

Subgroup Report

Shelter Experience Newcomer Women

This report summarizes data from the Women with Lived Shelter Experience HEAL Group. Delivered in partnership with Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic, Toronto, implemented from October 2024 to June 2025 with a total of 3 eligible participants.



Storytellers, Sunshine After the Rain



Coming Together, Journeys of Love

Participant Profile

All participants identified as heterosexual, of Black-African and Latin American descent. One woman was from Sierra Leone, and one woman was from Peru. sexual woman of Latin American origin.

Participants reported they were unable to meet their daily needs including food, rental costs, child care etc.

This group had mixed immigration status's including immigration status non-status and Canadian citizen. Participants held both full time work and returning to work.

Referrals and Support Needs

All women had shelter experience identified mental health counselling, employment support, and assistance with obtaining legal status as their primary needs.

The "Shelter Experience Group," a HEAL program subgroup, focused on newcomer women with lived experience in Toronto's shelter system. This cohort experienced challenges resulting in a smaller cohort with a total of 3 participants.

Partnering with shelter organizations revealed challenges including limited capacity to implement an expressive arts program, staffing instability, transitional nature of shelter participants, lack of program space, and organizational transitions.

In addition, the program began with 8 eligible participants registered in the program, however, retention was affected by ongoing housing instability, including evictions and transitions out of shelters, as well as competing priorities such as employment and English language classes. Limited readiness to engage in a structured program and inconsistent communication, often driven by precarious living situations, further impacted attendance. These challenges reflect broader systemic barriers faced by newcomer women with shelter experiences, whose ongoing housing and income insecurity constrain sustained program participation.

Quantitative Findings

Shelter Experience Newcomer Women

Quantitative data were collected using pre- and post-program surveys. It measured changes in participants' self-efficacy and knowledge of available support services using a 5-point Likert scale. Results reflect group averages and overall outcomes.

Self-Efficacy:

- Sense of belonging within the community increased by 11%, whereas feeling a sense of safety and trust in current relationships decreased by 9%
- Feelings of low self-esteem decreased by 50%, however, anxiety from past traumas increased by 7%
- There was a 30% reduction in participants who blame themselves for things that had happened
- There is a 6% increase in participants' ability to address issues of violence, along with the challenges that participants face to communicate their challenges remaining constant.

Knowledge of Rights & Services:

- 44% increase in participants having an understanding and knowledge of their rights in Canada. There is a similar increase in participants being aware of support services and resources that they can access in their community, relating to safety and violence
- 19% of participants reported an increase in taking action to access support services and resources to improve their situation
- 25% increase of participants reported are trying to experience their situation more positively.

Impact Summary

The HEAL program significantly enhanced participants' knowledge, skills, and well-being. All participants reported increased understanding of their rights, available services, and mental health strategies. Data indicate that the HEAL program had a positive impact on participants' well-being, social connections, and satisfaction with the program. Key outcomes include:

- 30% increase in participants getting emotional support from others
- A 9% decrease in participants being comfortable sharing their lived experience with friends and family
- 25% increase in participants who are trying to see their situation more positively

Takeaways

The quantitative data show that the participants experienced greatest improvement in their sense of belonging, self esteem, and understanding and knowledge of support services and resources relating to safety and violence.



Qualitative Findings

Shelter Experience Newcomer Women

Qualitative data were collected through pre- and post-program surveys, in-program feedback surveys, focus group discussions, and follow-up interviews at 3 and 6 months. The purpose was to explore participants' experiences of the HEAL program.

Knowledge & Wellbeing: Participants shared that they have started to rely on simple, accessible coping strategies – like breathing techniques, walking, or listening to music – when facing real-time stress. They find art-based activities less practical in the moment due to the effort required to gather materials. The HEAL program has helped them to shift their perspectives and cultivate gratitude. They report having learned to recognize and consciously address stress, and many are now sharing these tools with their children and friends.

“...for the coping strategies, I've not only used the breathing technique, I've tried... I love music, so sometimes when it's just... so much for me, it's just too overwhelming. I just, you know... tend to listen to music more.” – Participant

Community and Connection: The HEAL group served as participants' first meaningful community connection. Sharing struggles and receiving empathy from others with similar experiences encouraged them to reach out to build broader community ties. The HEAL program has raised awareness on the importance of building a supportive community for their own and family well-being.

“I guess it has brought my awareness to, oh, you know what, I need to reach out... Before I wasn't aware of, you know, you need... people, even though you don't have family, you know, you need to reach out, right?” – Participant

Building Healthy Relationships: Participants noted that open communication and well-defined boundaries were important factors in a healthy relationship. Post program, they noted that by prioritizing self-love and self-care, they are better able to support others, especially their children.

“I think happiness should not depend on other people, but it should depend on ourselves. We need to show ourselves love first before others, that is what I have learned and experienced.” – Participant



Takeaways

Participants built better knowledge and wellbeing, and learned techniques to better cope when faced with stress. They have also built community and connection through shared experiences. Finally, participants were able to better identify key factors in a healthy relationship.

The drawing exercises were helpful, my dad is an artist so it was helpful to go back to my upbringing of art forms- Participant

Future Considerations

Shelter Experience Newcomer Women



Reducing Barriers to Accessing Foundational Services

Participants identified legal status, employment, and system navigation as key support needs, yet face barriers when accessing services. Strengthening warm referrals, legal information sessions, and individualized follow-up support can help participants better understand their rights, reduce fear of institutions, and take sustained action toward stability and independence.

Supporting Social Connection and Trust-Building After Shelter Experiences

HEAL served as participants' first meaningful community connection following shelter experiences, offering a safe space to share and be understood. Future programming should continue women-only, trauma-informed group spaces, while incorporating peer support opportunities, community mapping, and supported outreach to help participants gradually build broader social networks and reduce isolation.

Prioritizing Practical and Accessible Coping Strategies

Participants favored simple, low-effort coping tools, such as breathing techniques, that could be used in real-time moments of stress, especially while navigating unstable housing or caregiving demands. Programs should prioritize practical, easily accessible wellbeing strategies, while offering flexible arts-based options that do not require extensive materials or preparation.

Building Confidence to Share Experiences and Seek Emotional Support

While participants reported increased self-esteem and sense of belonging, fewer felt comfortable sharing experiences of violence or seeking emotional support outside the group. Continued opportunities for guided reflection, normalized discussion of boundaries, and peer validation can help participants build confidence in expressing their needs and receiving comfort from trusted individuals.

Sustaining Engagement to Support Long-Term Stability and Wellbeing

Improvements in self-efficacy and service access occurred alongside ongoing housing and settlement challenges, underscoring the need for longer-term engagement. Follow-up sessions, booster workshops, and consistent facilitation can help participants maintain progress, adapt coping strategies over time, and continue building stability beyond the shelter system.



Learn more at Access Alliance Arts for Family Health

Connect

Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services
arts@accessalliance.ca

Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic
www.schliferclinic.com
(416) 323-9149

