

Structured living environments in Canadian federal institutions for women

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It was Monday afternoon. Hummingbird staff were in the middle of the Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) individual program reviews. Ruthie was up next. She came in smiling at everyone and sat down. She began talking about how excited she was about her upcoming parole hearing. As we watched her we were taken back to the days when we dreaded her reviews and had to sit in the dark to even get her to come through the door.

Behaviour change is the business of Hummingbird House at the Edmonton Institution For Women (EIFW). This Structured Living Environment (SLE) was so named because in coastal Native culture, the hummingbird is synonymous with healing. Hummingbird House fulfilled the gap in services for a few women offenders with significant mental health and emotional dysregulation issues. All SLEs in the federal women's facilities across Canada are very similar. They are stand alone structures that house a maximum of eight minimum and/or medium security women. In comparison to the rest of the housing units the SLE is resource rich. Part time psychological services and staff clinical supervision are provided by the Chief of Psychology. Three dedicated Behaviour Counselors facilitate the Dialectical Behaviour Therapy group and work individually with the women, while specially selected Primary Workers co-facilitate the group and provide security. The psychiatric nurse supports the team and provides information from a medical perspective. The Team Leader fulfills the administrative role but also plays a very "hands on" role in the daily operations of the unit. Prior to the opening of the unit all staff received general mental health, DBT and Psychosocial Rehabilitation (PSR) training from National Headquarters.

Hummingbird House opened its doors in December, 2001 to six women who had been specifically selected by the Coordinated Care Committee from staff referrals. Since that time Hummingbird House has been home to 39 different women. Some women come for a short time while they work on specific problematic behaviours, while others are long-term residents who really want to make significant lifestyle changes and can tolerate the 24 hour staff scrutiny. The primary therapy model is DBT². This is a cognitive-behavioural therapy approach specifically adapted to target not just borderline personality

features, but anti-social personality traits as well. The DBT skills group is held each weekday morning while the remainder of the day and weekends allow the women the opportunity to practice their new skills in a relatively safe environment. Any specific problems that a woman may be encountering can be dealt with by her individual counsellor in the weekly one-on-one session.

Marie moves to Hummingbird House because she was having significant trouble getting along in a regular housing unit. When she arrived she was very sullen and didn't appear to like staff. While she attended the group she did not like to be called on to participate. However, her homework assignments and questions to staff outside the group indicated that she was attentive and learning. She was a challenge. She was so fearful of social settings that she found it terrifying to participate in her own DBT program review conferences. The lights were turned out so she could talk. She has come so far that she was recently granted day parole to a treatment facility and she is really excited about going. She still has bad days but now when staff ask her what skill would be useful to get her through the stressful situation, she is able to identify and practice this new behaviour, thereby de-escalating herself. She is very proud of her newfound ability. So are staff.

A snapshot from a woman living in Hummingbird House

During my 18 months at EIFW, I spent nine months living in a minimum house in general population and nine months living in the SLE unit. Each was a very different experience. During that time, I have been through the DBT program twice. I much preferred living in the SLE unit. I have found it to be a much more supportive environment. You develop a more involved relationship with the staff that work on the unit. When you need help or just someone to talk to, the staff is always available. I developed a trust with certain staff members, which I believe was essential to my progress. There is a comfort in knowing that you can talk about anything, without having to explain your whole life story first, because you've built that relationship with them. DBT has helped me become more aware of my own thoughts, feelings and behaviours. This is something that was

difficult for me. I spent most of my life denying my own self and trying to be what others told me I was. I am more aware of my ingrained reactions to certain situations, thoughts and feelings. I am more able to recognize when the reaction starts and I can step back from it and generally stop it or at least work my way through it, instead of letting it control me.

I have come to realize that I have strength, determination, resiliency, understanding and a desire to make a better life for myself. All of these things have come from my past experiences. Those experiences have given me the wisdom to recognize my need to change and DBT has given me some of the skills to help me make those changes. I leave here a different person than when I first came through the

gate. I am confident that I can face each day and deal with whatever life sends my way. The hard work and trying times were worth every minute of my time here. Sometimes life sends us experiences that we neither want nor ask for. But in the end, it is those very experiences that can dramatically effect the rest of our lives and can potentially lead us in a new and better direction. (DeaLynn Davies, March 21, 2004). ■

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² Linehan, M. (1993). *Cognitive Behavioral Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

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