

Transforming the Emergency Homelessness System



Two Spirited, Trans, Nonbinary and Gender Diverse Safety in Shelters Project

Summary Report, March 2021



Introduction

Acknowledgements

First, our sincerest thanks to all of the clients and service providers who shared their stories, wisdom and experiences for this project.

Thank you also to the Working Group:

- Ailee Galicia, Homes First Society
- Courtney Dorrington, Homes First Society
- Clare Nobbs, YMCA of Greater Toronto Sprott House
- Denise Knee, Fred Victor Centre
- Jacq Hixson-Vulpe, The 519
- Jennifer White, YMCA of Greater Toronto, Vanauley House
- Kellum Jaymes, Friends of Ruby
- Lindsay Parsons, Toronto Shelter Network
- Lo Goldsmith, Sistering
- Logan Boderer, Fred Victor Centre
- Lucy Gallo, Friends of Ruby
- Martha Falk, Sistering
- Reese Jones, YouthLink
- Sandra Vaughan, City of Toronto
- Saige McMahon, 2 Spirited Peoples of the 1st Nations
- Sonja Nerad, Toronto Shelter Network
- Zoonah Khalid, City of Toronto

Thank you to Faelix Kayn, Project Coordinator (Toronto Shelter Network) and primary author for this report.

“There can be no progress without our involvement.”

In 2020, the Toronto Shelter Network, in collaboration with the Trans Working Group secured a one-time capacity building grant from Shelter, Support and Housing Administration (SSHA) at the City of Toronto to undertake a study regarding the safety of two spirit, trans, nonbinary and gender diverse clients in Toronto's shelters.

The Transforming the Shelter System: Two Spirited, Trans, Nonbinary and Gender Diverse Safety in Shelters Project (Transforming Shelters Project) engaged service providers and two spirit, trans, nonbinary and gender diverse shelter-using clients to document experiences with, and opinions and ideas about, safety and inclusion in Toronto's shelters. The project aimed to better understand the unique needs and challenges of Toronto's two spirit, trans, nonbinary and gender diverse shelter-using populations, and to make recommendations that will help the Toronto shelter system become a safer, more accessible and more inclusive environment for these communities.

Methodology

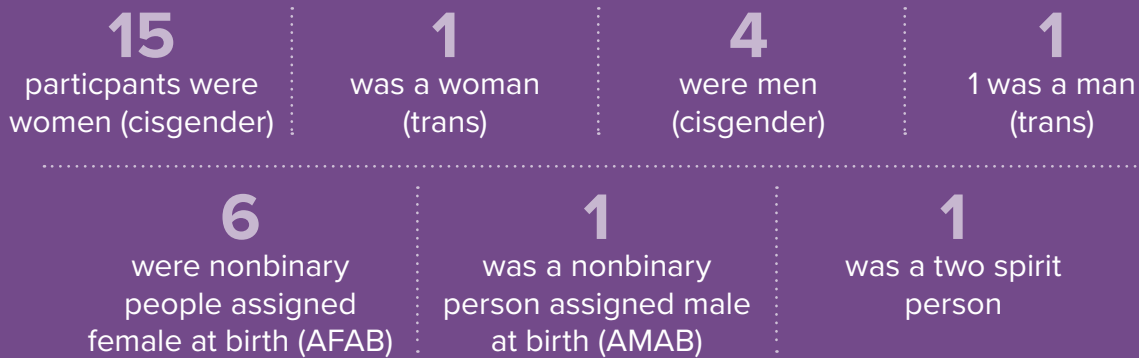
Two cohorts participated in the study – service providers and service users. Surveys and interviews were used to engage service providers and interviews were conducted with two spirit, trans, nonbinary and gender diverse shelter-using / client populations. The client survey-interview was designed from a strengths based and trauma-informed lens, so rather than focusing on experiences of victimization, it focused on solutions. Despite challenges posed by COVID-19 pandemic; access to internet and digital platforms, the short project timeline and limited funds for participant honoraria, 40 individual, including 29 service providers and 11 clients participated in the study. Both cohorts were diverse in terms of gender and race and the client cohort was also diverse in terms of other demographic and life experiences (i.e. age, mental health, substance use, etc.).

Who We Heard From

Service Providers

Demographic Data

Gender

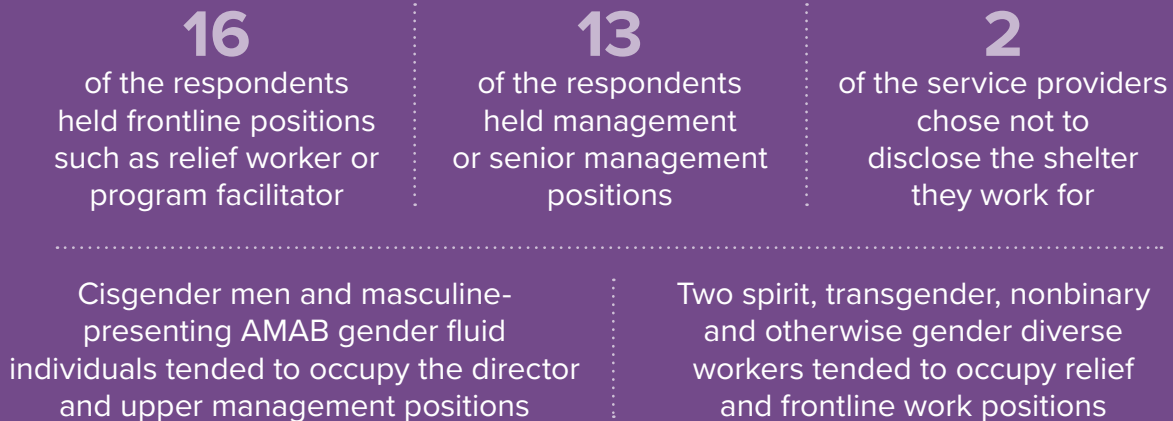


Race

Of the **20** service providers who engaged through Zoom interviews:



Role



Service Using/Client Populations

Demographic Identifiers



Findings

Gender diverse people are extremely diverse with complex histories and intersecting identities that impact their experiences as service providers and in particular as service users. This includes experiences of sexualized violence and intimate partner violence, histories of or experiences with trauma, mental health challenges and substance use, racism and colourism, neurodiversity and autism and deafness/hard of hearing.

The study found a disconnect between what many directors and management staff think is taking place within their agencies and what their front-line staff, particularly gender diverse staff, report. Overall, managers did not seem to fully grasp the frequency and severity of structural transphobia that exists in their organizations as expressed by front line gender diverse shelter staff and clients.

The study also revealed a disconnect between cisgender staff and staff who are two spirit, nonbinary, transgender or otherwise gender diverse. While most cisgender staff were sympathetic, they have knowledge gaps about terminology, pronouns, nonbinary people, recognizing transphobic microaggressions and expectations about education, while gender diverse service providers consistently had more thorough and nuanced knowledge of terminology and topics.



Knowledge and Learning

Knowledge and understanding regarding gender inclusion varies considerably across the shelter system. ALL staff should be trained in gender inclusion in advance of starting their employment, and further, all training services and programs used by shelters should be reviewed to ensure that they are of the highest quality and that the content is current. At the same time, training should not be restricted to staff, but also made available to ALL clients and all educational resources should likewise be reviewed for quality and currency. Finally, staff should be held accountable for translating learnings from training to their practice.

Organizational Practice and Service Delivery

The common client intake (Shelter Management Information System [SMIS]) form used by the City and its contracted homelessness service providers does not accommodate nonbinary and two spirit individuals. Rather the form tends to categorize gender diverse people as “men/women/trans” or “men/women.” When information collected by service providers cannot be reported accurately to the City, gender diverse populations may be misgendered, and when trans men and trans women are grouped together their authenticity as men and women dismissed. Further, intake processes used across the system vary, including the use of pronouns and referrals processes. It was suggested that developing a clear definition for gender inclusion could enable improvements in organizational policies, practices and services. Services and resources should be re-examined to determine relevance and should be updated to be more inclusive. This process would require the significant participation of gender diverse people. Hiring more staff who are two spirit, trans, nonbinary and gender diverse can help organizations to create safer spaces, accommodate the needs of and provide more support to gender diverse clients.

Findings

Infrastructure

Overwhelmingly, the study participants expressed the need for safer, more private and better quality homelessness facilities for two spirit, trans, nonbinary and gender diverse populations, particularly in terms of sleeping arrangements, bathrooms and showers. A dedicated 2SLGBTQ adult shelter was also recommended noting that at this time there are very few options considered to be safe for two spirit, trans, nonbinary and gender diverse youth age out of the youth system. At the same time, 91% of clients thought there should be more emphasis within the homelessness system on transitional, low income, subsidized and supportive housing, and creating a pathway out of shelters and into housing.

Organizational Policy and System Change

The study collected numerous stories and examples of discrimination, bullying and harassment experienced by gender diverse service providers in the workplace. Transphobia, coercive feminization and transmisogyny were identified by many study

participants as experiences common for gender diverse service providers. Gender diverse staff reported that often gender diverse staff are token employees, hired in low paying front line contract positions. Similarly, gender diverse clients, especially those who are black and/or transmasculine, and/or are “non-passing” transfeminine individuals experience heightened surveillance, bullying, discrimination, harassment, punishment, service restrictions/refusal and police intervention. Against this backdrop, it is understandable that many gender diverse people are hesitant to access services, and why some prefer to stay on the street, in emotionally abusive situations or in encampments.

Study participants called for improved accountability on the part of service providers and organizations to address discrimination and harassment experienced by staff and clients. They suggested that client engagement in decision making be embedded in organizational policy and processes and called for the use of transformative justice to reduce the shelter system’s need to engage the police and avoid escalating situations to the point of violence.



Recommendations

It is important to note that this study did not set out to once again document the injustices experienced by gender diverse populations in shelters. Rather, the aim is to put forward tangible strategies, short and long term in nature, for transforming the system into one that is safer for two spirit, trans, nonbinary and gender diverse people.

Knowledge and Awareness

- Ensure that all staff, including temporary staff receive training in gender inclusion and anti-racism prior to starting employment.
- Ensure that people who work with clients but who may not be directly employed by the shelter (i.e., security, cleaners, and caterers) receive training on gender inclusion and anti-racism.
- Create and deliver workshops on gender inclusion, led by gender diverse facilitators, for clients.
- Review and update all educational materials and resources.
- Distribute and display more inclusive and gender affirming resources and posters.
- Have pronoun pins/stickers available for clients and staff to wear.
- Invest in conflict de-escalation, harm reduction, and transformative justice training for staff and management.

“A good experience was when I had the opportunity to work with staff who was also queer/trans. Working with them, it really helped affirm me and my gender. Like seeing someone who is like you working with you and telling you advice and giving you advice and support. Really affirming.” —Client

Services and Supports

- Increase the number of mental health professionals who incorporate a gender inclusion lens in their practice on the staff team to enhance the care that is available to clients.
- Hire more gender diverse staff, including in management and leadership positions.
- Consider building positions for paid peer navigators who can advocate on behalf of gender diverse clients when connecting to external resources.
- Improve sleeping arrangements by reducing open concept sleeping arrangements and increasing privacy.
- Improve bathroom and shower facilities and arrangements (increase the number of private accommodations, repair all locks, ensure that gaps in stalls are not large enough to see through, etc.).
- Adopt reserved shower times in locations where privacy is limited.
- De-gender bathrooms.
- Offer free, non-gendered, menstrual products and disposal bins in all bathrooms. Refer to them as “menstrual products” and avoid gendered terms like “Feminine Hygiene”.
- Reduce reliance on the police by introducing transformative justice practices.

Organizational Policy and Processes

- Entrench the practice of providing pronouns and asking for other people’s pronouns; thereby avoid assumptions about gender or pronouns.
- Create gender inclusion committees and/or hire gender diverse consultants to work within organizations and identify areas that need improvement, most notably:

Recommendations

- » Improve human resources policies and procedures to protect gender diverse staff who experience workplace discrimination and harassment
- » Improve complaints policies and procedures to ensure that experiences of discrimination and harassment are aired and addressed in a timely and transparent manner
- Create a committee of past and current gender diverse clients to review organizational decisions that affect them.
- Incorporate conflict de-escalation practices, and transformative justice policies and processes into organizations for both clients and staff.

“*When I was first starting my transition... I recognized that being in shelter was a necessity but I was really, really reluctant on finding a shelter because the beds are (binary) gendered... and you can't ask (cis) people 'how are you with trans people?' because of course they are going to say they are great.”*—Client

Sector-Wide Standards

- Revise the SMIS intake form to ensure that it is gender inclusive and develop a standardized gender field and approach to the use of gender fields in all intake and referral forms used across the emergency homelessness sector.
- Develop and use a standardized definition of “inclusion” for the sector.
- Develop a curriculum for gender inclusion and anti-racism training for the sector that can be adapted for different knowledge levels and different service contexts.
- Advance the creation of a 2SLGBTQ+ adult shelter.
- Facilitate a formal and collaborative process to seek input and proposals for amendments to the Toronto Shelter Standards from gender diverse shelter providers and gender diverse current/former clients of the shelter system
- Hold all shelters accountable, through regular quality assurance audit, review and reporting, for meeting gender inclusion shelter standards
- Move the shelter system towards one that is less focused on being emergency focused to one that offers more housing options (i.e., transitional housing) and a pathway to low income, subsidized, supportive housing.

Conclusion

It is expected that some of the recommendations provided in this report are feasible short term/ quick wins that the Working Group can help to advance, in collaboration with TSN member agencies and SSHA over the coming months.

However, as the current barriers to inclusion and safety have long been embedded in individual behaviours, organizational policies, procedures and culture and sector wide systems and

standards, the pathway forward for each agency and site will be unique and many of the changes will require significant time, resources, funding and commitment from organizational leaders and the City of Toronto. Finally, the leadership of diverse two spirit, nonbinary, trans, and gender diverse people, especially from those who experience intersecting identities, is fundamental to ensure that change is undertaken correctly and to avoid repeating the mistakes or inaction of the past.