



Ontario Association of Interval & Transition Houses

Pre-Budget Submission

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Dying To Get In and No Way to Get Out

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Submitted By: Ontario Association of Interval & Transition Houses

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Background

The Ontario Association of Interval & Transition Houses, established in 1977, is a 76-member Association of violence against women shelters, transitional housing and community-based women's organizations. We work with our member organizations to strengthen the services they offer through training, education, public awareness and advocacy. Through OAITH's Violence Against Women Training Hub, we've trained thousands of VAW workers and other providers from a wide range of sectors working with survivors of violence. MCCSS Project Funding is critical to the success we're achieving with over 3,500 registered users who have access to 15 self-paced courses.

OAITH is actively engaged with government and our larger membership on the issues relating to investment and stabilization in the VAW sector. In the past year, OAITH has met with Minister of Children, Community and Social Services, Minister of the Attorney General, Associate Minister of Women's Issues, Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, and staff in the office of Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing and Ministry of Infrastructure. Ensuring that our issues are addressed across party lines, we've met with Critics from the Official Opposition for Women's Issues and Social and Community Services.

OAITH and our members were encouraged to see that fiscal enhancements were continued in 2019 and that the goal of ending violence against women is shared by MPPs at the local level and across government as a whole. We will continue to advocate for funding stabilization of core operating budgets for Violence Against Women services across the spectrum of prevention, early intervention and response. Reducing the prevalence of gender-based violence in Ontario needs to be made an urgent priority of this government.

Investing in The Safety of Women and Children

Over the last 5 years OAITH has led a strong lobby on funding with our membership to address the long-standing funding crisis of VAW Shelters. Through this collaborative effort of working with our membership and with government, we were pleased with the fiscal increase to stabilize funding in 2018-2019. In the fall of 2019, government announced to shelters another fiscal increase would be provided for 2019-2020. We do appreciate that funding to the sector has been

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maintained, and we know that these fiscal amounts will better serve the sector when it's included in their core operating budgets.

As much as shelters provide a range of services to gender-based violence survivors, a bottleneck crisis is occurring that can't be ignored. Between 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 there was a slight increase in the number women and children served in shelter; from 17,600 to 17,800 respectively. However, in 2018-2019, while the number of women/children served in shelter went down to 16,500, we are deeply concerned that this indicates women are unable to access shelter because they are at full capacity, not because fewer women are trying to access their services.

Understanding the difference in the number of women/children served compared to number of beds per night provides a better understanding of how many nights shelters were either under capacity, at capacity or over capacity. Shelters will often run over capacity by using unfunded beds. When women are in danger and no space is provided, this can be equated to a 911 operator saying "*we have don't have an ambulance who can come and save your life.*"

Further to this, women are staying longer in shelter simply because they have ***nowhere to go*** due to the lack of affordable housing. Women having to stay longer in shelter creates a domino effect for other women who are not able to access a shelter bed. While some shelters may be able to utilize their unfunded beds to go beyond their capacity (albeit with a significant financial burden and risk), not all shelters have this luxury as they have no 'extra' physical beds to fill.

We have valid reasons to be concerned here in Ontario and across Canada. Shelter Voices Report (2019)¹ indicates that on one snapshot day, a staggering **78.8% of women and children were turned away when trying to access a shelter bed.** Leaving shelters to either pull out a cot, find a shelter bed in another community (if it exists) or offer other services to support women until a shelter bed becomes available.

In 2016-2017 provincial and local VAW crisis lines received 51,700 calls, but when we look at the most recent MCCSS Service Statistics, this has grown to 65,700 calls in just 3 years. Calls are requesting help to flee a violent home, to receive ongoing support over the phone (due to capacity or waitlists), to access outreach services, for referrals to other resources or a myriad of information-seeking requests. And calls are continuing to increase. We must do more than

¹ Women's Shelters Canada (2019). Shelter Voices. Ottawa, Canada. Retrieved from: <https://endvaw.ca/shelter-voices-2019/>

leaving women with a number to call; They first need a safe place to go from immediate harm, and finally need affordable housing to move to after shelter. When we can do both in unison with one another, then the number of women being turned away from shelter will decrease.

“OAITH’s work on Femicide tells an indisputable fact; gender-based violence is killing women in Ontario. A plan for longer term investments, backed by measurable outcomes in the prevention of gender-based violence and femicide is urgently needed.”

Marlene Ham, Executive Director, OAITH

VAW Shelters must respond to their community crisis, NOT the crisis in their bank accounts:

The fiscal enhancements over the past 2 years have been used to improve the quality of service provided, enhance services in outreach programs, improve access to transportation, develop and/or enhance services to children and youth. Most importantly however, it’s keeping the shelters open. While the increment in fiscal funding feels significant in some ways, it barely scratches the surface from decades of inadequate funding for a sector increasingly doing more with less. Investments matched with a plan to prevent and respond that is outcome-based will build the sustainability of VAW services. VAW shelters are falling behind in staff to client ratios, staff wages and compensation, and having the staffing resources to effectively respond. The National Profile on Women Shelters outlines the following²:

- Of the 72 Ontario Shelters who participated, 48% of our workforce is precariously employed, mainly with casual employees and some part-time employees;
- Of the 234 shelters across Canada who participated in the study, an average wage of 19.34 is paid to VAW Counsellors. In Ontario, we are slightly above the average at 21.25. OAITH’s internal data on wages indicates wages as low as 17.00 an hour;

² Maki, K. (2019). “More Than a Bed: A National Profile of VAW Shelters and Transition Houses.” Ottawa, ON: Women’s Shelters Canada.

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- In terms of major challenges for the sector across Canada, 61% identified low pay and benefits, while 55% identified staff turnover and burnout;
- Ontario shelters are not alone in their struggles for funding. The study revealed that 74% of participating shelters indicated insufficient funding was a major challenge;
- The lack of cost-of-living increases for transfer payment organizations is contributing to shelters falling behind. Across Canada, 64% don't receive one from the funder. For shelters that do provide it, they are fundraising to make it happen;
- Over half of shelters (55%) who participated in Canada had no choice but to fundraise to meet their basic operating expenses. Internal OAITH member data reveals over a 5-year period (2011-2016), close to 80% had to fundraise to offset their basic operating expenses.

“Our pay equity plan has us closing the gap in 17 years. An annualized increase would allow us to revisit our current plan and reduce that timeframe”

-OAITH Member, Northern Region

Good fiscal health requires planning and vision in order for our members to achieve their goals, the current incremental fiscal investment models are posing a significant challenge for planning. While the fiscal enhancements are appreciated, these funds need to be adopted into shelters' core funding contracts for 2020. Fiscal enhancements are creating uncertainty and instability for our sector and this has an impact on the women and children we serve.

Women deserve quality supports and shouldn't have to worry if the service they are receiving today will continue beyond March 31st 2020. This continuity, reliability and certainty is what leads to better results for survivors of gender-based violence and lessens the impact and financial burden on our policing, health care and court system.

We trust that over the past two years the VAW shelters have demonstrated to government that these investments would be better served with a plan to annualize them, so that they can do the work they need to do in improving outcomes for women and children in Ontario.

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Family Court Support Worker Program

Further to working with our primary membership about the needs of shelters, we also work closely with our Associate Membership in determining some of the broader funding and advocacy needs for programs offered both within and outside of shelter organizations. Luke's Place, an Associate Member of OAITH has played an instrumental role in the coordination of building the capacity of FCSWP Staff across Ontario.

This program offered in many shelters (but not all) and through a range of other community-based services is deserving of attention from government and Ministry of Attorney General to stabilize and expand the services. Initially funded in 2010/2011, in 42 court jurisdictions, we've seen the demand exponentially grow, while staffing levels, program stability and funding to respond, has not.

What we've always known, but has been demonstrated more concretely through the development of this program is that in order for family court to be more effective, Family Court Support Workers need to be made available to more women. Safety planning and risk assessment are critical as women move through the system. In two separate research projects, Luke's Place found that 64% of participants had feared for their life while moving through family court. The first study examined this in Durham region³, the second study⁴ examined these experiences in 8 separate locations across the province, demonstrating that women's safety is a primary concern in family court proceedings.

Mental Health and Addiction Strategy

Co-occurrence of violence, substance-use and trauma is well-documented and researched, but our system and services significantly miss the mark in addressing the needs of survivors when gender-based violence, trauma and substance use co-occur. As a result, VAW shelter programs and services are left filling the gap, with no resources to do so.

We estimate that approximately 70% of women accessing VAW Shelter are living with substance use and/or mental health barriers, rooted in the impact of trauma

³ Luke's Place Support & Resource Centre (2008). Needs Assessment and Gap Analysis for Abused Women Unrepresented in the Family Court System: Final Report and Recommendations. Retrieved from: <https://lukesplace.ca/pdf/MAG-Research-Summary-Report-Apr-13-08.pdf>

⁴ Dragiewicz, M., & DeKeseredy, W. (2008). Study on the Experiences of Abused Women in the Family Courts in Eight Regions in Ontario. Retrieved from: <https://lukesplace.ca/pdf/Study-on-the-Experiences-of-Abused-Women.pdf>

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throughout their lifespan and requiring integrated services that will address violence, substance use and trauma under one program/service.

For women living in shelters, their lives are at risk, and there are serious safety concerns around accessing services outside of the shelter; For many it is simply not safe for them to step out the door to access services, while for others they may not want to access those services as they may not be responding to their needs. This gap in our systems and services has inevitably led to women falling through the cracks.

There are no standards around staffing levels or staff to client ratios, leaving many shelters single-staff amidst a significant epidemic in Ontario. This impacts service quality, particularly when supporting survivors who use substances and who are also suffering the long-term impacts of physical and emotional trauma, further complicated by their compromised safety. A single staff member working in shelter that house anywhere from 10 to over 30 residents is not sufficient given the scope of expertise required, in crisis-oriented environments mandated to keep women and their children safe. The lack of staff to client ratios poses significant safety risks for both residents and staff. Yet they have no choice, based on the funding they receive.

VAW shelters are experts in the safety and well-being of those fleeing gender-based violence, and have training in understanding the needs of women with concurrent disorders. There is significant value in having specialized trauma and substance use services available in VAW shelters to address notable changes in shelter demographics. We believe that a program supported through Ontario's Mental Health and Addiction Strategy, where women will be served with quality programs being brought directly to them will have the best outcomes.

Recommendations

1: Annualize all fiscal enhancement investments to VAW funded agencies through MCCSS from the 2019 Provincial Budget.

Fiscal enhancements received for shelter, counselling, transitional support, rural realities and for children and youth services in the 2018 and 2019 Budget have provided much needed relief to address capacity issues, safer workplaces and increasing the number of women and children we serve. Without annualizing this funding, it is not possible to plan for staffing and service-delivery in a sustainable way. The fiscal enhancements received in 2019 are directly funding core services

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and need to be added to their core funding to provide the best value for money and the best outcomes for women and their children.

2: Include mental health and addiction counselling and support services in VAW shelters as part of their core programming through the Mental Health & Addictions Strategy

OAITH's report *Shelter Realities* (2017) highlights the need for an inter-ministerial approach to funding the programs and services in shelter. These recommendations clearly outline the current tipping point of VAW shelters and the need for *trauma-informed + substance use* staffing, overdose prevention, and programming to be made available inside VAW shelters as part of their core programming.

3. Increase investments for MAG-funded Violence Against Women services, including the Family Court Support Worker Program (FCSWP).

Demand for services continues to increase, while the level of funding has remained the same. FCSWP helps to keep women safe and supported, while helping the Family Court system run more efficiently. Sexual Assault Centres are being forced to make survivors wait. Partner Assault Response Programs, Victim Witness Assistance Programs, and Victim Services are all deserving of the resources required so that we can effectively respond together. We need to ensure the whole system of supports is stabilized, so that we can stop the bottleneck service crisis.

4. Move forward with a comprehensive action plan, attached to investments, to prevent, effectively respond and improve outcomes.

Gender-based violence is a complex social problem that won't be solved by one sector, or through one ministry. The approach requires collaboration between ministries and service providers, with concrete planning, strategic vision and targeted investments over the next 2 years, with clear measurements to improve outcomes guided by expert advice from the sector.

5: Invest in decent, accessible and affordable housing that offers flexibility; new transitional housing spaces, affordable stock and portable benefits.

Women can't leave if they have nowhere to go. Women can't remain free if it's not affordable. It's cheaper to invest in the short term then it is to continue responding to violence over the long term.

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6: Invest in community-based primary prevention programs.

If we want to end gender-based violence, we must prevent it from happening in the first place. While we've built up a sector to intervene early to provide immediate safety, the most efficient way is to ensure it stops before it even starts. Money invested in prevention is money saved in policing, health and social services.

7: Income support programs, employment/education opportunities and access to affordable child care that are specifically designed to support survivors of gender-based violence.

Existing income support programs are not adequately responding to the needs of women fleeing violence. We need to create the conditions to lift women and children out of poverty, so that they can move onto a violence free life for their families. Designing poverty reduction pilot programs specifically for survivors of gender-based violence could help us measure progress and outcomes and lead to innovate approaches to ending violence against women.