

Symposium looks at ways to improve shelters for women

Emergency coed facilities should have separate areas to ensure safety, says director of Elizabeth Fry Society

BY CHERYL ROSSI, VANCOUVER COURIER NOVEMBER 12, 2011



A worker walks through the homeless shelter at 201 Central near the Downtown Eastside. The Elizabeth Fry Society is hosting a symposium Tuesday to discuss shelter designs and operation.
Photograph by: Mark Van Manen, PNG Files, Vancouver Courier

Dawn Bergman's death was the last straw for Shawn Bayes, executive director of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver.

Bergman died outside after her encampment caught fire a few blocks from St. Paul's Hospital in December 2008 after refusing offers of help from police.

Bayes knew Bergman from Elizabeth Fry's womenonly shelters in Greater Vancouver.

She says Bergman chose not to sleep in coed shelters because she felt they were unsafe.

Elizabeth Fry is hosting a symposium on Tuesday called Effective Shelter Design to Promote the Safety of Women and Families where experts will be asked to share ideas about every aspect of shelter design and operation.

Bayes hopes good ideas based on experience will arise from the discussions "because everybody's afraid somebody's going to come in and threaten their operations or criticize them," she said.

Minimum specifications for the shelters would include bathrooms and showers with lockable doors.

Bayes cites one case where a door separating the women's and men's sides of a bathroom was replaced with a sheet until B.C. Housing asked that the door be reinstated.

Bayes also says that of the two staff members required at shelters with more than 10 beds, one should be a woman.

Full-service shelters should provide separate rooms for women so they don't have to sleep in rooms with men they don't know.

Emergency shelters should have separate areas for women, situated closest to staff, so they can choose not to sleep head to toe with strange men, Bayes says.

Shelter operators have told Bayes they can't erect walls because of fire and building code issues.

"I say, you know what, you manage cubicle space for offices - you put those movable wall[s] [in].

"There are options that you can work within if you just will think about it," she said.

"We always look at what the ideal solution is and say we can't afford that so we can't do anything.

"And I want to say there are things that we can do, and let's start moving there and doing those things."

About one quarter of reported homeless people are women, according to Bayes.

That proportion doubles to 50 per cent for the aboriginal homeless population.

Lawyer Alison Brewin, retired executive director of Westcoast Women's Legal Education and Action Fund, will facilitate the symposium.

She will use the information shared to write a report that will be posted on Elizabeth Fry's website, as well as shared with the symposium participants.

The symposium runs from 9 a.m. to 4: 30 p.m. at the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, 580 West Hastings St.

For more information, see elizabethfry.com.

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