

Study looks to share rural shelter expertise

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Paul Mayne. Credit: University of Western Ontario

Western Health Sciences researchers are drawing attention to the challenges of – and hoping to find solutions for – women who experience violence using shelters in rural Ontario settings.

With funding from the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition

Houses, Health Sciences postdoctoral fellow Tara Mantler will meet with shelter directors, front-line workers and women using the shelter in four communities – Huron and Lambton counties, as well as Strathroy-Caradoc and Haldimand Norfolk – over the next six months to find creative solutions to familiar issues.

"We're bringing together shelter directors from across rural Ontario to find out what they are doing and if it's unique to their shelter. Are there unique strategies happening in different rural settings and can we bring them together to set up best practices? These strategies have worked. Can they work for all? What are you doing that is helping you to build relationships?" Mantler said.

"The idea is once with have that set of best practices we can continue on by disseminating them far and wide into more [rural areas](#)."

Her work, conducted alongside Nursing professors Kim Jackson and Marilyn Ford-Gilboe, builds on preliminary research done at the university a year ago which looked at the health outcomes for women who experience [violence](#) using shelters in rural vs. urban settings.

"If you go to a shelter in an urban centre, they may refer you to a doctor who understands specific aspect of violence against women. But in a rural setting, there's usually one doctor – you have no choice," Mantler said. "They can't manipulate the system like that. Instead they are looking at other strategies like community building or relationship building to help other services understand what violence against women is about."

There are drawbacks to rural shelters (fewer services, less access and difficulty with anonymity). However, Mantler stressed there is also trailblazing work being done in those facilities around education, community partnering with outside services, self-esteem and capacity

building.

Instead of lamenting how rural centres are not like urban centres, the thinking needs to shift to exposing the unique capacities of rural facilities, Mantler said. Hence, the goals of this recent study.

Referring rural [women](#) to urban centres is not the solution.

"Social support and connectivity is important. Pull a woman out the rural setting and drop her into an urban setting; she will be OK for the few minutes she is there. However, she has no ties there; she is not going to stay; and then she will fall right back. We are just perpetuating the loop of violence," Mantler explained.

"If we can solve the problem, or offer up the resources so she can deal with it in her own community, she is more likely to stay out of that violence. A lot of that is around relationships she can create in rural settings that they cannot in urban settings. Because you have that connection, and the strength of those relationships, you can leverage that towards change."

Mantler added the study is about giving the rural context a voice, which often gets lost in the urban voices that tend to dominate.

"Rural settings are facing a lot of barriers around marginalization," she said. "This is allowing the rural shelters the platform and the opportunity to have voice; to get those ideas flushed out and understand what's happening."

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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