



**Request for provincially funded transition
houses to be funded for double-staffing**

August 10, 2011

Background

- In October 2009, THANL submitted a request on behalf of all provincially funded shelters (7 at the time) that their operating budgets be increased to allow for double-staffing. The submission highlighted the dangers of shelter staff working alone – especially during nightshifts – and an increase in external and internal threats to safety.

Background

- As a result of this request, money was granted to THANL to hire a consultant to do further research on this issue.
- The preliminary results of this study were made available to HCS in November 2010. The #1 recommendation of the preliminary and final reports was for:

The implementation of double-staffing for mitigating the risk posed to shelter staff when working alone, especially at night and on weekends.

Background

- These results fed a request by HCS for funds from the 2010/2011 budget to cover a double-staffing model in all provincially funded transition houses. The approximate cost of this was estimated at: \$2,265,671
- The final report from the research, *Workplace Health and Safety in Transition Houses: Implications for Staffing Models*, was delivered in January 2011.

Background

- The budget request for funding for double-staffing was denied. Instead, shelters were allocated \$360,000 to improve their physical security infrastructure and provide staff with training on safety issues. \$160,000 of this money was actually for training funds that had been promised in the previous year's budget, but that had not yet been delivered to shelters/THANL

Background

- While this money is both appreciated and needed, it still does not correct the underlying basic problem:
 - Internal threats to shelter workers and clients are not reduced by physical security features designed to address external threats.
 - Shelter workers continue to work many shifts alone in potentially dangerous situations.
 - It is urgent that government funding be provided for double-staffing **before** a serious safety incident occurs at a provincially funded transition house.

Highlights from the Final Report

- Changing clientele and staffing structure were the factors identified most frequently as safety issues. The absence of reliable emergency backup was also a key issue.

*From Workplace Health and Safety in Transition Houses:
Implications for Staff Models*

Highlights from the Final Report

- **Changing clientele:**

“Almost all of the shelters reported a change in clientele. Shelters report the majority of their clients are presenting with additional issues such as drug and alcohol abuse or significant mental health/illness concerns.”

*From Workplace Health and Safety in Transition Houses:
Implications for Staff Models*

Highlights from the Final Report

- **Changing clientele – other factors**
 - Shelter staff report clients are behaving more aggressively with staff and other clients
 - Some clients are victims of violence as a result of lifestyle issues (eg., their partner is involved with criminal activities)
 - There has been an increase in clients revealing suicidal intentions or self-harming behaviours
 - Some sites report more older female clients, some with special needs

From *Workplace Health and Safety in Transition Houses: Implications for Staff Models*

Highlights from the Final Report

- **Changing clientele – what this means**
 - Shelter staff have been threatened with knives and/or been physically handled (pushing, hitting, etc.) by clients
 - Staff report they frequently do not have confirmation that the pills women bring to the shelter are legal
 - The increased combativeness of clients means staff may sometimes have to wait for a shift with a second staff person for backup before addressing a client about violations in shelter policies

From *Workplace Health and Safety in Transition Houses: Implications for Staff Models*

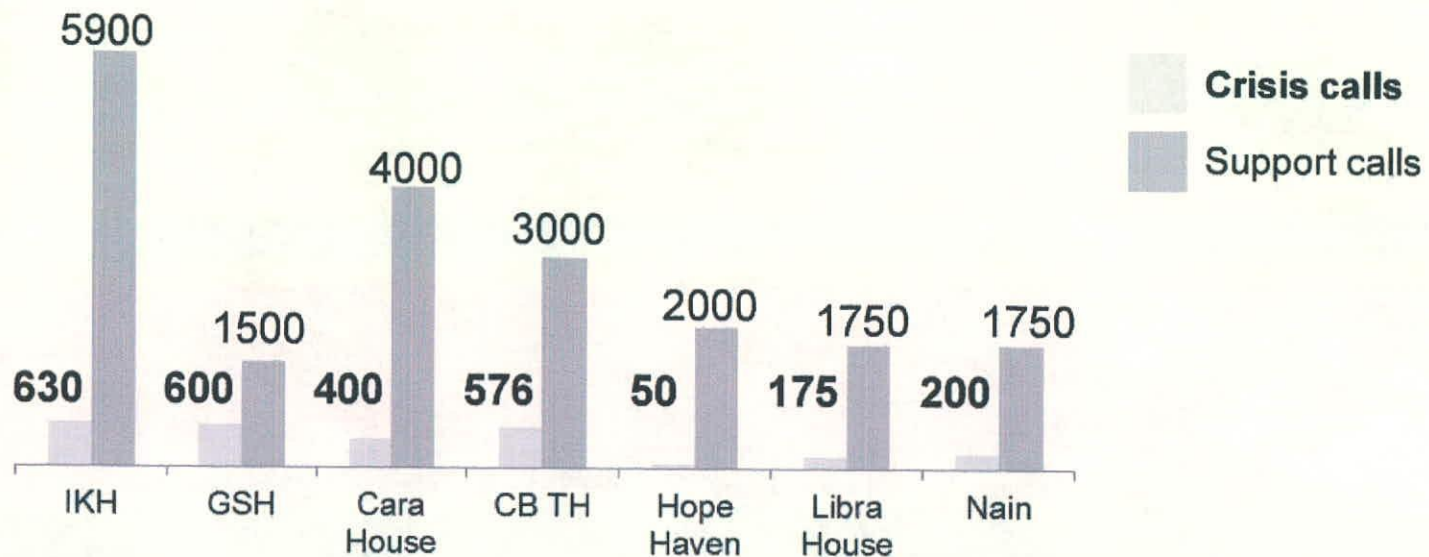
Highlights from the Final Report

- **Staffing demands**

- All the shelters operate a crisis line as part of their shelter service. These crisis lines provide vital services to women affected by violence. A staff person can not take a crisis call and deal with a situation in the shelter at the same time.

Highlights from the Final Report

Average # of crisis/support calls received by transition houses* 2009/10



Note: Figures do not include O'Shaughnessy House (which wasn't open yet), Kirkina House (which was closed part of the year for renovations), and Selma Onalik House (closed)

From *Workplace Health and Safety in Transition Houses: Implications for Staff Models*

Highlights from the Final Report

- **Staffing demands**

- There is usually a single staff person on between 6pm to 9am. This person is required to answer the crisis line, respond to the needs of clients, maintain shelter security, provide crisis counselling, complete paperwork, and offer intervention and problem solving for both clients and house issues
- 9am to 5pm staffing often relies on accessing the executive director and/or the child services staff person for assistance when required

From *Workplace Health and Safety in Transition Houses: Implications for Staff Models*

Highlights from the Final Report

“It is worth noting that the Provincial Mental Health Crisis Line is double-staffed after hours and in St. John’s, the line is linked with the mobile crisis response unit as well as the RNC.”

From Workplace Health and Safety in Transition Houses: Implications for Staff Models

Highlights from the Final Report

● Additional risk considerations

- If clients become aggressive, suicidal, or return to the shelter under the influence of drugs/alcohol there is a huge risk for conflict and confrontation
- Many women seeking safety at the shelter for abuse have disturbed sleep patterns, so night shifts are not necessarily quiet
- Unlike with many other service providers, shelters accept clients without medical and background files, so there is no prior indication of mental health problems, criminal concerns, etc.

From Workplace Health and Safety in Transition Houses: Implications for Staff Models

Highlights from the Final Report

- **Additional risk considerations**

- Women in the shelter come and go (including going outside to smoke). In most cases, a staff person has to unlock the door to let a woman enter. Although in many instances, doors are covered by security cameras, these entrances/exits are a time of increased security risk.
- Many sites have multiple levels, making internal monitoring of the shelter difficult for a single staff person

From *Workplace Health and Safety in Transition Houses: Implications for Staff Models*

Highlights from the Final Report

● Additional risk considerations

- While almost all the shelters report having some form of back-up emergency response, access to the RNC or RCMP is inconsistent (especially in smaller communities).
 - For instance, peace officers will not respond to a violent situation unless two officers are present. In at least one case, this has left shelter staff to handle a situation while an officer outside the shelter waits for a second one to arrive.
 - Some communities (eg., Rigolet) do not have access to “crisis button” service. Emergencies must be relayed to a provincial phone centre and then forwarded to the local RCMP.

From *Workplace Health and Safety in Transition Houses: Implications for Staff Models*

Highlights from the Final Report

● Additional risk considerations

- In addition, even if emergency backup does arrive to help a staff person in need, they may not be able to enter the shelter because of physical security measures (eg. locked door).
- Guns are widely available in homes on the North Coast of Labrador as well as in other rural communities
- Inadequate staffing, extra shifts, and limited vacation time take a toll on stress, thus affecting a staff person's abilities to perform her duties.

In Summary

- Some shelters have moved into a deficit budget with increased staffing costs. Some have been able to meet the budget using monies allocated for other purposes. (For eg., one shelter cut their public awareness officer position to improve staff coverage at night and on the weekends. However, they still were not able to achieve full double staffing coverage.) Most others continue to have night and weekend shifts with only one staff person working.
- When requested, Regional Health Authorities were not able to approve increased funding for double-staffing.

In Summary

- While dealing with the external threats from abusive partners is a real concern, there are internal threats within the shelter for staff and clients:
“While Transition house staff have external security measures such as locks, cameras, steel doors, etc. to decrease the risk of external threats, the changing needs of the clientele, the increased volatility of the environment, and the increase in drug and alcohol use by clients means there are risks from within the shelter to be managed as well.”

In Summary

- Double-staffing is considered the best approach to addressing safety and security issues because:
 - 1) It recognizes the multiple demands on staff time with respect to the needs for service from clients with increasing complexities
 - 2) It increases capacity for early intervention and prevention of incidents
 - 3) It complements existing physical supports such as security cameras, steel doors, etc.

In Summary

“Let’s not wait until this funding increase is implemented in response to a tragedy.”

– From THANL’s Oct. 14, 2009 submission to the Dept. of Health and Community Services