



Improving outcomes for substance-using mothers  
and their children: What difference does housing  
make?

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# MEIA Top up- Evaluation: The Questions

- *Did the provision of a shelter allowance top-up improve recipient clients' ability to secure stable housing during pregnancy?*
- *Did the provision of MEIA-funded supports have a positive impact on the health of recipient clients and their children?*
- *Did the provision of MEIA-funded supports result in significant social benefits to clients (e.g. improving the quality of life, engagement in their community)? What social benefits do clients identify as important for enhancing their health and well-being, and the health and well-being of their child/ren?*

# Methodology

Evaluation was conducted between February and July 2008

Four sources of data:

- Chart review (women and their infants)
- Interviews with women
- Focus groups with women
- Interviews with staff

# Total Expenditures

- Total expenditures: \$108,295.02
- All Sheway clients benefited from the MEIA funding (average \$403.70/ client)
- 102 women received additional supports as per MEIA criteria and individual needs (average of \$507.61/ client)

# Housing Top Up

- ❖ MEIA-funded housing top-ups assisted 23 women to secure “family-friendly” (i.e. at least Unit 2) housing and retain custody of their children.
- ❖ Rent top-up payments were paid directly to landlords for actual rent costs.
- ❖ The average monthly rent top-up was \$226.30.
- ❖ The median time for which Sheway clients received a top-up was 5 months.

# Indicators for impact of housing top ups

- ❖ Finding Unit 2 Housing
- ❖ Finding Housing Outside the Downtown Eastside
- ❖ Length of Hospital Stays
- ❖ Stays in Transitional Housing

# Getting into Housing is a Measure of Success

*“It [getting housing] gave me the feeling that I had completed something, that I had successfully completed the transition. Even if I was at a place that wasn't my first choice, or wasn't the most perfect. But from that point I was able to deal with that and continue working, and my daily routine, and not messing around. ....But two years from now I don't want my daughter here. I grew up on the Downtown Eastside and my mum wasn't all together. So, unless I get it together now, my daughter's going to be part of these programs, too. And that's the thing I want to avoid.”*

“Housing” is more than just walls  
and a roof

*“They gave us everything we have! I mean, what would we have done? We wouldn't have the rent.....they gave us our rent, and all of our pots and pans for cooking, and even cleaning supplies, and even just nice stuff for the house too. Just to make it homely.”*

# New MEIA Policy Changes Aren't Enough to Get Sheway Clients into Housing

*“Recently [MEIA] announced new legislation change where we’re allowed to top-up housing for pregnant women to shelter of Unit 2, but it’s too restrictive. Women aren’t allowed to have other children in care, they aren’t allowed to have a partner and they have to be currently pregnant. It’s a huge thing, but at time when this change came through, there were 16 people receiving housing top-ups and of them, only 1 is eligible, it’s so restrictive.”*

# Baby Equipment

- ❖ Ministry funds are typically only available to women to purchase equipment after their baby is born, and if the baby returns home from the hospital in their care. This can increase risks that the infant will be apprehended in the perinatal period.
- ❖ The average cost was \$251.15 per client.
- ❖ Clients placed a high value on the timeliness, quality, and safety of baby equipment provided by Sheway.

# Baby Equipment Can Help Avoid Apprehensions

*“The Ministry got involved when I had my daughter.... They did a home check on my place, and I wouldn't have had a crib.. If I wouldn't have had a crib, I wouldn't of been able to bring her home. All the clothes, or the diapers, or anything for the baby then.....Sheway was able to provide me with all that stuff to help me.”*

# Transportation

- ❖ Transportation supports were vital in assisting clients to access and maintain connections to services.
- ❖ MEIA-funded transportation supports enabled women and children to travel to and from Sheway, to appointments at other health care and social service agencies, and in emergency situations.

# Strollers are the “Family Car”

- ❖ Although typically thought of as “baby equipment” strollers serve as the “family car” for many Sheway clients, and were the type of support referred to most often by clients as assisting them with their transportation challenges.

*“ My name is on the list for the double stroller. But for us, that’s our transportation. That’s how I get all my groceries. I don’t take taxis, and I don’t really know anybody with a car... And so if I didn’t have that resource, it would be really, really, not only limiting but, it would also be really ...you know when a person loses your hope? Like you can make a go of it, but it’s still difficult? I mean, I know somebody that used to put her kids in a shopping cart, like an actual shopping cart, and pile her laundry because she had to take it to the Laundromat... It’s hard when you don’t have a bus ticket, and you’re like walking for blocks and blocks and maybe you can’t physically always do it.”*

# Food and Nutrition

- ❖ Most of the funds were used to purchase food and nutrition supplements for all Sheway clients and their children.
- ❖ MEIA funds provided staff with the flexibility necessary to address specific needs of individual women and families

# Food and Nutrition

*“50 bucks, it goes a long ways when you don't have anything. And they usually give it to you a week before Child Tax, so that's around a week that you're limited. Like, you got the bread but you don't got the butter, you got the spaghetti sauce but you don't got the pasta, you got the meat but you don't got anything to cook it with right? So it helps with that, they give us 50 bucks and you can go get all the matching stuff that you don't have.”*

# Food Supports Alleviate Stress and Support Positive Parenting

*“I know when I was stressed before I'd get angry at every, any little thing, and I'd take it out on my kids and stuff. But when you don't have that stress, you're not angry, you're not worrying all the time, you're able to sleep, do regular things and stuff. Not worrying about how you're going to make ends meet.”*

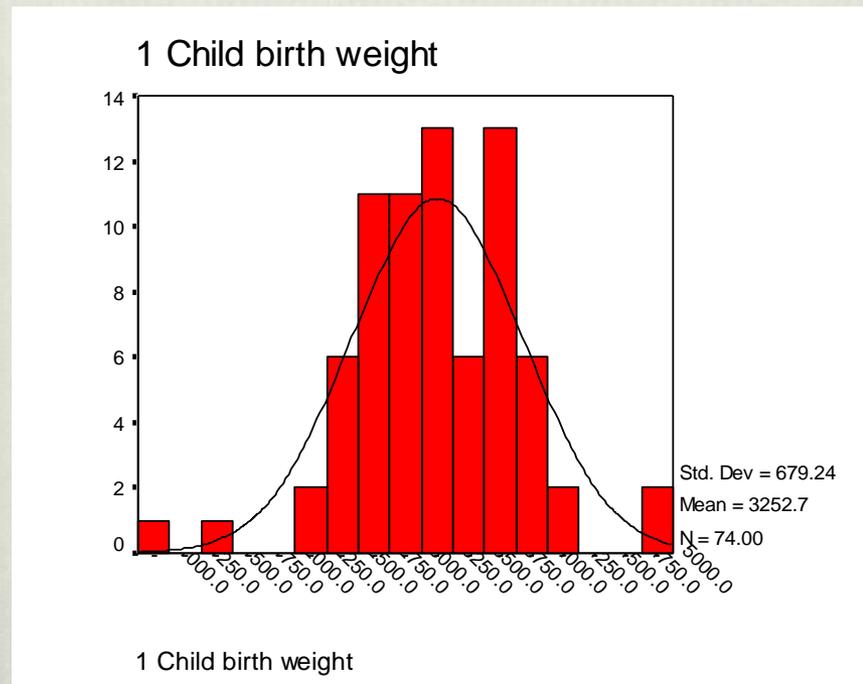
# Food Supports Help to Keep Mothers Connected to Children in Care

*“My 10 year old eats more than me, and sometimes he comes and eats all of my food in a weekend. And I can't tell him not to eat, right? So sometimes he'll come and eat me out of my house and home, and I have nothing, and I come in and tell them, “My son was over and ate all my food. Can I get a food bag?” And they usually give it to me when I need it, which is good.”*

*“I'm always making sure that my cupboards, and my fridge and my freezers are always filled with food and that way when my kids come over to eat, there's something in there.”*

# Infant Outcomes- Birth Weights

- ❖ 64 infants had birth weights within a “normal” range. *This represents an 8% incidence of low birth weight babies within the sample, comparable to that found in the general Canadian population*



# Custody: Children in Care

101 women received a individual-specific support. Of these:

- ❖ 51 had at least 1 child in care
- ❖ 39 had no children in care
- ❖ 11 did not have children in their care for non-MCFD reasons

# Custody Outcomes: MEIA Supports Provided *Before* Birth

**11 women** received support from the MEIA funding before the birth of their child. Of these:

- 6 women were able to keep at least one of their children
- 5 women did not have any children in their care

# Custody Outcomes: MEIA Supports Provided *After* Birth

**55 women** received a MEIA-funded support after their baby was born. Of these:

- 35 women were able to keep at least one of their children
- 8 women were in the process of regaining custody
- 11 women did not have custody of any of their children

# Custody Outcomes: MEIA Supports Provided *Before and After* Birth

**14 women** received support from the MEIA funding both before and after the birth of their child. Of these:

- 13 women were able to keep at least one of their children
- 1 woman was in the process of gaining custody of her child.

## Resources + Advocacy

*“ It got me off the street, got me stopped selling cocaine, and I was able to get things I probably wouldn't have been able to afford otherwise without doing that. They helped me get my son back, and my daughter was never put into care because of all the supports I did get here. They advocated, they helped me find housing and they helped me with all my getting my lawyer and everything else, and going to court and straightening out my life. In 14 months my son was home, which he probably never would've been otherwise....Because my social worker refused to return my son unless I had these things, so that helped a lot, and there's no way I could've afforded it all.”*

# Flexibility and Timeliness are Paramount for Clients and Staff

- Flexibility has been critical to the success of the MEIA initiative, allowing staff to efficiently and effectively address the support need of individual women and families.
- Not having to “beg”, “jump through hoops”, and wait for needed assistance was key for women.

# Conclusions: Key Findings

- Grocery vouchers and Unit 2 housing supplements help women by providing practical support during critical times
- Improved access to safe, stable, and appropriate housing, baby equipment, and food and nutrition supports helped women regain custody of children who were in foster care, and, in some instances, prevented children from being apprehended.
- Access to food and communications supports also helped women to build better relationships with children in care, which they viewed as an important step toward their eventual return.
- Some clients who had been experiencing health and safety problems due to living in dangerous and substandard housing identified receipt of rent top-ups as critical to enhancing their health and well-being by facilitating their move to a new apartment in safer surroundings.