

**Project Case Study
YWCA Housing, Residence and Crisis Shelter
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan**

1. Introduction

This case study of the YWCA Housing, Residence and Crisis Shelter is one of a series of case studies of projects funded at least in part through the federal government's National Homelessness Initiative (NHI). The case study first describes the project including: conditions prior to implementation, what the project involves and its objectives. It then describes project implementation to date. Finally, it notes outcomes to date, including comments from clients where available.

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) is producing these case studies in order to contribute to the government's understanding of how NHI is working in individual communities at the project level, to gauge the extent to which the objectives are being achieved at this mid-way stage of the three-year Initiative, and to determine what can be learned from the experiences of particular projects that may be applicable to others participating in the Initiative.

The case study is based on a review of the initial proposal for the project and other available documents describing the project and its objectives and how it fits into the community's plans to address homelessness, and on a series of interviews with people representing the following groups:

- managers and staff of the project
- clients of the project
- community organizations working in areas related to this project that might share clientele with the project or whose service to people who are homeless might be influenced by this project

2. Description of the Project

Conditions prior to project implementation

The YWCA Housing, Residence and Crisis Shelter for women is the largest in Saskatoon, serving the immediate physical, psychological and emotional needs of women, youth and children who are in a crisis situation. The emergency accommodation is wheel-chair accessible and offers food, counselling and referrals to other supports.

Originally the 40 rooms at the YWCA were used as a low-cost hostel for travellers and students. The primary purpose changed in 1990 when the Department of Social Services and other community stakeholders identified the YWCA as a place that could provide overflow shelter for women and children fleeing domestic violence as well as other women and children in need of emergency shelter.

Currently, the YWCA shelter has the following four components:

- a 24-hour, seven-day a week emergency shelter with 18 rooms (two rooms are wheel-chair accessible) with a total of 34 beds, open to women, female youth at risk and their children regardless of personal circumstances. The shelter also offers food, clothing, personal hygiene products, assessment counselling, transportation and access to a crisis-line telephone;
- short- or long-term housing with 18 rooms (18 beds) for women who need a supportive environment;
- Margaret's Place, a four-bedroom suite (eight beds) for young women, 16 to 19 years of age and their children;
- affordable family housing with 26 units off-site.

Within the YWCA, other services include employment services, child-care, and health and wellness programs. It also provides access to 14 community agencies that offer an integrated programming service through the Saskatoon Community Village, adjacent to the YWCA.

Over the years, the demand for services has increased as well as the range of needs of the people who use the services. During 2000-01, the YWCA provided care to 722 women, 716 children and 89 youth at risk. Funding for staff came from a variety of external sources, including the Kinsmen Club of Saskatoon, Department of Social Services, Saskatoon District Health and Interval House. The funding arrangements from 1998 to 2000 allowed the YWCA to have a single staff counsellor on duty an average of 17 hours a day. The YWCA shelter staff relied heavily on practicum students and volunteers.

In December of 1999, the YWCA Board announced it was considering closing the shelter due to inadequate funding for support services and staffing. Personal security of staff was also becoming a concern. Incidents requiring police back-up support were occurring

more frequently, as the type of clientele expanded. Conflicts among residents were arising due to the stress of being homeless and staff not being immediately available to support the women and children, especially at night. Issues tended to escalate and become critical more quickly. Children did not have an indoor space to play, other than the long halls, and this created some conflict between single women and those with children.

What the project involves

In February 2001, SCPI Urgent Needs funding was received to hire additional staff and to improve the programming options at the women's shelter. A subsequent amendment to the SCPI Urgent Needs funding supported the development of an independent business plan, called "YWCA of Saskatoon Business Plan for Shelter and Residence for Women, Children and Youth at Risk." The business plan helped to identify who was using the shelter, examine the funding base and make recommendations for the future direction of the shelter.

Objectives of the project

The goals of the YWCA Housing, Residence and Crisis Shelter are to:

- provide 24-hour emergency accommodation for women, children and female youth in crisis;
- provide support services such as counselling, community information and referrals;
- meet the varying needs of women, girls and mothers with young children in a wholesome atmosphere;
- provide a safe, comfortable, and affordable housing option for women and families (on and off-site);
- offer an integrated approach to service delivery including, employment services, child care services and health and wellness programs, plus access to services and integrated programming with the Saskatoon Community Services Village.

3. Implementation to Date

More staff members have been hired, bringing the total to six full-time staff, two to three casuals to cover when required, and additional hours for housekeeping staff. Some equipment for the kitchens was purchased, as well as programming supplies such as tables, chairs and children's indoor and outdoor play material. The independent business plan has been completed and is guiding the management of the shelter .

The business plan supported the staff's consensus that all of the women who come to the YWCA shelter are in crisis and need support. The current residents at the shelter typically include:

- victims of domestic violence and other forms of abuse
- users of the mental health system
- displaced, homeless and transient women
- women struggling with stability due to multiple issues
- youth who are at risk requiring trusteeship and/or supervision

Children now have a playroom and some programming supplies where they can play constructively and relieve some of their stress in more positive ways than running up and down the halls.

4. Outcomes to Date

Preliminary observations

While it is premature to make any assessment of the impacts of the YWCA women's shelter on the lives of its many clients in the longer term, it is possible to make the following preliminary observations:

- Staff reports a tremendous improvement with the increase in staff. It has assured residents access to staff 24 hours a day so they are able to get attention and support when they need it. There is less of an opportunity for issues to escalate into a crisis because staff members are there for support and each client knows she can book individual attention with the counsellors when needed. There is also less pressure on placement students and volunteers.
- Each shift change now overlaps by a half hour, so staff members have an opportunity to discuss issues arising from the activities of the previous shift and be alerted to potential problems. Staff members now have the opportunity to go out into the community and network with others. For example, a direct service providers committee has been established and staff members now have time in their workday to attend meetings.
- Shelter staff is able to follow up with residents who are accessing the services offered in the Saskatoon Community Services Village. Service providers working out of the Saskatoon Community Village have always had a good working relationship with the YWCA staff. Now that the shelter has adequate staffing, this relationship has been enhanced and agencies can work more closely together, for example co-facilitating women and violence workshops.

- Two agencies mentioned they feel more comfortable making referrals to the shelter after 5:00 p.m. and on weekends for female clients, now that they know staff are on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Said one respondent, “We would be in trouble if the YWCA was not there, we would be placing people in isolated, low-rate hotels.”
- The business plan is proving to be an excellent tool, which the YWCA used to demonstrate to the public the shelter’s funding situation. One person said, “It helped to inform the general public about women and homelessness and it created an awareness that the YWCA shelter was no longer able to offer a safe service to the community.” Another noted, “The HRDC funding helped to put the problem to sleep for awhile...the YWCA may have closed if the Urgent Needs funding was not there.”
- The community was very supportive of the YWCA and acknowledged the services they offered were valuable. The Saskatoon community plan singled out the YWCA and it was acknowledged that they needed on-going funding to provide adequate and appropriate support to the women and children who use their services.
- The YWCA received funding from HRDC to employ a person to help run the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) on the computer system in-house. It was felt that two hours of training would enable someone with basic computer skills to be comfortable inputting HIFIS data.

Client comments

In order to get a sense of the project’s impact on clients, the researcher spent the better part of a day at the YWCA women’s shelter having informal conversations with clients. The researcher asked clients what changes, if any, they have experienced as a result of the inception of the project or of additional services made possible by NHI funding. The responses are, by their nature, the subjective comments of those individuals willing to respond.

The women spoken with were referred to the YWCA by other agencies. One woman had been put up in a hotel before and found it to be “very lonely and scary in the middle of the night.” Another young women said she would probably be at her “Dad’s, where there is a lot of alcohol,” if not at the shelter.

One woman did not have any family in Saskatchewan. She was having difficulty getting the right medication to help stabilize her mental illness. She said she had used the

YWCA once before and it gave her comfort knowing she could come to the YWCA while she sorted out her medication problems.

Addendum - Recent Developments

The research for this case study was conducted at a critical time in the life of the project and significant developments occurred immediately after the research was concluded.

The business plan became critical to the continuation of the services provided by the Crisis Shelter. It demonstrated the scope of the services provided as well as their importance to Saskatoon. With it in hand, the YWCA began negotiating long term core funding arrangements with the Province of Saskatchewan. In late Spring 2002, the YWCA met with the Deputy Minister of Social Services for Saskatchewan. It was agreed during these meetings to negotiate details of a long term funding framework. These details will be submitted for consideration and inclusion in the Provincial 2003-04 budget.

At the same time the YWCA made application for a second project to run from June 2002 (when the Urgent Need project terminated) until March 2003. This was approved and funding continues under a new Homelessness Initiative contract while the YWCA and Saskatchewan Department of Social Services negotiate.

Spring 2002