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Supporting Our Sisters is funded by:

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Transitional housing is an important part of the S.O.S. program. It offers many women a place to be safe, secure and gives them the opportunity to develop relationships with other women and build a sense of community. This engagement broadens support networks, improves self esteem, and can contribute to better health and housing outcomes overall.

One of our early findings in the S.O.S. program has been that women in the program are often reunited with their children once housing issues have been set-tled.

Why Housing First for Women?

The objective of the Supporting Our Sisters project is to develop a comprehensive service system response for women at risk of and experiencing homelessness. The initiative was designed to build capacity within this community's assets by investing support services where they do not exist. The project brought together a complex cluster of services, developed a comprehensive gender specific service delivery model, and introduced supports where they did not exist to provide a range of options and identified more housing with supports for marginalized women.

The concept of Housing First focuses on establishing housing before addressing other issues like employment, addictions and mental health with the assumption that these issues are more easily resolved if housing is already in place. Housing first approaches have been gaining support in community-based research and practice over the last several years across Canada.

Practices have been successfully implemented in Hamilton to reduce homelessness among men with the Transitions to Home program. For youth, the Street Youth Planning Collaborative has a focus on early intervention and prevention. The Hamilton Executive Directors’ Aboriginal Coalition works to ensure that homelessness responses have a strong cultural component. Now there is a response to the unique challenges women face with launch of the S.O.S. program.

"Homelessness is a temporary experience, not an identity or permanent trait."  Emily Paradis

Contributors to howstheweather.ca

S.O.S. Participant

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Project S.O.S. (Supporting Our Sisters) is supported by an advisory committee of women with lived experience of homelessness. Without their valuable input the program wouldn’t be able to meet the unique needs of women. A gender lens is important when developing and delivering women centred supports. The image below was created by graphic facilitator Pam Hubbard with the input of women with lived experience of homelessness. The input happened at the Why Gender? conference held in conjunction with Hamilton’s International Women’s Day celebrations held in March 2013.

The graphic demonstrates that “something happens” that results in women in experiencing homelessness. The “Pathways to Supporting Women” can be very complex, and as the graphic shows, the lack of affordable housing is one of the main barriers to women having better health, social and economic outcomes. Women have told the community that homelessness can happen to anyone. With compassion, collaboration and respect the needs of women experiencing homelessness can better be met.

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**Project S.O.S. results as of September 30, 2013**

- 254 women served and 88% remained housed while receiving S.O.S. supports
- Data collection tool created, refined and staff trained
- 12 WHPC Meetings & 6 Advisory Committee meetings have been held
- S.O.S. Advisory Committee established and is informing the work of the project
- Why Gender? Housing conference held

**Original S.O.S. targets for March 31, 2014**

- Approximately 140 women will receive services to increase housing stability
- Approximately 85 –105 women will retain housing after 3 month follow up
- Data collection tools in place and formal project evaluation complete
- Approximately 12 S.O.S. Advisory Committee meetings held
- 12 Women’s Housing Planning Collaborative meetings held
- 5 joint training sessions for project staff
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Women’s Housing Planning Collaborative Members
Good Shepherd Women’s Services
Native Women’s Centre/ Honouring the Circle
Mission Services
Phoenix Place
Womankind Addiction Services – St. Joseph’s Healthcare Hamilton
YWCA Hamilton

Ex-Officio Members
City of Hamilton Housing Services Division
Ministry of Children and Youth & Ministry of Community and Social Services Ontario
Service Canada Homelessness Partnering Strategy
Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton

“I came from Nigeria and became homeless in Hamilton. We don’t have a word for this in my home country.”

S.O.S. Participant

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Emmy Paradis

November 2013
By Renée Wetselaar, Social Planner, & Sara Mayo, Social Planner
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