

Sistering: A Woman's Place

Agency Profile

Background Information

Name: Sistering: A Woman's Place

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Toronto, ON
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The team: 38 fulltime and 30 relief staff

Charitable Registration #: 10798 3009 RR0001

Sistering is a multi-service agency for at-risk, socially isolated women in Toronto who are homeless or precariously housed. We have been serving this community for over 35 years, validating women's experiences regardless of outcomes. These marginalized women come from diverse backgrounds and include: women with substance use and mental health issues; women who have experienced, or are experiencing, trauma and violence; immigrant and refugee women; women with disabilities; and women without legal status.

Our Vision

Sistering envisions a world where all women, in all our diversity, are valued; a world where we are safe and supported, treated with dignity, and given the respect we deserve. When opportunities are just and equitable, we can live life on our own terms.

Our Mission

Our goal is to create a safe, non-judgmental space for women who are socially isolated, poor, homeless or precariously housed. Guided by principles of Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression, Sistering works to change the social conditions that endanger women's welfare. We offer practical and emotional support to marginalized women through programs and services that enable them to take greater control over their lives.

Our Values

Women are strengthened in an open, accepting, non-judgmental and collaborative environment where basic needs are met. Each woman is capable of making decisions about her life; by sharing information women can help each other and themselves. The needs, interests and creativity of participants direct our programs and advocacy efforts, and we value the participation and contribution of each woman at Sistering.

When women come to Sistering, they are treated equitably and with dignity and respect.

Our client-centred model is trauma informed and guided by our core values:

- Each woman has dignity and is equal
- Each woman is unique and able to make decisions about her own life
- We can change the social and economic inequalities that harm women
- Women become strong in an accepting and caring place
- Sistering's programming and advocacy work should be directed by participants' needs, interests and creativity
- That unfair treatment of any woman affects the lives of all women
- The unique friendship, caring and respect that women can give to each other
- Programs, advocacy and administration are proactive, innovative and committed to supporting women in achieving their goals
- We are grounded in, and listen and respond to, our diverse communities

Who We Serve

Sistering's target population is women across Toronto who experience first hand the impact of marginalization and poverty. They may be without homes, sleeping outside, living in Out of the Cold programs or shelters, or poor and at risk of becoming homeless. We serve a diverse group of women aged 16 to 80 plus: women with substance use and mental health issues; sex workers; women who have interactions with the criminal justice system; women who have experienced, or are experiencing, trauma and violence; immigrant and refugee women; women with health issues and disabilities; and women without legal status.

At least 70% are consumer/survivors or substance users. More than half of them are survivors of violence and abuse from either childhood or adulthood. Fifteen percent have experienced sexual assaults. Many of the women have children, but are disconnected from family due to Children Aid Society interventions, mental illness, institutionalization, violence and abuse.

What We Do

Sistering's programs include a low barrier 24/7 Drop In, Housing and Case Support, Harm Reduction, Peer Outreach, On the Path to Employment, Inspirations Studio and Spun Studio social enterprises, and individual and systemic advocacy. Through a number of partnerships, Sistering provides on-site primary healthcare including a primary health clinic staffed with three family doctors and three psychiatrists, open three days a week, with evening support; and a trauma-informed psychotherapist who offers counselling two days a week. Participants also have access at the Drop In to a Settlement Worker and immigration lawyer.

Sistering operates an Outreach at the Masaryk-Cowan Community Centre (220 Cowan Ave.)

primarily serving senior women living in boarding and rooming homes in Parkdale.

How We Do It

Sistering operates on a trauma-informed and relationship-based model and our harm reduction philosophy is a core element of all the work we do: we are here to respond to participants' needs, in the moment, and to support them to reduce harm and/or increase safety. We recognize that their lives have meaning and value.

Sistering 24/7 Drop In

- Three hot meals, soup and sandwiches overnight
- Showers and laundry facilities
- Clothing and footwear
- Telephones and mailing address
- Internet access
- Crisis intervention and trauma-informed counselling
- Harm reduction support and supplies
- Peer support groups in English, Spanish, Cantonese and Mandarin
- Social recreational programming
- Information, referral and accompaniment to social assistance, legal aid, doctors, other appointments
- Onsite access to general practitioners, psychiatrists and nurse
- Onsite access to a Settlement Worker and immigration lawyer
- Social enterprises and pre-employment programming

Sistering Parkdale Drop In

- Breakfast and lunch
- Wellbeing workshops
- With partners, health education and violence against women programs
- Individual case support

Our History

In 1980, a concerned group of women came together to develop a strategy to meet the needs of the growing number of homeless and transient women in Toronto. It was a mixed group of women, with representatives from women's agencies, community residents and women who were living in hostels.

Women were being discharged from mental health facilities, and many had nowhere to go. They were alienated from their families, and community supports were seriously inadequate. Sistering was primarily created for these women. However, it soon became apparent that there were other marginalized and vulnerable women who could benefit from this unique service including women leaving abusive family situations, women who were widowed and pensionless, and young women involved in prostitution and drugs.

In 1981, Sistering opened its doors in an emergency shelter at Bathurst and Dundas. By January 1982, the program moved to Scadding Court Community Centre to accommodate the

growing number of women seeking support. The Drop In opened and began providing services and supports five days a week. Two years later, the space could no longer safely accommodate the increasing number of women coming to the Drop In and in September 1983, Sistering moved to a new home on College Street.

In October 1987, the Drop In began opening on weekends, and that same year, the Outreach program in Parkdale opened its doors. After 10 years on College Street, Sistering became the victim of urban gentrification; the building was sold to make room for a condominium development.

In 2004, Sistering moved to a temporary location at the Heydon Park School. After a three-year search for a suitable space, Sistering opened its doors at 962 Bloor Street, West.

In November 2015, Sistering opened 24/7.

The realities of the early 1980's have not changed much for many women who visit Sistering today. Low levels of social assistance and disability payment combined with the chronic shortage of safe, affordable and permanent housing continues to undermine women's efforts for independence and dignity.