

# The Women We Serve

Shelters working with women with DisAbilities  
Accessibility Outreach



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Did you know :

A DisAbled Women's Network Canada(DAWN Canada)study found that although women with disabilities constitute approximately 13% of the Canadian population approximately 2.2 million women; 40% of their respondents indicated that they had experienced some form of violence in their lives.

People with disabilities represent a significant and growing part of our population. According to Statistics Canada, about 1.5 million Ontarians have disabilities - about 13.5% of the population. It is estimated that by 2020, approximately 20% of people in Ontario will have a disability. Enhancing the ability of people with disabilities to have equal access to opportunities, live independently and contribute to the community will have positive effects on future prosperity in Ontario

**Quoted from the DAWN Canada Study of 2001**

Ontario, Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, based on data *Participation and Activity Limitations Survey - 2001 (PALS, 2001)*, *Statistics Canada and population projections by Ontario Ministry of Finance.*

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16% of all Women are disabled.

Disabled girls are twice as likely to be sexually assaulted. (*Violent Acts Against Disabled Women, DAWN Toronto Survey, 1986*)

Disabled Women are more likely to be the victims of violence.

Support and services for disabled mothers are almost totally inaccessible or do not exist.

Women's services are often inaccessible to Women with disAbilities.

The unemployment rate for Women with disAbilities is **74%**.

The most inescapable reality for Women with disAbilities is poverty. The median employment income for a disabled woman is \$8,360 (Canadian). The median employment income for a disabled man is \$19,250.

(*Health and Activity Limitation Survey, [Statistics Canada](#).*)

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Before discussing the nature of disability and vulnerability to abuse, it should be emphasized that the biological/physical fact of disability does not in and of itself create greater risk. Rather, it is the perception of vulnerability and the lack of accessible services and supports that creates the risk. This project was made possible by the courage and support of three of the strongest women I have ever met . Without them this work would not be possible. I would not have had this opportunity and I would have remained in the dark. I feel they have helped me to see where I did not see, hear where I did not here, walk where I did not walk and speak what was not spoken Thanks you Pat , Marilyn and Christine.

Quoted from Tips for Women's Service Providers Working with Women with Disabilities  
September 20, 2001, Education Wife Assault, <http://www.womanabuseprevention.com>

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There are 4 main components of this project, each designed to address the gaps in service to women with disabilities are:

1. Develop an audit tool to determine level of existing services.
2. Conduct audits with Violence against women shelters.
3. Develop an out reach plan to connect with Women With Disabilities and build relationships with service agencies to coordinate best practices.
4. Develop a support group for women with disabilities who have been impacted by violence.

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## 1) Developing an Audit tool

### a) STRUCTURAL Considerations

Curb cuts, entrance or ramp, parking, call buttons, lighting, hallway widths,(912mm) fire alarms connected to flashing lights for women from the deaf culture, office accessible without creating a “getting in the way” feeling for the women, info available in alternative formats, signage, parking, side access.

### b)ASSISTIVE DEVICES Considerations

TTY, TAD, height of phone, compatible coils, oral or sign language interpreters, signaling devices , plain language, info available in alternative formats, Bliss boards, mouth sticks, reachers, talking books, appliance control systems , wheel in showers and bars, etc.

### c) ATTITUDINAL and ORGANIZATIONAL Considerations

Screening tools, willingness to develop strategies to assist WWD, collection of stats, knowledge of resources, partnerships or service agreements, budget lines for increasing accessibility, specialised training, level of comfort , etc.

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**2) . Conducting the Audits** Suffice to say before we started this project we knew that there were gaps in the VAW sectors capacity to support WWD

Some results of the audits

**Most** of the 1<sup>st</sup> stage shelters were wheel chair accessible, though there was considerable difference in each shelters ability to provide adequate service upon a women arrival.

**We** have 2 new shelters and they offered the greatest access to the entire building , where as the older shelter limited access to one floor and sometimes only one room of the shelter.

**All** shelters indicated that they had a TTY machine , however not all staff were trained on its use, nor was there a mechanism to ensure new staff were trained .

**All** shelters demonstrated some access to play area so a mom could be with her children. Very limited access for a child with disAbilities.

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## **Results of the audits continued**

**None** of the shelters indicated that their staff had specialized training.

**Limited** knowledge of community resources. Most knew of CNIB, CHS only.

**Most** shelters felt that they were not equipped well to meet the needs of women with psychiatric or intellectual disabilities.

**None** of the respondents indicated that they had recently worked with a woman with a disability.

**None** of the participants indicated having formal or informal relationships with community service providers for women with disabilities.

**All** shelter staff indicated a desire for more training. Hence the development of the training tool.

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Briefly what we developed was a 1- 2 hour information session that we then took to all the shelters, usually as part of ongoing staff meetings as there was no funding to support a full day of training. The purpose was to increase awareness of issues related to WWD who experience violence.

Key Elements of the training included

1. Introduction and Pat's story
- 2. Attitudinal exercise (Marshmallow )
- 3. Reality check quiz (Gage where they were with basic knowledge Of WWD)
- 4. Oppression and Barriers (How can we create barrier free
- 5. Next steps and what do shelters need
- Each participating shelter received a copy of the Audit tool, a copy of the final report and list of community resources

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## 3. Developing an outreach plan and build relationships with community service providers

**For this** part of the project, in an attempt to identify the most variety of service providers, we contacted service providers who assisted women in an assortment of ways. Although the project did not formalize partnerships we were able to have all agencies contacted agree to have VAW resource material placed in their newsletters, websites and onsite resource libraries.

**By promoting** VAW services to community agencies and organizations whose mandates are to provide services to WWD we have an opportunity to connect with women who may be experiencing violence. Disabled women in the community could then contact shelters to access information , support and services.

**In addition** TSW from the shelters could increase our capacity to further provide support and when necessary facilitate access to shelter services

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## 4. Running Support groups for WWD.

This was the original intent of the project. There exists a significant gap in support groups for women WWD offered by VAW agencies. To that end we the aptly named Women's Action Group hosted a series of information sessions at a community agency working with disabled persons. The interest was overwhelming and we are set to facilitate an eight week support group for women with disAbilities who have experienced violence.

Some consideration when developing a support group for WWD

Two of the most important considerations are physical environment and accessibility of information.

- ❖ Choosing a location consider : signage, ramp, weather, accessible transportation, buzzers and call buttons, elevators.
- ❖ Washrooms and on site assistive devices,
- ❖ Be sure to visit the site before you advertize the group.

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- ❖ When promoting the group it is critical to be clear, include international symbols that suggest your target group, ensure the information is available in alternative formats.
- ❖ Once interest in the group is established remember to ask each women a series of questions related to: format specific needs, transportation, assistive devices she may require, safe people in her network of support, emergency contact, comfort related to food and drink, all this in addition to her experience as an abused women .
- ❖ Transportation is a critical element it is important to consider scheduling , advanced booking, group home time lines.
- ❖ Sign language interpreters , attendant care , note takes both print and real time.
- ❖ Adequate access to power cords for women using electric devices.

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## Group Content

- ❖ The three women who embarked on this journey with me from the beginning were instrumental in developing the content of the support group.
- ❖ These women were courageous, tenacious, and focused. They were able to consult with women in the community in similar circumstances and their feedback is what guided the final content.
- ❖ The group is an eight week group containing the following topics What is abuse?, What are your options? What happens when I report?, Safety Plans and what to expect if you access shelter space?
- ❖ So as I am here today they are putting the finishing touches on the group material and we are scheduled to start in early fall the first session group designed support the specific needs of women with disabilities who have been impacted by violence

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- I hope that this information and set of tips help you to assist women with disAbilities in breaking free from the violence in their lives . I also hope that it helps you to establish alliances within the women's disability community to bring about broader social change in the lives of women with disabilities.
- A very special to Pat , Christine and Marilyn whose patience, guidance, courage and strength made all of this possible

Thank you