

# **The National Shelter Movement of South Africa (NSMSA)**

**Presentation to the South African Mental Health Conference 2023**

**Gender Based Violence and Mental Health: The Experience of Shelters for  
Abused Women in South Africa**

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**NATIONAL 24HR TOLL FREE SHELTER HELPLINE 0800 001 005**

- Brief History of the National Shelter Movement of S.A,(NSMSA)
- What Shelters Offer GBV Survivors
- The Mental Health Gap in Service Provision for GBV Survivors: Learnings from the Shelter Workshop on Mental Health
- NSMSA Research and Recommendations
- Conclusion

# Brief History of the NSMSA

- NSMSA is a non-profit, non govt. organization established in 2008
- Umbrella body for 95 shelters in nine provinces of S.A.
- Vision-create a society where women & their children are free and safe from GBV
- Partnered with the HBF on a 3-year EU supported Research Project: 'Strengthening State Responsiveness to GBV – Paying the True costs
- Conducted a 3- year research project 'Raising Women's Voices in SA Shelters' in partnership with National DSD
- Established the National Shelter Movement Helpline on 02 Dec 2020
- Hosted 2 sheltering Indabas. 2021 –independently. 2022 with National DSD



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# What Shelters offer GBV Survivors

- Provide Safe Accommodation with 3 meals per day
- Space for healing, emotional containment & rebuilding self-worth-residents
- Access to health care, practical assistance e.g. ID applications
- Skills Development, Legal support & Employment preparation
- Access to child care, schooling & post shelter housing where possible
- Shelters are challenged with providing several services, however **mental health services for survivors of GBV is a significant gap which needs to be addressed**
- In 2022 a mental health workshop was conducted for shelter staff to understand the challenges shelters experienced with mental health matters

# Learning: NSMSA Mental Health Workshop for Shelter Staff

- A workshop on mental health was conducted with shelters Nationally
- Key issues raised at the workshop:
  - ❖ Shelter staff struggle with mental illness & behavioural manifestations of m/h of shelter residents
  - ❖ Shelter staff are not adequately trained to assist & manage GBV survivors with Mental Health matters in shelters (screening, assessments, identification)
  - ❖ Many Mental health medication concerns in shelters (compliance, etc)
  - ❖ Lack of adequate resources & support for mental health of GBV survivors in terms of the Public Health System
  - ❖ Staff at shelters for abused women & children need mental health support

# NSMSA Research and Recommendations

- In 2018 NSMSA conducted research on women's use of domestic violence shelters in which the mental health needs of women were detailed.
- Mental health concerns featured consistently and more frequently in shelters than most other health needs; depression, anxiety & suicidal ideation presented frequently
- All factors pointed to the worsening mental health of women in shelters, yet women's mental health does not feature prominently in shelter policy or practice.
- Care and support work were the least funded in relation to violence against women and children yet mental health is an essential element of shelter work.
- The researchers recommend that victim empowerment work can be expressed with the National Mental Health Policy Framework and Strategic Plan of 2013-2020

# Increased Access to Mental Health Services

- Shelters-need access to mental health services with a psychiatric & psychologist comp.
- Detox facilities - provided for women with substance abuse difficulties
- Formalise agreements-DSD & Dept. of Health in providing mental health services to shelters, clinics & hospitals
- Nursing staff could be primarily available to work with shelters
- Place clinical psychology masters students and interns at shelters
- Explore how psychological services specialising in children's mental health can be made accessible because of their exposure to violence & to prevent intergenerational violence
- Shelters should have limits & defined roles in providing mental health services. For severe mental health concerns; referral pathways for special assistance are necessary

# The role of Non-specialist Mental Health Workers in Shelters

- Training and specialised supervision can be provided, which is in line with the mental health policy framework
- NPO's can also provide information and education on mental health

## Recognition of the importance of work shelters

Shelter staff are mainly women who work very hard and experience vicarious trauma every day. They need support. Many of them earn less than the minimum wage and others below market rates



# Conclusion

- As a start, the NSMSA - partner with FPD to set up a pilot project to assist shelters in improving their mental health response.
- This is but one project. A lot more needs to be put in place to deal with the mental health of abused women and their children both in shelters and in the GBV sector

**THANK YOU!**



# National Shelter Movement of South Africa

Contact the 24hr Toll Free helpline by calling

**0800 001 005**

Or send an SMS, WhatsApp or Please Call Me to  
**082 057 8600 / 082 058 2215 / 072 230 7147**

Or send an email to  
**[infohelpline@womenscentre.co.za](mailto:infohelpline@womenscentre.co.za)**



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