**What We Do**

Sistering is a trans-inclusive agency supporting women from across Toronto who experience first hand the impact of marginalization and poverty. They may be homeless, or are at risk of becoming homeless. They are a diverse group, from 16 to 80-plus years old: women with substance use or 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.

Our 24/7 Drop In supports women with low barrier shelter; hot meals; crisis intervention and trauma-informed counselling; social and housing support; mental health case support. Participants include women with substance and/or mental health issues; sex workers; immigrant and refugee women; women who have experienced trauma and violence.

We advocate for the women who come to Sistering: we lobby for safe, low barrier shelters, affordable housing and public transportation that is economically accessible for all women.

In 2015/2016 more than 2,300 women made 67,000 visits to Sistering. Around 350 homeless women (unique visits) - more than 30 women a night - stayed overnight with us from November 2015 to March 31, 2016. In June 2016, 49 women stayed with us nightly. We served more than 105,000 meals. We made 572 housing referrals on behalf of Drop In participants and 6000+ referrals to navigate health, social services and legal and immigration systems

Many women who come to Sistering receive the support they need to make a change. Others have more difficulty. Regardless of her circumstances, we believe that every woman deserves a hot meal, a shower, a change of clothes – and a respectful welcome.

Homeless women are exposed to high levels of violence.

* 37% had been physically assaulted in the past year
* 21% had been sexually assaulted or raped one or more times in the past year

**Bloor West 24/7 Drop-In**

In November 2015, Sistering’s Drop In opened 24/7, 365 days a year, thanks to City of Toronto funding. Extended Drop In hours were approved by the City to address the growing concern of isolated women who could not access shelter due to a variety of complex issues, and/or who experience crisis and need a safe haven devoted to the ongoing care of women.

A core belief is that women with lived experience are key to enriching the foundations of our drop in services. Sistering has hired Peer Drop In Workers to interact with and provide support to fellow participants in the evening hours. Peer Outreach Workers engage women in the Toronto West Central area in the evening/night hours, and provide valuable resources and information about Sistering’s programming.

The Drop In Community Support team offer programs that meet a variety of needs as identified by participants including games, movies, art therapy, and social group for women, stretching, pet care and esthetic services.

Sistering is a low-barrier agency. When women come to Sistering they expect us to do something right here, right now. And we do. No one takes a number.

We provide:

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

**Parkdale Drop-In**

This program is open five days a week and serves marginalized and senior women. The program also supports the specific needs of vulnerable newcomers and immigrant women. We offer:

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

Drop In Calendar:

<http://www.sistering.org/What_We_Do/Drop_In_Program_Calendar/Drop_In_Program_Calendar.aspx>

**Support Services**

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, where they are at, in the moment, to support them in learning how  to reduce harm and/or increase safety, and recognize that their lives have meaning  and value.

Sistering is a low barrier agency. When women arrive at our door they expect us to do something right here, right now. And we do. No one takes a number.

**Community Support Workers**

The Community Support team provides support from an individualized, trauma informed perspective, and women’s self-identified needs and goals are prioritized. The team invests in the women who come to Sistering building trusting relationships and providing emotional support, informal counselling, community advocacy, and accompaniment to appointments with medical and legal services, immigration officials and other government services. They also help women with a range of housing and case support needs, including help applying for subsidized housing or searching for affordable market-rent accommodations.

Our programming includes:

* Individual counselling
* Support groups
* Referrals to a broad range of therapies
* Information, access, referrals to housing help
* Community resource mapping
* Budgeting
* Income support
* Eviction prevention
* Assistance applying for subsidized or market-rent housing
* Housing outreach, case management and personal advocacy
* Support to live in affordable housing
* In partnership, self-contained apartments in four locations

**Peer Outreach**

A joint program with Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre and West Neighbourhood House and funded by Toronto Central LHIN, our Peer Outreach Workers engage homeless or under- housed women who often end up in emergency departments due to precarious health, poor primary health care, lack of access to mental health and addiction services, inadequate housing and insufficient income. They provide advocacy and empathy, helping to reduce barriers and increase access to essential social services and community support.

**Domestic Violence**

### We have seen an increase in women coming to Sistering who are fleeing domestic violence since we opened 24/7. Predominantly young women, some pregnant, they are dropped off by the police from as far away Durham during the evening and overnight hours, right after an experience of domestic violence,. Why? Because there is no space in the Violence Against Women (VAW) shelters and services.

Sistering provides comprehensive, integrated services to women fleeing and/or healing from violence, including access to our 24/7 Drop In, a safe place to stay with three meals a day, showers, laundry and clothing/household donations, safety planning, accessing Violence Against Women shelters and housing, formal and informal trauma therapy and psychiatric counselling.

Our support programs in partnership with the Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic and the Jean Tweed Centre provide ongoing counseling for up to a year help ensure that participants are supported in their healing from trauma. In addition to our Drop In programs, we offer crisis counselling and support; safety planning; opportunities to heal from the trauma of violence through individual and group counselling and through art therapy groups; and resources and referrals to live free from violence or to reduce the risk of violence.

Actual participants served in 2015:

* Total VAW counselling and support 145 women
* One-on-One VAW counselling or peer support 50 women
* Group VAW activities 120 women
* Safety planning 15 women

**Social Enterprises**

Social enterprises represent a labour market model that recognizes the need for alternative/non-traditional employment opportunities for marginalized women who often can’t compete in traditional work environments. The supports that people living with disabilities need in order to ﬁnd and retain employment that accommodates their particular needs can be a barrier to returning to work. *Wellesley Institute, 2015*

Inspirations Studio and Spun Studio, Sistering’s innovative social enterprises, offer marginalized women a chance to earn supplemental income in a creative, collaborative and healing environment.

The women who create at Inspirations and Spun are living on the street, in shelters or in unsafe housing. Some have job skills but have difficulty managing conventional workplace expectations. Chronic physical and mental health issues, substance use, lack of skills, language and cultural barriers compound their marginalization.

Earning an income, coupled with the housing access and support services and harm reduction and trauma informed counselling offered at Sistering, provides participants with a round-of-circle care that contributes to finding and keeping secure housing.

Inspirations Studio and Spun Studio have developed unique curricula from a trauma informed perspective; our model is responsive to women’s episodic engagement due to trauma or disability. Participants are taught pottery and textile skills by trained professionals enabling them to create and sell pottery and textile items and earn supplemental income. They learn fundamental business and entrepreneurial skills that contribute to their ability to create micro businesses.

The Social Enterprise team works with community partners and community members to create business opportunities for participants including a variety of corporate and not-for-profit orders.

Our social enterprises contribute to participants’ sense of self, too. Creating and selling their work through Inspirations and Spun, supportive communities of entrepreneurial women who respect and honour one another, builds self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of independence and self-worth. Members of both studios sell at community festivals and events, as well as being offered opportunities to earn income as peer facilitators of arts-based social recreation workshops.

For more information or to place an order visit [inspirationsstudio.org](http://inspirationsstudio.org/) and <otpspunstudio.org>

**Sisters’ Kitchen**

The kitchen at Sistering is the heart of our home – it’s often a participant’s or volunteer’s introduction to the Sistering spirit.

Like the kitchen in your home, Sisters Kitchen is about more than tasty and nutritious meals. Participants gather to gossip, share stories, play cards perhaps . . . and forge friendships with each other and the Sistering team.

With weekly support from Sweet Potato Organics, Whole Foods, Second Harvest, Daily Bread and Red Lobster, supplemented with purchased items, our Food Access coordinator and her team design a menu plan and create recipes for lunch and dinner that include meat or fish, a starch, a hot vegetable and a vegetarian option, plus fresh fruit. From spring through to October there is also a salad; during the winter, a vegetable soup is on the menu.

Participants’ favourites? Curry Chicken with Rice and Peas, Lasagna with and without meat and Frittatas.

This past year, we served more than 105,000 meals at our Bloor St. and Parkdale Drop Ins. We often have more than 70 women join us for dinner. We couldn’t do it without a crew of committed volunteers – individuals and groups from corporations, schools, religious groups and United Way Days of Caring/Sharing supporters – who prep and also serve participants at lunch.

Participants at Sistering have little food security, so it’s important that they have the opportunity to enjoy three meals a day – plus soup, sandwiches and snacks if they visit overnight.

In addition, many women who use Sistering’s services suffer from chronic illnesses that are aggravated when a poor diet comes into play. For woman living with HIV/AIDS, diabetes, hypertension, or hepatitis C, sharing a meal at Sistering is, literally, a lifesaver.

Our Community Kitchen program, run in partnership with Christie Ossington Drop In and Toronto Public Health, teaches participants healthy eating strategies including how to read food labels, kitchen safety how-to’s, why a low-sodium, low-sugar diet is important to managing diseases such as diabetes, and then invites them to cook healthy, tasty cost-efficient meals.

***Sisters Kitchen Hours***

*Breakfast***:** Monday to Sunday 9:30 - 11:00 am

*Lunch:* Monday to Sunday

Table Service: 12:00 - 1:00 pm

Cafeteria style: 1:00 - 2:45 pm

*Snack:* Monday to Sunday 6:00 pm

*Dinner:* Monday to Sunday 8:00 - 9:30 pm

*Plus:* soup and sandwiches all night, every night

**Metro Video**

<http://corpo.metro.ca/en/corporate-social-responsibility/strengthened-community.html>

**Health & Wellbeing**

Poverty and homelessness exact a huge toll on women’s physical, mental and emotional health. Homeless women typically walk for hours every day. Life on the streets is extremely unsafe and stress is high and ever-present. Most homeless women do not have access to a family doctor or to primary healthcare.

At least 60 percent of the women we work with are survivors of domestic violence and abuse; some are fleeing it. Since we opened 24/7 in November 2015, the complexity of the women we serve has increased; we have also witnessed an increase in the number of women fleeing domestic violence who arrive at Sistering seeking emergency shelter.

In partnership with Jean Tweed, a trauma-informed psychotherapist provides participants with counselling two days a week as part of our primary care support services.

Sistering partners with St. Michael’s Hospital Inner City Health Associates to provide a primary health clinic onsite staffed with three family doctors and three psychiatrists, open three days a week.

Sistering also offers a range of on-site, language-specific programs, services and activities that promote both physical and emotional health and wellbeing including:

* Trauma informed counselling
* Harm reduction counseling and programs
* Diabetes management
* Yoga
* Massage therapy
* Aromatherapy
* Referrals to other medical services and departments
* Dental referral, partnership with Queen West Community Health Centre and the University of Toronto Dental Clinic
* Medical clinic
* Referral to emergency shelters, housing and housing workers, social assistance, legal aid, health care and therapists
* Advocacy and support to access programs and government services
* Accompaniment to, translation for, appointments with lawyers, doctors, social workers, government departments

**Harm Reduction**

Harm reduction is a pretty simple concept: offer substance users and sex workers the information and support they need “where they’re at” to use safely and stay healthy. It’s a social justice and public health response to drug use; rather than criminalizing users it focuses on reducing the harm associated with high risk behaviors – HIV, Hepatitis C, STDs, for example, that come with shared needles and crack pipes, and unprotected sex.

**What is harm reduction?**

Harm reduction focuses on reducing social, economic and health-related issues, helping women involved in substance use and/or sex work to build resiliency and improve overall health and wellbeing.

**What is a Peer Harm Reduction Worker?**

Sistering employs a team of Peer Workers who have lived experience with drug use to help deliver programs at our 24/7Drop In and through our Outreach programs; they also make and distribute harm reduction kits and educational materials.

Called Peer Harm Reduction Workers, our team connects with women who are using substances and/or are street involved because they have credibility; they have walked that road and in fact, may still be using. But they are strong, committed, compassionate advocates for the program and the women they serve – they deserve respect not stigma – they know they are making a difference and Sistering values them and the work they do.

In addition to providing practical supports such as harm reduction kits and referrals to government and counselling services, and self-help initiatives, our Peer team helps build a community where the women we serve are honoured, respected and supported in their ability to make their own life decisions.

**What do Peer Harm Reduction Workers do?**

Peer workers are considered the best source of authentic support because of their lived experience. They help determine effective interventions to reduce the harm caused by substance use, educating drug users on how to use more safely and teaching safe sex practices to fight the spread of HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C. They make and distribute safer smoking and injection kits and make referrals to other health agencies that provide support. And often, just as importantly, they are the voice of women who have no voice.

**Are Peer Workers specially trained?**

Lived experience is a Peer Worker’s most critical tool. But Workers also receive harm reduction training from Toronto’s Public Health department – how to implement safer drug practices in their outreach work, for example, or how to administer Narcan to reduce the effects of heroin overdose.

They also learn important personal life lessons: how to set boundaries so they keep enough of themselves for themselves; how to manage self care so they don’t burn out; how to teach and lead by example; and how to accept that they can’t make things right for everyone they touch but, at the end of the day, they did the best they could.

**Is the work they do important?**

Peer Harm Reduction Workers save lives, sometimes their own. They empower substance users and sex workers to use safely and live with dignity. They ensure that information is shared and that women know what they are entitled to, so that no one gets left behind. And because harm reduction work at Sistering is paid employment, the team gains not only an income but also renewed self-confidence and sense of purpose and personal value.

While Sistering’s Peer Harm Reduction Program helps female drug users stay healthy, it also inspires the Peers - their contributions drive their personal growth and help them to better manage their own lives.

Harm Reduction Program At Sistering:

<http://www.sistering.org/What_We_Do/Harm_Reduction/Harm_Reduction.aspx>

**Employment & Income**

On The Path to Employment is a pre-employment readiness program that operates within a trauma-informed model. The program supports women who have received stabilizing supports from Sistering’s Drop In programs, and who are now better able to explore re-engagement with employment opportunities. The services delivered include:

* Individualized pre-employment and employment counseling
* Information and education workshops on Employment Standards
* Orientation to employment training programs, including supports offered by Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program
* Job search support: resume writing; interview skills; career counseling; job search training; employment groups to give and get support and develop a job network; volunteer employment to develop workplace skills
* Linkages to appropriate educational upgrading programs
* Micro-business workshop series
* Paid Participant Peer Employment at Sistering: dishwashing and food prep in the kitchen; assembling Harm Reduction kits; Outreach and Workshops with the Harm Reduction program; cleaning at the Drop In

On the Path to Employment assists women who have experienced trauma and violence to prepare for the workforce. Every week our Employment Support Coordinator is available in the Bloor Street Drop In to answer questions about employment and set up personal appointments with women, assisting them with job search and resume writing.

The women who access On the Path live in poverty: some have job skills but have difficulty managing conventional workplace expectations. Chronic physical and mental health problems, substance use, lack of skills, language and cultural barriers compound their marginalization. They manage episodic disability or other disruptions in their life, which create a barrier to mainstream employment. Accommodations enable women to participate in employment while addressing other needs. Women who access Sistering’s stabilization supports including employment and education supports have the opportunity to participate in studio programs.

Sistering’s employment and income support programs offer women employment preparation, workplace and business skills, links to employers, the opportunity earn supplementary income and to develop a micro-enterprise. Programs include a focus on trauma-informed employment preparation – assisting women who have experienced trauma and violence to prepare for the workforce – and English as a Second Language on site.