



**Serenity House Inc.**

**Annual Report**

**2023 - 2024**

***Inspired People Creating Possibility in Recovery***

## Message from the Interim Executive Director

Marc Giroux, Service Manager



When I was asked by Sophie to write a report for the Annual meeting, I must be honest I was nervous. There has been so much accomplished in the past few years that it is a bit of a blur and to piece it all together for the past year sounded like a daunting task for this old memory of mine.

The progress and elevation of Serenity House in the past year, was only possible due to the people that come to work every day with a mission and a passion. None of them motivated by money or materialistic possessions. All of them motivated by the one thing that unites them. This is to help vulnerable people in our community.

Our team: I would be remised if I did not mention Sharon Pitawanakwat, our past Executive Director. Sharon came onboard a few years ago with a responsibility that only a few people could manage. Sharon handled herself with grace, dignity, and professionalism. Having the opportunity to have a front row seat and learning from such a knowledgeable Executive Director was a gift given to me. With her leadership, we accomplished so much, but the legacy left behind is to create our “Vision, our Mission and our Values”

Our team, including Matt, our new “Clinical Program Supervisor”, “Summer our new “Transitional Housing Coordinator” and Micky who wears too many hats to mention, have been on this trajectory for the past year and I can safely say that we would not be where we are without them. Coming into work every day to see them put so much of their energy, skills, and compassion into supporting our clients is a sight to be seen.

As I mentioned earlier, we support “people” in our community. We receive daily calls of mothers, wives, children, grand mothers in tears scared about what may happen to their loved ones. This leads me to mention the people in the background that do not get much praise: Hibo and Marcia. Although they may not work directly with pour clients, having the privilege to work directly with them, I can tell you that without them, Serenity House would not be...literally.

Our new Executive Director, Sophie, brings exactly what Serenity House needs now. I mentioned to her and our Board Chair that Sharon was who we needed when she was hired, and Sophie is exactly who we need now. This would be an ode to our Board of Directors for a job well done in recruitment. Sophie leaves her ego at the door, right next to mine. This allows both of us to utilize the strengths and knowledge that we both possess but also to learn from the other to continue to grow as leaders and colleagues. Sophie brings a positive energy to Serenity House and is approachable along with a calm presence. In this sometimes-intense workplace, it is a welcoming addition.

## Message from the Executive Director

Sophie-Claire Valiquette-Tessier, PhD



Dear Supporters and Community Members,

I am pleased to share with you some upcoming highlights at Serenity House.

### **Annual Fundraising Event**

On September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2024, we will host our Annual Fundraising event to celebrate 55 years of existence. This gathering brings together our community, donors, and partners to celebrate our mission and raise critical funds. Join us for an inspiring evening filled with music, stories, and a shared commitment to making a difference. More details will come shortly.

### **House Renovations and Upgrades**

Our commitment to providing safe and welcoming spaces for our clients remains steadfast. Over the past year, we have undertaken significant renovations in our houses. However, we plan on accomplishing more renovations to enhance the living spaces, and safety. By doing so, we will ensure comfort and dignity for those seeking refuge, and facilitate spaces for residents to connect, share meals, and find solace.

### **Team Restructuring**

To better meet the needs of our clients, we've restructured our team:

- **Intake Role:** A dedicated intake coordinator streamlines admissions, ensuring a smooth transition for new residents.
- **Service Facilitator Role:** This position focuses on personalized support, connecting clients with essential services and resources, and home maintenance.
- **Volunteers:** We're grateful for the volunteers who contribute their time and skills. Their commitment strengthens our community.

### **Looking Ahead**

As we move forward, we remain committed to our core values: compassion, respect, and empowerment. Together, we create a brighter future for those facing homelessness and adversity. Thank you for being part of the Serenity House family. Your support fuels our mission, and we are deeply grateful!

## Treatment Centre

Prepared by Matt LeBlanc – Clinical Program Supervisor

### **Continuous Intake**

In order to reduce wait times, in January of 2024 a new continuous intake process was implemented. Previously, new clients coming into Phase 1 of the program would all be admitted on the same date. If any of those clients left the program early, new intakes would not be admitted until the next intake date, which could be up to 5 weeks away. With the new continuous process, however, clients are moving in on a weekly basis. If clients leave the program early or if they complete the program, new clients will be admitted replacing the ones who left no later than the following week.

### **Graduation**

A new graduation ceremony was devised for clients who complete the program. Previously, the graduation was led by staff. Now, graduations are client-led and each of the clients contribute by sharing their thoughts and well wishes for the graduating clients. Also, a stone is given to the graduating clients at the beginning of the week, where they choose a positive/motivating word to paint on it, which is then covered in a sealant. During the ceremony, the graduating clients present their stone and talk about what it means to them. In the near future the stones will be placed in a designated rock garden on the property as a commemoration to all the clients who have come through the program or who've had challenges with addiction and/or mental health.

### **Client-Centered**

With the introduction of our new vision, mission, and values, Serenity House staff have put a major focus on becoming more client-centered, for instance, a review of all the program rules, policies, and procedures was undertaken, and many changes were made so that we are less punitive and more compassionate towards clients. One example of this is with our Significant Incident Report (SIR), which was previously used as a way to “write-up” clients who weren't following rules and procedures, giving them a “warning” for their behaviour with the possibility of being discharged depending on the amount of SIRs they received. Now, the SIRs are simply used as a way to communicate incidents and behaviours to other staff members, so that the counselling team can discuss the issues and bring them to the clients' attention with the goal of coming up with ways for the client to improve those behaviours.

## Relapse

For many years the Serenity House program has mostly treated relapse as something negative and to be frowned upon. If a client in the program was found to have used a substance, he would be immediately discharged from the program and was told that he could not re-apply to the program until a full year had passed. This shamed the client and was quite defeating for them. Now, Serenity House understands that relapses happen and that they are often a normal part of the process, as clients are still learning how to manage their emotions and learning the necessary tools to prevent relapse. The new procedure that has been implemented is that if a client has a setback, we do our best to get the client admitted into the Ottawa Withdrawal Management Centre or Billy Buffets for a period for them to stabilize. We reserve their bed, then we bring the client back into the program to continue where he left off. This shows the client that mistakes happen and helps them to feel more understood, cared for, and supported.

## Smoking Cessation

Serenity House has touted itself as being a “non-smoking program” for several years now, where Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT) is provided to clients who use tobacco products. In the past, clients were told that they could not smoke at all, and a Carbon Monoxide (CO) device was used on clients to detect levels of CO in their lungs. If the client was found to have smoked cigarettes, he would be reprimanded by not being allowed to leave the property for 3 days, and with doing all the dishes for each meal during those 3 days. Sometimes clients were asked to leave because of their smoking, and sometimes they left the program themselves due to the strict policy. Now, since we understand that clients are here first and foremost for their harmful drug or alcohol use, and since we recognize that quitting tobacco can be quite difficult compared to other substances, we are now taking more of a harm reduction approach to smoking cessation, by working with clients to help them *reduce* their tobacco intake using NRT and with the end goal of quitting completely.

## Program/Groups

To help make the clinical program more engaging and exciting, all of the Phase 1 slideshow presentations were updated in terms of their content and their visual appeal, and they are now more modern and interactive. Many Phase 2 groups have also been updated to reflect feedback that was given by clients. Another thing that was introduced is what we call Flex Groups, which are additional groups, activities, and games for clients to help fill periods of down-time that may come up, which aren't part of the normal Serenity House programming. Examples of these flex groups are in-house meetings such as SMART Recovery, client team-building activities, and an interactive Jeopardy game to remind clients of the rules and policies of the program. Finally, a Program Notebook was created that includes a review of the program material and topics that have been discussed. The notebook is given to each client so that they can refer to it in the future as a reminder of what they learned.

## **STI / HIV Testing**

Serenity House is now working together with the Sexual Health Clinic through Ottawa Public Health. This means that on-top of the free supply of condoms that we have been receiving through them for many years, we can now fast-track our clients to get testing at their centre for sexually transmitted infections (STIs). We also now have HIV rapid-testing kits on-hand that we can provide to clients who are interested. These services are provided on an as needed basis, and clients who are interested are registered through an online portal with Ontario Public Health.

## **TFA Groups**

After receiving client feedback over the last year informing us of recurring issues with the morning TFA group (Thoughts Feelings Actions), updates were made to the format based on this feedback, which now allows the new TFA group to be a more positive, engaging, and solution-focused experience for the clients. One of the main changes is with the “Actions” portion of the group. Now, clients are asked to share about what they can do that day to help with their recovery, and what actions they can take to create a healthier, happier version of themselves, whether emotionally or physically. When the group is finished, a staff member then goes into the room to discuss any “house issues” that they clients have, and mediate in order to come up with solutions to the issues that have been brought up.

## **Client Outcomes**

Looking at our stats for 2023-2024, the total number of individuals served and the number of admissions has gone up by 12 clients compared to the previous fiscal year. This is likely due to the fact that we increased our total number of allowed admissions at one time, since we are now out of the pandemic. Also, the average length of stay is higher than the previous year, as is the number of clients who completed the program, both of which are likely due to the fact that we have become much more client-centered, less punitive, and more compassionate and understanding with the clients we serve in multiple ways.

## **Transitional Housing**

Prepared by Summer O’Toole – TH Coordinator

## **New Furniture**

All bedroom furniture at Transitional Housing use to be mismatched and collected second hand from thrift stores. After months of planning and organization, we received brand new furniture from Pineapple Furniture in January 2024.



All Transitional Housing bedrooms received a brand-new desk, night stand, and dresser.

**Enhancing Safety**

We moved from key lock systems to number lock pads on all front doors of our locations. We now give each client their own unique pin number to enter their perspective houses. This pin can be easily erased on site by staff in the result of a discharge. Full-time staff members also have a universal code to all locations for seamless entry and no need for copying of keys. This improvement has resulted in a decrease in money spent on keys and a much safer process surrounding discharged clients.

In June 2023, we contracted with Pheonix Private Security to accompany staff after hours. For any afterhours calls, on-call staff are now able to call Security before going on site to a location to make sure that no one goes into a situation alone. Security has also been able to assist staff for difficult conversations with clients. This has helped with ensuring a safe environment for both clients and staff.

**Enhancing Client and Staff Communications**

We have made many technical advancements in the past year that have enhanced the interactions between clients and counselling staff. We have adapted our on-call policy to include all 4 counsellors in the rotation across both the Treatment Centre and our Transitional Housing locations. We were able to change the on-call pager to a cell phone, making communication for emergencies easier and more reliable. We also changed the Transitional Housing line to a cell phone. This has made the Transitional Housing counsellors more accessible to clients and caused a major increase in client interactions.



## **Maintenance & Trainings**

There were many maintenance projects completed throughout the past year. We were able to put the work truck back on the road for staff to complete Transitional Housing rounds and travel across all locations.

The following upgrades were made at each location:

- At Walkley → Arborists came to cut trees down that were leaning on the house and its powerlines. There were also driveway repairs completed.
- At Alta Vista → Received a new stove and new television, as well as couches from our Treatment Centre to replace the old ones.
- At Brunel → Driveway repairs completed, received a new dryer, and upgraded the Wi-Fi system.

All staff members completed Food Handlers certifications. Two staff members were trained in Health and Safety certification in order to ensure proper upkeep of all locations. Health and Safety checks have been completed across all locations. Fire safety inspections were also conducted at all locations with Fire Protection Services.

## **Our Challenges**

Staff support was a continued challenge throughout this past year. We had to overcome counselling staff turnover as well as an increase in demand from Transitional Housing clients. Despite this, we were able to consistently increase our client engagement and continue to be adaptive to staffing changes.

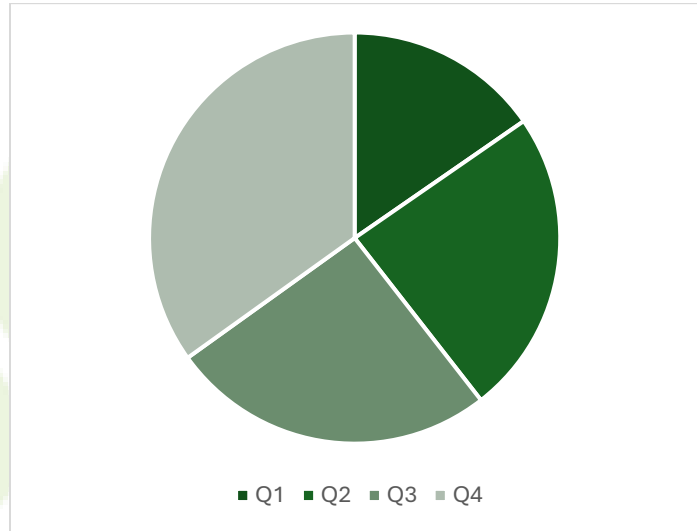
Another challenge we have faced over the past year was with our occupancy rates. We were unable to keep Transitional Housing beds full for a variety of reasons, most of which were outside of our control. Due to the furniture delays with Pineapple, we had to close off multiple rooms that did not have any furniture. With the increase in client engagement, there was also an increase in involuntary discharges due to relapse or behavioral concerns. We are continuing to be more client centered and have attempted to organize temporary lateral transfers for clients who have had a lapse while in our program. Our Transitional Housing program is dependent on referrals from not only within Serenity House but also from other agencies within our community. We had several weeks where we were not receiving any applications from prospective clients, which heavily impacted our ability to keep beds full. To further engage with our community, we have been working on a plan to increase networking and outreach to other addictions facilities in Ottawa and the surrounding areas.



## Our Impact

### Client Interactions

Throughout the year, between two counsellors, we had nearly 1500 individual client interactions. This includes clinical conversations stemming from: intakes, quick check ins, one on one counselling, crisis intervention, discharges, and everything in between. Our SPI's are calculated quarterly with 229 interactions in Q1, 359 interactions in Q2, 382 interactions in Q3, and 520 interactions in Q4.



This number only represents clients in our care and does not include any pre-service or post-service interactions.

### Clients Served



In 2023-2024, Transitional Housing served 37 clients in total. The average age of our clients was around 42 years old. We had 7 Francophone clients and 3 clients that were Indigenous.

Out of those 37 clients, counsellors aided 20 clients in scheduled discharges. These clients were assisted in either finding safe housing, reconnecting with family, or being transferred to organizations with more appropriate support.

On average, clients resided at Transitional Housing for 194 days.

## Community relationships - WOW Festival

On September 15, 2023, Serenity House counsellors Micky, Isabella, and Summer ran a community partner booth at the WOW Festival. The WOW Festival through CAPSA aims to bring agencies together to focus on physical, mental, and substance use health in our community.

Through this festival we were able to network with other agencies, enhance client referrals, and educate the community about Serenity House and our growth over the past



Current Serenity House clients were also in attendance and enjoyed the opportunity to educate and interact with the community.

## **Accreditation**

Prepared by Marcia Callendar – Executive Assistant

In collaboration with our consultation expert, Jessica Bindra, Serenity House has been developing a comprehensive work plan aimed at enhancing our services. Our Executive Director is currently reviewing and potentially updating several Human Resources policies, such as our recruitment and selection policy, performance management policy, and employee development policy, to ensure they align with best practices and meet our organisational needs for accreditation approval. Accreditation serves as the cornerstone of our reputation and trustworthiness. Over the past year, we have achieved significant milestones in the certification process, including implementing hand-washing instructions, establishing bills of rights for staff and clients, and ordering chart boards to align with our mission and purpose. These efforts have fortified our credibility and underscored our commitment to excellence and adherence to not-

for-profit standards. Items such as First Aid kits and cork boards for displaying our mission, vision, and values have arrived and will be installed in each office and residence.

