

# **ABORIGINAL WOMEN FLEEING VIOLENCE IN SASKATOON**

***“LOOKING FOR A SAFE PLACE FOR MY  
FAMILY”***

## **FINAL REPORT**

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# **BACKGROUND**

The Bridges and Foundations Project on Urban Aboriginal Housing, an initiative of the CURA (Community – University Research Alliances) Program of SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) and CMHC (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp.) had monies available for research on Aboriginal housing in Saskatoon. The researchers submitted a proposal to research specifically the capacity of Saskatoon to meet the needs of Aboriginal women fleeing violence and the shelter needs of Aboriginal women fleeing violence in Saskatoon. This task brought the researchers to many organizations and agencies that refer and service Aboriginal women and Aboriginal women who had a vested interest in contributing to the discussion.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project is based on the principles of community-based research, which include the community being involved in the development, implementation, and analysis of the project. There is limited literature on Aboriginal women fleeing violence and on the specific shelter needs of Aboriginal women. There was a strong response from the Saskatoon community of Aboriginal women fleeing violence; the bulk of this report consists of their voices. In addition, the researchers contacted agencies and organizations that specifically deal with Aboriginal women fleeing violence.

The findings of this study include the following:

- 50% to 99.9% of shelter clients are Aboriginal women
- Saskatoon needs more shelters specific to Aboriginal women
- Lack of shelter research on service users and quality of stay
- Waiting periods, in most instances, are extremely long
- There is a need for long term shelters beyond 30 days
- Lack of programs reflecting Aboriginal women and families needs
- Elders involved in the project suggest cultural programming including ceremonies
- Not all women fleeing violence are poor
- Shelters are not set up for large families
- Women suggested: physical components and programming components that will better meet their needs as Aboriginal women and family
- Women expressed their need for spiritual and traditional activities and practices as well as personal growth as part of programming
- Children's programs are needed
- Holistic approach is suggested as a foundation for further development of a shelter for Aboriginal women
- A focus on family healing was expressed , specifically for men

## I. Introduction

This report reflects the voices of 25 Aboriginal women fleeing violence in Saskatoon, two non-Aboriginal women fleeing violence, 14 agencies and organizations that work with or refer Aboriginal women fleeing violence in Saskatoon, and three Elders. These participants were comprised of extended family, mothers, grandmothers, and friends. Our main objective in this study was to find out more about the current capacity of Saskatoon to shelter Aboriginal women fleeing violence and the specific shelter needs of Aboriginal women fleeing.

In our initial literature search we found that there was limited research indicating the current capacity of Saskatoon to house Aboriginal women fleeing violence. We also did not find much information on specific needs of a shelter for Aboriginal women. What we were able to find was an abundance of people interested in discussing the capacity of Saskatoon to meet the needs of Aboriginal women fleeing violence, and discuss the physical components needed in a shelter for them. This report addresses and voices their opinions, concerns and recommendations on a shelter for Aboriginal women fleeing violence. What the report does not speak to is why women entered the shelter and what women thought of each shelter. As researchers we felt that the limited timelines and a potential complicated and sensitive issue could not have been addressed appropriately or respectfully. Therefore, we limited our research to specifics dealing with capacity and components of a shelter.

As researchers we did not have the time within the project to exhaust all the important organizations, agencies and people who are working very hard to meet the needs of Aboriginal women fleeing violence. However, the report hopes to give the reader a broad view of the current capacity of Saskatoon to shelter Aboriginal women fleeing violence and their shelter needs.

This report is written for those who contributed to the project: organizations, agencies, and service providers who currently provide services to Aboriginal women fleeing violence, and agencies and organizations who plan to provide services to Aboriginal women. The report utilizes the voices of the women and organizations and agencies the researchers interviewed, and conducted focus groups. We have highlighted the voices of the participants by placing the text in italics. This information makes up the bulk of the report. As researchers we have strived to ensure the voice of the people effected by service or lack of service are paramount in this document. Their voice is integral for further development in the area of shelters for Aboriginal women. Also, in keeping with our methodology of community-based research and our teachings from First Nations we listened to the people who were talking to us; they were the ones who have the experience, knowledge and vision for what **they** need. As several women said, *"Our stories matter, our voices are heard"*. Throughout the report we do not use specific names of people or organizations.

Please note that this report reflects the people with whom we had the opportunity to speak in an interview or focus group. It does not reflect all service providers or all Aboriginal women fleeing violence. Nor does it reflect the several related issues with violence and shelters. Considering the scope of this project we have concerned ourselves mainly with the capacity question and components of a shelter.

The two main researchers are both employees of the First Nations University of Canada and both endorse community-based methodologies that build capacity in the community and encourage individuals to speak for themselves in the research process in the community. All research assistants hired for the project are First Nations and are students of the First Nations University of Canada.

## **II. Methodology**

This research project was based on the principles of community-based research which include the community being involved in the development, implementation, and analysis of the project. Therefore, throughout this project many efforts have been made to include participants in the research process and activities that sought their input in a non-judgmental and welcoming way. Focus groups and personal interviews were conducted to gather a majority of information for this report.

### **Ethics**

After a brief literature review, the researchers sought ethical approval from the University of Regina Ethics Board, December 2004. After approval, the researchers embarked on a month of interviews and focus groups. The ethics that guided the project included the TIPI teaching (located in Appendix A) and the ethical guidelines outlined by the University of Regina Research Ethics Board, located at [research.ethics@uregina.ca](mailto:research.ethics@uregina.ca). Consent forms were used for personal interviews and focus groups. This consent form allowed participants to have choice in the research process. The participants could decide to partake or not and could choose to exit the research at any time. This is an important aspect in respectful research that educates the participant of their rights as a participant and the right to make a choice without penalty from those conducting research. Particularly in focus groups a group consent was signed to encourage confidentiality within the group.

### **Questions Guiding the Research**

Questions for the research were developed with the Bridges and Foundations mission in mind - to research Aboriginal housing in Saskatoon. Given this mission our goal was to develop questions that would help us find out the current capacity of Saskatoon to meet the shelter needs of Aboriginal women fleeing violence and also find out what physical and programming components Aboriginal women feel they need to make a shelter comfortable. There were two main stakeholders: agencies and Aboriginal women. We asked very similar questions to allow for consistency in analysis and we developed open-ended

questions that fostered the vision of participants answering the question. A copy of the agency questions is located in Appendix B. A copy of the questionnaire is located in Appendix C.

Qualitative methods of focus group and personal interviews were used to encourage and nurture the voices of Aboriginal women fleeing violence and encourage organizations and agencies who work with Aboriginal women fleeing violence.

### **Who was involved in the research?**

The researchers gathered information from those who had a vested interest in discussing Aboriginal women fleeing violence and Saskatoon's shelter capacity to meet the needs of Aboriginal women fleeing violence. The researchers contacted agencies and organizations that specifically dealt with Aboriginal women fleeing violence, and those who were already housed in a shelter, thinking of going to a shelter, had moved away from a shelter, or were extended family of those who had been in a shelter.

Contributing to this report were 25 Aboriginal women fleeing violence in Saskatoon, two non-Aboriginal women fleeing violence, 14 agencies and organizations that work with or refer Aboriginal women fleeing violence, and three Elders. These participants were comprised of extended family, mothers, grandmothers, and friends.

### **How were the data collected?**

#### ***Focus Groups***

Four focus groups were conducted. Three focus groups were done with Aboriginal women fleeing violence, and one focus group with agencies working with women fleeing violence.

To engage organizations to take part in the focus groups, letters were sent out, followed by personal phone calls assessing their interest and inviting them to discuss the current capacity of Saskatoon to meet the shelter needs of Aboriginal women fleeing violence and the components that would make Aboriginal women comfortable in a shelter. For Aboriginal women in the focus groups we spoke with people within the shelters and put up posters in the shelters encouraging them to attend a focus group discussing the needs of Aboriginal women in a shelter. The data collected throughout these meetings were analyzed using a constant comparative analysis. This allowed for several themes to emerge from the responses.

Meals and snacks were provided in each focus group. To encourage responses, questions were asked in a circle encouraging participants to answer without judgment or criticism. In addition, the UNICEF method was used. This method

asked each participant to write down three suggestions, on a small piece of paper, for a shelter that would make them comfortable. Then the suggestions were pasted on a flipchart. This process allowed for equitable responses from all participants and supports more discussion and brainstorming on their suggestions.

### ***Interviews***

Personal interviews were conducted with agencies, Aboriginal women fleeing violence, and Elders. The interviews were one-on-one and took approximately 1 1/2 hours. The researchers were accommodating, ensuring that all interviews took place in a location agreed upon by the participant. Each participant was required to sign a consent form before beginning.

Interviews were based upon the opinions and recommendations of a shelter for Aboriginal women fleeing violence. Confidentiality and anonymity were stressed.

### ***Literature review***

A literature review was conducted by the researchers before and during the research study (see Bibliography). This included developing a search strategy that included some key terms such as Aboriginal women, violence, family violence, shelters, programs for Aboriginal women in violence, First Nations women and violence, and many organizations that provide services for women fleeing violence. There was an abundance of literature on women fleeing violence; however, limited literature was found that specifically dealt with shelter needs and specifically with Aboriginal women.

A majority of the research took place in face-to-face interviews and focus groups where the most spontaneous perceptive information was gathered. The research team consistently utilized the community-based approach for the research project. As stated earlier, the research strategy was mostly qualitative and participatory to engage individuals in a process that allowed feedback on their perceptions of Aboriginal women fleeing violence in Saskatoon. The advantage to the focus groups was the open response format, which provided an opportunity to obtain large amounts of data in the respondent's words. In addition, it also provided opportunities for respondents to react to, and build upon, the responses of others. This format allowed for deeper meanings and deeper connections.

The researchers received very good cooperation from community members in providing their input and suggestions. Our intention as researchers is to share the information to those who contributed and requested feedback and clarification. After this point we intend to release the report to the Saskatoon community inviting all those who contributed and who have an interest in service for Aboriginal women fleeing violence.

### III. Responses from the community

The response to the research questions was overwhelming. Agencies and organizations suggested several organizations that provide services to Aboriginal women fleeing violence that were not formerly within our research scope. This indicated to the researchers that there are many people unaccounted for who provide service to Aboriginal women fleeing violence. Note that the responses are not in a prioritized order. We have chosen not to prioritize them at this stage because this is a task for the dissemination process of giving the data back to the participants and providing them an opportunity to prioritize. Therefore, the responses throughout the document, unless otherwise indicated, are all ones that participants indicated repeatedly.

Two questions need to be answered to provide a context for the responses that participants gave throughout the research. Coupled with the themes extracted from the responses, there are two particular questions that will also provide this, one of the agency, "What state are Aboriginal women in when they contact you?" And the question particular to Aboriginal women, "How do you access a shelter?"

#### **State of Mind:**

All agencies indicated that the women were desperate, in crisis, scared, and confused. Specifically for Aboriginal women, these responses were no different.

An agency shared that *"Women who are entering a shelter are doing so as a last resort."*

One Elder indicated that when she sees women going into the *shelter*, *"they are fearful for their life, the kids are upset and they are in crisis."*

A community worker indicated that when women go to a shelter *"they are at the bottom, they have exhausted all their choices and have to go to a shelter"*.

The state of mind of a client is important when you are asking the client to make several decisions and trust the shelter and people who are helping her and her children.

#### **Accessing a shelter:**

There were Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women who responded to this question. Their responses were as follows:

- Through the phone book
- Referral from family doctor
- Talking to a friend
- By phone
- Referral from police
- Referral from community program or agency

- Social services

One woman indicated that she learned about shelters *“through my kids who learned about family violence at school and brought the information sheets home”*.

Most of the participants had knowledge about the shelters in Saskatoon and how to access them. Some participants had difficulties because of their relocation to an urban centre.

Both these questions provided responses from participants that allow us as researchers to understand the situation of a women coming into crisis and needing a shelter. Also, awareness of the traumatized state of mind of a woman and children in these circumstances has to be continually considered.

## **A. Themes**

Several themes emerged from the information provided by the participants. We have listed them below with discussion. They are not in a priority order; however, they appear here because of their repetition as responses.

### **Lack of Statistics/research**

#### **Capacity**

Within the research there was only one shelter that was required to keep statistics on Aboriginal women. All other shelters and organizations kept statistics, or some form of recording, but did not distinguish ethnicity among the women clients. This provided some difficulty in answering one of our research questions referring to the capacity of Saskatoon to meet the needs of Aboriginal women fleeing violence. However, when agencies were asked to approximate how many of the women they serve are Aboriginal, their answers ranged from 50% to 99.9%. These numbers were considered within agencies that specifically service Aboriginal women and those that service all women. However, each of the 14 agencies commented that they welcome all women.

The shelters that participated in the discussion were at two levels, the entry level, which is emergency based, while another is like a second stage where the client has stabilized and is seeking programming and possibly long-term housing.

The one agency that shared numbers with us indicated that they turned away 892 women who called in 2004. This number does not include children. With each woman coming with an average of two children this number jumps to 2,676 people who could not be sheltered at one particular shelter last year. This number is alarming and speaks to the need for more shelters in Saskatoon.

In discussion with agencies about how long it takes to shelter a woman and what happened if they can not be sheltered, the agencies all responded that if they

can not find immediate accommodations, and have exhausted family and other emergency options for women fleeing violence, then the women will likely return to the situation they originally left.

### **Evaluations**

So far in the research only one shelter is conducting a post-shelter evaluation. However, many agencies and organizations mentioned that they have discussions with the Aboriginal women staying in the shelter on what would meet their needs while in the shelter with their families.

One agency that conducted post or exit evaluations, indicated that they have an evaluation form that women can choose to fill out at the end of their stay. The workers in this agency would discuss this feedback and make changes according to what they could afford and if the suggestion was reasonable. They did make several changes with the women's input. The forms are kept on file, but they have never been tabulated.

These activities are important in determining the value of services and assisting the women in having a voice in a service they are receiving. As researchers the project did not require an evaluation of current service; however, the evaluations would be helpful in further planning and vision in organizations servicing Aboriginal women fleeing violence. The research considered this question with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women fleeing violence; the comments on what they would like are in the physical components, programming components, and holistic section of this report.

### **Waiting Periods**

When asking agencies about the wait period to enter a shelter, again there were minimal statistics kept by the agencies. However, participants indicated that they are full a majority of the time and consistently turn clients away. Each woman is encouraged to call the shelter each day to find out the current status. If someone leaves unexpectedly or their 30 days are up, then a space comes available. Many organizations and agencies indicated that the road ends at their shelter or agency. If they cannot house them immediately and the women and family have no one else to turn to, they will return to the home they originally left. In some circumstances the Salvation Army houses the women temporarily, one or two nights, at a local hotel. This is a temporary solution and does not include professional assistance or support while staying at the hotel.

### **Limited Time in Shelters**

Most shelters within Saskatoon have a 30-day stay period. This time period is linked to funding for women and families to stay in the shelter. The time limit poses problems for many women who are in crisis and may not be able to coordinate resources to leave the shelter in 30 days.

This limit is complicated with other issues for Aboriginal women, particularly for Aboriginal women who are moving from rural to urban environments. Their lack of knowledge of service and programs available in an urban setting are limited, and given that women are entering the shelter in crisis and may be scared for their lives. This time limit is not feasible for all Aboriginal women fleeing violence. One participant shared, *“Many women feel that as soon as they are in a shelter they must move on, but for lots of Aboriginal women this is not what they want or are ready to do”*.

All data that were collected from agencies and Aboriginal women reflected the need for a longer stay. Data indicated several reasons for these responses, as follows: once the decision to go to a shelter was reached women were in a very traumatized state of mind, and their abilities to problem-solve and find the energy to follow through were compromised. After coming from a painful and, often, dangerous home situation women and children need to have a sense of stability and thirty days goes by quickly – within two weeks they have to accept that further insecurity is looming. Women who were seriously trying to find new housing found this 30 day rule restrictive because they may enter the shelter in the middle (or later) in the month and not be able to find accommodation until the following month.

Suggestions given by the participants included: stages of housing, such as an emergency shelter for 30 days and then second stage housing for another period of time until the women and children felt they were ready to move on. One particular participant who had attended a shelter in another province stated: *“This shelter I was in had two sections, one side was for women just coming in and who were in bad shape with her family, the other side was for women who had been there a little while and were helping each other out. It was important to have these women separated so that they wouldn’t be triggered by seeing these women come in fresh”*.

From discussion with respondents, the researchers found out that only emergency shelters are funded and second stage housing is funded in the Province of Saskatchewan. This route was a suggestion made by all agencies and women, that more options for shelters be available for those who were at different stages.

### **Lack of Programs Reflecting Aboriginal Women**

Agencies servicing Aboriginal women had relationships with Aboriginal agencies offering programs requested by their clients. Aboriginal agencies offered programs and also utilized programs offered by other Aboriginal organizations. The network among the organizations seems to be very communicative and supportive in helping the Aboriginal women fleeing violence. However, Aboriginal women shared that they still needed more programming that was specific to their issues and was appropriate to their culture. “Culture” is used

loosely here because Aboriginal is defined, in this report, as First Nations, Metis, and Inuit. Therefore, the cultural practices within each of these groups would be very diverse. As well, there is great diversity among these groups in practices and understandings of cultural activities. This is complicated by the diversity of women who are at different stages of their healing.

A comprehensive look at programs that best meet the needs of the Aboriginal women entering the shelters is needed. One respondent indicated she did not feel comfortable at this one shelter because *“I was going to these groups, because I had to. They had nothing to do with me. I had not been hit. I was emotionally abused, but nobody talked about that; they talked about how many bruises they had. It was like they were trying to see who was more abused. I also went to a support group there; they were all talking about divorce and custody of children. I was in a common law relationship. Nobody talked about this. I needed to know my rights, but nobody talked about this. I was not comfortable. I could not relate to these women or the program”*.

Another respondent pointed out she was not comfortable with all the chores and rules: *“I was very shy. I did not want to cook for anyone else, but we all had chores. I felt like I was forced to do them if I wanted to stay at the shelter”*.

Another women indicated that she was not allowed to smudge in the building but had to go outside. She was not comfortable with this because it was cold and she did not want to dress up her children to bring them outside.

Many women indicated that they wanted an Elder, and they had to leave the shelter to access an Elder, because the shelter could not bring an Elder in due to costs. Leaving the shelter was an issue for one woman because she had three small children. She did not want to bundle them up when it is cold to go see an Elder. She was worried they may get sick.

There are a few Aboriginal shelters in Saskatoon that are at full capacity a majority of the time. These shelters provide culturally appropriate programs as requested by their clients.

### **Stigma - All Women Fleeing Violence are Poor**

Many of the agencies are funded through the Department of Social Services and Employment (DCRE). This can be an advantage to a women and her family who are receiving social assistance, when fleeing the home, as her expenses will be covered through the shelter; however, this can pose problems for the shelter- as their beds are earmarked for clients on social assistance. For example, if a woman who is not on social assistance requires a shelter she may not receive a space, assuming she can pay for one herself or has other resources to rely on. This can be a complicated situation, as the system assumes those in poverty are most likely those who will require or enter a shelter.

One agency representative stated that middle class women, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, fall through the cracks. She said that many come to the groups they provide and talk about the difficulties of not having sponsorship/financial support to go to shelters.

### **Limited Space for Large Families**

One agency representative indicated that *“We had a woman who had to go to a shelter and she had several children. One was over 16 and a boy, so the shelter did not take him. She did not want him to go back to the house by himself, she did not want to leave him, so she went back to the home she just left”*.

Another agency representative pointed out that *“if women have more than three children we usually can not house all of them. Our rooms are not large enough and it is against fire regulations. We work very hard with them to find good places for their kids”*. In this case, the woman and her children were separated in order to receive shelter.

## **B. Physical Components of a Shelter**

The following are suggestions from Aboriginal women fleeing violence and the agencies, organizations, and shelters providing service to Aboriginal women fleeing violence. Specific questions were asked about the physical components of a shelter that would make their stay comfortable and meet their needs. The responses were:

*“The place should provide a live-in, ceremonial atmosphere.”*

*“At the entry: spacious and homey and yet private so prying eyes are not felt. A place where welcoming can happen and the women (and kids) can get to their own room without having to interact too soon.”*

**Prayer room** - also called a quiet room - the space would be allocated for quiet time for women or their families, burning sweet grass or sage, a room of meditation, a room to have privacy. The room would have soft colors, not very large but very comfortable, large pillows, natural sunlight and sound proof. One woman suggested *“a room where the teaching from the Aboriginal culture could happen, a smaller room with decorative blankets on the wall”*

An agency shared, *“Smudging ceremonies really help the women to feel more centered when it all feels overwhelming. The traditional approach often (is) new to them but brings something powerful into their life and provides hope”*

**Hominess** - a home away from home with all the amenities - towels, shampoo, books for the children and adults, people who speak your language, willing to

help you out. One participant indicated *“The house would have everything you need and be child-friendly”*. Another participant pointed out that, *“a large house with plants, pictures, kitchen and backyard”* would make her comfortable.

**Large family rooms** - to accommodate women with larger families (more than two children). Curtains, half wall, accordion wall could separate this room; this is to ensure the mother is close to her children but also maintains some privacy. It was suggested that there be bunk beds for children, cribs for little ones, and a separate area for kids to play in their room. Many shelters have play areas for children and there is no play area in their sleeping space. Mothers indicated the need to have some play space that is separate from everyone else. This was important for them because the children have to feel comfortable before they go play with other children and the mother wanted time alone with the children.

A participant suggested, *“Have a small fridge for snacks, baby’s milk, have access to blankets and pillows without feeling guilty, have a donation room and figure out how it can be updated with clean stuff”*.

Another participant suggested *“women would be given the choice of a bedroom that would accommodate all the kids with her. Some women want to have their kids real close (fear). Some might need an adjacent room off their main room for separation”*.

**Shelters with kitchens and bathrooms for each family** – Currently, shelters have a communal kitchen and most have communal washrooms. This poses some difficulties as women are entering the shelters in a crisis state and are required to share with everyone around them and contribute to the community. This may be very difficult for some women who are experiencing high levels of stress and fear.

Aboriginal women indicated both structures, communal and shared; the communal was good for socializing and the separate kitchen was good for preparing food that you are used to eating.

One participant suggested she would like *“a communal kitchen that would have lots of tables, benches, chairs where women and children could eat healthy foods.”*

**A large socializing room** -This room would be available for socializing children, moms and visitors. It was suggested that it be large with lots of windows and a multi-functional space that could have a play area for children, t.v., couches, and phone.

**An Aboriginal specific shelter** - could meet the specific programming needs of Aboriginal women and their families. Many programs require spaces that are not currently available in shelters. Currently, non-Aboriginal shelters refer their

Aboriginal clients to community programs that are Aboriginal specific. One preliminary example is an Elders room: an Elder could have their own office to meet with Aboriginal women and their families. Specifics on these programs are not analyzed yet.

**Exercise room** - this contributes to the development of holistic health for the women and their families. Rooms where they could exercise and relieve some stress.

**Safe house** - Some suggestions shared by women and agencies are:  
*"I would like a shelter to be in a safe area of town where I can walk and not be stopped by people who think I am looking for work."*

*"There should be security, high fences and a sense that you are safe"*

**Children's Space** - A large indoor space where children could make noise and run around. It could have a computer, desks, toys, and books. One participant suggested *"possible schooling for the children at the shelter, especially if families are in transition and don't know where they are going to live; this way they don't get behind in school"*.

A large outdoor space was also suggested that could be fenced, safe and have security. The space would have swings, toys, play ground, sand, and a slide. "Kids could visit and have stuff to do there."

**Daycare Centre** - many women, when entering the shelter, have young children. If a day care centre was included then the women would be able to leave their children at the daycare while they are working on healing themselves, finding a place to live, and accessing programs. For example, if a woman enters the shelter with three children under the age of five, she will have them with her while she seeks counseling, therapy, housing, etc. The agencies and organizations indicated the women seeking shelters are in crisis. Taking three children while trying to access these other programs may cause further stress and anxiety. A daycare center would allow the women to have more flexibility in moving towards independence from the shelter in 30 days.

### **C. Programming Components of a Shelter**

Agencies and women were asked what kind of programs would help them feel comfortable in a shelter and help them deal with their situations. As researchers we see the programs identified translating into spaces. One participant welcomed the opportunity to contribute to a discussion. She shared that she liked *"Women authoring their own programs"*. This statement was powerful for the researchers and the groups involved in the project as we invited ideas, visions and

suggestions. None were too crazy, instead, the questions fostered the imagination of many people who welcomed the opportunity to have a say in what services, programs and spaces they were using.

### **Programs identified were:**

#### **Traditional Aboriginal programming**

One of the most frequent ideas regarding programming was to have the involvement of Elders. Support to have both female and male Elders involved in programming was requested. It was important that traditional ceremonies such as sweats and healing circles be part of the programming. It was also indicated that having Elders available for one-on-one counseling during the day and in the evening was needed. Several participants said that it would be important to have Elders available following other types of group work in case they felt triggered and needed further processing. Elders would need office/room space that was private and comfortable.

Specific activities suggested by participants were:

*“Circles, sweats, pipe ceremonies a must.”*

*“Elders who are very good with story telling that could help them understand domestic violence and that it isn't their fault.”*

#### **Counseling**

Participants also wanted counseling available from other resource people as well. They felt that therapy could be an important part of their healing alongside Elders. Specific counseling was mentioned as a need. Meeting the needs of each woman who came into the shelter, rather than grouping all women who enter the shelter with the same types of abuse and situation, was indicated.

One participant shared a need for, *“Every evening there should be a circle check so that those who go to school or work in the day could attend. One shelter offered this once a week in the day time.”*

Many participants stated that they would encourage having male facilitators/counselors in the shelter. They felt that having healthy male role models could help women to address some of the concerns they have about males and the issues of power and control. It was also expressed that women should have some choice about working directly with male employees. If males were part of the shelter, bathroom space may be an issue.

Participants supported working on relationships:

*“Counseling for couples has to be available with Elders and social workers.”*

*“There should be advocates for each of the couple – allies.”*

### **Personal Development**

Programming for healing and personal development was seen as an essential part of a shelter’s identity, however, several people suggested that they should not have to do all the activities but have some choice as to what fits their life and world view.

*“I think a shelter should have programs on building self-esteem, learning about your culture, and anger management.”*

### **Children’s Programming**

*“Don’t forget the children,”* expressed a participant. *“They are harmed. In each agency, learning and healing opportunities need to be available to the kids.”*

Programming for the children was brought up over and over. Having the Elders involved with the kids was important. Teachings for the little ones was requested, as well as circles specifically for them to deal with the emotional issues that they carry after being around violence. It was suggested that, *“there be a cozy space in the children’s room that could provide a place for intimate gatherings and teachings from Elders.”* Story telling was also suggested as part of programming for children. Counseling should be available for the kids and such expertise as art therapy and play therapy should be explored.

The space for programming could vary. If the activity was informal then the socializing area, with couches and comfortable chairs could accommodate the program; however, if the focus was more educational there should be a room that is specifically set up for such activities. It would accommodate sitting in a circle and it would have white/black boards, electrical capacity for overheads, TV, videos, DVD’s, power point, etc.

### **Physical Well-being**

Programming for physical well being was important to the women. They wanted to see a space available for physical activities such as exercise, weight training, massage and reflexology.

Pampering activities would be welcomed and could be done in various rooms in the shelter, as long as there was a spacious layout. Some ideas were hairdresser to style and cut hair, make-up make-overs, pedicures, manicures, etc.

## **General programs**

Some very specific programs were suggested, as follows:

- Domestic abuse outreach programming
- Parenting traditionally
- AA
- Life skills
- Arts and crafts, pottery
- Teachings about the medicines
- Life skills
- Work on relationship issues
- Aftercare

As one participant put it, *“The focus should be on education for anyone who is there.”*

*“There should be evening programming for those who work, day for those who don’t.”*

*“AA, NA available regularly in the lodge, and transportation to other meetings.”*

*“Communication styles should be taught and examined.”*

## **D. Holistic Approach**

*“It could be grounded in holistic healing.”*

During one of the focus groups someone said, *“Men need a place to heal, too. My partner looked for help, and couldn’t find too much that worked for him.”*

This comment was followed by a burst of ideas and support that focused initially around men healing and then relationship healing and then family healing. There was a lot of positive energy around this conversation and many comments reflected the desire for holistic approaches when dealing with the issue of family violence, as follows:

*“Men need support if they are willing to work on the relationship.”*

*“It’s hard for those who want to make it work. They don’t know what to do to get over their anger.”*

*“Many men will work on themselves. We have stereotyped men as not able to change.”*

*“There needs to be a shelter for men. No, a Learning Lodge so they can find themselves again.”*

*“Have Elders on staff who can talk about the issues of being a strong, good man.”*

A comment was made that a network of 'buildings' seemed to be emerging. First, a safe secure place for women and their children who are in danger; second, a men's lodge for men who want to heal and work on themselves and perhaps on the relationship; and then connecting to other agencies that may already exist to provide individualized programming needs as the people grow.

*“Adult children need to be involved, too. Often they are grown but have been affected by the violence.”*

There should be circles for the whole family and opportunities to talk it through. It seemed this group opened up an area of discussion that is not addressed in the system. Everyone deserves the opportunity to grow and change and develop.

Housing for Aboriginal women fleeing violence is needed. It is desperately needed. As well, there is a need to support the men involved, and develop housing possibilities for their healing too.

This input took place in the first focus group, and resonated throughout other focus groups and individual interviews. The value of family and relationships was paramount for a majority of the participants. A holistic approach to the issue of family violence became a factor in the analysis of all the community input. There needs to be a holistic approach to addressing the needs of women who seek shelter from family violence. The building that provides shelter must reflect the philosophy and values of the Aboriginal people. Spaces are needed that attend to the spiritual needs, physical needs, emotional needs and mental needs of the inhabitants.

However, as previously noted, the teachings about wholeness and balance place value on the healing of all members of the family. The idea of developing a lodge for men that focuses on traditional and contemporary healing will help the women and children, too. We are at a time in our community's development when the worldview of Aboriginal people must take the lead. Women and children who are in danger need shelter, and they need healthy families. A commitment to both women and children's safety and family healing is what is being asked for by the women who took part in this study.

The possibility of housing for men who have been part of domestic violence is perhaps an unexpected vision to arise out of research that has focused on shelters for Aboriginal women fleeing violence, but it is a potent and powerful vision.

## IV. Recommendations

These recommendations come from the people who participated in this project:

- It is recommended that future stages of development towards shelters for Aboriginal women should continue to have the participation of the Aboriginal community. The research process continually fostered the input of women who were using the service.
- It is recommended that the results of this research be widely disseminated and published to address the issue of limited information and knowledge of the shelter needs of Aboriginal women.
- It is recommended that statistics and evaluations be conducted to further contribute to the development of shelters for Aboriginal women.
- It is recommended that continual support be given to Aboriginal Women fleeing violence and organizations servicing Aboriginal women fleeing violence.
- It is recommended that more statistics be collected that reflect the waiting periods of Aboriginal women entering a shelter.
- It is recommended there be several shelters meeting the needs of women, specifically crisis shelters, transition shelters, long-term shelters.
- It is recommended the programs in shelters reflect Aboriginal women and families needs.
- It is recommended that shelters do not discriminate service based on women who have or have not money.
- It is recommended shelters be set up for a variety of family sizes, accommodating women with or without children
- It is recommended that the physical components and programming components shared in this document be implemented to better meet the needs of Aboriginal women and family: daycare, prayer room, cultural programs, Elders counseling, etc.

- It is recommended that cultural programming be a foundation for shelters and that Elders be involved in this program development with the women.
- It is recommended that children's programs be developed and that there be a search for funding from a variety of sources that can accommodate this.
- The Elders recommended that the services should be consistent with First Nation's cultural and spiritual principles, philosophies, and traditions.
- It is recommended holistic approach philosophy be used as a foundation for further development of a shelter for Aboriginal women
- It is recommended there be a focus on family healing, specifically for men. There is limited research on men's role in healing the family.
- It is recommend that research be done similar to this project for men.
- It is recommended that to support and meet the needs of Aboriginal families, shelters for Aboriginal women fleeing violence be created with the input and knowledge of the needs of the women, children and partners.

## **V. Conclusion**

When we began this research we had two questions to answer:

1. What is Saskatoon's capacity to meet the shelter needs of Aboriginal women fleeing violence?
2. What are the specific components in a shelter that would make Aboriginal women comfortable?

Have we answered the questions? Yes, the responses from the women and the agencies that took part in this research have been very supportive of an Aboriginal shelter that meets the specific needs of the Aboriginal women who enter the shelter. Although there are specific services in Saskatoon for Aboriginal women, there still remain many Aboriginal women who are not able to access the shelters because they are full, or the shelters are not meeting their programming needs, or are not large enough to accommodate their family size.

There has also been considerable support for an Aboriginal men's shelter that lends itself to a holistic approach that many Aboriginal people use to treat the family - to also treat the man. This philosophy resonated throughout the research as women were working towards healing for themselves, children and partners.

How should the shelter look? The responses leaned towards a very inclusive and harmonious physical structure that nurtures growth, privacy, large rooms to accommodate large families, visitors space, and importantly, a prayer room where women can have quiet time or smudge, and women can practice their culture in a comfortable space. Programs should be plentiful and project a holism for clients that includes programming for the women in physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual domains as well as making this programming available to children and men.

Overall, the research project collected an abundance of data, experiences, and stories that supported another shelter and very specific components that are reflective of the needs of Aboriginal women accessing a shelter. We regret that not all data are presented in this document but it will be very useful in further research and discussions around Aboriginal women's needs in a shelter and the capacity of Saskatoon to meet the needs of Aboriginal women fleeing violence.

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# **APPENDIX**

## **A**

### **“TIPI Teachings” Ethics**

# TIPI Teachings

## Principles of the research-learning circle

We strive to live in harmony with one another and with all creation around us in this circle of life. In a circle no one is above another. There is a sense of belonging to a family and to a community.

These are the principles that the researchers will follow in terms of how they conduct themselves.

## The Fifteen Poles represent the Following Values:

- 1. Obedience**  
We learn by listening to traditional stories; by listening to our parents or guardians, our fellow students and our teachers. We learn by their behaviors and their reminders, so that we know what is right and what is wrong.
- 2. Respect**  
We must give honor to our Elders and fellow students, and the strangers that come to visit our community. We must honor other peoples' basic rights.
- 3. Humility**  
We are not above or below others in the circle of life. We feel humbled when we understand our relationship with Creation. We are so small compared to the majestic expanse of Creation. *"We are just a strand in a web of life"* and we respect and value life.
- 4. Happiness**  
We must show some enthusiasm to encourage others at social functions. Our actions will make our ancestors happy in the next world.
- 5. Love**  
If we are to live in harmony we must accept one another as we are and to accept others who are not in our circle. Love means to be kind and good to one another.
- 6. Faith**  
We must learn to believe and trust others, to believe in a power greater than ourselves whom we worship and who gives us strength to be a worthy member of the human race.
- 7. Kinship**

Our family is important to us. This includes our parents, our brothers and sisters who love us and gives us roots, the roots that tie us to the life blood of the earth. It also includes extended family; grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins and their in-laws and children. These are also our brothers and sisters and they give us a sense of belonging to a community.

8. **Cleanliness**

We must learn not to inflict ills on others, for we do it to ourselves. Clean thoughts come from a clean mind and this comes from Indian spirituality. Good habits also reflect a clean mind.

9. **Thankfulness**

We learn to give thanks for all the kinds things others do for us and for the Creator's bounty, that we are privileged to share with others in the spirit of love.

10. **Sharing**

We learn to be part of the family by helping in providing food or other basic needs. This is sharing responsibilities in order to enjoy them.

11. **Strength**

We must learn to be patient in times of trouble and not to complain but endure and show understanding. We must accept difficulties and tragedies so that we may give others strength to accept their own difficulties and tragedies.

12. **Good Child Rearing**

Children are unique and blessed with the gift of life. We are responsible for their well-being, spirituality, emotional, physical, and intellectual development. They represent the continuity of our circle of life which we perceive to be the creator's will.

13. **Hope**

We must hope for better things to make life easier for us, our family and the community, both materially and spiritually.

14. **Ultimate Protection**

The ultimate responsibility to achieve is *"health for a balanced caring for the body, mind, emotions, and the spirit of the individual, the family, the community and the nation."*

15. **Control Flaps**

We are connected by relationships and we depend on each other. This controls and creates harmony in the circle of life.

# **APPENDIX**

## **B**

### **Agency focus group questions**

# Aboriginal Women Fleeing Violence Interview Tool/Focus Group

## Agency

- Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed.
- Introduction of researchers
- Description of Bridges and Foundations.
- Purpose of the study

Please provide a short description of your agency: funding, programs, partners in service

How many women do you have referred to you in a year?

What state of mind are they generally in when they contact you?

How quickly are you able to find accommodations if you are a referring agency? How quickly are you able to house them if you are a shelter? What type of waiting period might they wait?

Do you collect information from the Aboriginal women on the comfort of their stay?

What are the services you provide to Aboriginal women fleeing violence?

From your experience what do you think are the physical components that a shelter could incorporate to assist Aboriginal women better meet their needs?- if programming is needed- what type of space will best suit your programs? What about privacy?

Do you have any other ideas about how the physical setting of a shelter could be created to help Aboriginal women fleeing violence?

Who else do you feel we should be talking to about Aboriginal women fleeing violence and their needs in a shelter?

Are there any reports or studies that could inform the project?

Thank you.

# APPENDIX

## C

### **Aboriginal Women focus group questions** Aboriginal Women Fleeing Violence

# Interview Tool/Aboriginal Women

- Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed.
  - Introduction of researchers
  - Description of Bridges and Foundations.
  - Purpose of the study
  - Ethics- give a copy to participant
1. How do you access a shelter?
  2. Are there any things about a shelter's physical setting that might make you comfortable?
  3. If you could help create an ideal shelter, what would the sleeping accommodations look like?
  4. If you could help create an ideal shelter, what would the eating accommodations look like?
  5. What would the socializing space be like?
  6. What type of setting would best suit your kids?
  7. For the programming or teaching part of the shelter, what would work best?
  8. Do you have any ideas that would make a shelter more comfortable and meet your needs better?

Thank you.

