
FUNDING MY SISTERS' PLACE: BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Janice Byrne, Sophie Bacq, and Vania Sakelaris wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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“Hope is not a strategy when it comes to fundraising!” As she finished the call with a local roofing company representative on a rainy day in April 2021, the wise words of Wendy Sanderson, funding developer for My Sisters’ Place (MSP), rang in Kristy Bell’s ears. Bell was the manager of MSP—a safe, welcoming, and inclusive support centre for women in London, Ontario. Since 2009, MSP had welcomed countless women to Buchan House, a historic Victorian mansion located in downtown London, that had been generously donated by a local family.¹ While it had become a safe haven for so many people in the community, the building’s age and heritage status also meant frequent and high maintenance costs. Bell had been hoping that the roof repair estimate she had sought would not be too pricey—but she had been hoping in vain. The roofing repair bill was just another item on a long list of expenses.

With strong community support, MSP’s plans for future programs and initiatives were burgeoning. While it had always been challenging to cover operational costs and programming expenses, the COVID-19 pandemic had seen the number of women in need of MSP’s services increase steeply. Sanderson and Bell were feeling a little overwhelmed by MSP’s mounting financial needs. A huge repair bill was the last thing they needed.

As the manager of a not-for-profit social enterprise with limited funding, Bell understood that proceeding with the repair would translate into a painful cut somewhere, whether that would be in program provision or potential staff reduction—all at a time when the participant need was acute and growing. She also knew that the roof leak would soon progress from a mopping nuisance to a potential safety risk. Bell was torn, knowing that a reduction in services—and potentially staff hours—would heavily impact the vulnerable population the organization was designed to serve. Facing the two equally undesirable options of cutting services or staff, Bell’s hope was fading.

ORGANIZATIONAL OVERVIEW

MSP was a safe drop-in centre for women experiencing a range of issues, including gender-based violence, trauma, chronic mental and physical health challenges, homelessness or housing instability, substance use,

¹ “Buchan House,” London Public Library, accessed February 11, 2022, <https://www.londonpubliclibrary.ca/research/local-history/historic-sites-committee/buchan-house-plaque-no-16>.

and extreme poverty. It operated as a non-profit subsidiary of the Middlesex branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), a national organization with local chapters that offered community-based mental health supports for individuals aged 16 and older. Born from a grassroots community initiative, MSP provided a range of services and support tailored to meet local women's needs. "At the core of My Sisters' Place is a commitment to promoting a welcoming and non-judgmental culture, a reprieve from the stigma women so often feel in other community settings," said Bell.

Over 150 women in the London area accessed MSP each day. They ranged from 16 to 70 years of age and hailed from diverse backgrounds. The majority were individuals who had experienced abuse, trauma, and isolation, and many were homeless, at risk of homelessness, or were street-involved.² Their lives were often complicated by poverty, health concerns, and addiction, and over 80 per cent of them struggled with mental illness or substance abuse. Wraparound and drop-in services like those provided by MSP helped women recover and supported them in (re)building healthy, sustainable lives.

As a manager with CMHA, Bell's responsibilities included outreach for the target population in this region, and as such MSP was a key service provider. She valued the safe, welcoming, and inclusive nature of the centre, describing MSP as "a low barrier" drop-in centre for women or anyone who identified as a woman. Bell appreciated that while MSP served a large number of individuals with mental illness, it also served women with a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and needs.

We see a large population of individuals who have a diagnosis, mental health diagnosis, but are not consistent on their medication or don't have access to a family doctor or a psychiatrist to prescribe and follow up. But it's really all walks of life, you know? It's anyone and everyone. There are individuals who are in subsidized housing. They have wraparound services and support. They may come for groups and the socializing aspect of the program. And then there are people who come because their life depends on it. It's the full spectrum.

As with other organizations that worked with marginalized populations, it was challenging to collect and maintain accurate data on the women served. Many of the individuals who accessed MSP and its services faced housing insecurity or homelessness; however, they may not have identified as such. As Bell noted: "Even though they don't have an address of their own, they're couch surfing, or they're staying in a shelter, they won't consider themselves homeless, or they wouldn't classify themselves that way." MSP served as a lifeline for those without anywhere else to go. In the words of one MSP program participant:

I still remember the first time I went to MSP. I was walking down the street from the methadone clinic and ran into a girl who I had been in jail with. We talked for a minute, and she said, "you know what, I'm going to take you to My Sisters' Place." When a very nice lady introduced herself and gave me a pamphlet at the door, that's when I realized it wasn't her sister. It was everyone's sister. I fell in love with the place. It wasn't like anywhere I had ever been. It was like one big happy family of sisters. . . . There's no judgment. You're treated with respect no matter your past. This isn't the case everywhere a drug addict might go.³

² The term "street-involved" accounts for both varying degrees of homelessness and a wide range of at-risk behaviors. This term describes those who are not necessarily homeless but who may be exposed to and experiencing the adverse physical, mental, emotional, and social risks of street culture (April S. Elliott and the Canadian Paediatric Society Adolescent Health Committee, "Meeting the Health Care Needs of Street-Involved Youth," *Paediatrics & Child Health* 18 (June–July 2013): 317–321, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3680258/>).

³ "CMHA Thames Valley Addiction and Mental Health Services," Run for Women, accessed June 20, 2022, <https://www.runforwomen.ca/Cities/London/Canadian-Mental-Health-Association.aspx>.

SERVICES OFFERED

The women who accessed MSP had an opportunity to tap into resources that helped them to manage daily basic needs such as laundry, showers, day beds, and personal hygiene supplies. They also benefitted from access to nutritious meals, warm drinks, and snacks. Hot lunches were prepared and served to 100–200 individuals each day. The demand for meals had steadily increased in recent years, and the MSP team had strived to meet that need as best as it could. Bell remarked, “I wish we could provide 400 meals, but we have limits. We would never turn anybody away without something, so we always have snacks at the ready. We often ask for [donations of] protein drinks or those sorts of things so that if we did run out of meals, we are able to provide something.”

Transitional staff delivered support and care to women via one-on-one assessments, advising on pressing short-term needs (such as harm reduction and prevention or crisis intervention) as well as longer-term options. Women could work with on-site case managers to develop personal plans focused on independence, confidence building, and quality of life, including their mental and physical wellness. MSP supported the advancement of these plans by extending skill building, self-help, and training opportunities through its numerous learning and development programs. Many programs took the form of peer-led groups and spanned a wide range of interests and themes, including art therapy, Indigenous awareness, theatre, addiction support, sewing, music, women’s wellness, yoga, and nutrition.

Participants were also extended an opportunity to join MSP’s microenterprise (ME) program. The ME program functioned as a social enterprise: women who joined produced jewellery and accessories to generate income. Eighty per cent of program earnings went to the individual, with the remaining 20 per cent going back to the program. This experience not only taught practical craft skills but also exposed participants to marketing, business planning, sales, and inventory management. In addition to the learning opportunities, participants benefitted from mentoring as well as a strong sense of community membership. The program engaged 12 participants at a time and each cohort was supported by a dedicated ME facilitator. After completing a three-month program, the participants could move on to other school and employment opportunities and launch their own business start-ups or other endeavours, and new participants on the waitlist were welcomed. Bell was proud of the fact that many of the individuals went on to start their own ventures. Since its inception in 2007, the ME program had doubled in size. In 2013, a new facility for the ME program was made possible by a \$250,000 renovation on the MSP main property.

STAFFING AND PARTNERSHIPS

Staffing was a significant challenge for Bell and MSP, which relied on a mix of paid staff and volunteers. Bell described how she needed to balance its “open-door” policy to help ensure that her staff was safe and able to do their jobs and not negatively impacted by potentially volatile program participants.

We get funding for staff from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, and three hours on the weekend. . . . Due to the nature of our work, some of our participants can be quite volatile and quite unpredictable because, of course, we’re a low-barrier facility. So, we always need three staff on the floor just for safety measures and to be able to meet the needs . . . because when you have a hundred people, sort of coming in and out of the building, it gets very, very challenging. You have to have eyes on everything.

The high-stress environment reflected the traumatic experiences many participants brought to MSP, a variety of mental illnesses, and the work performed in support of harm reduction. “We’re also a harm-reduction location. We are partnered with the Regional HIV/AIDS Connection and provide harm reduction,

teaching, training, Naloxone training, and distribution of Naloxone kits as well as clean kits for individuals. We do often have individuals who use on-site. The staff are quite well versed in life-sustaining first aid and CPR. Fortunately, and unfortunately,” Bell remarked.

As a large portion of services provided included access to healthy food, MSP also employed a full-time nutritionist as well as a kitchen assistant. Some of the work in the kitchen was performed by volunteers. Because of the demanding work environment, Bell used what she described as an “unorthodox” hiring process to ensure the right fit with MSP’s needs and its participants.

I do a bit of an unorthodox sort of interview for people who come here because it’s a very specific skill set, and I only want staff who are here because this is truly where they want to be because it is very difficult. There’s a lot of vicarious trauma. There is a greater increase in potential harm to themselves. We have, and we’ll continue to have, assaults that happen on staff. So, this isn’t the place to necessarily just get your feet wet in social services. This is a place where you really need to have a passion for the job that you do. I am incredibly fortunate that I have the most dedicated staff I’ve ever had the pleasure of working with. It doesn’t mean that it isn’t hard, and it doesn’t burn us all out from time to time. But they keep coming back, and they just won’t leave—not that I want them to.

Recruiting staff and the high cost of training and onboarding was an ongoing issue. According to Bell, “It’s flying by the seat of your pants every day. No two days ever look the same.” Bell relied heavily on the interview process to help assess fit and to support the retention of those she onboarded. She was also highly cognizant of how time consuming and costly the hiring process was.

But really, my team leads and I spend a lot of time in the interview being very upfront and very honest—oftentimes, it will scare people away. . . . That is sort of the goal. And I don’t mean that in a negative way, but we pose questions and have more of a dialogue than an interview about scenarios that have taken place and how they would respond. We’re looking for really an open-minded individual, somebody who has no judgment, who really believes in harm reduction. And then, we spend a bit of time at the end of the interview and the question-and-answer period where we try actively to really challenge them. Do you really want to work here? We don’t want [people] to think it’s all sunshine and roses. I’ve never loved a job more than this job, but it is also one of the hardest jobs.

MSP relied heavily on partnerships and collaborations, such as accessing and sharing resources provided by other service providers in the community. For Bell, partnership was the “key” to MSP’s success. Its annual reports acknowledged the value of these partnerships, stating that “it truly takes a community to provide support and improve mental health and addiction care in London, Ontario.”

An example of one such collaboration included MSP’s connection to the London Food Coalition, which rescued soon-to-expire food from large grocery store chains, such as Costco, and provided lower-cost options to over 22 organizations.⁴ MSP saved significant food costs through its membership in this coalition, acquiring 100–250 kilograms of food four times each week. Bell explained, “So, we do pay into it, but it is a huge, huge savings for us. If you could imagine what it takes . . . to feed 200 people a day a nutritious meal, it would be quite costly. So, it really offsets that. It’s all fresh fruit and vegetables. There is sometimes meat, but also beans and those sorts of things.”

Other community partners included the London Housing Registry, Women’s Community House, Regional HIV/AIDS Connection, London InterCommunity Health Centre, and London CARES. Partners were invited to provide on-site programs for the benefit of participants. MSP staff connected participants with local

⁴ “Programs,” London Food Coalition, accessed February 7, 2022, <https://www.londonfoodcoalition.com/programs-1>.

mental health service providers, clinical services, and community programs, aligning program provision with the needs of the group. These local service providers helped MSP with training programs but also facilitated access to specialized services on- and off-site.

EXPENSES AND FUNDING

As a non-profit supporting up to 200 women each day, and with a growing demand for services, operating costs were a continual concern for Bell. The MSP budget reflected fixed costs such as staffing and administration expenses as well as overhead costs including rent, taxes, and depreciation. The main MSP property warranted ongoing (and growing) repair and maintenance expenses. Known as Buchan House, the historic Victorian mansion was built in two stages in 1872 and 1887.⁵ The building was generously donated to MSP in 2009 by the late Dave and Noreen Bird. The age and heritage status of the property implied frequent and high maintenance costs, which often arose unexpectedly. For example, Bell recalled how in May, 2017, MSP experienced plumbing issues, and the bill ran into tens of thousands of dollars.

The organization's operating budget for 2019–20 was CA\$980,000,⁶ up from \$500,000 in 2015. Like many non-profits, MSP relied on a combination of somewhat precarious funding sources. Grants from the United Way and CMHA Middlesex as well as the City of London typically accounted for around 25 per cent of MSP's operating costs. While this funding was relatively steady, the amount received through such sources could fluctuate.⁷ Bell recalled, "while we have been able to rely on United Way for about \$200,000 or just over every year, last year we received less." The "last year" that Bell referred to was 2020—the year that the COVID-19 pandemic had hit. The decreased funding amount was often attributed to reduced funding that the United Way received through its own fundraising efforts. Bell accepted that "it's a bit precarious, but that is the nature of My Sisters' Place, and that has been true for years, and we're still here and still offering more than we've offered the year before . . . Somehow, we still managed to grow, which is quite incredible."

The remaining funds (i.e., 75 per cent of MSP's operating costs) were raised through community donations, events, and other fund-development-related activities. MSP was heavily dependent on goodwill donations from the community to operate, drawing on both financial and in-kind contributions. In May, 2017, when MSP experienced unexpected plumbing issues and was unable to cover the costs, the community came to its aid. An anonymous individual started a GoFundMe campaign that raised \$62,000, which exceeded the cost of the expense. While such support was highly valuable, it was variable year over year.

As a subsidiary of CMHA, MSP had access to the services and support of an experienced fundraiser, Wendy Sanderson. As a senior fund development associate for CMHA Middlesex, a large portion of Sanderson's role was fundraising for affiliates, including MSP. She worked in collaboration with a volunteer-based sustainability committee focused on fundraising. The committee promoted annual events in support of many of MSP's programs including its nutrition program and had raised over \$800,000 in support of MSP's needs in recent years.

Sanderson explained how MSP donations worked: "First and foremost, we count on the generous and ongoing support of our community donors. Some of them do not require an ask or solicitation. . . . It is part of their annual commitment, and those cheques come into us or come to us online."

Sanderson indicated that "there's also a family that are very, very strong supporters of My Sisters' Place. And annually, we reach out to them, and they provide support, financially for after-hours or extended hours to keep My Sisters' Place open." This family was central to MSP's success and the relationship was ongoing:

⁵ "John Buchan House," Canada's Register of Historic Places, accessed February 11, 2022, <https://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=8569>.

⁶ All currency amounts are in CA\$ unless otherwise specified.

⁷ Hala Ghonaim, "They Have Nowhere to Go' London Shelter Cuts Hours, Asks for Donations," *CBC News*, July 13, 2017, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/my-sisters-place-cuts-hours-asks-for-donations-1.4202335>.

We're very close with the family who has donated, and they have come back and donated further. . . . The family wishes to remain anonymous, preferring the good MSP does in the community speak for itself instead. . . . If it's a business [donating], often they're fine with recognition. But when it's a family or a family foundation, they oftentimes want to remain anonymous. They're doing it in remembrance of a loved one who maybe has experienced homelessness, addiction, or mental illness, throughout their lifetime. So, they just want to give back and don't want the focus to be on them.

MSP applied for grants through family foundations but also sourced funding and support from other sources. This included organizations such as the London Community Foundation as well as local individuals and businesses with an interest in the work of the organization.

Hosted events were another revenue source for MSP. These either took the form of events that MSP coordinated or third-party events that MSP supported through volunteering or social media and promotion. One example included the Shoppers Drug Mart's Run for Women, which launched in 2017. MSP was the chosen recipient of the London area's Run for Women funding in support of women's mental health. In 2018, the run raised \$110,000. This popular third-party event facilitated access to additional funds including \$77,000 that MSP was awarded through Shoppers' Growing Women's Health Campaign.

Sanderson acknowledged MSP's success over the years in generating community support and contributions, attributing this to its position as "the sweetheart of the community." She explained:

. . . it's a real beloved service that people really, really care about. And we're very, very fortunate in that respect. So, I would say, you know, donations are very, very consistent. And we do have monthly donors that give to it. There are many church groups and quilting groups and women's auxiliaries. The Sisters of St. Joseph have been strong supporters. So, you know, that variety of support really coming together, makes for some very great solid financial support.

MSP also has an active social media presence and regularly posts 'asks' on their Facebook page (see exhibit 1). Whether it is a need for water bottles in the hot summer months or granola bars, warm gloves and socks in the Winter, the community always responds positively.

AN ONGOING BALANCING ACT

On countless occasions over the years, MSP had experienced local government funding cuts, or unexpected costs arose, and it had to find a solution, often with little warning. For example, in 2015, the City of London decided to withdraw funding for a housing support worker who had been working with MSP for six-months to help find longer-term housing solutions for program beneficiaries.⁸

In the past, these shortfalls had been offset by generous community donations. Throughout the years, MSP had made numerous public funding appeals and had successfully rallied the local community to bridge the funding gap. One example included a private donation of \$97,000 that was received in 2012 to help sustain MSP's evening program. By the winter of 2018, MSP successfully managed to receive an increase in community donations, which allowed it to re-establish the evening programs and to expand service hours, enabling continuous access to services for women at risk.

Bell acknowledged that investing in MSP could feel risky to funders. "This is a very unique population of people and very unique program." She also acknowledged the desire for impact that funders could have: "It would be quite risky for a funder to take it on without requesting some changes."

But while obtaining sustainable funding was crucial, so too was staying true to MSP's guiding mission and its beneficiaries. As Bell stated, "It's a balance of, yes, we want sustainable funding, but we want to make

⁸ Ghonaim, "They Have Nowhere to Go."

sure that the program remains at its core of what our mission and value is, and that can get tricky.” That mission, clearly communicated on its website, reflected “a commitment to promoting a welcoming and non-judgmental culture, a reprieve from the stigma women so often feel in other community settings.”

Honouring this commitment sometimes meant renouncing financial aid. For example, as part of its impact evaluation, funding entities often required information on the women’s backgrounds and experiences, their health, and family histories. In many instances, grant provision was directly contingent on the collection of such data. Yet, in line with its reputation as a low-barrier and welcoming space, MSP did not collect some of the data that would be required by specific funders (such as health-card numbers, addresses, or other personal information). Bell and her staff tracked how many people came in the door but did not require anyone to give them their date of birth, their address, or even their name if they did not wish to share it. “You know, we’ve got a lot of individuals who come in through aliases. We are very, very harm-reduction focused and low-barrier focused.”

Indeed, the collection of data on program beneficiaries was a thorny, reoccurring issue. Bell often had to choose between turning down aid (because of data provision requirements) or risk negatively impacting the women MSP served. She justified her choice, given that the majority of MSP program participants “would be quite put off by that requirement.” For Bell, asking the women for detailed personal data was a no-go, stating that “It would change the tone of the services that we’re offering. And while I am all for growth and development, it needs to be with [the women’s] needs, at the forefront, not the funders’ needs.”

THE FUTURE FOR MSP

In looking to the future, Bell had ambitious plans. In addition to its drop-in daytime services, she was hopeful that MSP would be able to expand to provide overnight services. “We’ve applied for funding to be able to provide resting spaces, women-specific resting spaces. . . . what we hope to offer is 10 overnight resting spaces for women on-site at My Sisters’ Place.”

Bell’s aspirations for MSP also included the expansion of one of its transitional housing programs referred to as Holly’s House. Municipal funding in support of the program was short term in nature, while the need for this service continued to grow, and evidence of its impact had been clear. “We’ve seen so much success in assisting people to find housing, permanent housing. By providing that period of stability with staff on-site to help them work through some of their struggles—it has made a huge impact on their ability to find permanent stable housing.”

Being able to grow the ME program was also on Bell’s wish list for MSP. To support this effort, ME launched an online store to help increase sales. This extra revenue was put toward the program itself, as well as helping accommodate more participants.

While expansion was on her mind, Bell was well aware of the many and growing needs of the women that the organization proudly served. She thought about the looming cost of the roof repair. Bell questioned how fruitful yet another plea for community support would be and also worried about how onerous such efforts were for the already-lean team at MSP. In addition to the extra workload were the risks of possible staffing and program cuts if donations failed to cover the full cost of the roof. With rainy April in sight, Bell was also conscious of the safety risks associated with not addressing the leak. She felt cornered and pondered how best to proceed.

The authors would like to thank Laura Thorne for her contributions to the development of this case.

EXHIBIT 1: EXAMPLE OF MSP'S 'ASK' FOR WATER AND SNACK DONATIONS

We are in need of snacks and water at both My Sisters' Place and the London Coffee House. Water is going to be in demand all summer long – some days more than others.

What kind of snacks you ask? Fresh fruit (bananas / oranges) or individually packaged items like: granola bars, cereal bars, fruit cups, Rice Krispie Squares... Softer items are appreciated as many participants have dental issues.

We appreciate any help you can offer.

Source: Company documents.