

Access to Legal Services in Women's Shelters

Alysia C. Wright¹ · Lorne D. Bertrand¹

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Abstract This study examines access to legal services among clients of three Calgary-area domestic violence shelters. The study samples the views of staff and clients at three domestic violence shelters with the goals of improving understanding of clients' legal service needs, understanding the challenges clients attempting to access legal services encounter and making recommendations for improvement. The authors conclude that clients' service needs are complex and often involve legal problems, yet shelters face specific organizational barriers to coordinating legal services. The authors recommend that a further analysis be undertaken to examine the legal access patterns of women experiencing domestic violence, to assess the prevalence of the barriers identified in the study and to determine whether further barriers are present in other shelters.

Keywords Intimate partner violence · Legal services · women's shelters · Legal system · Family violence

Background

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is violence occurring between spouses or dating partners and is considered an international major public health issue by the World Health Organization

(2013). IPV can manifest as physical, sexual or psychological harm to a person by a current or former spouse or partner (McLeod et al. 2010). While it is understood that both men and women can be victims of IPV, IPV continues to be a gendered issue, with the majority of victims being female (McLeod et al. 2010). IPV victims represented more than 27% of all victims of violent crime in 2013 in Canada, with the majority of Canadian IPV victims being female (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics 2015). The complex nature of IPV poses unique challenges to service delivery models due to the need for responsive client-focused services, increased safety measures, multi-agency collaboration, and intersectoral partnerships within the housing, health and justice systems (Fleury 2002; Gill 2006; Mears et al. 2001). The literature suggests that help-seeking behaviours, cultural competency and the unique service needs of urban and rural populations influence the provision of IPV service delivery and client interactions with the justice system (Eastman and Bunch 2007; Macy et al. 2013; Pyles and Kim 2006).

Help-seeking behaviours of women accessing shelter services can be negatively affected by the conditions they expect must be met in order to receive services, such as income eligibility guidelines or a requirement to end a relationship, the client's tolerance for a certain level of abuse, personal fear of legal processes and other barriers to accessing service (Antle et al. 2010; Fleury 2002; Fugate et al. 2005; McLeod et al. 2010; Stephens and Sinden 2000). Clients may also experience anxiety about interacting with social workers or other social service workers for fear that they may lose their children if they report the violence or that the worker may not provide a supportive response (Antle et al. 2010). Referral fatigue, the result of referring clients to resources that do not actually help the client or exacerbate the issue, can foster frustration for both clients and staff. When the helping system becomes a barrier due to complexity or lack of coordination, the client's ability

✉ Alysia C. Wright
acwright@ucalgary.ca

Lorne D. Bertrand
lbertran@ucalgary.ca

¹ Canadian Research Institute for Law and The Family, 308-301 14th Street NW, Calgary, AB T2N 2A1, Canada

to obtain safety is affected. A holistic, multi-agency approach is required to address the complex nature of IPV, which in turn requires comprehensive training and regular assessment of service delivery models (Clarke and Wydall 2013; Pyles and Kim 2006).

Cultural competence is rooted in the understanding that clients have unique needs based upon their religious, socio-cultural, economic and ethnic backgrounds. The cultural competence of helping professionals is generally associated with the knowledge and skills that allow service providers to operate in cross-cultural settings (Pyles and Kim 2006). The term has generally been applied to social workers with a diverse client portfolio; however, the concept of cultural competence can also be applied when identifying how rural, suburban and urban services are delivered (Pyles and Kim 2006). Competency training and levels of knowledge about cultural competence vary among helping professionals, suggesting that it would be beneficial to have comprehensive training programs and advocacy systems in place in order to improve service delivery to vulnerable groups, especially clients accessing domestic violence shelters (Pyles and Kim 2006), and the family court system should be culturally competent for the same reasons.

It is important that the family court system also recognize the need for a dedicated response to cases with a domestic violence component. According to Birnbaum (2012), the majority of high-conflict family law cases involved an allegation of domestic violence, most often perceived and reported by the mother. Bow and Boxer (2003) also note that domestic violence is a common component of family law cases in the United States; these reports support the need to address domestic violence claims in a dedicated and integrated court system (Birnbaum 2012; Bow and Boxer 2003).

Macy et al. (2013) conducted a study in the United States to identify service delivery models in shelters for six different types of services, including legal advocacy. The study found that rural shelter directors agreed that legal advocacy should be made available to clients on a year-round, 24-h basis; however, suburban and urban shelter directors disagreed. This divergence in opinion may be rooted in the geo-economic differences between urban and rural shelters. Recent scholarship has found that rates and characteristics of IPV vary between urban and rural regions due to factors such as substance abuse, socio-economic status, accessibility and quality of IPV services, and social health determinates (Eastman and Bunch 2007; Edwards 2015; Sandberg 2013). Sandberg (2013) considers the issue of misapplication of rural research on IPV and notes that negative stereotypes can be established that negatively affect IPV service provision in rural areas; the author cautions researchers to conduct rural research that combats negative stereotypes of rural areas and recognize the unique challenges faced in rural areas.

Clients in urban and rural areas experience direct and indirect interactions with the justice system (Antle et al. 2010;

Cattaneo et al. 2013; Dickson-Gilmore 2014; Victim Services and Crime Prevention Division 2010; Eastman and Bunch 2007; Fleury 2002). Tutty et al. (2008) reviewed the police response, the court response and victims' perceptions of the court system's response to domestic violence, finding that women rated their satisfaction with the justice system's response as relatively low, indicating a largely dissatisfied minority. Fleury (2002) and Macy et al. (2015) found that when domestic violence survivors felt that they had control over legal proceedings and that their voice was heard in the court case, clients experienced more satisfaction with the legal system. This finding also supports the need for a coordinated response between systems that provide services and supports to clients affected by domestic violence, particularly in an effort to reduce the fear and anxiety associated with interacting with the justice system (Victim Services and Crime Prevention Division 2010).

Scholars agree that clients of women's shelters interact frequently with the justice system, including legal and enforcement professionals (Campbell 2002; Dickson-Gilmore 2014; Eastman and Bunch 2007; Edwards 2015; Fugate et al. 2005; Gill 2006; Letourneau et al. 2012; Tutty et al. 2008). However, there is a lack of information about how women's shelter clients access legal services in both rural and urban regions; further, it is important to consider the opinions and perspectives of shelter staff regarding service delivery and the responsibility of shelters to provide access to legal resources (Macy et al. 2015; Macy et al. 2013; Sandberg 2013).

In summary, the current literature indicates that IPV survivors have unique service needs that regularly intersect with the legal system. IPV survivors may possess characteristics that make it difficult for them to trust the legal system and operate within it, including feeling a lack of personal agency or control over their legal issues. The legal system is complex and requires IPV service providers to possess unique competencies in order to navigate IPV service provision and the legal system successfully.

Purpose and Objectives

The current study examines access to legal services among clients of women's domestic violence shelters. The study sampled both clients and staff through a client exit survey and shelter staff focus groups. This project supports further collaborative research related to the legal needs of women's shelter clients, how clients gain access to legal services and staff capacity to address these needs.

The goals of this study were to:

- improve understanding of legal service needs among women accessing shelters;

- understand the challenges that women in shelters face as they attempt to access legal services; and
- determine how the current provision of legal services to women accessing shelters is working, such as the availability of service, coordination of service, and how it may be improved.

Methodology

Research Design The Institute collaborated with Calgary-area women's shelters to develop a mixed-method research project utilizing a client survey and staff focus groups. An 18-question client survey was developed with multiple choice and Likert-scale questions. No identifying information was collected in the client survey and the researchers did not have direct access to the clients who completed the surveys. Focus groups were conducted with shelter staff and managers to obtain their opinions of how clients are accessing and interacting with the justice system.

The purpose of the focus groups and surveys was to address the following research questions:

- What types of legal issues do women accessing domestic violence shelters present with?
- What is the nature of the services they require?
- What are their experiences accessing legal services?
- What types of services are women receiving while accessing domestic violence shelters as a result of their contact with the agency?
- Do they find the legal services they receive helpful and accessible?
- Is progress made on the clients' legal issues as a result of legal services coordinated by the shelter?
- What gaps exist in legal services for women accessing domestic violence shelters?

Sample The Institute collaborated with three Calgary-area shelters on the project, each representing a unique service population:

- Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter, a large 50-bed, 21-day emergency shelter in Calgary;
- Discovery House Family Violence Prevention Society, a 19-apartment second-stage shelter, offering a maximum 18-month stay; and
- Rowan House Emergency Shelter, a 16-bed, 21-day rural emergency shelter.

We collected surveys from clients accessing both shelter-based residential and community-based programs. The

sample was composed of clients accessing shelter programs offered by the three partner shelters for a period of five months between April and September 2015.

Ethical considerations were reviewed by an internal ethics review board and the survey tools were developed according to the feedback received from the board. Due to concerns about safety, we asked all participating agencies to have clients complete the survey while the clients were with a staff member or other person with whom they felt comfortable. We also ensured that no surveys or information were sent home with clients so that their participation would remain anonymous. In addition to the physical precautions we took in delivering the survey, we also provided participants with contact information for local counselling services. At the time of publication, no ethical concerns have been raised regarding the data collection and participation requirements of clients, suggesting that a larger client study could be feasible with similar ethical considerations in place.

Data Collection While the researchers made every effort to maintain objectivity throughout the data collection and reporting process of this research study, it is expected that the authors cannot be fully objective in their analysis of the data and development of the data collection tools due to their individual content expertise and experience. The primary researcher is an academic and sits as an academic member of the Calgary Domestic Violence Collective and has worked with vulnerable populations in various roles for more than five years. The second researcher has more than 25 years of experience working on program evaluations for the Department of Justice and Solicitor General, including work in the area of elder and child abuse.

The Institute employed two methods of data collection for the project: client surveys and staff focus groups. The three partner agencies signed a disclosure agreement and agreed to distribute surveys to their clients and provide staff for the focus groups.

The client survey included questions about the legal issues that clients were experiencing at program entry, their legal needs and their general perceptions of legal services and outcomes. Program staff distributed the survey while clients accessed services, either during their stay or upon exit; the survey was completely voluntary and was returned to program staff once completed. When asked how the shelters would prefer to offer the survey, shelter staff said that they preferred to have a master copy of the survey and would deliver it to clients as they saw fit. Shelters were given a master copy of the survey and asked to give it to clients at exit; consequently, the researchers did not establish a response rate for the survey. Shelter clients completed a total of 46 surveys.

Staff focus groups were conducted with each partner agency. Four to seven staff members from each agency participated in the groups, which were facilitated on-site at each agency by

the project researchers. The researchers created a protocol that included questions intended to examine how staff perceive and address the legal needs and issues of clients, the utilization of community resources and the staff supports in place, such as training and legal education. A total of 15 staff participated in the focus groups, including managers and front-line service workers. The lead researcher conducted the focus group and took notes while the secondary researcher took notes.

Analysis The survey responses were entered into Fluid Surveys, a Canada-based electronic survey service. Responses were exported from Fluid Surveys into SPSS for quantitative analysis.

Staff focus group data were coded using a thematic content analysis of the notes collected by the researcher and a secondary note taker. The focus groups were not recorded or transcribed; as a result, the analysis is limited to the notes and observations of the researchers. Thematic content analysis was used in order to identify the larger patterns of staff responses to legal issues presented by clients and their ability to address these challenges. Finally, the analysis of both data sets informed the discussion and recommendations to improve legal service coordination and delivery to women accessing shelters.

The lead researcher conducted the primary data analysis and content development of the report, with support from the secondary researcher. Initial analysis of the notes showed that both researchers had similar observations and recollections of the focus groups and both researchers concurred on the interpretation of the data collected.

Limitations The project faced a number of limitations, primarily related to accessing women's shelter clients. The researchers were limited to a quantitative survey tool due to the ethical considerations involved in working with vulnerable populations. The project may have benefited from conducting face-to-face client interviews with current and past shelter clients with different experiences in the legal system. The current study did not conduct face-to-face interviews due to time constraints and ethical considerations. Further, agency staff members may have exercised personal discretion in distributing surveys, as a result of which it is possible that not all clients who accessed the programs received a survey.

The survey was only distributed within three women's shelters in the Calgary area. There are approximately 10 crisis and second-stage shelters in and around Calgary, and approximately 41 women's shelters across Alberta. Consequently, the limited scope of the project means that the findings may not be representative of all Alberta-based shelter clients. Further, the researchers did not limit the shelters to a certain number of surveys, resulting in no reliable response rate.

Future Steps The findings from this study are preliminary and primarily descriptive in nature. It would be valuable to

conduct pre and post test measures with a group of shelter clients in order to determine what their experiences with the legal system were before and after their use of shelter services, i.e. what kind of legal resources did they access prior to entry; did the shelter provide unique services that would have otherwise been unavailable to them; did the clients feel better prepared to interact with the legal system as a result of the services they utilized at the shelter? It would be valuable to conduct a comparison study between rural and urban shelter services to further identify opportunities and challenges to coordinating legal services in shelters.

Survey Findings

Demographic Characteristics of Clients

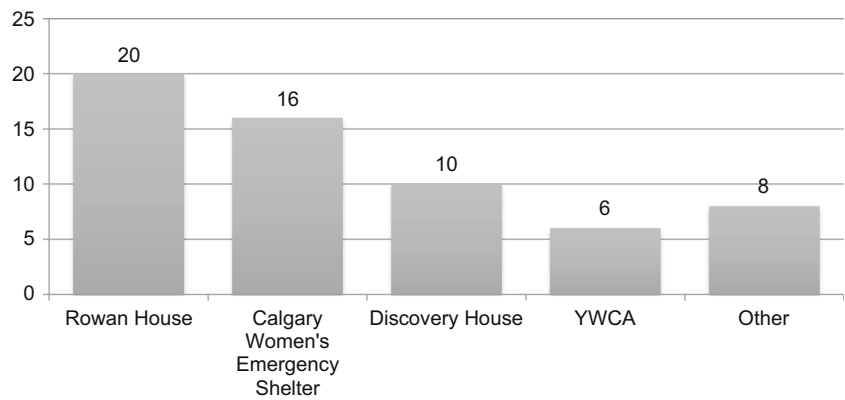
Forty-six clients completed and returned the survey to a shelter worker. The majority of respondents ($n = 34$; 73.9%) said that they had received support from one shelter; nine (19.6%) received support from two shelters and two (4.3%) accessed supports from four or more shelters. One person did not answer the question. Five respondents (10.8%) accessed supports from six shelters that were not a part of the current study. The rural shelter was accessed the most times out of the three participating agencies ($n = 20$), followed by one of the urban shelters ($n = 16$); Fig. 1. The higher number of visits to the rural shelter could be due to the lack of available resources and options in rural areas compared to urban areas (Macy et al. 2013; Sandberg 2013).

The survey collected demographic data including age, number of days spent at the shelter, number of children who stayed at the shelter with the client, and the presence of a legal problems; see Table 1. The majority of respondents ($n = 41$; 89.1%) used English as their primary language, while five respondents (10.9%) identified Tagalog, Mandarin, Punjabi and other languages as their main language.

Clients ranged in age between 22 and 60, with a median age of 36.7. Most respondents were between the ages of 30 and 39 ($n = 18$; 39.1%) and 40 and 49 ($n = 14$; 30.4%); nine respondents (19.6%) were between the ages of 20 and 29; and five respondents (10.9%) were between the ages of 50 and 60. The majority of respondents ($n = 32$; 69.6%) had one or more children with them during their shelter stay. Of the 32 respondents who had children with them, 40.6% were between the ages of 30 to 39, compared to 34.4% between the ages of 40 to 60 and 25% between the ages of 20 to 29.

Of the 45 respondents who answered the question, clients indicated that they accessed between one and four shelters. The average number of shelters accessed was 1.3. Of the 30 respondents who answered the question, the average number of days spent at the emergency and second-stage shelters was 60.5. Rowan House offers emergency crisis shelter for up to 30 days,

Fig. 1 Number of times shelters were accessed. Multiple response data; $n = 46$



with possible extensions. Fifteen respondents accessed Rowan House exclusively, with an average stay of 17.7 days. Four (26.7%) respondents stayed at the shelter for 30 days; the longest stay was 52 days and the shortest stay was 5 days.

The urban shelters both offer emergency shelter, residential programs, and community outreach programs. Thirteen clients accessed Calgary Women’s Emergency Shelter exclusively, with an average stay of 22.5 days. Six respondents (46.2%) did not respond to the question. Of the seven participants who responded to the question, four (57.1%) stayed for 30 days or more, with a maximum stay of 61 days. Three clients (42.9%) stayed for 10 days or less, with a minimum stay of 1 day.

Four respondents accessed Discovery House exclusively, with an average stay of 142.6 days. Discovery House offers both short-term and long-term facilities and respondents were not asked which service they accessed. The shortest stay was 30 days and the longest stay was 300 days. Finally, two respondents accessed the YWCA or another shelter exclusively. In these cases, respondents did not indicate that they received service or shelter from one of the participating agencies. It is possible they received the survey through outreach or another community resource. One of the two accessed counselling services from an undisclosed agency with no length of stay reported and one accessed shelter services for 30 days.

When asked if they needed help with any legal issues during their stay at the shelter, the majority of respondents

($n = 36$; 78.3%) said yes, while ten (21.7%) said no. The remaining analysis is based upon the 36 respondents who had legal issues during their stay at the shelter.

Type of Legal Problem Presented

Respondents were asked what legal issues they needed help with during their stay at the shelter; see Fig. 2. The majority of respondents had two or more legal issues ($n = 24$; 66.7%). The most common legal issue was *child support/children's expenses* ($n = 16$) followed by *separation* ($n = 13$), *protection order for myself* ($n = 11$), and *dividing property* ($n = 10$). None of the respondents checked off *I am a witness in the case against my abuser*. Three respondents indicated that they had other issues, including “notice of assessments, court dates for impaired driving charges, and requesting court support.”

Respondents were asked if all of their legal issues had been resolved while they were at the shelter; Fig. 3. Of the 28 responses, only seven (25%) said yes. It is unlikely, however, that all legal issues would be resolved during a client’s stay at the shelter due to the significant period of time court cases require. When asked what legal issues the client was still dealing with, spousal support was the only legal issue that increased at exit, suggesting that other legal issues may have been addressed or circumstances may have changed for the respondents during the client’s time at the shelter. Two respondents said that they needed help with an impaired driving charge and changing their name, while another respondent said they needed more help accessing additional legal resources because the first referrals did not help.

Resources Accessed

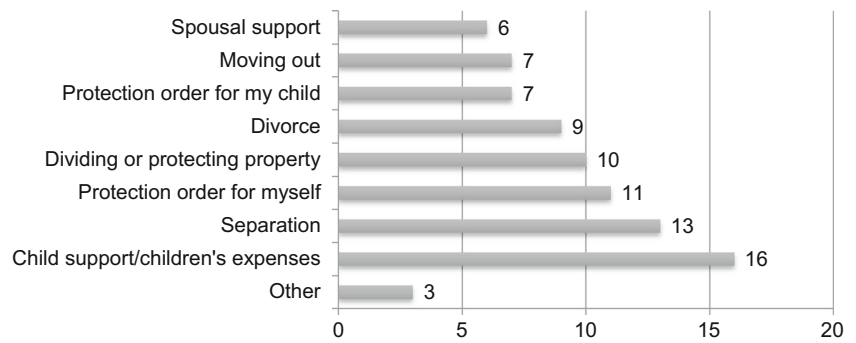
When asked if they had received legal help while accessing shelter services, 26 respondents (72.2%) answered yes. Eight respondents (22.2%) answered no and two participants (5.6%) did not answer the question. Respondents who did access

Table 1 Client characteristics

Variable	Range	Mean
Age	Range: 22 to 60	Mean: 36.7
Number of shelters accessed	Range: 1 to 4	Mean: 1.3
Number of days at the shelter	Range: 1 to 300	Mean: 60.5
Number of children who stayed at the shelter with the client	Range: 0 to 4	Mean: 2
Legal issues present	Yes: 78.3% No: 21.7%	

Total number of respondents $N = 46$

Fig. 2 Number of times a legal issue was reported at shelter entry. Multiple response data; $n = 36$

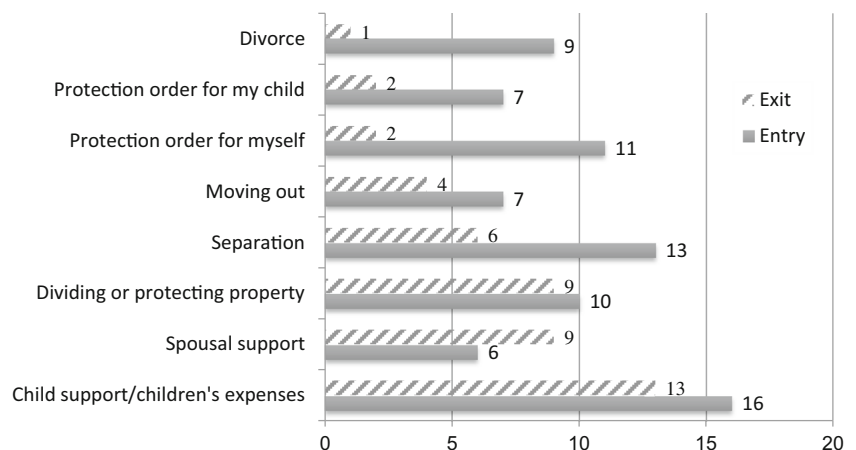


legal supports during their time at the shelter were asked what services they used and how helpful those services were.

Twenty-one respondents (80.8%) of those who had received services accessed legal aid in some form and the majority ($n = 15$; 71.4%) said that the service was helpful or very helpful. Twelve respondents (46.2%) accessed a free consultation with a lawyer and the majority ($n = 10$; 83.3%) found this helpful or very helpful, while two respondents (16.7%) said that it was not helpful at all. Twelve participants (46.2%) utilized court support by shelter staff, all of whom found the service helpful or very helpful. Ten participants (38.5%) accessed Calgary Police Service, and the majority ($n = 7$; 70%) found CPS helpful or very helpful, while three (30%) said that CPS was not helpful at all. Nine participants (34.6%) accessed Calgary Legal Guidance, seven of whom (77.8%) said that the service was helpful or very helpful. Six participants (23.1%) accessed court support by the HomeFront Court Case Worker or the HomeFront Domestic Violence Conflict Response Team, all of whom found the service helpful or very helpful. Three clients who accessed HomeFront court support also accessed shelter-provided court support (Fig. 4).

Of the services listed on the survey, Pro Bono Law Alberta, Victim Services and other court support programs were not frequently used, possibly suggesting that these services are not viewed as applicable by shelter staff or other legal professionals.

Fig. 3 Number of times a legal issue was reported at shelter entry and exit. This figure illustrates how many times a legal issue was reported when clients entered the shelter and when the client exited the shelter. Multiple response data; $n = 28$



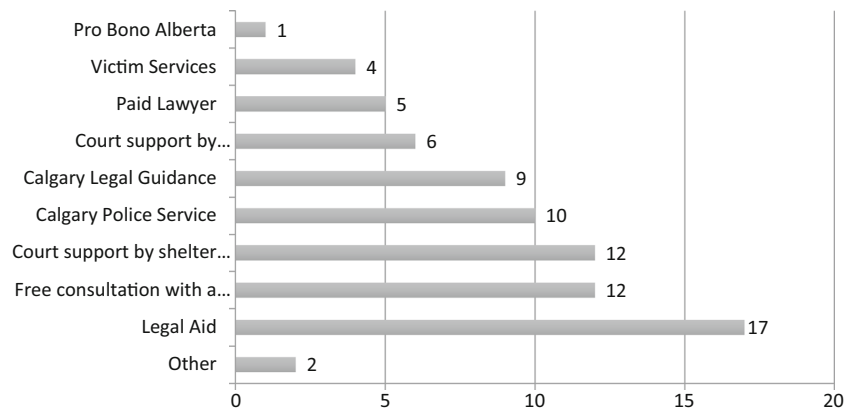
Participants were asked how they accessed legal services during their shelter stay and if they encountered barriers. Of the ten respondents who answered the question, 60% ($n = 6$) received legal services from a legal clinic outside of the shelter, while 40% ($n = 4$) said that the shelter offered a legal clinic but they could not attend due to scheduling issues. Clients reported barriers to accessing legal services such as a lack of on-site legal resources through the shelter, long wait times for on-site legal clinics, and not being able to access legal clinics or information.

Resolution of Legal Issues

Of the 28 clients who answered the question about unresolved legal issues, 75% ($n = 21$) of respondents had an unresolved legal issue at the time of the survey. When asked how they would deal with the legal issues that they still needed help with, the majority of respondents ($n = 14$) said that they will apply for Legal Aid and six clients said they will go to Calgary Legal Guidance, while seven participants said they will hire a private lawyer. Two respondents indicated that they will not deal with their legal issues because they have given up; see Fig. 5.

Of the 36 respondents who had legal issues at entry, 10 (27.8%) reported prior involvement with the legal system, while 24 (66.7%) respondents had no prior involvement with

Fig. 4 Type of legal resource accessed. This figure illustrates how many times legal resources were accessed. Multiple response data; *n* = 26



the legal system. Two respondents (5.6%) did not answer the question. When asked if they thought their prior involvement with the legal system had an impact on their current legal situation, the majority (*n* = 6; 60%) said no. One client indicated that their prior involvement in the legal system may have made the process easier this time: “because I had orders in place from 2012, some access to orders have been easier this time.” Another respondent said that the legal system still needs to improve, and one felt that the court supported her ex-husband.

Participants were asked if their current experience with the legal system was easier or more difficult than they thought it would be. Twelve respondents (33.3%) said that it was more difficult than they expected, and nine (25%) thought it was much more difficult than they expected; see Fig. 6. Only ten respondents (27.8%) thought it was easier or just like they expected. Four respondents (11.1%) said that they did not know what to expect, and one respondent (2.8%) did not answer the question.

Of the 36 respondents who answered the question, 83.3% (*n* = 30) felt that the legal services they received while accessing support services were helpful or very helpful. Only four (11.1%) felt that the services were little help or not applicable to their situation. Two respondents (5.6%) did not answer the question. When asked if they had other comments about their legal issue or the legal services they received

at the shelter, the majority of comments about the shelter supports were positive. However, commenters generally were not satisfied with the legal process or supports provided. Some comments included:

I felt supported, calmed down, assured. I appreciate the knowledge/calmness my advocate [shelter worker] provided to me, making this experience less frightening. I felt supported. I was not alone. I could see the bigger picture.

The support from the shelter has been amazing. My issue with the legal system is that the courts do not take domestic abuse into account, which leaves a woman who has fled a domestic abusive home still subject to her abuse.

Shelter connected me with the services I need but I am [having] trouble with my lawyer.

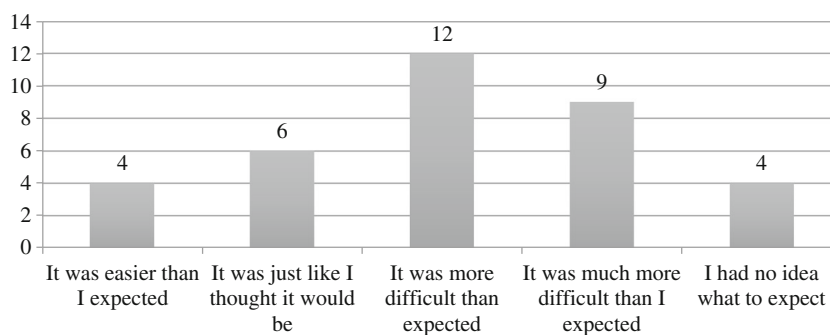
It would be helpful to know that there could be a long wait to access a legal aid lawyer.

...legal advice is crucial for women in these circumstances and access needs to be improved so they can make informed timely decisions about their future.

Fig. 5 What resource will be accessed to resolve outstanding legal issues. Multiple response data; *n* = 28



Fig. 6 Whether participants' experience with the legal system was easier or more difficult than expected. Response $n = 35$; missing = 1



Staff Focus Groups

Purpose and Methodology

Focus groups are controlled group discussions used in social science research to collect data about participant experiences and perceptions on a specific issue (Smithson 2000). The purpose of the staff focus groups conducted for this project was to identify how agency staff respond to the legal issues presented by clients. Focus group participants included four to seven staff members from each of the three shelters participating in the study. In one instance, two of the seven participants were management; the researchers did not observe that this inhibited the responses of the staff members present.

The researchers prepared a semi-structured protocol that outlined the areas of focus and the questions that guided each focus group. The areas of focus were general thematic questions that were informed by recent literature on the complex needs of IPV clients. Areas of focus included topics such as the service delivery models utilized by shelter staff, the community resources or relationships shelter workers use to refer to external services, and how staff work with clients who have legal issues and require legal assistance during their interaction with the shelter. It is important to note that not all women who utilize shelter services are residents; some clients may be accessing community outreach services through shelters or simply looking for information and referrals (Grossman and Lundy 2011).

Eight open-ended questions were then drafted based upon the areas of focus. The questions included the length of time staff had been working with clients affected by IPV, the issues commonly presented at intake, the service referrals that are given to clients and how clients follow up with those referrals, and staff perception of the efficiency of available legal services and supports. The primary project researcher facilitated the focus groups and collected responses electronically, with the support of the secondary researcher who took notes about his observations of the groups, using the same methodology for each group, and their responses. The focus group participants were not provided with the protocol prior to the meeting.

The focus group meetings were not audio-recorded and data findings are accordingly based upon the notes and observations collected by the researchers. Although focus groups are generally audio-recorded and transcribed (Anderson 2007; Krueger 2002), the researchers determined that, because of the ethical considerations applicable to this study, objective data collection by two trained researchers would be sufficient to analyze the findings from the focus groups (Anderson 2007; Antle et al. 2010).

The researchers' notes were analyzed using thematic content analysis to determine categories and themes. The researchers compiled and analyzed the data based upon the exploratory questions and then identified themes within the responses.

Limitations

Focus groups generally involve between six and eleven participants (Krueger 2002). Due to the limited availability of client-facing staff at the three agencies, the focus groups for this study each involved between four and seven staff from each agency, with a total of 15 participants across the three agencies. The views and opinions expressed by the focus groups may not be representative of their entire organizations because we did not have a representative sample of staff and management in the focus groups.

It is also possible that the staff members involved may have limited knowledge of the oft-extensive operational policies in place at their agencies, specifically information relating to service referrals and follow-up. Further information about the operational procedures of the agencies would be required to support or challenge the responses provided by the focus groups.

The researchers did not record the focus group sessions, which may have resulted in a broader interpretation of participant responses than an interpretation based on transcripts (Anderson 2007). The researchers relied on their professional objectivity and their separate sets of notes to provide comprehensive and objective reporting of staff responses (Antle et al. 2010).

Finally, there may be historical effects that cannot be controlled in the current focus group setting. Historical effects can include past personal experiences or prior professional practices in other agencies that affect the individuals' capacity to address complex client challenges.

Findings

The majority of the focus group conversations identified five common themes: safety of clients; interactions with legal professionals; interactions with the legal system, including judicial and non-judicial dispute resolution; legal training and internal capacity to coordinate legal services; and agency relationships with the justice system and legal authorities. The identified themes support the hypothesis that shelter staff have complex roles as advocates and require a supportive agency system to reduce compassion fatigue and better assist clients (Macy et al. 2013; Merchant and Whiting 2015; Tutty et al. 1999). It should be noted that staff primarily referenced family court and any mention of court in the findings should be understood as family court unless otherwise specified.

Safety of Clients Client safety was described by each focus group as the foundation of successful client-staff relationships, particularly with regard to helping clients feel secure throughout their shelter and court experience. Participants in all focus groups agreed that safety planning and relationship building were the first steps in addressing clients' legal issues. This is due in no small part to the fact that when clients arrive at the shelters, they are often in survival mode and may have difficulty overcoming their situational fear and anxiety, especially if they have experienced prior abuse or patterns of abusive relationships (Letourneau et al. 2012; Mears et al. 2001). Both the literature and the focus groups suggest that client safety involves a complex web of needs that must be met in order to support positive outcomes for the client. Staff said that they regularly had to rebuild trust and relationships between themselves, the justice system, and clients due to the fact that various agents of the justice system had compromised client safety or trust at one point or another. This sentiment is echoed in the literature as well (Cattaneo et al. 2013; Dickson-Gilmore 2014; Eastman and Bunch 2007; Fleury 2002; Letourneau et al. 2012; Victim Services and Crime Prevention Division 2010). All staff supported the establishment of a dedicated domestic violence court that would serve the Calgary area. Specialized domestic violence courts have been shown to better address the complexity domestic violence contributes to court cases (Birbaum et al. 2014).

The importance of safety planning was mentioned in all three groups, specifically when addressing the legal concerns of clients. The process of safety planning is used by shelter staff to help strategize their responses to their case (Campbell 2002; Murray et al. 2015; Victim Services and Crime

Prevention Division 2010). When asked if staff recognize legal issues during the initial safety planning, the majority of urban respondents initially answered no. When asked what types of issues are addressed in safety planning, these respondents said that issues included protection for the client and their children, family issues, coping with the trauma, and going through the court system. Rural staff, however, reported that legal concerns were one of the leading three issues presented by clients. Rural staff stated that legal issues appeared to intersect all levels of their clients' safety plans. This variance in perception could be due to the level of involvement staff have in their clients' legal issues; shelters with access to fewer legal resources may see an increase in frontline staff working through legal issues as an immediate part of their treatment plan. Macy et al. (2013) found that directors of rural shelters agreed that clients should have access to legal advocacy 24 h a day, year-round; in contrast, directors of suburban and urban shelters tended to disagree. This supports the hypothesis that rural and urban shelters have different resource needs and use service delivery models to support clients.

Staff also expressed concern about the security and safety of their clients when the clients are in the court house. Staff from the rural shelter were uncomfortable with the idea of their client being made to sit in a courtroom or waiting area where the alleged abuser may also be present. The lack of security poses a risk for both the client and any shelter staff who may be present. Staff said attending public court takes away the safety provided by the shelter and reported that clients often expressed feeling intimidated, uncomfortable and revictimized while accessing the courthouse.

Interactions with Legal Professionals Participants stated that their relationships with the court system and legal professionals were challenging. The majority of respondents said that this is due to the slow processing times for legal aid approvals, inadequate follow-up to client inquiries by legal assistance groups, and general difficulty in getting to the court house. Rural shelter staff identified transportation barriers for clients requiring legal orders, as staff do not have the capacity to drive their clients to and from the Calgary court house, which is more than 80 km north. Rural staff reported that their clients usually take the commuter bus from High River to Calgary, a nearly two-hour journey. Safety concerns are compounded by public transportation for both clients and staff as many clients have never used public transportation and there are no mechanisms in place for keeping the client safe while they are away from the shelter.

To further complicate matters, rural shelter staff reported that their clients were more successful in obtaining an emergency protection order if they had been away from the alleged abuser for a shorter amount of time; this necessarily means that the client has fled an abusive situation and is almost immediately required to travel a significant distance via

unsecured transit in order to wait an indeterminate length of time to be heard by a judge. As children are not allowed to stay at the shelter without their mother, mothers must find childcare elsewhere or travel to the court house with their children. The entire experience may be revictimizing and traumatic for the client (Cattaneo et al. 2013; Clarke and Wydall 2013; Fleury 2002; Letourneau et al. 2012; Mears et al. 2001).

Interactions with the Legal System, Including Judicial and Non-judicial Dispute Resolution

All focus group members acknowledged that many clients do not know what their legal issues are during safety planning and generally want information and resources on their legal issues. Specific staff training is required to enable staff to identify the legal needs of their clients and how clients may access the resources to meet these needs. Dedicated court support workers and rural shelter staff were more confident in identifying legal issues as a primary concern prior to safety planning than their urban counterparts, who often recognized legal issues after the safety planning process. Staff who recognized legal issues at intake felt more confident in creating a safety plan that would strategically address client legal issues and support clients' well being at the shelter. Staff recognized that legal issues affected most aspects of their clients' needs, such as housing, income support and safety.

Two of the three focus groups reported that staff members regularly attend legal appointments with their clients, including court dates and meetings with lawyers. Additionally, all three focus groups said that staff regularly advocate for clients' legal needs, such as contacting Legal Aid and other resources to encourage a quicker response. When asked about staff interactions and relationships with legal authorities, the responses were mixed. All focus groups agreed that the relationships between shelter clients and local law enforcement authorities were strained; the majority of respondents said that the agency and staff relationship with law enforcement was neutral to positive. One focus group related a story about a client who had experienced a particularly negative encounter with law enforcement and the researchers noted that staff seemed reticent to trust legal authorities or refer clients to them. Staff in all focus groups concurred that once an agent of the justice system breaches the trust of a client, or if a client feels revictimized by the system, it is more challenging for staff members to work with the client and get them the services they need to move forward (Fleury 2002; Tutty et al. 2008).

Non-judicial dispute resolution processes, including mediation, were not highly recommended by staff and some staff expressed concern that non-court resolution processes could contribute to referral fatigue. All three groups agreed that non-judicial dispute resolution options may revictimize clients and expressed frustration that those options are often encouraged by judges and lawyers due to the reduced costs and perceived

benefit of an amicable solution. One staff member said, "lawyers and mediators aren't always compassionate and may inadvertently gang up on the client because they aren't aware of the power dynamic between the alleged abuser and the client." Staff suggested that family court counsellors, lawyers and judges have a responsibility to litigants to emphasize the nature of the proceeding, making it clear that the client is involved in the court system due to a domestic violence issue.

Urban shelter staff expressed more satisfaction with the court system than their rural counterparts, although they noted similar concerns regarding wait times, restrictions for obtaining protection orders and legal aid. One shelter in particular offers a dedicated Court Support Program that provides court support to both residential and community outreach clients for their agency and others in the area. The rural and urban shelters that do not have a dedicated court support program reported using this program on a regular basis, with all staff highly recommending the program and its operation. All staff recommended that shelters should advocate for dedicated court support workers in their agencies, particularly due to the lack of a domestic violence court. Staff recognized that, while the court support workers worked efficiently and collaboratively with other agencies, it is imperative that agencies establish the capacity to provide internal court support workers. This service would also build trust and rapport between clients and workers, eliminating the need to refer clients out to external services.

Legal Training and Internal Capacity to Coordinate Legal Services

Participants expressed general discomfort helping clients navigate the legal system as the staff did not feel adequately trained to address the complexity of the justice system. The judicial response to IPV is complex and challenging in the best-case scenario (Letourneau et al. 2012); staff are often working with clients who have complex and intersecting needs, posing a significant challenge to the provision of comprehensive services. Staff reported that clients have a perception of urgency in regard to obtaining protection orders and other court-provided safety measures and staff said that clients expressed frustration at not being assigned a lawyer as quickly as they feel they need to be in court.

With the exception of the dedicated court support staff, the majority of focus group participants expressed concern with their level of legal education and support training. All staff acknowledged that legal training has been made available to them in some form or another, but it has not been mandatory and staff focus is primarily on supporting a smooth transition for clients from their alleged abuser to a safe place. More experienced staff members stated that they believed their experience and training over the years has allowed them to be confident in their ability to help with their clients' concerns. These staff stated that they were open to mentoring and guiding less-experienced staff; staff with fewer years of experience

expressed interest in having mandatory legal education training. In one focus group, two of the four staff members present had been working for the agency for less than three years, compared to two staff members who had been with the agency for 15 or more years. Staff with less experience in the agency stated that they felt the need for more comprehensive legal training in order to be more confident when attending court with their clients, communicating with legal professionals, and completing the legal portion of safety plans.

When asked if they had any other comments about the legal needs of their clients, all respondents emphasized the need for adequate internal legal resources. One respondent said that she felt discouraged referring clients to legal aid, “knowing that it won’t do any good because the client won’t qualify anyway, but we have to jump through the hoops.” All participants expressed similar forms of compassion fatigue, expressing frustration that there is not a more sensitive and trauma-informed court available in Calgary. One shelter specialized in trauma-informed practice and the staff from that focus group appeared to be the most discouraged by the justice system and its perceived impact on client well being. In one of the urban shelters, one staff member said, “we may be able to make referrals to lawyers and I can say that clients are assigned a lawyer most of the time. I can’t say that client satisfaction is all that high, though.” These concerns can be partially attributed to the organizational structure of women’s shelters and the limited scope of advocacy capacity for staff (Nichols 2011).

Agency Relationships with the Justice System and Legal Authorities Staff members suggested that legal professionals would also benefit from sensitivity training or trauma-informed practice training. All staff agreed that many legal professionals they work with are overburdened and often do not approach their clients in a sensitive manner. Without exception, staff stated that some duty counsel were more sensitive than other lawyers, saying “it’s like choosing the lesser of two evils at some point. You just have to support the ladies as best you can and help them through the process.” Staff expressed an interest in working more closely with legal professionals and collaborating on training. When talking about legal professionals undergoing compassion and trauma training, one staff member said “I don’t know if it will happen, and there are some duty counsel lawyers who are really compassionate, and it could help our ladies feel more supported.”

The three focus group discussions showed little variance in the support staff’s experience of working with clients who have legal problems. Despite geographic and policy differences, all the staff reported similar feelings of dependence on their team members, general frustration with the current court system and revictimization. One urban shelter group reported that some clients might perceive the legal barriers to leaving their alleged abuser as insurmountable and return

to their alleged abuser. Staff expressed concern that systems further marginalize women experiencing IPV, particularly in the justice and social assistance systems. Staff avoided using the term *victim* as well, preferring to use the terms *client*, *ladies*, *women*, *residents* and *survivors*.

Overall, the findings from the focus groups add unique markers to the existing body of scholarship on service provision in domestic violence shelters. Staff are increasingly aware of the complex socio-legal needs that their clients are confronted with, yet are woefully under-trained to respond to these needs appropriately. Further, organizational policies may in fact pose barriers to providing comprehensive socio-legal services to clients due to an increasingly complex legal system and continued reductions to shelter funding. One of the recurring themes from the focus group respondents was the issue of capacity; if staff are not provided with the training and tools required to serve their clients’ needs, then staff are more likely to experience referral fatigue that could possibly lead to negative gate-keeping behaviours. The qualitative information gathered from the focus groups also supports the quantitative findings from the survey analysis. Staff recommended that interviews be conducted with clients should another project be completed. Staff unanimously agreed that further study into the socio-legal needs of clients who access women’s shelters is needed and expressed interest in being involved in the process.

Discussion of Findings

Both staff and clients recognized that the legal system is difficult to navigate. Staff were particularly concerned about the likelihood of clients accessing sufficient legal assistance through free or low-cost programs; staff and clients indicated that they are not satisfied with the legal assistance options available due to stringent eligibility guidelines, long application processing timelines and possibly with lawyer-client compatibility. Staff were concerned with the significant financial burden that results when clients feel that they have to hire a private lawyer when the client has been denied legal assistance. Staff understood that hiring a private lawyer is a personal choice and that clients have the option to self-represent, but staff expressed concern that the complex nature of the legal system, client vulnerability, and lack of knowledge of the legal system may inhibit clients’ interest in self-representing. Staff suggested that their clients would rather go into debt hiring a personal lawyer than represent themselves in court.

One of the key findings from the focus groups is the lack of organizational capacity to address the complex needs of clients. Staff spoke of service provision and safety planning in terms of triage rather than holistic service delivery. Service provision is dependent on staff capacity, available resources

and immediate needs identified through the safety planning process. This delivery model does not necessarily account for complex legal, emotional or social dynamics that may influence client outcomes. The standard emergency shelter stay for a client is also relatively short; when a client accesses an emergency shelter it is likely that they have experienced significant trauma and will arrive at the shelter with a variety of challenges. The triage model of service provision may treat the symptoms of the problem but rarely addresses its root causes.

Staff reported that the structure of their agencies inhibited their ability to advocate on behalf of their clients. Staff recognized that the service provision model was limiting their ability to advocate for their clients and that the structure of their organization necessarily makes a difference in how clients access services (Nichols 2011). Staff from the two agencies without internal court support programs described referring clients to the single agency that did have a court support program; however, the court support program in that agency only has two staff members. These two staff members reported that they assisted clients from a variety of agencies in the Calgary area but acknowledged their limited capacity to meet the need, due in large part to being understaffed. Staff and survey respondents indicated that on-site legal assistance services would benefit both staff and clients; staff would benefit from increased confidence that the legal needs of their clients were being addressed and clients would have simplified access to legal assistance in a timely and compassionate manner.

There was one point of divergence between the focus group and client survey findings. Of the clients who utilized the Calgary Police Service, the majority ($n = 7$; 70%) said that CPS was helpful or very helpful and only 30% ($n = 3$) said that CPS was unhelpful or very unhelpful. Staff reported that the relationship between shelter clients and police had been strained in the past; further, staff expressed concern with the level of compassion and appropriate response training police officers had with regard to domestic violence issues. The divergence in opinion could be due to different interactions between police and staff members as compared to interactions between police and clients.

The focus group findings indicate that staff understood that clients come to their shelters with a complex array of challenges, although some staff seemed to underestimate the prevalence and the importance that legal challenges pose for their clients' futures. The survey findings suggest that clients have multiple legal issues at the time of intake, particularly because many of the primary issues clients may identify, such as housing, income support, separation or safety concerns, involve a legal component. The findings from the survey suggest that staff need to be aware of the socio-legal challenges clients may encounter and the significant complexity these challenges may add to the client's capacity to participate in their case or recovery from IPV. Staff may also require more

extensive legal education in order to efficiently assess their clients' needs.

Staff and clients reported that it would be helpful to have onsite legal support. Jones (2008) suggests that shelter services may not be the only way to reach out to clients experiencing IPV. Non-traditional intervention strategies may provide clients with a safe and neutral place to access services, such as an agency that provides legal, social welfare, and childcare assistance in one place. Clients said that the shelter agencies helped them sufficiently and the survey data suggest that, overall, clients were satisfied with the assistance they received. The data show that clients often left the shelter with unresolved legal issues, possibly indicating that clients either do not think that shelter services should include legal assistance, or are not distinguishing their positive experience with the shelter staff from their legal issue. It is likely that clients do not stay at shelters long enough to resolve their legal issue. In this instance, it would be beneficial to conduct a follow-up study to explore how the legal resources provided by the shelter helped address clients' legal issues or advance them toward resolution.

IPV survivors may require immediate attention to their legal and social welfare needs in order to obtain safety and security for themselves and their children; as noted in the focus groups, clients often need to access court services immediately after entering the shelter. The judicial response to domestic violence should be informed, compassionate and safe for both survivors and alleged abusers (Cattaneo et al. 2013; Clarke and Wydall 2013; Gill 2006; Mears et al. 2001). The majority of client respondents had children with them and the majority of legal issues involved child support and separation, suggesting that clients involved in the family justice system are likely presenting with complex issues such as domestic violence and potentially high-conflict relationships.

The comments of staff suggest that it is the responsibility of shelters to provide or coordinate access to legal services for their clients. Towards the end of each focus group session, staff agreed that legal issues were the thread of commonality throughout client management. Appropriate legal education training and strong relationships with legal professionals would increase the capacity of staff and management to adequately serve the complex needs of their clients. In general, staff reported feeling responsible for the safety and well being of their clients; this behaviour can result in a form of gate-keeping between clients and resources, especially if a staff member is not confident or knowledgeable about the resources available (Holly and Horvath 2012). Referral fatigue can negatively impact a client's well being and staff are reticent to repeatedly refer clients to resources that may or may not prove beneficial. The issue of referral fatigue for clients and staff in domestic violence shelters deserves more extensive inquiry.

The current study did not include indigenous or First Nations communities or shelters. However, an indigenous women's shelter, Awo Taan Healing Lodge, was utilized by at least two survey respondents. Rural indigenous communities experience an increased amount of IPV compared to their urban counterparts, due to risk factors such as rural isolation, substance abuse, historic oppression and cultural silence (Jones 2008; Reinikainen 2012). Jones (2008) points out that there is a significant gap in research regarding the impact of IPV within indigenous communities. The findings from the current study support the need to partner with indigenous communities in order to identify barriers to accessing services and opportunities to address them.

Finally, the survey data show that clients who had legal issues did not access some of the available resources and services. It is imperative that shelters build relationships with community partners in areas such as law, housing, income assistance and childcare. The focus groups indicated that their agencies had difficulty brokering these relationships; it is apparent that the participating shelters are working at capacity and may not have the resources to foster or facilitate these partnerships. Some staff said that they experienced referral fatigue due to perceived roadblocks to accessing external resources for their clients, which has the potential to prevent agencies from pursuing future relationships. Social service agencies and the justice system have numerous points of intersection; it is important that these systems participate in inter-agency collaboration.

Recommendations

The findings from this study indicate that clients of women's shelters in the Calgary area arrive with complex service needs that often intersect with legal issues. It is apparent from the focus group findings and lack of internal legal supports that women's shelters are facing organizational barriers to coordinating sufficient legal resources to clients. These barriers may include limited funding, lack of staff capacity and legal training, and limited to non-existent legal resource partnerships. Further research needs to be conducted to determine if these barriers are present in other Alberta, national and international shelters.

Shelter directors and managers are encouraged to identify creative solutions to the gap in coordinating legal services for shelter clients. One solution may be to partner with a local legal clinic, law students, or a law firm that provides services to vulnerable populations. Relationship building with external agencies is time consuming and requires dedicated resources; however, it could feasibly be rolled into the tandem duties of a senior manager and community coordinator. Staff repeatedly stated that they simply did not have the resources, primarily time and financial capacity, to foster these relationships but

they unanimously felt that establishing long-term relationships with local legal professionals would make access to legal services much simpler for their clients. Similar to providing in-house court support, another method for legal service provision is applying for a one-day per week lawyer who would spend one day a week physically at the shelter. The lead researcher has seen similar models employed when shelters have needed on-site medical or psychiatric help. While the front-end work of a funding application and identifying the right lawyer would be resource-heavy, the long-term outcomes would be self-sustaining and support on-going relationships with local legal professionals.

The current study provides data that support a broad research project examining access to legal services among clients of women's domestic violence shelters both nationally and internationally. There is a significant gap in the current literature about how women's shelter clients are accessing legal services, particularly in the Canadian context. Social scientists and social service agencies have an opportunity to collaborate in the collection of original data that will support funding applications, improve existing service delivery models, and supplement staff training. A project of this scale requires the establishment of partnerships and the encouragement of trust within social service agencies. Although it is the responsibility of social scientists to foster these relationships, it is the responsibility of social service agencies to provide a space for conversation with researchers. It is also important to involve other partner agencies which work with clients experiencing domestic violence (Jones 2008).

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