



Vernon Women's **Transition House** Society

HISTORY

The concept of Vernon Women's Transition House arose January 16th, 1975 when a group of local women got together to plan an International Women's Year celebration. A women's centre was subsequently opened in early July of that year, with funding from Secretary of State and Canadian Mental Health Association. Activities such as consciousness raising groups, women's health groups, yoga, massage, macramé and ageing workshops were held. Lobbying for a transition house began to take place.

As more women in the community were coming forth about being abused by their husbands and having nowhere to go for safety it became increasingly apparent that a Transition House was needed in the Vernon area. Lobbying accelerated and the effort was successful and Vernon Women's Transition House's initial funding was in place in 1976 and was opened in the old United Church Manse on 27th Street. . The community rallied to provide furnishing and household items. Service groups were approached for donations and gradually the house was equipped.

Casimir Court was acquired by the Society through a CMHC mortgage was operated as Second Stage Housing for women leaving the Transition House; Specialized Victim Assistance Program was added and then Vernon Girls' Residential Attendance Program rounded out the services offered to women and girls.

The location of the Transition House changed from the Manse to the original house on 26th Street. This location became inadequate for the need and the community raised over \$750,000 in 1993 to build a new Transition House on the existing lot. This present Transition House is one of the finest facilities of its kind in Canada. As well, in the early 1990's provincial funding became available to offer an independent counselling program for women (Stopping the Violence) and Children Who Witness Abuse Counselling for children.

Since the year 2000, the services have responded to community need by focusing Second Stage toward serving pregnant and parenting teen mums in the Support to Young Parents Program. As well, the Vernon Girls' Residential Attendance Program was discontinued, due to ongoing conflict with other programs residing in the Transition House.

A dramatic step toward the way services are organized, delivered and planned came when the Society's first strategic plan was developed in 2001. We are currently working on our second plan, which takes us to the year 2010.

In 2005, several additions to services were made. Children Who Witness Abuse expanded to Armstrong, Outreach Services Program responds to the needs of women not needing or wanting to stay at the transition house, a Child and Youth Worker joined the team at the transition house, a Prevention and Awareness Program was added, and most recently, a licensed child care centre was added for the young parents at Casimir Court.

In 2006, the Society engaged with Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARC) to conduct a thorough organizational review. Noteworthy recommendations were to increase the leadership capacity of the organization, clarify Board and staff roles by adopting Policy Governance and increase services and staff available to families staying in the Transition House. These recommendations have been addressed through the hiring of Residential and Community Programs Managers, fully adopting the Carver Model of Board Governance at the Annual General Meeting in June 2008, and implementing increased staffing and programming in the Transition House.

Also in 2006, efforts to create and provide affordable housing to women leaving abuse and their children were complicated by a downturn in the economy and reduction in government funding for housing projects.

Partnerships and collaboration are a way of doing non-profit business, with a reduction in available resources and a willingness to work together to solve community problems.

Some significant partnerships for the Vernon Women's Transition House Society are with the *RCMP, North Okanagan Youth and Family Services, Interior Health Authority, Vernon Jubilee Hospital, Splatsi'n Indian Band, First Nations Friendship Centre and Regional Transition Houses*. 2009 saw an increase in partnerships and collaborations with the beginning of *Sexual Assault Services Team, and Integrated Case Assessment Team*.

Justice related services were added to our complement in 2010, when The Legal Advocacy Program (*funded by the Law Foundation*) and the Legal Services Outreach Program (*funded by Legal Services Society*) were initiated.

Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies granted VWTHS membership in their national association in 2011. CAEFS mandate is to address issues that cause criminalized behaviour and to support women and girls who have come into conflict with the law. In 2012 VWTHS and Correctional Services Canada contracted to provide support services to women who had finished their prison sentences. Until this, there were no services like this in the Okanagan.

Plans to collaborate with other agencies to provide administrative services were realized in 2012. VWTHS to begin the transition process in July 2012.

The Vernon Women's Transition House continues to evolve. Staff is becoming more qualified and professional, and services are becoming more specific to providing shelter and support to women leaving violence in their intimate relationships. As we become more focused with our service, we strive to retain the grassroots kind of atmosphere of women helping women that initiated the conception of the Vernon Women's Transition House Society more than 30 years ago.

Ninke Beeksma, was hired in April 2013 to replace Debby Hamilton as the new Executive Director for Vernon Women's Transition House Society. Ninke has worked in the social services sector most of her professional career and she believes in the principle of caring for people in distress. Her goal is to motivate, support and encourage VWTHS staff, while providing overall direction and planning to oversee the accomplishment of VWTHS's mission.