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To: The Honourable Dalton McGuinty, Premier of Ontario

April 2, 2012

On behalf of the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH), I am writing to respond to the Ontario budget which was tabled on March 27, 2012.

OAITH is the province-wide network of women's first and second stage shelters serving women and children who experience violence against women. As such, the budget bill concerns the Association in its potential impacts on women and children who are trying to address the violence in their lives, as well as the impacts on the services they need in order to do that. OAITH has a number of concerns with the fiscal plans of the Government of Ontario as outlined in this budget.

- 1. Social assistance and the Ontario Child Benefit:** We are pleased that the government has chosen to increase the overall budget for social programs by more than the draconian level recommended by the Commission on the Review of Ontario's Public Services. However, we are deeply troubled by plans to freeze social assistance rates and delay increases to the Ontario Child Benefit. Considering the rising cost of living, this "freeze" is in reality an unnecessary and unjustified cut to people who are among the poorest of Ontario's most vulnerable citizens. Women and children on social assistance are now struggling with what amounts to a 55% cut to their already low income since the Harris government slashed social assistance rates in 1995/96.

Although the Liberal government has made increases to the rates and accomplished some positive steps in creating the OCB, women and children on social assistance remain mired in poverty and this progress is now being eroded.

In a recent meeting with the Honourable John Milloy, Minister of Community and Social Services, our Association urged the Minister to argue for raising the rates. We spoke about the ongoing poverty of women and children in abusive situations and impact of that poverty on their efforts to be safe and to protect their children. At that time, the Minister indicated that the budget of Ontario would reflect "Liberal values". We are disappointed to learn that the values of the Liberal government include driving the most vulnerable Ontarians into deeper poverty in order to respond to economic problems created by privileged entities and individuals. There is nothing fair about the decision to include social assistance recipients in sharing any responsibility for a global economic crisis

from which they can only suffer. They should not have to share the blame. This is not the kind of “balanced approach” that serves well the future of Ontario and we hope that you can reassure us in the coming days that these measures can be changed.

2. Structural changes to social assistance and employment supports:

OAITH has participated in the consultations on the review of social assistance in Ontario. On reading the budget papers, we were mystified to learn that apparently decisions about restructuring social assistance in Ontario, for example merging Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program delivery of employment services into a “one-stop shop”, have been taken without waiting until the Commission on the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario, set up by the current government, has finished its review.

In addition, the proposal to move some benefits into Municipal Affairs and Housing are apparently new suggestions made without public consultation or discussion with those most affected by them. For example, OAITH would have appreciated some notice and discussion on the decision to restructure the Community Start-Up benefit, a benefit which many women who use women’s shelter services need to escape an abusive situation.

Ontarians have provided hundreds of responses to the Commission that they hoped would be considered seriously before any major changes were made. OAITH had hoped that the review would be guided by that advice in a thoughtful and conscientious way. We are surprised and worried that major shifts in the structure of social assistance, affecting hundreds of thousands of low-income and marginalized people in Ontario, are now being tabled as part of an “austerity” budget.

3. Missing in Inaction: The current budget does not address some of the most serious issues for women and children who experience violence and want to escape it. Central among these are affordable and low-income housing and child care. We know that lack of low-income housing is one of the barriers—along with severely inadequate financial supports such as OW and ODSP—that drives women back to abusive situations, or prevents them ever leaving them. Yet there are no initiatives to protect the faltering community-based, non-profit child care system in Ontario and no initiatives to provide more low-income housing despite the promise of progressive action from the Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy. For women who are leaving abusive relationships, this is very discouraging news.

We are aware that the economy in Ontario is fragile; investing in child care is a priority if the Province is to support working women whose ability to find and maintain employment will be jeopardized if child care is not available.

By not addressing the ongoing issues of sub-standard housing and lack of child care in Ontario, government is setting the stage for problems that will cost every bit as much to solve as it would take to support women to work, or to ensure

that women who are currently working are not forced from jobs because they no longer have child care. As with increasing poverty in Ontario, increasing lack of safe, affordable housing will result in higher health costs, higher justice system costs and increasing dissatisfaction with government. A better, more prosperous Ontario cannot emerge from such a scenario.

4. **Women's services:** We have been very grateful to the Liberal Government for restoring funding cut by the Harris regime from women's first and second stage shelters in 1995/96 as well as for subsequent support for women's services, including for the initiative to begin a much-needed Sexual Violence Action Plan for Ontario in recent years. In the context of this budget, we assume that funding for women's services, therefore, will not be cut. That is good news that we can celebrate.

At the same time, we know that economic recessions create higher demand for anti-violence and other women's services that women use when they face the increasing poverty and violence that recessions create. We would have liked to see this reflected in some initiatives to enhance support for women and children most affected by economic downturns, loss of employment and ensuing struggles to address violence in their homes, schools, workplaces and their communities. We would have liked to see this reflected in an understanding of the often low wages paid to women workers in independent, community-based women's services, the disparity of funding between similar services in the North and South, the disparity of funding for services for Aboriginal women and women from marginalized communities as well as other ongoing issues faced by women who use and provide supports for women experiencing abuse.

It is precisely in these challenging times that government must ensure that women's equality and human rights, as well as those of marginalized communities, are upheld and defended. Maintaining and strengthening frontline services in the community is one important way by which government can do this. It is discouraging that this budget does not reflect the gender and equity analysis that women and equity-seeking communities in Ontario called for during the previous provincial election.

5. **Efficiencies and consolidation:** The current budget recommends changes to government operations that seek to create tightened processes, consolidation of operations and enhanced oversight. These types of measures now appear to be *de rigueur* in any government cost-cutting exercise but we wonder just how much "efficiency" is possible without serious negative consequences to public service. Surely, there must be a limit to how much "more" we can do with "less".

One initiative suggests greater authority for the Ontario Internal Audit Division to audit the broader public sector. Budget papers are complex, and it is often difficult to know how particular announcements or proposals will play out in reality. As women's services, however, we are concerned that any entity that has auditing authority must also have the necessary understanding of our work

if it is to assess whether or not public funds are well-used. It would help us to comment on the budget if we knew what impact such an initiative might have on women's services within the broader public sector.

Although fully in support of financial accountability for government funds, we believe it is important to ensure that funding oversight and support for women's services are framed by expertise about our work within the public service.

As often underfunded and overburdened services, women's shelters, second stages, rape crisis centres and women's centres often face disproportionate administrative reporting per public dollar than many much larger public services. Added administrative responsibilities and expectations are not often accompanied by increases in administrative funds by which to comply with new expectations. We would like to be reassured that new accountability and efficiency measures do not add to the administrative burden on small community-based services.

As much as we, as taxpayers, may wish to have an efficient and effective public service, we are concerned that the compulsion of governments at all levels to merge processes and reduce public service staff may well result not in efficiency, but in short-term measures that prove costly in the long term.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the budget.

Sincerely,



Eileen Morrow, Coordinator
Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH)