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Nome Day Shelter

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Nome Day Shelter

Cover Page Footnote

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Norton Sound Health Corporation (NSHC) in Nome, Alaska, opened a Day Shelter on December 29, 2018, as a safe environment for those with no other place to go. The Day Shelter is located in a 1908 Bureau of Indian Affairs building, which was modernized and refurbished to accommodate guests. The Shelter's operations are fully funded through NSHC (NSHC, 2019). The Shelter is a pilot project extension of the Behavioral Health Services (BHS) department of NSHC. Nome is a hub for the northwest area of the state and is situated within a 24,000 square-mile section of the Norton Sound region. The Shelter was created in response to community needs due to weather-related exposure deaths, impoverished community members, homelessness, hospital emergency department interactions, and various presentations of public social maladies. BHS staff were tasked in September 2018 with opening the Shelter prior to the impending winter. The staff members developed, facilitated, hired, and began operations of the Shelter in very short order. Although formal research has not been conducted, anecdotal evidence suggests the Day Shelter has been an integral factor in reduction of emergency room contacts and law enforcement activity, as reported in the local newspaper, the Nome Nugget (2019), and in data tracking through Norton Sound Regional Hospital. A program evaluation to assess use, efficacy, and community impacts region wide is being conducted by a rural health psychology postdoctoral fellow at NSHC.

There are approximately 20 shelters statewide (shelterlist.com, 2019), with the majority in the Anchorage area. The Nome Day Shelter provides a safe place for guests utilizing the space. Although the protection of women was not the primary purpose in the establishment of the Day Shelter, this factor is a significant by-product of this sanctuary. According to a 2018 study conducted by Seattle-based Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI), Alaska ranks fourth in the nation with regard to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). In

addition, as a part of MMIWG awareness, sexual assaults of Native women have been implicated as a consistent factor in this epidemic. An accurate accounting of MMIWG does not exist in the Norton Sound region. A disproportion exists in data recording between law enforcement and community families reporting loved ones missing and murdered. The Day Shelter initiative assists in providing a safe place for women who might be experiencing housing dilemmas for innumerable reasons. Therefore, it may be reasonably inferred the shelter safety is worth noting to the extent it has an impact on MMIWG in the Bering Strait region. The Shelter is non-restrictive in access and serves approximately 60% of the Nome population. This includes individuals from remote Alaska Native villages. Previous Shelter alternatives were only open part time and to short stints in the winter. Previously there were limited options for individuals trying to stay warm and included doorways, a visitor center, local bars, and sometimes hovering in spaces under houses and buildings.

The capacity of the Day Shelter hovers around 25 people; however during subzero temperatures, the number of guests fluctuates for accommodation of more people. Once the day shelter opened several guests were immediately able to benefit from the warmth, meals, and safety the Day Shelter offered. The Shelter remains open seven days a week from 8:30AM to 7:30PM. A corresponding shelter managed by a community non-profit agency offers overnight accommodations. The Day Shelter welcomes individuals without restriction and provides areas to sleep, watch television or movies, play games, and utilize computers that have internet capacity. Common areas are coed, but sleep areas are divided by gender. The day shelter is also utilized by individuals released from the emergency room and find they may need a few more hours for recovery.

The Day Shelter is staffed by recovery coaches who take care of administrative tasks, monitor guest activity, provide snacks, serve lunch, and perform the critical role of building relationships with guests. The coaches also provide information about community resources, liaise between behavior health staff, and serve a critical role in continuity of care with behavior health care providers. The behavior health care providers supplement the efforts of the recovery coaches and are present four hours each day. They also provide an opportunity for guests to talk with a mental health or substance use provider. By interfacing with providers, this model of care allows individuals to be in a community where they may eventually engage in mental health or substance use recovery services without pressure to formally enroll as a client. In this spirit, a holistic service care model is provided to guests accessing the Shelter, which may be representative of mental health service support delivery via a non-western intervention strategy approach as proposed by Dr. Joseph Gone (Dhar, 2019).

This holistic care paradigm exemplified by the Day Shelter may be useful for the safety of Alaska Native women in particular. According to the UIHI report (2018), the Alaska State Troopers reported homicides from 1940 to the present in the range of 800-1,200 for Alaska Native women. These data suggest that Alaska Native women are in need of safe spaces. Women's safety concerns may be remedied through initiatives such as the Day Shelter. It is possible that the safety of the Day Shelter and the close staff attention that occurs at the Shelter, may temporarily decrease a heightened distress of some women who fear being violated physically or sexually. This refuge also allows individuals to retain their dignity and a modicum of self-determination while struggling with challenging life circumstances associated with displacement. Further, the non-confrontational atmosphere opens the door for those who have been assaulted so they may begin healing their trauma. The protective factor that the Day

Shelter provides may play a critical role in the support and resiliency for those needing a safe haven and additional support in times of need. The Norton Sound Health Corporation Day Shelter serves as a model that could be implemented for the protection of individuals in other communities, especially in locales where resources are sparse, where geography places individuals at significant risk, and where access to care is limited.

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