The 24 Hour Drop-In at Sistering:
Women’s Oral Histories
Project Update

Background

Sistering’s Drop-In converted to 24/7 in 2015 after activists lobbied City Hall to demand low barrier drop-in centres for women, including transgender women, whose needs were not met by existing shelters and agencies. We wanted to find out if the women who needed a 24/7 drop-in are being helped, and what things are like now that Sistering is open 24 hours.

The Project

We formed a collaborative research team of four participant women peer researchers, one former Sistering staff member, and a professor and two students from the University of Waterloo, using funding from Women’s College Hospital and the Harding/Claxton HSS Endowment Fund. We wanted to hear in women’s own words what their experiences are like when they use the 24 Hour Drop-In. We held a focus group of 12 women and interviewed 43 women from June-Sept 2018.

What we learned

We learned a lot from the women who generously shared their stories with us. We learned that Sistering is the only option for many women: for these women, the rules that some agencies have about curfew, substance consumption, and providing one’s name create too high a barrier for them. Many women said they would be sleeping outside if Sistering did not have a 24 hour drop-in where they could sleep. Women described what low barrier service means to them, and used words like freedom, dignity, independence, and choice to explain why they needed to come and go when they wish, why they needed harm reduction supplies for themselves or for friends, and why they felt safer when they did not have to give their name. The women we interviewed also appreciated that they did not feel judged or stigmatized at Sistering when they picked up harm reduction kits. Some women said that this helped them find dignity, and it also helped them make healthy choices.

We also learned that women are concerned about violence and conflict in the drop-in. Many women described drama, yelling, theft,
Our conclusions

Homelessness is a trauma, and has physical, emotional, and mental effects. Many participants at Sistering are experiencing forms of trauma, and many have complex mental health needs and consumption needs. Participants at Sistering are at different places on their paths, and Sistering plays a different role in their well-being over time. Women may have different needs when it comes to low barrier: some women need low or no barriers to get access to drop-ins and shelters, and some women want higher barriers and more rules to feel safe and feel that things are fair. Members of our research team had different ideas about best solutions. A low-barrier drop-in like Sistering seems to be the only option for many women, who would otherwise not have a safe place to find shelter and sleep. Since the drop-in spaces at Sistering are always full, this means that more low-barrier spaces, or drop-ins, should be made available to meet the needs of a diverse group of women with a range of needs.

Next steps

- Share the project findings and conclusions with the Board of Directors at Sistering, the Sistering community, local media, and the City of Toronto
- Plan for discussions with Sistering participants about possible project ideas for 2020

The team

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