



A 'safer' space: Investigating ways to improve emergency shelter services for transgender and non-binary clients

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Good Shepherd Women's Services

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Contents

Key Definitions	2
Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
Methods	4
Literature Review.....	5
Interviews	6
Limitations	6
Findings.....	7
Challenges and concerns of transgender and non-binary people.....	7
Discrimination and Harassment	7
Privacy and the Built Form	8
Insufficient Staff Knowledge and Training	9
Gender Identity and Service Denial.....	11
COVID-19 and Service Demand	12
Lack of Funding.....	13
Improving the service experience for transgender and non-binary people	14
Accommodating Facilities	14
Staff Training.....	14
Fostering community.....	15
Reporting Practices and Accountability	16
Inclusive Policies.....	17
Funder Expectations	18
Staff Representation	18
Wraparound Services.....	19
Key takeaways and next steps.....	20
References.....	23
Appendix: Interview Questions.....	26

Key Definitions

Cisgender: someone whose gender identity corresponds with the gender they were assigned at birth.

Cisnormativity: the assumption that being cisgender is the norm.

Gender identity: each person's internal and individual conception of their own gender.

LGBTQ2S+ (or LGBTQ): an acronym that stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, and Two-Spirit.

Non-binary individual: someone who has a gender that blends elements of being a man or a woman, or a gender that is different than either man or woman.

Trans-feminine individual: someone who is assigned and categorized as a man at birth and whose gender identity is partially or fully feminine.

Transgender individual: someone whose gender identity is different from the gender they were assigned at birth.

Trans-masculine individual: someone who is assigned and categorized as a woman at birth and whose gender identity is partially or fully masculine.

Two-Spirit individual: an Indigenous person with a diverse gender identity and/or sexuality.

Executive Summary

Good Shepherd Women's Services (GSWS) strives to provide safe, welcoming, and accommodating emergency shelter services to anyone who comes to their door. However, the organization's leadership is aware of persistent safety and accessibility barriers that transgender and non-binary clients experience in the shelter system. GSWS commissioned the McMaster Research Shop to research the experiences of transgender and non-binary clients in the shelter system, as well as ways that shelter services can be adapted to better suit their needs. This report provides a summary of our findings and intends to inform GSWS's service delivery, including tangible policy and practice changes to better accommodate transgender and non-binary clients.

From September to December 2021, the Research Shop team conducted a literature review, as well as interviews with managers and frontline staff at other emergency shelters, to: 1) Understand the challenges and concerns of transgender and non-binary people wanting to access emergency shelter services, and 2) Highlight ways that shelter services can be designed to be more accommodating to transgender and non-binary clients. Our findings suggest that primary challenges and concerns of transgender and non-binary people pertain to service denial, discrimination and harassment from staff and other residents, tensions between the desire for privacy in shelter spaces and estrangement from other shelter users, and lack of staff training for their needs. These issues may be particularly pronounced due to the underfunding of the shelter system coupled with increased demand for services due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Elements of shelters that can improve the service experience for transgender and non-binary individuals include increasing access to secure private and autonomous spaces, improved staff training and representation, creation of an inclusive shelter community with increased visibility for transgender and non-binary people, reliable incident reporting mechanisms, procedures for recording and reporting formal and informal feedback from transgender and non-binary clients, adoption of gender-inclusive policies, and increasing access to wraparound support services.

This research was a first step in identifying opportunities to improve emergency shelter services for transgender and non-binary clients at GSWS. A major limitation was that, due to time and resource constraints, our approach did not include the primary perspectives of transgender and non-binary clients at GSWS, who are likely better able to identify context-specific challenges, concerns, and solutions. A next step for GSWS could be to incorporate their perspectives into service evaluation and improvement efforts.

Introduction

Good Shepherd Women's Services (GSWS) provides emergency shelter services for women and gender-diverse individuals dealing with abuse, violence, homelessness, poverty, substance abuse, mental illness, and other sources of adversity. Residents also receive counseling, safety planning, wellness programming, health care, and housing services. The organization strives to promote safe, inclusive, and culturally appropriate services and spaces as part of their goal "to offer services to anyone who comes to the door."

GSWS endeavors to provide a 'safer' space for individuals who identify with the LGBTQ2S+ community. However, leadership at the organization are aware of persistent challenges that members of this population, particularly trans* individuals, face in securing safe emergency shelter options free of discrimination and violence. As such, GSWS commissioned the support of the McMaster Research Shop to learn about the issue, with the goal of informing tangible changes to their services so that they are safer, more inclusive, and affirming for transgender and non-binary people.

The two research questions for this project are:

1. What are the challenges and concerns of transgender and non-binary people wanting to access emergency shelter services?
2. How can emergency shelter services be designed to improve the service experience for transgender and non-binary people?

This report is a summary of the Research Shop team's findings, which will be used by the Good Shepherd Women's Services to inform their own service delivery models, as well as policy review, development, and revision. The community partner may also share the report with other community stakeholders and agencies who offer emergency shelter services.

Methods

The research team relied on a literature review and interviews¹ to answer the research question, which are elaborated on below.

¹ The research team, in collaboration with the community partner, originally discussed the importance of primary data collection with transgender and non-binary service users as an element of this research. However, due to time and capacity constraints, this research activity did not occur.

Literature Review

The team looked for literature on the following topics:

- 1) Primary research or reviews outlining the concerns and challenges facing transgender and non-binary people wanting to access emergency shelter services.
- 2) Research outlining accommodations that can be made in shelters to improve the service experience for transgender and non-binary people.

In addition, when deemed relevant for the target population, the team reviewed articles relating to concerns, challenges, and accommodations in other social service or healthcare programs like mental health clinics, domestic violence shelters, substance abuse clinics, and housing services. The team focused on articles published after 2000 and was attentive to whether or not the research incorporated the primary perspectives of service users (as opposed to review articles or empirical research that relied on observation or perspectives of frontline staff/managers).

The team searched scholarly databases, such as the McMaster Library Database and Google Scholar. Search terms included, “transgender AND/OR non-binary AND/OR gender non-conforming AND/OR gender-diverse AND/OR transgendered AND/OR transsexual,” “emergency AND shelter,” “safer/safe AND spaces OR communities,” “best practices AND shelter AND transgender (or any synonym re: list above),” “accommodation AND shelter AND transgender (or any synonym re: list above),” “design AND shelter AND access,” “inclusive language OR gender-affirming language,”

The team also examined grey literature, including:

- Government reports
- Policy reports
- Shelter network reports

Grey literature was located primarily through Google searching.

A total of 34 primary research studies and grey literature articles were included in the literature review.

Interviews

To supplement the literature review findings, the team conducted seven key informant interviews. Informants were either managers or staff members at a shelter that provides services to transgender and/or non-binary individuals. Due to limitations around participants' availability, one interview took place via email. The other six interviews took place via Zoom in a one-on-one format between a research team member and a shelter manager or staff member. Interviewees were asked about their organization and their role, their perceptions of the challenges and concerns faced by transgender and non-binary people accessing shelter services, and their perspective on best practices and principles to accommodate this population in emergency shelter services (see Appendix A for the full interview guide). The length of each Zoom interview ranged between 30-90 minutes. Consent to conduct and record the interview was requested from the shelter manager or staff member interviewee before the interview took place. The recorded Zoom interviews were transcribed and analyzed along with the typed responses from the email interview according to a coding framework. Categories for the analysis aligned with the overarching themes arising from the literature, while also developing new categories for original information from the interviews.

Limitations

The research team faced a number of limitations when conducting the literature review and environmental scan.

1. *Lack of research with transgender and non-binary people:* Many articles did not focus directly on the concerns and challenges faced by the transgender and non-binary community. Of the 27 articles investigated, 12 focused on the broader LGBTQ2S+ community.
2. *Lack of research on the primary experiences of transgender and non-binary people:* Of the 15 articles that did focus primarily on the transgender and non-binary population, only five incorporated their primary experiences.
3. *Lack of research on transgender and non-binary people at (emergency) shelters:* Of the 27 articles investigated, only 16 touched on transgender and non-binary concerns in emergency shelters; the remaining 11 explored similar topics in other social and health services, such as mental healthcare. Of the 16 articles on emergency shelter accommodations, only six focused exclusively on transgender and non-binary populations, whereas the others discussed the LGBTQ2S+ population more broadly.

Findings

This section presents findings from both the literature review and interviews. We identified several cross-cutting insights, as well as a subset of unique insights from the key informant interviews. Reflecting our research question, our findings are divided into two sections:

1. Challenges and concerns of transgender and non-binary people
2. Improving the service experience for transgender and non-binary people

Challenges and concerns of transgender and non-binary people

Discrimination and Harassment

Existing research highlights discrimination and harassment as core barriers for transgender and non-binary individuals accessing emergency shelter services (e.g., Stotzer et al., 2013). In a survey conducted by Shelton et al. (2018), 60.7% of transgender people in shelter systems across the United States reported experiencing discrimination from shelter staff and users due to their gender identity and gender expression. Examples of discrimination include disregarding an individual's identity, pronouns, name preference, and choice of dress (Mottet & Ohle, 2006). In some instances, residents are housed according to their assigned gender at birth rather than their gender identity (Skinner & Rankin, 2016). While shelters can often provide healthcare resources and aid, transgender- and non-binary-specific aid is not always available (Shelton, 2015; Spicer, 2010). For instance, in our key informant interviews, a staff member at a local shelter highlighted that “transgender, nonbinary, and Two-Spirit youth do not see themselves reflected in the services offered at shelters which can lead them to feeling like they do not belong and avoiding accessing shelters and services altogether.”

Harassment, physical assault, and sexual assault by staff and other residents also reported concerns for transgender and non-binary shelter residents (Bardwell, 2019; Skinner & Rankin, 2016). Grant et al. (2011) found that 55% of transgender and non-binary residents experienced harassment and violence from staff and other residents, and 22% experienced sexual assault. Yet cases of harassment are often ignored. For instance, Abramovich (2017) found that while staff noticed transphobia among residents, they often did not recognize the significance of such incidents; instead, they believed that claims of “transphobia” was being weaponized by transgender and non-

binary individuals. Failure to identify incidences of discrimination and harassment enables future incidents to occur.

In women's shelters, trans-feminine individuals tend to experience greater discrimination from cisgender women residents and staff due to fear of potential assaults on other women residents (Mottet & Ohle, 2006). As a result, shelters have denied access or made the shelter environment unwelcoming to these individuals. In some cases, the ability to be accepted in women-specific services was contingent upon feminine gender expression (Ecker et al., 2021). A manager at a local shelter recounted that complaints made by service users regarding trans-feminine individuals who are transitioning occur more frequently than non-binary or trans-masculine individuals. Harassment and assault may also be particularly pronounced for trans-feminine individuals, who are more likely to experience sexual harassment in men's shelters (Lyons et al., 2016).

Privacy and the Built Form

The built form of a shelter concerns the physical features of the space and the design and function of any structures. This is of particular importance for transgender and non-binary service users given their unique privacy concerns, which arise from situations where their physical exposure in certain spaces can lead to or intensify harassment and/or discrimination. Key areas of concern include bedrooms, restrooms, and showering areas (Mottet & Ohle, 2006; FTM Safer Shelter Project, 2008).

Private bedrooms are generally considered a safer option in comparison to dormitory-style lodgings for transgender and non-binary service users (FTM Safer Shelter Project, 2008). One reason for this is because unclothed in front of others can be an uncomfortable, dehumanizing, and potentially dangerous experience, especially for transgender individuals (Mottet & Ohle, 2006). In our interviews, a manager at a local shelter discussed how in their dorm-style space, trans-feminine individuals and early transitioning women who still had masculine features were often targeted by cisgender women through comments like, "Why are you letting [in] that man?" and "What's wrong with that person? Why are they dressed like that? You're not really a woman." Instances like these can contribute to transgender women feeling unsafe and unwelcome in gender-segregated shelters (Ecker et al., 2021; Lyons et al., 2016).

Communal lodgings can also be an issue because they lack privacy for transgender clients to prepare their physical presentation (Shelton, 2015). In our interviews, another shelter manager discussed how they typically grouped individual residents together in a

room with two beds that, despite being an improvement from dormitory style lodgings, remained a challenge for individuals that had not come out as transgender or who were transitioning. For instance, for individuals who chest bind, being in a room with another resident while conducting this practice could result in them being unwillingly outed. Thus, shared spaces have the power to strip individuals' ability to inform other shelter residents of their gender identity on their own terms (Mottet & Ohle, 2006).

One shelter manager we interviewed debated the universal merits of private bedrooms over dormitory-style lodgings. They discussed how some transgender and non-binary clients may feel safer in an individual unit, whereas others might prefer a communal sleeping environment where other residents would be present to witness and respond to an attack if one were to occur. Another shelter manager highlighted that a history of trauma must be considered around whether private versus communal lodgings are appropriate. For instance, the manager discussed that they "had a trans-person who [had] been taken advantage of sexually as a trans-person, and [was] fearful to be in a room by themselves without a lock on the door." Thus, unless an adequate physical barrier is present, some transgender or non-binary clients may prefer dormitory-style lodgings over private and segregated accommodations due to their fear of an attack.

Another aspect of the shelter space that has been associated with safety and privacy concerns are bathrooms, where having single showers, separate bathrooms, and choice of bathroom have been noted as safety and privacy needs for transgender and non-binary shelter users (FTM Safer Shelter Project, 2008; Yu, 2010). These concerns are partly rooted in the lack of privacy and consequent safety issues when transgender clients are forced to access bathrooms according to their assigned gender at birth, rather than their gender identity (Yu, 2010). However, even when bathroom access is based upon each individuals' choice and gender identity, there are aspects of the built form that can contribute to a sense of limited privacy within bathrooms. In our interviews, a shelter manager stated, "our washrooms don't have doors from floor to ceiling. They're like stalls. And so I know for some trans folks, they feel like there's not a ton of privacy. We have showers with doors, but they're open at the bottom for security features, in case somebody passes out in the shower. We have to be able to see. It's better than a curtain, but it still feels like potentially, somebody could look underneath the door".

Insufficient Staff Knowledge and Training

Existing research highlights a need for more staff training on transgender and non-binary issues within emergency shelter services (e.g., Abramovich, 2014; Ecker et al.,

2021). Although some shelters have training programs regarding the transgender and non-binary population's needs, many of these trainings are not mandatory due to a lack of funding and have low enrollment (Abramovich, 2014). A lack of knowledge and standardized procedures for this population can be harmful due to the staff's inability to provide appropriate support and services to transgender and non-binary individuals (Redcay et al., 2021). For instance, Bardwell (2019), in interviewing transgender shelter residents, found that shelter staff would make assumptions about residents' gender, use incorrect pronouns, and exclusively use transgender and non-binary residents' legal names rather than their preferred names. Abramovich (2014) argues that staff assumptions and treatment of residents based on their physical appearance normalizes oppression and results in other shelter residents modeling this behaviour.

Moreover, researchers from the FTM Safer Shelter Project Research Team (2008) conducted qualitative interviews with 18 trans-masculine individuals in Toronto's shelter system and found that some of these individuals were forced into women's dorms out of concerns for their safety in men's or co-ed lodgings. In addition, some of these individuals reported being addressed by women's names and pronouns by staff. In one men's shelter, a trans-masculine resident reported that they were pressured by a staff member to undergo hormone therapy to ensure their safety among the other residents, who were men.

A lack of staff knowledge and training can contribute to an unwelcoming environment for transgender and non-binary individuals. In our interviews, a manager at a local shelter recounted that there was initially a hesitancy among some shelter workers to support people who identify as women, regardless of biological sex. Regardless of whether staff were vocal about their hesitancy or not, "people [picked] up on that: if you're not welcome somewhere, somebody doesn't have to say that in order for you to feel it, right?" As another one of our interviewees noted, "Cisgender staff can be sympathetic, however, they tend to have knowledge gaps about terminology, pronouns, non-binary people, trans-specific issues, recognizing transphobic microaggressions and expectations on education." Inappropriate treatment by staff can cause transgender and non-binary individuals to avoid the shelter system altogether, contributing to a lack of visibility and awareness among staff, which exacerbates ignorance about appropriate treatment of these populations (Abramovich, 2016).

One of our interviews contrasted to the literature, in that a shelter manager felt that the need to have regular conversations with staff regarding appropriate treatment of transgender and non-binary residents has declined in recent years, due to perceived

broader social awareness. From the manager's perspective, staff have actively created a safer space for transgender and non-binary individuals by encouraging the proper use of pronouns and validating residents' identities. Such cases of staff competency and respect have contributed to improving the shelter environment and the accessibility of shelter services for this population.

Gender Identity and Service Denial

Several studies have reported that LGBTQ, transgender, and Two-Spirit individuals have been denied access to shelters on the basis of their gender identity. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) found that approximately 30% of homeless transgender individuals reported being turned away from shelters due to their transgender identity (HUD, 2021). In particular, transgender women have been reported to be most frequently denied access to women's shelters (Skinner & Rankin, 2016; Ecker et al., 2021). In some cases, transgender individuals have faced eviction upon their gender identity becoming apparent (Skinner & Rankin, 2016). Reasons for denial based on gender identity are varied, but can include:

1. *Concerns for the safety of the transgender/non-binary individual.* Among youth, LGBTQ individuals have been refused from shelters out of staff concerns for their safety (Yu, 2010). Yu (2010) discusses several instances reported in the literature where LGBTQ youth were discriminated and victimized in the shelter space, including being forced to wear orange jumpsuits at a Michigan facility; at another facility, having their bedroom door removed by staff to prevent sexual activity; and being encouraged to engage in unprotected sex in order to contract HIV so that they become eligible for certain types of housing.
2. *Concerns for the safety of other shelter clients.* Shelters have sometimes refused to place transgender women in shelters with cisgender women based on their beliefs that this would endanger cisgender women clients (Mottet & Ohle, 2006). Some women's shelters have expressed hesitancy over housing transgender women who have not received genital surgery. This is due to the fear that without genital surgery, a transgender woman may physically or sexually assault another client, or the possibility may trigger other clients who have experienced abuse or sexual assault. Some women's shelters have also expressed concerns that men may dress up as women and pretend to be transgender to gain access to a women's shelter and assault clients (Mottet & Ohle, 2006).
3. *Belief systems underpinning social service organizations.* Lyons et al. (2016) conducted an investigation on the experiences of transgender women and Two-Spirit individuals trying to access women-specific housing and health services in Vancouver, Canada. They found that some transgender women and Two-Spirit

individuals have been denied access due to the centres' religious affiliations (Lyons et al., 2016). Specifically, they interviewed an Indigenous, transgender woman who was denied access to a detoxification centre. The participant described their experience, "I was trying to get into detox a couple weeks ago...and I was so happy when they accepted me. Anyway, they phoned me back and they said it was a religious organization. They couldn't allow transsexuals in there." (Lyons et al., 2016). Stotzer et al. (2013) discussed a study in the US where 36% of transgender individuals attempting to access social services reported either having bad experiences in the past or having been told explicitly by service providers that they are not welcome. At a gender-segregated shelter in Atlanta, confusion regarding where to house potential transgender clients escalated to the point where signs were put up on the main shelter door indicating that "no transvestites" were allowed (Mottet & Ohle, 2003).

Despite these historical trends highlighted in the literature, the shelter staff and managers we interviewed perceived a positive trend towards shelters permitting transgender and non-binary individuals access to their services. One staff member reported that the only reason a transgender individual may be denied service is because they are already accessing gender-based services in line with their identity (e.g., a trans-feminine individual may be denied access to men's services because they are already accessing women's services, and vice versa). This staff member also remarked that, "it is mind-blowing to me to think that in my time working here, we at one point required that anyone on the trans continuum, beyond hormone therapy, that they must identify as female. We've come a long way... We didn't know what we know today." Another shelter manager stated that over the last number of years, there has been a "conversation around, do we serve transgender [and] non-binary [individuals]? Are we equipped to serve? Should we be serving? I think, for a period of time, probably pre my existence, the women's sector was really reserved for individuals who were biologically women...I think over time there's been a lot of education around raising awareness around...where is our responsibility as a sector and as the system to support people who identify as women, regardless of biological sex".

COVID-19 and Service Demand

According to a participant we interviewed, it has become more difficult for women-identifying individuals to access shelter services amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. In our interviews, a shelter manager discussed how they have found more people identifying as transgender or non-binary at the door during the pandemic in order to gain access to their services. Since the women's shelter they worked at had stated they are an

inclusive space that accepts transgender and non-binary individuals, existing clients encouraged their cisgender friends to identify as transgender or non-binary at the door in hopes that it would encourage their acceptance into the shelter and ultimately give their cisgender friends access to services. The shelter manager stated that “it’s become an expectation in our space, like “trans-folks are here.” And it’s expected. It’s going to be happening.” They further explained that “one thing we have been seeing recently ... is women telling [their cisgender] friends ‘just say you’re trans at the door’, or ‘just say you’re non-binary’ because there’s such a lack of services right now that people are desperate to access. I wouldn’t say that I’d seen that experience three years ago, but since the pandemic, that has increased”. The shelter, in its aim to not turn anyone away, acknowledged this constituted a challenge: “It just puts us in a little bit of a spot. You want to respect somebody’s identity as they speak it. So that’s been challenging, because we never want to offend someone or not validate their spoken identity. We don’t have much criteria to access our space”.

Lack of Funding

Several interview participants expressed concern over the lack of funding for implementing gender-inclusive changes and accommodations within the shelter system, as well as for women’s shelter services overall. One shelter manager voiced that they felt “the women’s system is completely underfunded”, as they are “expected to do the most work with the least amount of resources”. This includes serving women with high mental health needs, high physical needs, substance use issues, and those involved in sex work, which creates multilayered, complex cases that require a greater number of resources to address. Similarly, a staff member at another shelter pointed out the current lack of funding for gender-inclusive services, programs, and training. They suggested that “a specific pot of funding for shelters to improve services, policies, and processes for non-binary, transgender and Two-Spirit folks would increase these opportunities”.

Funding was particularly a concern around implementing structural changes in shelters to create more privacy and safety for residents. According to a shelter manager, the pandemic has emphasized the need for more individual women’s rooms. They noted several challenges with converting family-style shelters into individual rooms, such as having to build additional bathrooms if existing rooms are split, having to build additional entries and exits, and addressing other complications while still meeting fire codes. Overall, they recommended that “as the needs in the sector have changed, we need more funding to be able to build buildings to accommodate those changes.”

Improving the service experience for transgender and non-binary people

Accommodating Facilities

As previously discussed, privacy concerns for transgender and non-binary shelter residents exist for lodgings, washrooms, and showering areas (Bardwell, 2019; FTM Safer Shelter Project, 2008; Mottet & Ohle, 2006). Our research findings point to several ways these facilities could be improved to accommodate these populations. One recommendation is for gender-neutral and gender-inclusive restrooms to be included on every floor (Nisly et al., 2018; Yu, 2010). Second, in an interview, a manager at a local shelter said that transgender and non-binary residents should have access to autonomous spaces. This could include offering them private rooms, if available, which is generally considered to be a safer option compared to dormitory-style rooms (FTM Safer Shelter Project, 2008). Though the manager discussed how most shelters do not allow residents to lock the doors to bedrooms and washrooms in case of an emergency, the manager then asked, “What else can we offer people that makes them feel safe? So if we can’t lock the door for these reasons, what else can we do to help you feel safe? You know; [would] putting one of those Canadian Tire alarms on the door [help]? What can we do to make this work for you?”

Staff Training

Adequate staff training can equip shelter staff to properly intervene in circumstances involving discrimination and harassment, create a more welcoming environment, and address the unique service needs of transgender and non-binary clients.

For example, in our interviews, a shelter staff member described how an instituted staff training program contributed to creating a welcoming environment at their shelter: “It’s hospital-y but it’s called Safe Words, and Safe Words has a number of different pieces around mutual expectations around staff disclosure, around how we share history of clients among each other. So it’s a whole bunch of different techniques that actually fall in well with that culture of safety and diversity, and so we employ those strategies and do a lot of training with our staff around that. And I think that that’s helped.”

Literature suggests that staff training should target transphobia and cisnormativity upheld by dominant belief systems (Pyne, 2011; Skinner et al., 2016). As one staff member commented in our interviews, “Conversations need to be had. You might have uncomfortable conversations, but you need to ask questions to best support them. We

have learned so much from the women we're serving. That's how we've changed their program based on the feedback we're getting." From another staff members' perspective, no single staff training can fully reshape entrenched practices and beliefs, but that it's nonetheless a catalyst for further work: "it's effective in getting us started [...]. So it's a good foundation. And I do think that it opens up dialogue and leaves room for individuals to, to carve out more learning goals, and for staff, for program development. So I don't think that in itself, that that's all that we need to do but it definitely helps. It gives us...to be able to hang these signs and it gives us a little bit of credibility to say and back it up when we need to, and to hold each other accountable – I think that's a big one."

Fostering community

The need for community, over and above inclusivity, has been highlighted in both the healthcare and shelter systems. Transgender women residing in co-ed shelters most frequently find support from other transgender women in shelters, but not necessarily from cisgender women (Ecker, 2021). According to Auerbach et al. (2020), building community between transgender and cisgender women can be helpful in creating effective health programming. However, cisgender shelter residents may benefit from developing knowledge and skills to inform their interactions with transgender residents, such as by learning about proper terminology and transgender identities. For example, one of our interviewees discussed how, when observing incidents in which residents misidentify transgender or non-binary people due to a lack of respect or understanding, they would calmly explain the importance of using proper pronouns and name preferences. Once shelter residents understood, they would spread the word to other residents: "They were the resisters at the beginning and now they're the ones leading the inclusive conversations."

Creation of LGBTQ2S+ spaces and services are another way to potentially foster community among transgender and non-binary clients. Participants of existing LGBTQ2S+-specific services have had opportunities to build friendships with other LGBTQ2S+-identifying individuals (Ecker et al., 2021). This can and has contributed to their overall wellbeing, as well as the potential of developing inclusive social networks (Ecker et al., 2021). However, Pyne (2011) suggests that having segregated spaces or programming could lead to further marginalization or stigmatization of transgender and non-binary clients (Pyne, 2011). For instance, segregating transgender and non-binary clients from other shelter residents may force them to out themselves by being part of these groups, which could place them in unsafe situations (Abramovich, 2014; Abramovich, 2017; Pyne, 2011).

Findings from the literature and interviews show that emergency shelters should make support for transgender and non-binary clients visible as a way to attract more residents from those populations (Ecker et al., 2021; Hall & Delaney, 2021; Nisly et al. 2018). Examples cited by a shelter manager include celebrating Trans Awareness week and putting the Pride flag up in communal spaces. They expressed how word travels fast within the transgender and non-binary community about accommodating services: “That’s really how our population has expanded through word of mouth from one trans-person to another...No massive advertising needed. It was once one person came in and felt good, and they would invite someone else.”

Reporting Practices and Accountability

Our findings suggest that greater accountability mechanisms are required to create and maintain an environment where transgender and non-binary clients feel safe and included. In our interviews, a shelter staff member noted that “there is a need for shelter services to improve accountability and address discrimination and harassment experienced by staff and clients.” One way to create accountability is through incident reporting practices. These practices must be impartial, and staff should be held responsible in scenarios in which their beliefs influence how they report incidents. For instance, as we discussed previously, the belief that individuals weaponize words such as ‘transphobia’ to get their needs met has been found to prevent staff from properly documenting instances of discrimination and harassment against transgender and non-binary individuals (Abramovich, 2014; Abramovich, 2017). Staff also note that it is important to “...ensure that experiences of discrimination and harassment are addressed in a timely manner.” These sentiments illustrate the role that reporting policies play in overall accountability within the organization.

Developing formal mechanisms to receive and record feedback from transgender and non-binary residents is another way that shelters can increase accountability. However, shelters report difficulties receiving formal feedback regarding transphobic discrimination and harassment from transgender and non-binary clients due to anonymity concerns. Multiple interviews highlighted an unfulfilled need for tools that can extract formal feedback from those with lived experience that does not inherently involve violation of privacy. In their statement, “As far as formal feedback, our evaluation instruments would be one method, however, we’re not really extrapolating who’s answering those evals.” This implies that there may be a need for diverse and anonymous ways for transgender and non-binary residents to provide feedback on their shelter experience, beyond conventional evaluation instruments.

An interviewee also acknowledged the value of informal feedback in stating that, “When we have individuals that are staying in our service, they will provide us feedback on their day-to-day experiences. They may, you know, like, shoot right over staffs’ heads to go and speak with management and so I’m privy to some of that information. And I would say that it could be around their experiences with other residents, or their experiences with some of our practices; and over the years, we’ve made many adjustments, like many community services have, to adapt to meeting needs better.” The staff member suggested that regardless of how they receive information about incidents of discrimination and harassment, they ensure that feedback coming from transgender and non-binary clients is recognized and impacts the organization’s practices. This suggests that developing procedures for recording informal and incidental feedback could help shelters make more decisions to improve the experiences of transgender and non-binary clients and that are grounded in their primary perspectives.

Inclusive Policies

There is precedence for implementing policies and procedures that codify the protection and appropriate treatment of transgender and non-binary people in shelters (Pyne, 2011). For example, in the City of Toronto, standards for emergency shelters include having a board-approved policy for providing safe and dignified services to LGBTQ clients (City of Toronto Shelter, Support & Housing Division, 2015). In the policy, City of Toronto shelters must not assume but rather ask clients for their gender identity, use correct pronouns, provide services to clients in their self-identified gender, and work with LGBTQ clients to identify specialized support practices. Finally, these standards encourage shelters to form partnerships with other community and healthcare services that are LGBTQ-positive to facilitate service referrals and to collaborate on in-shelter programming (City of Toronto Shelter, Support & Housing Division, 2015). The ability for these policies to create a culture of safety and respect for transgender and non-binary individuals across North American shelters has been documented in the literature (Mottet & Ohle, 2006; Yu, 2010).

Adoption of new policies may accompany the removal of outdated policies that are harmful and/or exclusionary towards transgender and non-binary individuals. For instance, Bardwell (2019) reported that some shelters’ policies restrict the use of transgender and non-binary individuals’ correct pronouns and names, and solely use what is on their official identifications instead, which may lead to a reluctance among transgender and non-binary individuals to access shelter services (Stotzer et al., 2013). In general, when policies were discussed in our interviews, shelter staff reported that

they had dropped or revised policies that disrespected residents' chosen names and gender identity. For example, one interviewee discussed, "We're speaking specifically about trans and non-binary people, right? Yeah, so our policy is that they can come into shelter and receive services the same as anybody else." They elaborated that their shelter does not require transgender and non-binary clients to share their identity and "if they disclose it to [shelter staff], it is still not even something we necessarily document." In addition, a staff member at a local addiction service and shelter for women recounted dropping a policy in which transgender women would only be served if they were undergoing hormone therapy, underscoring the importance of "believing that the person in front of [you] is the expert in who they are and what their needs are." Within the literature, policies that mandate confidentiality around transgender identity are recommended, in that a resident should be able to choose whether to disclose their transgender identity to staff or other residents. Staff may ask transgender residents how open they are with their identity and act accordingly (Mottet & Ohle, 2006).

Other policies that may be important for shelter services, as reported by one of our interviewees, include anti-racism and anti-oppression, trauma-informed care, and person-centered care policies. An interviewee suggested that "clients should be engaged in decision-making and must be embedded in organizational policies and processes." Another interviewee suggested that transgender, non-binary and Two-Spirit residents should be specifically included in the design and development of organizational policies to ensure their relevancy to the community.

Funder Expectations

Two of our interviewees suggested that funders play a role in supporting the experiences of transgender and non-binary shelter residence through the expectations they set. Both interviewees emphasized the need for funders to adopt inclusive language and to emphasize the importance of accommodating transgender and non-binary people. One interviewee suggested that if grants require emergency shelters to answer a question about how they specifically accommodate transgender and non-binary people, then the shelter applicant would be required to have or develop policies and practices to access the funding opportunity.

Staff Representation

Multiple shelter staff and managers underscored the importance of representing transgender and non-binary individuals among staff. One staff member indicated that asking scenario-based questions in interviews that can be used to identify an

interviewee's ideologies around transgender and non-binary individuals can help maintain an inclusive complement of staff. According to a shelter manager, ensuring that the staff complement is inclusive could allow staff to provide more effective support to transgender and non-binary residents. Representation should also include hiring transgender and non-binary individuals for both frontline and management positions, as well as hiring support staff (e.g., mental healthcare professionals) who bring a gender-inclusive lens to their practice.

Wraparound Services

Shelter staff outlined some of the unique wraparound service needs that transgender and non-binary individuals could be helped in gaining access to, including hormones, surgery, binders, and gender-inclusive mental health services; assistance in legal name changes; peer support advocates; and support in finding affordable housing. A manager at another local shelter underscored the importance of proactively working with residents to remove barriers in accessing these services.

A staff member at a local shelter indicated that there may be benefits in creating partnerships with other agencies that provide the above services. A manager at a different shelter also highlighted the importance of community partners but indicated that in some municipalities it can be difficult to find partners that focus on the needs of the transgender and non-binary population. Instead, they advocated for partnerships with other services that, although not specifically geared towards the transgender or non-binary population, were inclusive of these groups in their service design and delivery models. They indicated a need for a service "hub" that would allow service providers to have an awareness of specific services available to different communities in the municipality.

Key takeaways and next steps

Our research suggest that many emergency shelter services are lacking in their accommodations for transgender and non-binary people. Cases of discrimination and harrassment by staff and other residents, including misgendering, disrespect for gender identity and preferred pronouns, and physical and sexual assault are not isolated incidents: research suggests the majority of transgender and non-binary people accessing shelter services, particularly trans-feminine individuals, have been subject to these abuses. In some instances, shelter residents identifying as transgender or non-binary are housed according to their assigned gender at birth instead of their gender identity or may be refused service altogether. It may be especially problematic when transgender or non-binary clients are placed in shelters with dormitory-style rooms and/or gender-specific restrooms and showering areas because these facilities often lack the privacy or security features required for these individuals to feel safe.

A lack of knowledge, training, and resources may be underlying some of these trends. Our research suggests that knowledge gaps exist for some shelter staff, including a fundamental understanding of gender identity and expression, as well as the use of correct pronouns and the unique privacy concerns of transgender and non-binary clients. This ultimately lowers staffs' capacity to facilitate a safe and welcoming environment. While some shelters offer training on the unique service needs of these groups, they may be non-mandatory, leading to low attendance rates. Finally, demand for services—which has been exacerbated due to COVID-19—coupled with underfunding of emergency shelter services may preclude the adoption of provisions to improve experiences for transgender and non-binary clients.

Solutions to some of these problems may be within reach. Shelter facilities can be made more accommodating by creating gender-neutral or gender-inclusive restrooms on every floor. If budgets permit, creation of more private rooms and autonomous spaces would better accommodate gender-diverse clients. Otherwise, existing private spaces could be prioritized for these individuals. Basic security features, such as the installation of emergency alarms in rooms, could help prevent fear of harrassment or physical and sexual violence. Access to wraparound supports and services, such as gender-affirming physical and mental healthcare, assistance in legal name changes, and affordable housing can augment support for transgender and non-binary residents beyond what an individual shelter can provide.

Shelters should also strive to create a culture of inclusivity among staff and residents. Staff training should be implemented with the intention of providing personnel with

straightforward expectations for their conduct and tools that give them the means to contribute to the desired culture of the shelter. Fostering community among and between cisgender and transgender residents can further promote inclusivity. For instance, the creation of LGBTQ2S+ exclusive spaces and programs can facilitate social connections among transgender and non-binary residents and allies, while greater integration with cisgender residents could reduce the stigmatization and stereotyping that can occur when residents are segregated. Placing transgender, non-binary, and Pride flags and stickers around shelters, as well as celebrating Trans Awareness week, can help signal support for the transgender and non-binary population and normalize their inclusion in these spaces.

Lastly, developing concrete policies and procedures can institutionalize support for transgender and non-binary shelter clients. Toronto's city-wide policy for the provision of safe and dignified services to LGTBQ2S+ clients (City of Toronto Shelter, Support & Housing Division, 2016) can be a source of inspiration, and contains guidelines around respect for gender identity, pronoun use, and specialized support practices. Adoption of new policies should replace outdated policies, such as those assigning service users to gendered lodgings based on perceived, rather than stated gender identity. Finally, shelters could implement formal feedback mechanisms that allow for the identification of service concerns and needs specific to transgender and non-binary clients. There should be clear guidelines around what constitutes discrimination and harrassment so that all incidents are reported, rather than underplayed or ignored. There should also be processes for reporting informal feedback received from transgender and non-binary clients since some residents may feel safer disclosing feedback confidentially rather than through formal evaluation tools.

This research was a first step in identifying opportunities to improve emergency shelter services for transgender and non-binary clients at the Good Shepherd Women's Services (GSWS). Though there is a lack of scholarly literature evaluating the needs and interventions specific to transgender and non-binary clients, our key informant interviews helped supplement these knowledge gaps with the perspectives of frontline staff and managers at other Canadian emergency shelters. Despite this progress, a theme in our research was the need to take a community-centered approach in the design and provision of shelter services. Due to time and capacity constraints, our research did not investigate the primary perspectives of transgender and non-binary individuals who access GSWS's services, constituting a major limitation to this research.

For next steps, our research points to the importance of GSWS clients' involvement in specifying the challenges and concerns with shelter services, as well as being collaborators on the solutions. As such, GSWS may benefit from further investigation that incorporates the perspectives of those who have experienced their shelter system. Indeed, a major step towards creating inclusive shelters requires honouring transgender and non-binary individuals as experts of their own identities and needs.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

Section 1: Introductory Questions

1. Please tell me about [organization].
 - a. Prompts: Who does your organization serve? How long have you been operating? What's the organization's mission?
2. What is your role in [organization]?
3. How long have you been working in this role?

Section 2: Challenges and Concerns

1. To the best of your knowledge, does [your organization] serve, or has served, transgender or non-binary clients?
 - a. (If yes): Do you have an idea of what proportion of your clients identify as transgender or non-binary?
 - b. (If yes): Have you ever received any formal or informal feedback from your transgender or non-binary clients about [organization]'s services? If so, what has been the feedback?
2. Through your work, have you become aware of any challenges or barriers that transgender or non-binary folk experience in accessing shelters?
 - a. Prompt: Are you aware of any transgender or non-binary folks getting turned away from shelters? If so, what was the reason?
3. Based on your knowledge, once in the shelter system, how might the experiences of transgender or non-binary folk differ from cisgendered individuals, if at all?
 - a. Prompt: From your perspective, are there particular concerns that transgender or non-binary folk might have about the services or shelter environment? If so, please explain.

Section 3: Best Practices and Principles

1. Based on your knowledge, how, if at all, can shelter services be inclusive of transgender or non-binary folks?

- a. Prompt: Are you aware of any practices, policies, or other considerations within your own shelter, or another shelter, that have been effective in making services more accessible? If so, what are they?
 - i. Prompt: Are there other policies that could improve the accessibility and experience of shelters for transgender or non-binary folks?
 - b. Prompt: Do you have any ideas about the physical design of the space that might be important to transgender or non-binary folks?
 - c. Prompt: What about the role of shelter staff? How, if at all, can they contribute to the positive experiences of transgender or non-binary folks accessing shelters?
 - i. (If using own staff as example): Did your staff undergo any specific training to work with transgender or non-binary clients? Please elaborate.
 - 1. (If yes): Is it mandatory? What did you learn from this training? In your view, was it effective?
 - 2. (If no): Is it something that [your organization] has considered implementing?
 - a. (If yes): Please explain.
 - b. (If no): Why might that be?
2. From your perspective, what are some of the challenges in making shelters more inclusive of (or accessible to) transgender or non-binary folks?
- a. Prompt: Are you aware of any institutional or societal barriers that might disrupt shelters from becoming more accommodating?
3. Based on your knowledge and expertise, if a shelter wanted to change its design to become more accommodating to transgender or non-binary folks, what would be your top three recommendations, if any?
4. Do you have any final thoughts on what principles, practices, or designs could make shelters more accessible to and inclusive of transgender or non-binary folks?