



June 2023
VOL 35/1

CHEZNOUS

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Universal accessibility at Logifem: so much more than adding ramps

When you first meet a woman in a wheelchair, do you wonder what happened? Perhaps a car accident. Maybe health issues that turned into complications. Or a genetic condition.

Would you ever think that she is in a wheelchair because her partner beat her so badly that she lost her leg and has been in a wheelchair ever since?

At Logifem, we do.... now.

We live in a society that strives to treat everyone equally. Sometimes our efforts address what is more obvious discrimination in our experience, and we fail to see the subtle ones. Equality for those living with reduced mobility is one example that seems to fall under the radar. People with reduced mobility don't always have access to the same services as fully mobile people. For example, access to every public building. Not all have wheelchair-accessible entryways, elevators, or accessible washrooms. Going out for dinner or coffee, to the dentist or to a hair salon, presents barriers that make these everyday things more complicated or even impossible for someone using a wheelchair.

When Logifem learned that there was funding available to shelters like ours, part of the provincial government's action plan against domestic violence, we immediately started exploring the feasibility of extending our services in order to help women having the added challenge of reduced mobility.

And here the story begins...

1. Feasibility assessed

Logifem first turned to *Société Logique*, a non-profit organization whose mission is to promote and create universally accessible spaces. After an onsite visit, their team presented us with several options. Relocating office space to be able to create ground-floor bedrooms and renovating an existing bathroom was the most practical and economical option.



2. Funding received

Part of the Quebec government's 2018-2023 action plan was to provide funding to shelters to better adapt their services to the realities of people living in vulnerable situations. Excited with the positive results from the feasibility study, we decided to assign the funding to this project.

3. Committee formed

We realized that a construction project of this scale, with its specific universal accessibility requirements, needed a technical committee to guide us through the process. Roy Dalebozik, a former Logifem Board member was a key player. A building engineer also diagnosed with MS, Roy's expertise in construction as well as his lived experience as a wheelchair-user were vital.

The committee worked alongside *Architecture sans frontières* who designed the necessary modifications. One of the decisions made was to create adjoining rooms so that in the event that a single mom was in difficulty and had a child in a wheelchair, we could welcome the family.

4. Partnerships created

While structural modifications were crucial, we also wanted to work on creating an environment that respected and valued the unique experiences and challenges faced by women living with disabilities. We partnered with *INÉÉI PSH (The Institut National pour l'Équité, L'Égalité et l'Inclusion des personnes en situation de handicap)*. Their mission is to create solidarity and build healthy, safe, equal and inclusive communities for persons with a disability and persons in vulnerable situations. We knew we were in good hands.

At the same time, the *Service Régional Diversité et Inclusion* of the *CIUSSS* was looking for a partner to run a pilot project to provide home-based care in women's shelters. This was a great opportunity for Logifem to contribute to developing best practices regarding women living with disabilities in shelters.

5. Staff trained

Every member of our staff, including employees who work in operations and in administration, participated in a training session offered by the *INÉÉI PSH*. We learned that women living with disabilities have a double vulnerability, firstly because they are women and secondly because the disability results in daily barriers. These difficulties can include prejudices, financial dependence, inaccessibility to jobs, services and housing, little or lack of transportation services and dependence on care givers. The lack of accessibility to buildings also has an effect on their social life, further isolating them from the support they need.

These obstacles are all factors that abusers use to reinforce their control. As a result, women with disabilities are at greater risk of violence which can include negligence as well as psychological, sexual and physical abuse.

In fact, **60% of women who have some sort of disability will be victims of violence in adulthood** (Roeher Institute, 1995).

Despite this alarming statistic, few shelters are accessible.

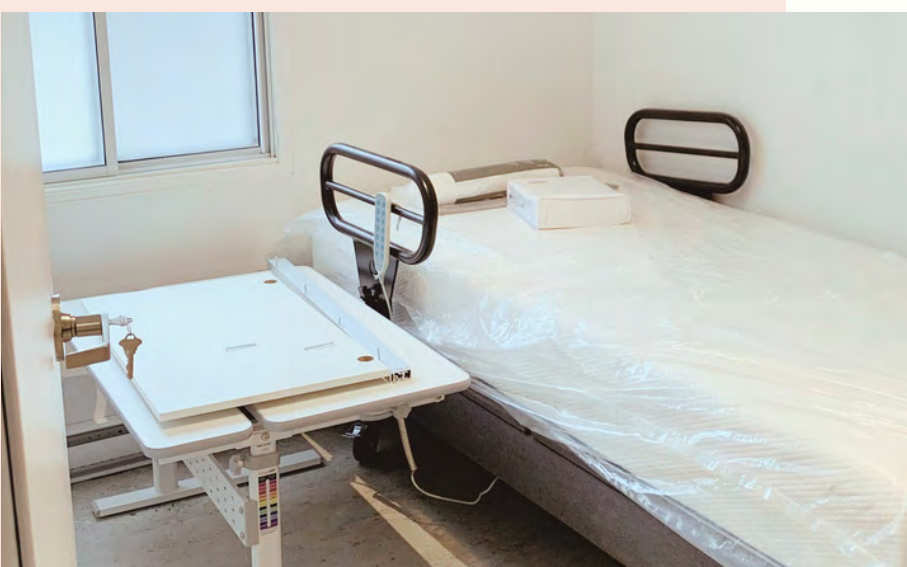


6. Renovations undertaken

By the beginning of 2022, preparations for the renovations were underway. Offices and photocopiers were moved and the storage closet was emptied. Work started in February 2022. As with most renovations, various temporary working areas were created, along with noise and dust! By the end of fall 2022, Logifem had a renovated wing with a universally accessible bathroom and two bedrooms. New front and back entrance doors, power door operator systems on all main floor doors and a ramp in the back. COVID created many supply chain challenges, with the longest delays being the doors and their installation.

7. Equipment purchased

Logifem's occupational therapist helped with the room design and choice of furniture. Hospital beds and height-appropriate adjustable dressers were purchased. She also determined what pieces would be needed for everyday living. These included wall-accessible storage shelves, grabber tools, mirrors, non-slip carpets, handlebars and bath seats. We also bought portable security buttons so that staff could be alerted if a resident fell.



8. Eligibility criteria determined

With an ongoing waiting list and few accessible shelters in Montreal, we needed to establish eligibility criteria to establish who would have priority to stay in the accessible rooms. Our occupational therapist developed a questionnaire to evaluate the physical and sensory capacities of women seeking our services. Questions such as “Can you stand up?”, “Can you bend over and tie your shoes?” or “Do you need assistance to use the bathroom?” were included.

9. Admission process refined

The questionnaire was also used to improve the admission process. By knowing an applicant’s capacity level in advance, Logifem could adequately adapt our services in preparation for her arrival. For example, “Can you participate in the daily chores?” or “Can you do your own laundry?”. This also spared the women from having to repeat their needs.

10. First residents welcomed

By the end of the year, the renovations were not fully completed, but were sufficient for us to be able to admit two women in wheelchairs. At last, two women were going to benefit from this collaborative initiative. We were thrilled to welcome them!

Both have slipped right in and have added vibrant energy to the house. Each one has lived traumas over the years and greatly needed our support. From the outside however, we only see the positive: the big smiles they give us every morning and the jokes they like to tell.

"All women should be able to access a safe place to heal from their trauma. No one should be excluded because of a mobility issue."



PLEASE HELP LOGIFEM CONTINUE TO OFFER A SAFE PLACE TO ALL WOMEN IN NEED

