



Deputation to Community Development and Recreation Committee

Re: 14.10 - Survivors of Domestic Violence: Portable Housing Benefit Pilot

By Silvia Samsa, Executive Director, Women's Habitat of Etobicoke

September 20, 2016

Hello and thank you for the opportunity to share with you some of my experiences and recommendations for the Housing Allowance program for women who are fleeing violence. My name is Silvia Samsa and I am the Executive Director of Women's Habitat, and agency that serves women and their dependents who are fleeing violence. We are an active partner with the city on the poverty reduction file, and participate on your Community Advisory Committee on Poverty Reduction to help bring a gender analysis to the strategy.

As I spoke about yesterday in the consultation with your staff, I managed a Rent Supplement Program from 2008 – 2015 that sought to link women who were fleeing violence to private market housing by providing a subsidy over the course of the program.

The following are my lessons that I learned managing this program and recommendations that I am confident will enhance the outcomes of your, very similar, program:

- 1. Women who are not eligible for the Special Priority Program need to have access to a housing allowance.** The eligibility criteria for SPP program are so constrained that many women are not accepted. Not only does she have to have lived with her abuser to be eligible, she also has to have proof that they resided together. These criteria are based on very narrow definitions of domestic violence and doesn't consider that many women don't live with their abuser and if they do, frequently are not listed on documents accepted as proof such as the lease agreement. With astronomical private market rents, women and their dependents not eligible for SPP experience homelessness and hidden homelessness, which includes staying in shelters, with friends, family, in her car, or other precarious and dangerous situations. The rent supplement program I managed was available to women who have no other options, who were not on SPP. Women who were connected with a VAW counselling agency were referred to this program, and in partnership with several agency representatives, we assessed women's eligibility for the program.
- 2. Rent Supplement programs need to be delivered in partnership with VAW and women-serving agencies.** There is a very strong link between mental health, addictions and gender-based violence. Rent supplement programs in the past in the States have showed that people with mental health and addiction issues who are housed in the private market did not fare well. People need to be connected to social supports in their communities in order for such a program to work, especially during their transition phase, which was one of the key successes of the rent supplement program I managed. The Woman Abuse Council wrote a letter of support for the



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City's application to administer this program, and it was signed by our networks that represent dozens of women and VAW agencies. In that letter, we offer to support and work in partnership with the City to ensure positive outcomes and successes for women who access this program.

3. **The program needs assist women to plan for when the benefit ends.** This benefit program ends March 2018. It is unclear what will happen when the benefit program ends. Will she be left to pay private market rent on her own? Will she remain on the waitlist for social housing? Will she be put on a pathway to employment during the program? In the rent supplement program I managed, one of the criteria we assessed women for their potential to be able to pay full market rent independently when the program ceased. We helped her connect with skills upgrading and employment programs as well as childcare and counselling services so that she was set up to be independent and succeed. The 5-year rent supplement program allowed time for that. This program will need a review system that considers how likely a woman will be able to pay her rent post-program if she is not allowed to stay on the SPP list after she receives the benefit.
4. **This program will require an in depth evaluation of program outcomes.** We know from previous programs that some variations of rent supplement programs can succeed when the system is set up to ensure people receive holistic supports. And we know that in the past, rent supplement programs have isolated and failed individuals when these systems weren't in place. We have an opportunity to document and evaluate the implementation, strengths and weaknesses of this program and use it as a tool to work with the province to continue to refine rent subsidies and housing allowance programs that contribute to the spectrum of housing services available for those in need.

Women's Habitat looks forward to working with the City on this project to ensure the best outcomes for women and their dependents who are fleeing violence.

Thank you.