



OdysseyHouse

Equality and Empowerment

Serenity Place

Report:

**A Look Back on the
Last Three Years**

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The History of Odyssey House

As recently as the late 1970's, the Government of Alberta offered no official financial support to women's shelters. Women who had experienced abuse in their lives within the Peace Country had limited options – their needs often unmet and unnoticed.

One day, someone did notice. That person was Elmer Borstad, Grande Prairie's then MLA. What he saw compelled him into action. His immediate response was to push for the creation of a local shelter, as well as for a provincial funding policy. Through dogged determination, he was successful on both fronts.

The immediate result in Grande Prairie was Croken House, a trial project begun during the summer of 1980. It started with ten beds and was originally run by students working on government grants. It was a huge step in the right direction, though not nearly enough to deal with the full problem. A larger building was needed, along with a broader range of services.

A little over a year later, a new facility was opened. It was given a new name – Odyssey House – which spoke to the journey faced by those breaking free from cycles of violence. In 2005, a new 42-bed emergency shelter was built, which still exists today and provides a private, secure, and welcoming facility for women and children in need of short-term emergency accommodations. In 2016, Odyssey House opened a second-stage shelter – Serenity Place.

Thanks to Elmer's efforts and the contributions of countless volunteers, Odyssey House now consists of a 42-bed emergency shelter, and a 14-apartment unit supportive housing building, Serenity Place. Both the emergency shelter and second-stage shelter offer a significant number of additional support services including community support, childcare support, and public education, ensuring that victims of abuse have the necessary tools to complete their healing journeys. We can protect our sisters and sons and daughters. We can help people escape cycles of violence. We can rescue, educate, and empower.

Odyssey House Services

For more information on any of the services below, please click on the box or visit www.odysseyhouse.ca/services



Emergency Shelter

42 beds in a private, secure, welcoming facility. For women and children in need of short-term emergency accommodations



Serenity Place

An apartment building for women, with or without children in need of safe, affordable housing and specialized programming



Education

Community awareness is key to prevention of family violence. Our Public Education team is active in the community, advocating healthy relationships



Community Supports

The healing journey can be long and difficult. It wasn't made to be walked alone. Programs open to residents and community clients



Family Resource Center

Get the help you need. After-school and respite care for children is provided for residents. Community support clients can also access childcare during



Volunteer

You only need two things to make a difference: a desire to help, and a decision to act. Share your interests and talents with the residents at Odyssey House.



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A Look into Serenity Place

In order to pull together this report, it was important to connect with residents (past and present) of Serenity Place. Their stories can be found imbedded through out the document, each resident has been assigned a designated letter of the alphabet for the reader to correctly follow along with their journey while protecting their right to privacy.

“Things started to get worse and I began just doing whatever he said. There was no such thing as ‘no’ anymore, only ‘yes’ because I couldn’t take the physical abuse anymore. He called the RCMP on me and told them I was abusing the kids. I left with just my passports and the kids’ birth certificate. In Odyssey House, all I could think about was how he was going to live, if he could take care of himself. I wasn’t sure at first if I wanted to go to Serenity Place. [Staff] told me “you don’t need to go back to him” and to “just try it” at Serenity Place. There was a lot of fear at first but a lot of support. I couldn’t pay rent at first because I didn’t have my papers. He had cancelled the immigration application. I couldn’t access tax benefits or financial supports through the government. I volunteered at the kids’ school, so I wouldn’t have to pay the school fees. Despite what I’ve been through, I feel pretty lucky to be here.” - *Serenity Place Resident A, 2019*

Serenity Place is a second-stage shelter that opened in 2016. Second stage shelters are safe, longer-term residences which are part of the spectrum of domestic violence and housing supports services. Domestic violence greatly contributes to the rates of homelessness among women in Grande Prairie. Serenity Place is a unique service that exists in Grande Prairie that allows for women with and without children who have experienced family violence to transition into a long-term (six months to two years) shelter that provides safety. Serenity Place offers the opportunity to continue to complete programming to support their journey of healing from the effects of violence, while providing tools needed to ensure future violence is less likely



Figure 1: View of Typical Serenity Place kitchen/dining room area

to be experienced.

“[Serenity Place worker] – until the day I die I’m not going to forget her. The impact – it’s big.” - *Serenity Place Resident B, 2019*



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This unique space reduces the barriers to accessing support and allows for wrap-around services. The two full-time Client Support Workers support residents as they conquer barriers and attain goals that they have self-identified in hopes of transitioning out into the community to live safely, sustainably, and independently. Typically, several services are utilized by the residents in Serenity Place, with each service delivery agency playing an important role in the life and progress of the resident.

Serenity Place has **welcomed 47 families** since opening in 2016 (47 women and 66 children). The average age of the women staying at Serenity Place was **35 years (ranging from 18 – 71 years of age)**. The average length of stay of families was **6 months**. Thirteen women identified as Indigenous and four women identified as a new immigrants to Canada.

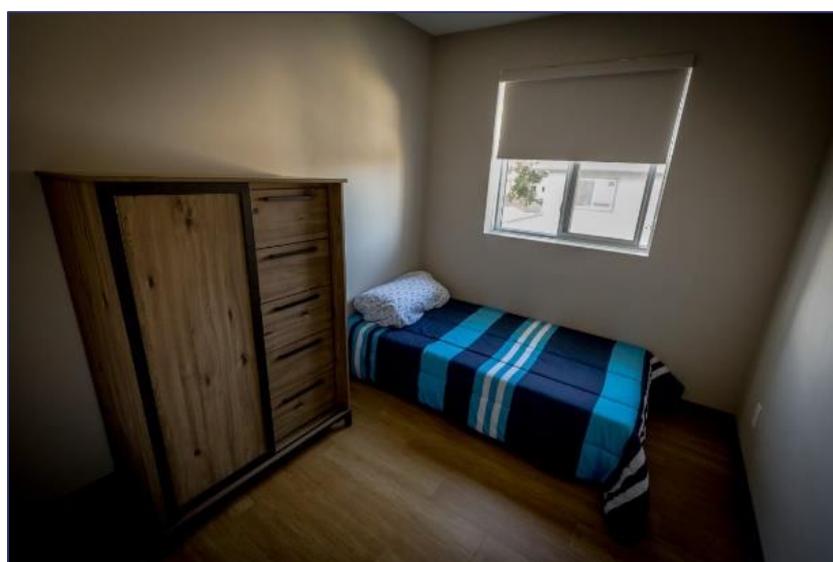


Figure 2: Typical Furnished Bedroom

The client support workers have implemented a case review and case consultation process that occurs with the permission of each resident that allows for the coming together of service delivery professionals in a capacity that is safe and respectful of the women's circumstance. This case consultation processes allows us to continue to build on pre-existing

relationships and establish new working relationships with other professionals who may or may not be versed around the complexities that exist for women and children who are impacted by family violence. It aids in the spreading of truths about the realities of who experiences violence in our community, and how we can all best work together to support and advocate for those impacted by family violence.

Serenity Place Partnerships

We work hard to facilitate existing relationships and establish new partnerships in the community to support women and their children with all their identified needs. These partnerships including working with local housing agencies, developing relationships with Child Family Services and finding experts in community to support facilitation of support groups.

Housing First Agencies

We know that housing is a huge barrier to women that are fleeing abusive situations. Women living in second-stage shelters are at high risk for housing instability and homelessness. Housing instability differs from homelessness because sometimes women have a place to live; however, maintaining that residence may be difficult for a variety of reasons. Women may have experienced financial abuse and therefore suffer from bad credit which limits the housing options available for her.



Figure 3: Serenity Place furnished living room area

An agency that holds a Housing First contract attended a case conference called by a Client Support Worker at Serenity Place on behalf of a resident that had been in Serenity Place for over a year and was ready to move out. Through this specific partnership, we were able to connect weekly and support her in finding a safe, and permanent house in a rapid matter. This was the first time this woman had her own home in two years. Should this consultation process have not existed, the resident would have struggled to access safe and affordable housing that met her needs for independence and safe, stable housing.

Child Family Services

Often women are coming into shelter with young children and require support from the Children's Services Ministry. When a child has been exposed to severe, ongoing, or an instance of severe and isolated violence, Children's Services will become involved in either a short- or long-term capacity to ensure that the child's survival, security and development are protected. Often this can be worrisome and traumatic for mothers and it can prove difficult to balance the power differential that exists when working with an authority that has the legislated right to remove a child from parental care. The ability to have case consultations within Serenity Place has been a great relief for women as they report feeling safe in this space – her space. It seems like a small detail, but for a resident who has experienced violence, and has likely been oppressed or further victimized by any number of complex systems, this shift in space can be empowering.



Figure 4: Kitchen Room Table (at times we have case consultations in the apartment unit)

In one specific instance we were able to bring all parties together in our multi-purpose group room to review, with the client present, which is not always the case, the successes and challenges that are being experienced, and created a plan that allowed for the mother to be supported and transition toward having her child returned to her care. Having the Child

Services workers come to Serenity Place allows for everyone to speak as equals, and to build on a working relationship from a place of empowerment and equality.

Before coming to Serenity Place, I was controlled. I could not be my own person, I had NO VOICE! I felt isolated from the community and from the world. I was drugged by sadness, I was prisoner to my hopelessness and I had no control of my feelings. Coming to Serenity Place opened a whole new world to me. A world full of support, caring people, new independence and HOPE! – *Serenity Place Resident C, 2019*

The spaces at Serenity Place have been used to host visits with children who are in the care of Children’s Services. This again is a collaborative practice that allows for moms to create a sense of normalcy for themselves and for their children and enjoy their time in safe and protected space that is trauma-informed, as opposed to rigid and punitive.

Other Partnerships

Over the last three years, Serenity Place staff have worked hard to bring in facilitators to support individual needs of women. We work with many local agencies including: Pace, the local Sexual Assault centre which supports supervised visits and parenting support;

Partnering with Serenity Place has enabled us to provide support to hard-to-reach families. Once connected to support at Serenity Place; it is easier for clients to reach out for other supports. Collaborating with staff at Serenity Place gives clients tools for understanding and moving forward from trauma as well as opportunities to gain connection and understanding of their children and the impact they make in their successful outcomes – *Tanis Jones, Family Education Society Grande Prairie, 2019*

Family Education Society, which supports families through trauma; and AHS in terms of in-house support wellness groups and the SmartRecovery program.

One Woman's Story

A young mom and her child have recently transitioned into SP after a lengthy stay in the emergency shelter. Several complexities existed that made securing stable permanent housing in Grande Prairie impossible, one of which being that the mother had zero income and wouldn't have income in the future as she was unable to work in Canada due to immigration issues. Without income, finding safe and secure housing for herself and the child became a daunting task.

The mother and child had no natural support system in the community, province or country, and several barriers existed around her not being a Canadian citizen that made accessing other social supports a non-option. When a unit opened at Serenity Place, we were able to transition her and the child into the second stage shelter, where she has continued to work toward independence and build friendships with other mothers. The Client Support Workers have been able to support the mother as she pursues protection for herself and the child through various court orders and were able to cheer for mom as she advocated fiercely for herself and child to be supported pro-bono by a top lawyer in the community. Without the support of this lawyer, she would have had to access an inexperienced lawyer provided to her through legal aid, who she had utilized previously and experienced several issues with the quality of care her matter was receiving.



For more survivor stories follow our Social media accounts to read [#SundaySuccessStories](#). We feature stories under the alias "Equality" of the women who have used Odyssey House or Serenity Place services and are now healing and moving forward in their journey.

Serenity Place Wrap-Around Services

It has been important since the building was just a dream to offer wrap-around on-site services to women and children.

Childcare

Childcare has been offered to women and children in the building since we first opened. Currently we offer respite care to women on a first-come-first-serve basis. We have received approval and starting September 2019, we have opened a full-time trauma and violence informed daycare space for parents in Serenity Place and for parents with children that have experienced violence. It is important that children feel safe in their environments and this centre will provide that care.



Figure 5: Childcare Space

The childcare staff are friendly and made me feel welcome. Having access to childcare has given me so much trust with other people handling my baby. They are always open for questions and advice when needed. They make sure I am comfortable with everything before leaving my child with them. – *Serenity Place Resident C, 2019*

“I had never left my kids in a childcare before. I would take them everywhere with me or they would cry – even to take out the trash. My kids are comfortable with the staff here and it helps me feel comfortable.” – *Serenity Place Resident A, 2019*



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Support Groups

Serenity Place offers different groups during the week. We offer two abuse groups on Monday evening and Wednesday afternoon. These groups help the women explore more about abuse, the different types of abuse and how to recognize the red flags. These groups are beneficial when a woman leaves her abuse partner as a lot of the time women do not notice the abuse until it gets physical. We also offer a self-esteem group on Thursday evenings that support women in terms of self-



Figure 6: Serenity Place Group Room

confidence and empowerment. This group has included bowling, a spa night, building a vision board, yoga, and paint night. We have had different presenters come into group. We have had Lawyers, FASD, AHS, Money Mentors, Suicide Prevention Resource Centre, Healing Arts with Center for Creative Arts and the enhanced women's services coordinator with AHS deliver groups on Smart Recovery and Wellness. We are so grateful for the community for coming into group and helping us understand the different services and support available. These weekly groups are an optional service that women can access. Giving this choice to women has helped them take back their power and make choices around what their needs are. We put the group topics up every week throughout the shelter and on our website so prospective attendees can choose if they want to come join in.

One-on-One Support

Serenity Place residents have access to a client support worker for goal attainment and one-on-one support. We recently have extended this service from five days a week to six days a week. Client Support Workers spent 14 hours with each resident on average during their stay at Serenity Place.

Serenity Place Client Support workers helped give me the confidence to make important decisions in my life. I have now bought my own condo and I am moving forward. I am still good friends with some of the residents at Serenity Place and visit them often. When you are living with people that are going through the same experiences as you are it helps, and you feel less lonely. – *Serenity Place Resident D, 2019*

My support worker has been nothing but helpful in every way. My support worker helps me with everything I need, from basic needs to helping with the process of healing through this journey. She has always been supportive towards my independence and helps me reach the goals I have set. She makes sure my son and I have everything we need, she helped me with the basic stuff when I first moved in. My support worker is helping me get ready to live in the community, she has supported me with Grande Spirit and learning how to budget. She supports me in every way possible and she has gained my trust. When she is unavailable there are other workers willing and open to helping us. My support worker has been helpful and became my friend. – *Serenity Place Resident C, 2019*

Culture of Community

Serenity Place has created friendship among the residents and became a space where women built up trust and can lean on each other. In conjunction with our Client Support Workers, there have been various events to celebrate holidays such as: Christmas in

“Residents would come knock on my unit door when I was isolating myself. They knew when I was feeling down. I am still good friends with some of them and visit them often. When you are living with people that is going through the same as you are it helps and you feel less lonely” – *Serenity Place Resident E, 2019*

July, a Hawaiian Luau, Halloween parties, and a collaborative Christmas Party every year.

We are lucky that we have such a generous community and able to get donations for children’s toys and self-care items for women. Serenity Place has helped the ladies overcome the trauma of abuse and learn how to live a life free of fear. The ladies know that there is support here for them, but they reach out to each other knowing their neighbours are going through similar experiences.



Figure 7: Community Kitchen

We have had people from the community donate gifts on Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day to help make these often-difficult days extra special. Residents have come down to our community kitchen to engage with each other use the space to make soups, cinnamons buns and other baking to share with each other.



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Trauma Counselling

“I was not able to attend counselling before coming to Serenity. I did not know any resources and did not have the funds to pay for counselling. I wasn’t aware of the free counselling the community has to offer. Coming to Serenity has opened that up for me and now I have access to an amazing counsellor that I see every time I need too. My counsellor is very helpful and friendly. She listens and offer advice when needed, she also does Art Therapy I didn’t realize how much that could help with healing.”

– *Serenity Place Resident A, 2019*

Odyssey House has partnered with Catholic Family Services since December 2016. Sixty-two percent of those who have lived at Serenity Place accessed these trauma counselling services. There are a minimum two counselors with different expertise that are supporting women and children daily at Serenity Place. Although the funding for this partnership is shared with the emergency shelter and second-stage shelter, many Serenity Place residents have accessed this service. The counsellors used to be situated in the Emergency shelter, however after conversation and moving some spaces around,



Figure 8: One-on one space

we were able to bring the counselling space over to Serenity Place, which has made a huge impact. Serenity Place is certainly less chaotic and allows for a calmer experience for both the counsellors and clients who access this service. The counselling office is located on the main floor of Serenity Place, right beside our childcare facility.

“I thought I was mentally sick until I started seeing [trauma counsellor]. Then I realized it was him who was sick. I had no clarity. There was self-doubt that I wasn’t normal. She helped me work through that. My kids, too. She helped me find ways to explain to them what they were going through, too.” – *Serenity Place Resident B, 2019*

Once the counsellors had the opportunity to move over to Serenity Place it made a huge difference in the quality of service that we were able to provide. We were able to have

more permanent items in the office, such as books that we sometimes lend out to clients and art supplies (one of our counsellors is an art therapist). Having a variety of art supplies on hand means more opportunities for clients to engage in alternative methods of expressing what's happening. The counselling office now at Serenity Place is also a more comfortable space with more room for a couch and comfortable chairs and we can keep some toys for children as well as a mini fridge and Keurig machine to offer clients juice boxes or coffee during sessions. The counselling office is at the end of a quiet hallway and so the space itself is much calmer and a calmer environment can have a significant impact on people when they are in crisis. Overall it is a more professional office space and more comfortable both for the counsellors and clients.

Donations

We completed construction of some undesignated space in 2018 which included a donation sorting and organizing room at Serenity Place. We now have a safe space separate from the emergency shelter that is not invasive for clients that are accessing services. People from the public can come and drop off donations at pre-scheduled times each week.



Figure 9: Donation Sorting Area

On-site Gym

Thanks to Flaman Fitness, we secured gym equipment to offer an on-site gym for residents of Serenity Place



Figure 10: Gym

Next Steps

“I believe that having more places like this would help other women who believe that the only option is to go back to their abusers. I now am living with my children, going to school, and I have the strength to tell my abuser no.” - *Serenity Place Resident B, 2019*

Trauma Counselling for Children

Under certain circumstances, when a child is accessing counselling both parents/guardians are required to provide consent for that child (see College of Alberta Psychologists' Standards of Practice section 3). Generally, if the parents/guardians are currently together, then only one parent/guardian needs to provide consent. However, when parents/guardians are separated and/or divorced, consent is still required from both parents/guardians unless one of the parents/guardians has obtained court documents giving full-decision making capabilities to that parent/guardian for the child. Please see the Family Law Act for more information about guardianship and custody.

When working with an adult in a family unit, obtaining consent for minors may pose some challenges. For example, lack of contact information for the other parent/guardian, distance, safety/domestic violence, or disagreement regarding the need for counselling. Knowing that the parents that are accessing our services are already in the court system for various reasons (e.g., parenting orders, custody and access, divorce/separation), obtaining a court order in order to get counselling for children adds another layer of complexity.

In cases of emergencies, such as when there is a risk of suicide, counsellors can see the child on an emergency basis only to the extent needed to reduce the emergency and stabilize the situation at which time they will need obtain consent from the parent(s)/guardian(s) before continuing counselling. We are continuing to work with lawyers and advocates to find loop holes to best support children and ensure that they get the services and counselling support they need to lessen the effects of the trauma they have experienced.

Affordable Housing

Finding safe, affordable housing for women leaving Serenity Place has been a difficult task. The vacancy rates in Grande Prairie are low and affordable housing programs have long waitlists and are difficult to get into. Market housing is often out of reach for women in Serenity Place due to costs. At the time of this report, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation reports the rental vacancy rate in the city has dropped from 4.9 to 3.6 per cent over the past year, as the average rent for a unit has increased from \$951 to

\$1,056 (CMHA, 2018). Often women who have left violent relationships will have limited finances and limited means to affording housing without supports, specifically women without children with limited income. In addition, navigating the various housing supports available in Grande Prairie is challenging due to the various agencies who hold Housing First contracts and the multitude of options available.

We have therefore partnered with a University of Calgary student in order to help us navigate this complex system. This student will work with Serenity Place residents, staff, and community to pull together all the information and resources. Look for the details of this report that will highlight gaps and successes for survivors of violence looking for housing in our community.

Self-Care Support Group

As indicated above, reoccurring support groups are an imperative piece of service delivery. We have had specific training related to group facilitation that focuses on the process and moves away from the talk-teach method. Support groups are known to reduce social isolation and create collaborative, supportive environments where participants lean on each other for support. The support groups currently offered have a focus on abuse and self-esteem. This fall, we are excited to offer a group once per week specifically dedicated to self-care. We have already lined up yoga, and a paint night.

Last summer I was faced with a very difficult battle I had no idea how to escape. I never thought I would be able to recover from running away from an unhealthy relationship. With that, I ended up being put in a woman shelter (Odyssey House) because I had nowhere else to go. Since staying with my family was not an option. I was in a 5-year relationship with my ex, and because of this I pushed my family away I did not want them knowing what I was going through. With all the barriers I was facing, I was put on the waiting list to live at Serenity Place. A place where my son and I will be safe and supported. A place I didn't know existed! – *Serenity Place Resident D, 2019*

Thank you

Serenity Place would not exist without all the support from our community and donors. Not to long ago Serenity Place was just a dream and a piece of empty land, we would like to sincerely thank those that came together to support the capital campaign to get enough funds to build Serenity Place. We are eternally grateful.

Government of Alberta, County of Grande Prairie No. 1, City of Grande Prairie, MD of Greenview no. 16, Swan City Rotary Club, Husky Group of Companies, RBC Foundation, Canadian Tire Associate Store Grande Prairie (#344) , Dean Swanberg, Ken & Theresa Sargeant Family Foundation, Devon Canada, County of Northern Lights, GP Petroleum Arts Guild and finally the Annual Odyssey House Sunrise House Golf Tourney Committee.



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