

A Success Story

Native Women's Shelter of Montreal Montreal, Quebec

Traditional values meet modern customs at the Native Women's Shelter of Montreal

Getting off the street is no easy feat, and once you manage it, the challenge is not to go back. Thanks to the Welcoming Fire project, along with the other services offered by the Native Women's Shelter of Montreal, Native women get the support they need to take control of their lives and stay off the street.

Many Native women hope to find a better life when they leave the reserve and move to an urban environment. In reality, they often end up moving from place to place or wind up homeless: discrimination complicates their search for lodging and lack of skills prevents them from finding work. The threat of the street is always there, either in the short or medium term. "We're there for them," explains Nakuset, the young woman who runs the Native Women's Shelter of Montreal (NWSM). "We give them shelter, help them take stock of their lives and find solutions so that they can take charge of their lives again." Using the medicine wheel to determine the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual states of their clients, workers at the NWSM help them to prepare an action plan to balance these aspects of their lives. Thanks to the SCPI*, they can spend more time helping these women make a success of their lives.

Effective help, right on target

The SCPI* was very instrumental in enabling the NWSM to offer more than emergency shelter. The first contribution of \$156,288 in 2001 made it possible to hire a worker and a liaison officer and went toward the purchase of a vehicle for accompanying clients, emergency transportation and small moving jobs. More recently, \$55,534 contributed through the Urban Aboriginal Homelessness Component has helped the organization create the *Welcoming Fire* program: "This community program enables us to provide our clients with longer-term support so that they can build a more solid foundation for their new lives." Through SCPI* funding, the NWSM also created a personal skills program for Native women. In co-operation with EPOC Montreal (Education, Placement, Orientation, Communication), this seven-week training program, along with a cash allowance that encourages participation, gives women all kinds of useful information, from how to use a computer to sexual health and stress management.

Welcoming Fire does more than just respond to emergencies and manage crises. Through regular home visits, hands-on help, encouragement and a good network of resources, it helps women complete the steps themselves in making something of their lives.

Authors of their own success

Nakuset and her team have made it possible for Anna,** a woman in her mid-forties, to attend university in Applied Social Science and find a steady job. Anna had lost custody of her children because of her drinking, but has gotten a new lease on life thanks to *Welcoming Fire*. "We helped her control her drinking, and we got her to talk about what she wanted to do with her life," says Nakuset. Anna was unaware that she could receive financial assistance from her Band Council to go back to school. With the help of the NWSM, she registered for university and worked as a volunteer with elderly people. "She was soon offered a job at the place where she volunteered," continues Nakuset. "Today, Anna is a role model for her 18-year-old daughter, having taught her that it is important to persevere and to stay in school in order to have some control over her life."

For Jane,** a woman in her fifties, life began anew with the help of NWSM workers. Having been thrown out of her apartment following the death of her room-mate, Jane, an alcoholic, was able to

find lodging thanks to the people at the NWSM. However, she started drinking again and lost a foot after getting drunk and falling asleep in a park in winter. “We visited her continuously during her hospital stay and until she learned how to walk again with a prosthesis. We got in touch with her brother, in the North. He finally came to get her and brought her back to her family, and now she is happy with them,” says Nakuset.

The Native Women’s Shelter of Montreal helped over 100 women in 2004 alone. Without the help of the SCPI*, many of them would have simply spent a few days warming up in a shelter and gone right back to the street. “For us, the SCPI* was the key to long-term action, which is vital to effective intervention,” concludes Nakuset.

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***The names of these people have been changed to protect their privacy.*

*SCPI: Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative