes they don't pay the rent because it's either pay the rent or buy some food. It's the poverty issue that overrides an awful lot of this too... I have nothing but admiration for these women who are raising 3 kids on \$800/month... I don't know how they do it... Some of them do it very well... There's alot don't have those skills and just don't know where to go or how to do it. (OW)*

Lack of good lifeskills was one of the areas of competency seen to be lacking by service providers. These included education and literacy:

*A lot of them are illiterate... We have...doctors, lawyers all the way down to women who can barely write their name, have a grade 4 education, or who speak another language... With no education in the country they came from... That's really difficult.(OW)*

as well as basic life skills which may include budgeting, banking and self-efficacy.



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*The life skills .... in terms of budgeting, shopping, all that kind of good stuff. We assume far too much. We just assume because we go through schools and community, we understand everything. But the individuals that we see and their families are dysfunctional and they don't understand the basic way in which the society works, socially, economically, whatever. They just have a real problem picking up the very basic things. Bus tickets, bank accounts, to understanding legal responsibilities as an adult. So life skills training. That can be bought in a reasonable fashion where you would see an amazing saving to a tax payer and a great benefit to the quality of life [of the] individual. (SH)*

*I think a part of our role as outreach counsellors or advocates is to educate them that the system can be flexible. I think sometimes the lack of knowledge creates additional unnecessary crisis. Because, for instance, with an eviction notice from Calgary Housing, I see that like, "ah let's deal with it".*

*[The women] are like, 'let's find another place. How am I going to find another place? How am I going to get another place? What am I going to do?' And to educate them to say that this system sometimes is not very flexible but sometimes it is. ... And so go back to your problem. Say what caused the eviction, you haven't paid your rent. OK deal with it. Tell them... Quite often that's what they get thinking is they're behind now I guess I don't need to pay anymore... They do that sometimes too. "OK, I'm going to get kicked out anyway so I better pay the gas bill so I can get gas at the next place"... They compound the problem... So it may be just education about other resources and about how they work and how they operate cause there's a good chance these women never dealt with utilities... somebody else was trying to do it for them. But to educate them and say this is how it works. And I always tell women, you kick a door and if it doesn't open you kick another one. Kick it til something opens. (OW)*

Women leaving abusive situations are often seen as a homogeneous group and are provided with a standard set of supports which do not reflect the enormous diversity which underlies this category. Supports need to be designed to meet the woman's need where she is at.

She may need basic life skills training such as how to open a bank account, or she may need help pursuing her higher education goals. Without recognition of these individual differences and multiple issues, any supports will continue to fail a significant portion of this population.

A case management approach for women leaving shelter to enter social housing needs to be developed. This would include exploring professional issues such as disclosure and confidentiality of records, as well as better ways to ensure follow-up support for these women.



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Similar efforts in the area of homeless Calgarians and crisis services may serve as models for the development of a more integrated system of services. This approach may require commitment from agency board members to work together to identify a workable systematic approach to case management.

**Recommendation 1: An individualized, holistic and integrated support system needs to be designed for women in transition. This involves bringing together service providers working with the individual and, if applicable, her children, to provide a seamless and comprehensive support network.**

**Advocacy** - Part of case management is social support, especially in the form of advocacy. A more systematic process needs to be designed to ensure that each woman has the support of an advocate who can help her negotiate the system, remain safe, and attend to issues that she may be too overwhelmed to consider.

For example, women need an advocate to work with social housing to keep them on the priority list for housing:

*This is what you try and advocate that they stay as a priority. But [social housing's] initial reaction is, no, she's no longer a priority, she's not in the shelter. And then you send a letter saying, "yes she is a priority, she is a very active client". You have to actively pursue that. Otherwise she will, in terms of their point system, she will go down. ...I'm finding when I advocate for the women and write the letters I'm getting them back up. ...Not all of them have outreach workers. You know, a lot of them are slogging it out on their own and are in more difficult situations. (OW)*

and to help them access the system:

*It's so difficult for some of them to access these things [social housing, social assistance]. I hate phoning them. You get this menu on the phone which gives you another menu, which gives you another menu, and before you get through the first menu you haven't got a clue which one you should have picked.*

*No wonder it's frustrating and difficult for those women to get through and say, "hey my check is late"... Especially if you haven't got a phone and you're hanging out with three kids running away from you outside the pay phone outside of Macs somewhere... messages on how to apply for welfare, you got to listen to all this but there's no option that says if you want to talk to a person. So I had to go down [to the agency office] and say I have to talk to somebody. (OW)*



*You get nowhere and then they [social housing] get a call from an outreach worker. I have clients who phone and phone and phone and phone and got nowhere, then I phone and it happens. It's highly unfair. (OW)*

Advocacy was also needed to ensure that pre and post tenancy inspections were fair and consistent.

*There almost needs to be an advocate going through those walk throughs because [when] women get there, they're just glad to be there. They're not thinking and it's hard to notice things if you're not knowing what to look for... A lot of them don't know what these walk throughs are for. How [social housing] can use them at the end regarding the damage deposit or damages to property... Or they're so excited. I had a client. She was so excited about getting a place that when she looked at it, she didn't really look at it.*

*It was at Shaganappi and I happened to be going to see someone else and she was moving in that day. I found her downstairs waiting for the movers and in tears and saying "I didn't realize this was a ghetto". She was just beside herself. "I didn't look at the place. I didn't look at where it was. I was just so happy to get a place." I think that's what happens frankly. Let's face it, they have 3 weeks [in shelter] and ...a lot of pressure to get a place... And a life and the kids and healing. Your life is going at warp speed. So you're not necessarily really looking at details like that. (OW)*

Alberta Family Social Service has increased funding to women's shelters for 1997/98 and 1998/99, and will work with the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters to determine exactly how this funding can be used to help reduce the number of women turned away from women's shelters (AFSS, 1998: p. 1). By providing more outreach workers to advocate for women, we could increase successful transitions from the shelter thereby reducing the number of women returning to shelters, and thus, the number of women being turned away. A similar recommendation to expand outreach services was made by the Action Committee on Family Violence in their January 1996 progress report.

**Recommendation 2: Budget new funding dollars to increase outreach staff at women's emergency shelters to act as advocates for women leaving shelter for social housing.**

**Incidental Costs** - As mentioned in the discussion of what made the transition easier, having enough money to pay the bills was of paramount importance. And yet, for most women, it wasn't the rent or food costs that broke the bank, but rather the endless incidentals for which it is hard to plan. These included maintenance fees, damage caused by others, fees for yard maintenance, court costs, etc.



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*It might be a door or a hinge broke and I had to pay. I didn't know they will charge me. I got a letter that said how much I owed them. Then my bathtub flooded. ...I thought this was a low subsidy house, but everything I am paying for, even for the maintenance... (FG)*

*Another thing, when you were talking about expectations, is lawn mowing and snow shovelling. That's a surprise. People they phone in a big panic, "I just got a bill from Calgary Housing. They're going to charge \$45 to mow the lawn"... So they're expected...they got a lawn the size of that chesterfield... And they need a lawnmower... They don't have a community lawnmower... (OW)*

It is these unexpected costs which really impact these women's lives. And there is some resentment that the person responsible for their situation, namely their abuser, is not held accountable for some of these expenses.

*I think that if you have somebody who's got a court order that says get x dollars a month...I don't see why they can't go to this ex-husband of mine and slap a lien on his house... I think it's ridiculous that the tax payers have to pay all this money for me and now it's going to cost \$50,000 plus for me to go to university. I'll have to pay that back but still... A lot of it is at tax payers' expense. It's ridiculous. Aren't you sick of paying this man's bills? (L)*

*If your partner comes - whether there's a restraining order or no restraining order - and they smash in your windows you pay. ... Her [a client] guy came there 1:30 in the morning. She wouldn't let him in. He smashed all the back windows.*

*The police were there and they did get him but she's gotta pay for all the damage. (OW)*

Azmier (1997) writes that 40% of women leaving shelters are referred to Alberta Family and Social Services for financial help. Recent cutbacks have left women unable to cope with costs above their basic needs.

A similar finding was obtained in a study of Calgary food-bank users (Community and Social Development, unpublished) many of whom were female single parents. They found that reductions in medical and dental coverage, utility deposits, transportation allowances, maternity allowances, clothing allowances, and childcare allowances greatly affected their ability to meet their basic needs.

It is apparent from a variety of studies that Supports for Independence (SFI) funding is not adequate, especially for single parent families. According to Azmier, a single mother with one child was entitled to 13.4% fewer dollars from SFI in 1995/96 than she was in 1992/93. Recently, the Alberta government has noted that it is decreasing the welfare load while ignoring the seemingly concomitant rise in the number of



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children living in poverty. For example, between 1994 and 1999, the child welfare caseload ballooned from 7,866 to 12,884, a 64% increase (Rechner, 2000). Rechner, Alberta's child advocate says that disadvantaged children are falling through the cracks (Calgary Herald, 2001). Premier Klein's response to the report and the recommendations is that it is out of date. However, the connection between these figures needs to be explored, especially in light of recent initiatives to end child poverty and the large body of evidence attesting to the impact of poverty on health, learning and social adjustment outcomes.

In addition, women who can not meet their rent requirements may leave social housing to return to an abusive spouse or shelter agencies. The cost to the shelters is \$80.34 per day (cost for one client) and the minimum cost of tenancy breakdown to social housing agencies is \$200.00 per tenant. This cost fluctuates depending on damage or cleaning costs.

Given the latter figure and the estimation that a third of women moving from shelter to social housing per year ( $n \approx 28$ ) experience tenancy breakdown within six months, the cost to social housing agencies is \$5600.00/year. While the actual dollars and cents of breakdown do not seem overly large, the hidden social costs are immeasurable for the woman, her children and society.

**Recommendation 3: Advocacy is required to persuade the provincial government to re-examine its funding decisions and cutbacks in order to avoid incurring larger costs down the road, for example, in the areas of health care, education, and the criminal justice system.**

***Transition to Full Employment*** - It is important to note that according to the Women's Shelter Information System, most women leaving Alberta's emergency shelters do not enter social housing but rather go to live with friends or relatives, live independently in market housing, or go back home with or without their spouse (see Azmier, 1997). However, this does not negate the fact that significant numbers of women are leaving the shelters for social housing and finding the transition difficult.

The women in our study, and their outreach workers, were very troubled by how the housing system operates. In particular, they called for more support to keep rents affordable so women could complete their transition to independent living. The sense of happiness and relief at finding full-time employment is quickly diminished by the reality that it may have been much easier to budget on social assistance given the spectrum of supports that go along with it. Thirty percent of gross income for rent is not affordable when you have to pay for child care and/or medical expenses and it makes saving to move into market accommodation nearly impossible.



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*It would be nice if there was a grace period... so they could just get a little bit caught up... Of course we expect people who can afford market housing to leave subsidized housing for people who can't afford market housing.*

*But you can get a job today and your first paycheck... They might be making extra but It's going into the same brand of place. And there's a backlog so they're paying off all those old bills so the paycheck isn't going anywhere right now. It's a vicious cycle that keeps you stuck really... So they're no further ahead... I think if there was some way for people who get employment there could be some grace period that their rent just doesn't skyrocket right away. (OW)*

Upon securing a full-time job, tenants in social housing immediately experience rent increases equal to 30% of income. At the same time, medical and child care allowances formerly available on social assistance are gone. This increase does not provide them with an opportunity to save for market accommodation. Many are struggling to pay off back debts and the new debts that working entails, e.g., appropriate clothing, transportation, etc. In 2001 it was noted that the Support for Independence program gives a lone female parent \$906 per month, but the cost of living for basic needs in Calgary is \$1,942 per month (Koziey, 2001). As a result, women are forced to return to abusive situations or live in poverty when they leave an emergency shelter. Lana Wells, President of the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters says:

*“Escalating rent and utility payments, as well as a lack of affordable housing, only add to the barriers many women face when considering leaving a violent relationship. Often they'll go back to the abuser or they'll end up living with friends in unsafe and inadequate housing, in a car or a tent”.*

Single women with children are a very important segment of this population and need better access to child care so that they can pursue training and employment opportunities that will help them improve their lives. Given these concerns, some time is required to make a positive move from social assistance to employment income.

**Recommendation 4: A grace period of a few months needs to be instituted to allow women in transition to gather the resources for independent living. This may mean advocacy on the part of social housing agencies to ask that provincial legislation in this regard be revisited. The goal would be to ensure that social housing rents remain affordable for tenants moving directly from social assistance to employment income.**



***Social Housing System Priorities*** - Also required, is a better understanding of who gets priority and how to better support women so that they can access the system, particularly single women.

Social housing felt that 'everybody knows how our priorities go', about the waiting list, and that people coming from shelters are given a priority, but it is apparent from the interviews that this knowledge was not as well understood by their clients and the outreach workers as they may think.

**Recommendation 5: Social housing agencies need to better articulate their priority system for shelter agency staff and clients.**

***Systemic Discrimination*** - Single women without children were especially concerned about the discrimination they perceived they faced from social housing staff. They cannot be expected to live in cramped rooms or shared accommodations. Too often though, they are neglected or marginalized when dealing with housing issues.

*When I was looking for housing I found that the agencies had no vacancies for single women with no children. ...I also found that the agency employees showed little or no sympathy for single women on their own. I felt that if a home were available that I had better take it, even if it were not suitable or I would be passed over. (S2)*

*Right now there are lots of people that [we can't find places for]. We've had a lot of problems especially for single women. There is no place for them to go. ...Calgary Housing, they said to me that they will not put a single person in a one bedroom. It would only be a bachelor. (OW)*

The discrimination shown to single women and single mothers has been apparent for some time. In July, 1997, the Calgary Herald carried an article which noted that the number of single mothers looking for low-cost housing in Calgary had jumped 33% in the past three years according to statistics kept by Connection Housing (Dolik, 1997). They were the largest group seeking housing and the hardest hit by social policy reforms. Cut off welfare, many returned to the workforce, but in low-paying jobs which do not help make ends meet. And, as noted by women in this study, they are often under-skilled to participate in the high skill jobs of the current job market, yet cannot receive accessible up-grading. These women want to be and can be productive participants in the community, but they require supports in learning, and flexibility in their jobs.



**Recommendation 6: Social housing and Women's Emergency Shelter agencies, along with other stakeholders, need to develop an action plan to work more effectively with single women to ensure that their accommodation needs are better met.**

*Standard of Housing* - As we have seen, many respondents were concerned about the unclean and unsafe conditions of a number of social housing units. One woman noted that for people to care about the rules and regulations outlined by social housing, they had to feel that they were treated with respect.

*Their standards are very low and I believe that some people don't care but I also believe you shouldn't treat the whole lot of people like animals, with disrespect to health and children, and expect tenants to care about the rules or their homes. To keep them up is ridiculous when the impression [social housing] gives to you is that they don't care about you or the premises. How the standards should be, they do not exercise, so why would anyone learn, see or practice anymore than what you see on the move in? (S5)*

But, single parent women, for whom security of tenure, safety of neighbourhood and access to transportation and amenities are crucial, tend to be the most willing to make the greatest sacrifices to obtain decent housing (Chisholm, 1995, p. 20).

If housing is not provided that meets the standards outlined in Chisholm's report (1995), we risk increasing social costs in other areas including health, education, emergency shelters and social assistance. Women leaving abusive situations have an attenuated need for some of the things many of us take for granted in our communities. These include good access to transportation and other facilities, as well as safety and security for them and their children.

The suitability of publicly funded housing in Calgary should be assessed to determine how suitable complexes are to women and children leaving violent situations. This is done through a gender impact assessment which looks at a number of issues including safety, transportation, community facilities/services, and women's participation in decision-making (Women's Services & Housing Network, 1996). This assessment should be accompanied by information and training for social housing staff, property managers in particular, on the specific housing needs of women leaving shelters. The Bridgeland Project, a collaborative initiative between Calhomes and the Community and Social Development Department, is piloting many of these considerations with a low-income housing unit. This project may serve as model for similar collaborations.



**Recommendation 7: Develop a comprehensive plan for assessing the suitability and standard of social housing for women leaving abusive situations. Such an assessment would consider placement, safety, design, accessibility and community development components. The assessment would become part of the case management plan.**

*Children* - One component that seems to be missing from research on victims of abuse, is the impact dislocation and disintegration of the family home has on the children, and on the woman who now has to cope as a single individual and parent. However, the effects are often visible in the child's disruptive and/or violent behaviour which creates added stress in an already untenable situation.

More work is needed to understand the impact of transition on children, and more social supports in the form of counselling are required. The Women in Need Society's Parent Child Drop Ins serve as one example of how these needs can be addressed. The Drop Ins have been acclaimed by clients and professionals alike for their contribution in meeting the needs of both women and children healing from domestic violence.

**Recommendation 8: Develop partnerships between children's services agencies and women's emergency shelters to begin to design a holistic approach to helping children through the transition process. This would include helping mothers develop the skills to work with children who are demonstrating aggressive behaviour, and developing strategies to ensure that families are not fragmented even further.**

## **Conclusion**

This study confirmed many of the findings that have been noted in past research with women moving from shelter to social housing. For most women, this transition may be smooth and positive, but as high as one third may experience difficulties. Social housing staff noted that it was the Native Women's Emergency Shelter that we had the most problems with on referrals and one staff member was of the opinion that the problem was due to just a lack of basic life skills.

But, in our study, all the women, including Aboriginal women, were highly skilled and articulate about their needs, yet were still having difficulties with social housing. If even high-functioning women have difficulty, it is apparent that the problems facing these women are not only due to poor life skills. Racism and/or systemic discrimination may be operating as proposed by some of the respondents in this study.



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Calgary Housing's statistics show that from April 1 to September 30, 1996, no non-shelter single parent tenants were evicted, whereas two tenants from Sheriff King, four from Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter, and five from the Native Women's Shelter were evicted.

It is clear that social housing in Canada needs to be closely examined. Chisholm (1995) has argued that housing developments that offer proximity to employment, child care, transportation, schools and other amenities, increase in value over time.

The concern is that if the federal government gives the provinces more control over social housing, provinces such as Ontario and Alberta which are receptive to privatization, will badly deplete the availability of subsidized housing for low-income Canadians. Cutbacks to social housing programmes are tantamount to abandoning women who head the majority of social housing unit households.

Some of the women in this study keenly felt this abandonment when the housing at Currie Barracks became available. Planners and developers had the opportunity to put market value considerations aside to concentrate on social values, but they failed to do so. One working mother noted that this site could have been a model for development with community kitchens, food buying clubs, baby-sitting co-ops, workshops and seminars, etc., that would have provided much needed expansion of low-cost housing in Calgary (Braid, 1997).

The shortage of suitable, affordable and safe housing was attenuated by the burning down of Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter on November 4, 1997. This event increased the challenges facing outreach workers, social housing staff, and women who are struggling to leave a life of abuse in a climate of overflowing shelters and a limited housing market. The shelter has been rebuilt but has seen a substantial rise in demand for space.

But by continuing to work together and building on actions already initiated, social housing and women's emergency staff, along with other concerned service providers, can develop a system that will better optimize a successful transitional outcome for these women.



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## **APPENDIX 1**

### **Residential Support Services Study**

The City of Calgary, Community and Social Development Department, social housing agencies and women's emergency shelters, are working together to understand why some women who move from shelter agencies to social housing do not make a successful transition and end up returning to shelter agencies, their abusive spouses, or undesirable housing arrangements.

We would like to hear from women who have had, or are having, **positive** or **negative** experiences with social housing. Below, you will find some of the questions we are interested in answering. What we would like you to do, is, in your words, describe your experiences with social housing. While the questions may serve as a guide, please feel free to discuss any experiences you think may be helpful to this study.

Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary. All information you provide will be kept completely anonymous, private and confidential. Please do not put your name on this form, but we would appreciate it if you could fill out the information on the final page which will help us to understand better where concerns lie for women from different backgrounds.

You may return this information to your outreach worker, or directly to the Community and Social Development Department, City of Calgary, in the attached postage-paid envelope.

Thank you for taking the time to assist us with this study. Your insights will help the City, shelter agencies and social housing agencies design more effective support services for women. If you have any questions about the research project, please contact Valerie Pruegger, Social Research Planner, Community and Social Development Department, at 268-5126.

#### **Questions to consider:**

- What made the transition easy for you?
- What made the transition hard for you?
- What kinds of supports would have been helpful?

Below there is room to record your experiences, but please feel free to use the extra sheet of lined paper on the next page should it be necessary.

