

COVENANT HOUSE  
**TRAFFICK STOP**

Sharing Knowledge to End Sex Trafficking

# Developing a Transitional Housing Program

For Survivors of Sex Trafficking

# Introduction

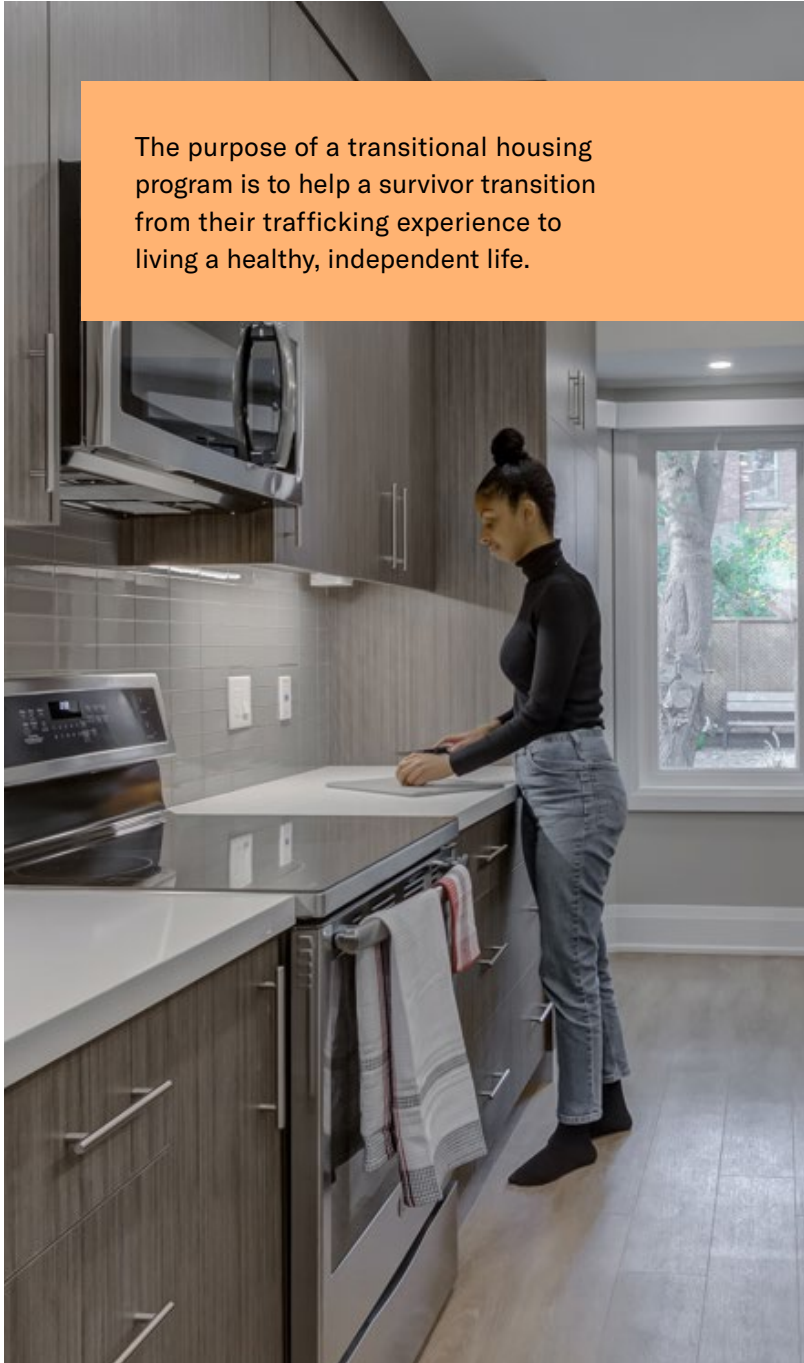
Sex trafficking is happening in communities all across Canada. When developing support services for survivors, it is important to assess the specific needs in your community. Consult with local survivors, service providers, law enforcement and other agencies doing similar work to gain an understanding of what service gaps exist and what supports are needed.

As survivors may have endured significant trauma, the impact from their experiences can result in complex needs requiring specialized support. Transitional Housing can be a practical and ideal option when a safe space for healing and recovery and/or intensive care is needed. We have seen how the community, connection and engagement fostered by this type of program can support positive outcomes for survivors.

Comprehensive and specialized support that helps address the mental, physical and emotional needs specific to a survivor's experience of exploitation are vital. Specialized support is crucial as survivors often face experiences that trigger shame or barriers due to stigma. They may also fear being preyed upon or exploited again. Providing opportunities to gain skills needed to live independently, such as job training and education, are also advantageous.

This guide outlines various considerations for developing a transitional housing program for survivors of sex trafficking. This information is based on promising practices from Covenant House's experiences and learnings from developing and operating this type of programming. The extent of what your program offers will largely depend on the needs of your community and capacity of your agency.

To learn more about our agency's anti-sex trafficking work, visit our [Milestones](#) page and [our anti-trafficking plan](#).



The purpose of a transitional housing program is to help a survivor transition from their trafficking experience to living a healthy, independent life.



# Program Vision

Start with articulating a vision to lay the foundation for your program. Ensure key stakeholders, such as your board, executive team and community leaders/organizations like your local Children Aid Societies and police endorse what you are trying to do.

Your vision and philosophy will intertwine with how you work with survivors and should mesh with your model of care. Client voice is extremely important when you begin program design. Use a co-design approach when you get to this stage.

A trauma-informed approach is an industry best practice for working with survivors of sex trafficking.



For survivors of sex trafficking, recognizing their experiences of trauma, and how these experiences have affected them are vital to being able to provide the care they need. For more information about our agency's model of care, click [here](#) or visit the [Trauma and Trafficking](#) section.

# Program Development

## Residents

A good place to start when developing a transitional housing program is who you want to support. From there, you can build out the necessary program services, structure and staffing needs.

Here are some considerations as you begin:



GENDER  
IDENTITY



AGE



STAGE IN THE  
PROCESS OF EXITING  
THEIR TRAFFICKING  
SITUATION



SUPPORT NEEDED



READINESS TO  
ENGAGE AND MAKE  
CHANGES

The stages of change model is a useful tool to assist you in assessing where a survivor may be at in their journey, what kind of support they need and guide your engagement. This theoretical model breaks down different phases in an individual's readiness and ability to make change happen. An important note is to recognize that this is not a linear path; a survivor can move to the next stage on one day and two stages back on another. For more information about this theoretical model, [click here](#).

## Living Arrangements

There are many different types of housing programs offering varying living arrangements. This can range from relatively independent living in a private apartment to communal living in a shared facility.

For housing programs that involve shared spaces, thinking about how the residents will interact with each other is crucial. For example, having residents at very different stages of their journey can potentially introduce volatility in the environment and compromise any progress in healing made.

Also, if one individual is still connected to their trafficker, this may jeopardize the safety of the other residents. Individual needs can also vary dramatically, making it a challenge to satisfy them all. For these reasons and many others, we suggest grouping a relatively similar client group together.

## Program Services

Consider the following as you determine what services to offer. All program services should incorporate a trauma-informed approach, a harm reduction perspective and be mindful of cultural sensitivity:

- Basic necessities like shelter and food
- Health care—mental, physical and spiritual
- Counselling, such as a trauma-informed or a trauma therapist
- Support with substance use
- Education, including life skills—cooking, financial literacy, budgeting, etc.
- Job training





## Program Structure

Determining the budget early in the process helps to ensure that you build a program that accurately reflects the needs of the community and is sustainable. Ongoing input from survivors and front-line staff can help balance the structure of the program while ensuring it satisfies the needs of those you're supporting.

Working from a trauma-informed perspective and maintaining flexibility in the program are key, as sometimes clients will not be able to meet certain expectations on certain days.

Consider the following as you build out the program structure:

- ✓ Length of the program
- ✓ Phases of program stay and what is involved at each stage. For example:
  - Orientation
  - Transition
  - Engagement and performance
  - Aftercare
- ✓ Resident engagement and activities
- ✓ Resident responsibilities
- ✓ Resident expectations and acceptable behaviours
- ✓ Managing/supporting clinical and trauma presentations

Once you've built out your program, we recommend capturing all the information in a resource, such as a program guide. This resource will help ensure your entire team is on the same page, support you in your day-to-day operations and provide a sense of grounding in this complex line of work.

# Staffing

Just as housing programs and supports for survivors can vary, there is no single model for staffing. How you staff your program will be based on your budget, costs, needs and wants. As you begin operating your program, you will learn more about what works and what doesn't.

Accept that you will need to make adjustments in your program model as you learn from your implementations. Be patient and pace yourself as your program evolves and be transparent about the process and adjustments you are making with staff and survivors.

## Hiring

When hiring staff, consider fit with the overall team. Ensuring the team is built on strong relationships and healthy practices of discourse can lend to the operation of a more effective program.

It's important that candidates understand the issue and the complexities related to working with survivors. It's advantageous to hire someone with a sense of intuition, maturity, autonomy and experience managing crises. Patience, flexibility, understanding and the ability to self-reflect are important qualities as is being dedicated to personal and professional growth and committed to self care.

Hiring staff with lived experience can also benefit your program as well as those you support. Ensure they have gone through their own journey of healing before working with survivors.

If you are considering supplementing your staff team with volunteers, check with other organizations who may have a staff & volunteer operating model to better understand the complexities of this type of operation. In our experience, it is important that the individuals working with survivors have clinical experience due to the intensity of the work.

## Scheduling

Arriving at the right schedule for your staff may not occur immediately. Experience and input from staff and survivors can help inform what is most suitable. Keep in mind the value of consistent staff in providing continuity, safety and stability to the disrupted lives of survivors.

When offering a housing program to support survivors of sex trafficking:

- Evaluate your needs and budget to determine what the right schedule is and if 24-hour assistance is needed. Our experience has been that 24-7 coverage is helpful for any issues or incidents that arise overnight.
- Consider establishing multiple shifts to cover the full period that services are offered, i.e. three shifts for a 24-hour period.
- Utilize not only full time staff but per diems as well.
- Breaks, coverage during moments of crisis and balancing the demands of staff positions with survivor needs, are all important to think through when developing your schedule.

The presence of regular staff members can support the development of relationships and the recovery of trust in people, which has often been lost through a survivor's experience of victimization.



## Staff Support

An inevitable aspect of working from a trauma-informed perspective is the challenging reality of working in gray zones. Here, situations and solutions are not always straightforward or clear. Healthy practices that your agency can instill to help staff manage include:

- Training and reinforcement of concepts—including ensuring what this work entails when hiring staff, providing on-going booster trainings and opportunities for role modelling .
- Conducting frequent check ins, supervision and clinical supports to support staff.
- Inviting feedback and collaboration, routinely seeking input from survivors and staff, and being unafraid of making mistakes—these are opportunities for learning and growth.
- Being attentive and keeping track of challenges and growing pains so periodical reviews can take place and adjustments can be made to your program.



A very common implication for professionals who work in this field is the experience of vicarious trauma. Having clinical supports and debriefing sessions available for staff can help avoid potential staff burnout.



## Training

Staff and the agency overall can benefit from embracing a nature of continuous improvement and help ensure the efficacy of the support they provide. Trauma-informed and anti-oppression training are important for all staff. Ongoing training opportunities are also essential as sex trafficking is a perpetually evolving crime. Front-line service providers need to adjust to meet the changing needs of survivors and embrace new knowledge and promising practices that arise.

# Intake and Assessment

The intake process is the primary opportunity to control entry into your program. This is important as it helps ensure the environment you provide is a safe space and that the program can operate in the most effective way for survivors.

Due to a shortage of housing programs for survivors, be prepared to receive referrals that are not completely aligned to your entry criteria. As a result, staff should be prepared for disruptions caused by clients who may not be ready to participate in the program model.

**The phases of an intake process generally include:**



## Referral

Referrals can come from a variety of sources including your own agency, other agencies and law enforcement. Self-referrals may be considered, depending on the type of program you are offering, as they can have challenges. There may be a need to have applicants vetted in certain spaces.



## Assessment

As criteria for entry, use the characteristics you identified when considering the residents for your program. Once applicants have been screened based on your criteria, this can include an interview step to meet with the survivor and find out their needs, share program information and determine if it's the right fit for them. Ensure that the staff who will be working with the survivor are present.



## Intake

Various forms are completed at this stage when the survivor has been welcomed into your program (i.e. an intake form that captures basic information; safety planning form covering information like triggers and coping strategies; etc.). Take time here to probe and get to know the applicant, including the status of their mental health, supports needed, etc. This can help prevent surprises and better set up the survivor for success in your program.

It's very important not to re-traumatize the survivor. Only ask questions that are deemed relevant and necessary for understanding where the survivor is on their journey, and the level of safety for them and other residents. Utilize the 5 Principles of Trauma Informed Care: Safety, Choice, Collaboration, Trustworthiness and Empowerment.



# Physical Site

The key drivers in your decision for the physical site of your housing program will be based on your budget and the availability of a facility. Here are key considerations that we found helpful in our planning process:

## Location

- Consider the supports you are offering in addition to the housing itself. If any of the services are offered at a site away from the house, a housing facility in close proximity may be convenient but may also come with risks. This is why understanding where your clients are on their journey is very important.
- If you already have a facility where you offer services and are considering utilizing a space on-site for your housing program for survivors, think through the possible impact of interactions/exposure between youth in your anti-sex trafficking programming and youth attending other programs.
- If there's an aspect of independent mobility for residents in your housing program, space for cars or close access to public transportation are important. This is also relevant for staff Research if there are any licensing, zoning issues and/or local standards and regulations for this type of housing to ensure your facility meets them.
- Knowing your neighbourhood is critical. Consider the community's attitudes and beliefs about sex trafficking in the locations you are considering. This includes those of service providers/agencies and the general public. Understanding the complex nature, needs and experiences of survivors is critical to finding appropriate supports to connect them with that will not re-traumatize.

## Off-site agency support

- An individual or team handling Information Technology (IT) may be necessary to outfit your facility with the equipment and systems needed to operate your program. This support maybe needed both initially and on an ongoing basis.
- An individual or team to handle housekeeping and property maintenance such as snow removal, preparing bedrooms for new residents, lawn maintenance, etc. Consider what your program needs are and the frequency of visits.
- Having an on-call staff list to respond to emergencies related to the property (i.e. leak, frozen pipes, etc.) is valuable.





## Renovations, security and safety

- Depending on your budget self-contained rooms with bathrooms and storage may be necessary as well as possibly an office space for private conversations.
- Considerations related to décor are important and should not be overlooked. Use colours and images that create a harmonious environment. These touches help establish the ambiance of the space and lend to feelings of comfort and safety for residents, which, in turn, will support them in their journey of healing and self-discovery. Fabrics and materials need to withstand heavy use.
- Installing a security system is essential. Also, consider exterior cameras, locks, bulletproof glass, back-up power generators, etc. It may be beneficial to consult with your local law enforcement for recommendations on additional safety elements.

## Neighbours and community engagement

- Engaging with neighbours and establishing a relationship is valuable in ensuring the facility and program provide a safe space for healing. Attending neighbourhood forums (if available) or inviting neighbours to an open house can be helpful to provide information, answer any questions and manage expectations.
- The confidentiality of the type of program and the identities of the residents are crucial. Ensure neighbours are aware of this and are onboard, but they do not need to know the fine details of the circumstances of the young women.
- To establish good working relationships with neighbours, it is important to engage them in discussions prior to taking possession of the facility and launching your program. Highlight the added-value the program offers the neighbourhood as well as the management of the program to secure confidence. Ongoing neighbourhood engagement will help maintain the relationship.

## Licensing and tenancy agreements

- It is important to seek legal advice to create an agreement that best suits the needs of your program and is protective for all parties.
- A lawyer can create a youth residency agreement that outlines the provisions in the Residential Tenancies Act that apply to the type of accommodation you are providing. Any agreement should outline the rights and responsibilities for both landlord and residents, including how to deal with evictions.
- Also important is to identify any requirements related to your local shelter or rooming house standards/regulations and ensure your facility meets them.

## Research and Evaluation

To ensure you continue to provide effective support to survivors of sex trafficking, it is essential to actively gather, track and review information related to the support you're providing.

When developing the research portion of your program, ask yourself what information you should collect, how to collect it and the frequency. Consider what is important to know versus simply what you want to know. Be aware that this process will continuously evolve and require adjustments as you learn more and as your needs and program change.

Re-traumatization is a very real possibility. For example, participants may become triggered by questions. To help mitigate this, be clear that participation is voluntary and that they can choose to discontinue their involvement at any point in time. Also, have staff on hand to offer assistance if needed.

Make sure to work anonymity into your process as well, so that participants feel safe to provide candid information and/or feedback. Be transparent in your processes to help maintain trust. Having your researchers and front-line staff be on the same page and work together can help this process run more smoothly.

Finally, acknowledge, honour and validate the input of survivors. The information they share is key to the success of your program and to their healing.

For details on outcomes related to our transitional houses, visit The Rogers Home and Avdell Home sections.

## Support for Everyone

Survivors seeking support more often identify as female than male. At Covenant House, our transitional houses support young women to recover, heal and move forward with their lives. We also provide case management support to young men who have been trafficked. They often face an added layer of gender stereotypes that makes it more challenging to identify as victims and reach out for help.

For privacy, survivors have not been photographed for this document.