


Shelters under microscope

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By Paul Mayne

Thursday, April 23, 2009

While women's shelters play a vital role in our communities, there is little detailed evidence about how their interventions and services affect the women and children who use them.

An Ontario Research Development Committee, which includes Western staff and faculty, has been formed to embark on a two-year study to identify specific and accessible forms of service at the local level, and how shelter workers link women to – and guide them through – these various services and resources.

Committee member and Faculty of Information and Media Studies (FIMS) assistant professor Nadine Wathen says the study will explore the connecting role played by shelters within larger networks of community services.

"The goal of this project is to explore the particular contributions made by shelters against the backdrop of this larger service infrastructure," says Wathen.

"To do so, in this unique investigation, we will examine the cross-organizational and cross-sector relationship and networks that facilitate or impede the ability of shelters to assist their clients."

Professors Marilyn Ford-Gilboe (School of Nursing) and Roma Harris (FIMS), along with Barb McQuarrie, community director at the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, will also play a major role in this Ontario Trillium Foundation Grant (\$248,000 over two years) study. Led by Michele Hanson, executive director of Women's Shelter, Second Stage Housing and Counselling Services of Huron, the study will also involve three other women's shelter directors in Hamilton and London. The study will be launched at a Friday (April 24) press conference in Goderich.

Wathen says shelters are available to women in 122 Ontario communities. At any given time more than 1,000 women and their children reside in shelters and upon leaving half do not know where their next home will be.

"The difficulties women experience in 'navigating' the various health and social services system to get help for themselves and their children should not be underestimated," says Wathen. "Many women report that it's difficult to get the support they need from formal systems."

The study will include all participants in the process, from front-line workers, administrators and representatives of the related service organizations, to the women receiving actual shelter assistance.

Wathen is confident the study will show not only what shelters do in offering short-term residential services and ongoing outreach but also how other sectors perceive and understand their work.

"We want to pin down indicators of success, in other words identify the outcome measures that should be used to determine the impact of shelter services in the lives of abused women and their children,"

says Wathen. "There is a need to better articulate what they do, as well for them to understand the services they offer and how they benefit women."

Since 1995, 267 women and 42 children have been killed by an abusive male partner in Ontario, and more than 200 children have been left motherless.