

Falling Through the Gender Gap

How Ontario Government Policy Continues to Fail Abused Women and their Children

**Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH)
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Where we have been

Over the last 20 years, the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH) and its member shelters have worked in a non-partisan way with all three political parties in Ontario as each took its turn governing the province.

In 1982, we heard the first significant call for public responsibility for violence against women by their partners made to the Progressive Conservative government of the day during hearings on Wife Battering.

The hearings heard about serious gaps in services and ingrained attitudes of re-victimization towards women experiencing violence. A subsequent report made 47 recommendations for change¹, but the government chose largely to rely on already established mainstream systems which had been criticized by presenters at the hearings as insensitive and misinformed. Little was done to seriously address the problems facing women and children escaping violence.

In 1986, during the tenure of the Liberal Party of Ontario, the Joint Family Violence Initiatives were developed as the centrepiece of Liberal Party policy on violence against women. We began to see some of the recommendations from 1982 addressed more seriously. Women's advocates from shelters and other women's services began to consult more closely with government policy makers.

During this time, basic but inadequate core funding for women's shelters was introduced. For the first time, police were mandated to lay charges against abusers and wife assault was decriminalized. Police training on the issue was developed. Government created publicly funded education campaigns to provide some community awareness.

In the criminal justice system, the Liberal government set up the first Victim/Witness Programs under the direction of the Crown Attorney's offices. While these programs gave increased support for women entering an largely hostile system, they remained under the control and restriction of the justice system itself. Also during this time, legal aid certificates for emergency legal aid were provided for the first time to abused women needing legal advice, and the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board provided relief to some women injured by violent partners. A few language interpretation services were funded on a generic basis.

For the first time, government acknowledged that children who witness violence against their mother need support, and shelters for abused women were funded specifically to support child witnesses.

As more and more women and children turned to shelters and advocacy services for support to leave, or survive, violence, advocates began to realize the complex impacts of violence against women. They began to understand the barriers women and children face not only before, but after they escape from an abusive relationship. All community systems, including women's shelters, were challenged to take an integrated approach that addressed not only gender equality for women, but action against compounding forms of violence based on race, culture, poverty,

differing abilities and sexuality, so that *all* abused women from all communities in Ontario could access services and support.

In 1990, the New Democratic Party took office in Ontario for the first time. Under the NDP, support for women's equality services increased significantly. Training for police, Crown Attorneys, health professionals and educators was increased. Some publicly funded supervised access centres were created and child support order enforcement was strengthened.

Government policy on violence against women began to include the specific concerns and issues of First Nations Women, Women of Colour, Immigrant Women, women with disabilities and Francophone women. Women's advocates from diverse communities were consulted regularly about policy changes. Social assistance policies were developed to give greater support to abused women and children and training was provided to social services workers, although social assistance rates continued to leave women and children in poverty. Pay equity and employment equity legislation was passed.

There were, of course, many gaps in services and policy that were not addressed during these times. Women's advocates from OAITH and other equality seeking women's groups continued to pressure each successive government for more change, more progress towards ending violence against women and their children.

Over the course of the last 20 years, numerous reports and studies confirmed for each government the relative lack of progress compared to the need for action. Recommendations from report after report became redundant: more funding for shelters and counselling, more child witness programs, better response from police and Crowns, public and education, better social programs for women surviving violence, child poverty programs, First Nations, racial and ethno-specific services for abused women, and many many others.

We had--and still have--a long way to go. The 1997 *Woman Killing* report, a study of intimate femicide in Ontario, reminds us that on average, 40 women a year are killed by their male partners and ex-partners² in this province, and that while the rate of killings of women by strangers has decreased, killing of women by their intimate partners has not³.

Where we are today

Near the end of the NDP period, economic recession was the driving force and every government began to respond to increasing criticism of social program spending, justified or not.

Governments had essentially one platform: deficit reduction at any cost. In Ontario, this call was zealously answered by the newly-elected Progressive Conservative government under Premier Mike Harris. Virtually every ministry of the government was ordered to make substantial cuts, with the possible exception of the police.

Cuts to services used and supported by women--social programs, education, health--were hardest hit. In a 1996 report by OAITH entitled, *Locked In, Left Out*, we outlined the numerous cuts to

services affecting abused women and their children, including:

- < 5% cut to funding for all first stage emergency shelters for abused women
- < 100% elimination of counselling and advocacy programs in women's second stage shelters
- < cuts to community counselling and crisis telephone line services for abused women
- < cuts and eliminations of funding to racial and ethno-specific services
- < 21.6% cut to social assistance and housing subsidies critically needed by abused women and their children to leave the violence
- < cuts to legal aid resulting in a 77% reduction of family law legal aid certificates issued between 1995, when the government was elected, and 1997
- < changes to eligibility requirements for assistance to reduce the numbers of eligible persons and funding to individuals in need, eg. for people with disabilities
- < reduction in the number of day care spaces in the province by thousands
- < cuts to training and education women needed to start new lives free of violence
- < elimination of funding for advocacy programs and groups, such as OAITH, tenants' rights groups, etc.⁴

The impact on abused women was severe. Shelters reported women were remaining or returning to abusive partners as a result of the new reductions. Many women and children were going hungry and without proper clothing, utilities or necessary care such as dental care or medication. Shelter services themselves were struggling to adjust and programs in abused women's second stage shelters were decimated.⁵

Since then, the Ontario Government has allocated comparatively small amounts of funding to violence against women initiatives. Primarily funding has been spent within the justice system creating specialized domestic violence courts and expanded police and Crown-controlled generic victims' service programs.

Along the way, Dianne Cunningham, the Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, commissioned a controversial report, commonly known as the McGuire Report—after its author, suggesting that women's shelters could be used for 24-48 hours until women attained restraining orders and that shelters and rape crisis centres could be amalgamated into generic Assault centres for victims of crime. The report was obtained by women's groups and widely criticized by both press and public. Finally, it was ostensibly shelved in favour of the 1997 *Agenda for Action*, the framework of initiatives in the government's response to violence against women.

Under the *Agenda for Action*, shelters and rape crisis centres would be allowed to continue to exist, but no commitment was made to address the serious inadequacies in funding. In addition, \$27 million dollars over four years was also allocated to new initiatives.

In 1997/98 and 1998/99, those dollars have been spent to provide initiatives largely within generic institutions such as the justice system, hospitals and school boards, or to provide for

development work such as training packages, model development and research. Only relatively small, generally one-time grants were provided to community-based women's services or education/prevention projects. Very little enhancement of direct community crisis and counselling services has been created for women experiencing violence, or for child witnesses.

Demand for direct, community-based services, however, continues to rise and gaps in service continue to be severe. Abandoned by the Province, struggling second stage front line programs for abused women face down loading to municipalities where they will be cut off from public policy initiatives for other violence against women prevention programs. At the same time, cuts to social assistance and housing supports continue to leave abused women and their children desperate and isolated.

Falling through the gender gap

Polls conducted while the current government has been in office show consistently that most women in Ontario do not support the direction and strategies of the Progressive Conservative Revolution. The latest poll, released by Angus Reid in mid-October, shows that only 34% of women support the Tories as compared to 51% of men⁶.

Premier Mike Harris has, as his government has for a number of other unpopular policies, shifted the blame to someone else and claims that, "We're not communicating clearly, effectively, directly with women. A lot of our opponents have invested a lot of time saying, 'Your policies hurt women.'"

More believable, unfortunately, are the posturings of government leaders, including the Premier, who regularly make no apologies for their policies and preen with pride about the tough decisions they've made, knowing they will not have to feel the impact. More indicative of government attitudes to women are remarks such as that made by the Premier about cutting off benefits to pregnant women on welfare so "those dollars don't go to beer". This comment came only shortly after a leaked draft document--created following polls showing lack of support from women and seniors--directed that Tory communications now should be filtered with the perspectives of Ontario's seniors and women in mind. To appeal to these audiences, our government must be portrayed as competent, honest, and trustworthy, yet caring and protective⁹.

The truth is policies of the Progressive Conservative government of Ontario *have* hurt women. Women who experience violence and are trying to escape to safety with their children are finding it harder than ever to get away, to feed their children, to find housing and to stay free. Explanations that there is a failure to communicate ring hollow to these women. New, very expensive government TV ads on hospital cuts explain that "change sometimes hurts." Indeed, that is a message that has been communicated all too clearly to abused women and their children.

The current government has repeatedly claimed that it listens to the needs of Ontarians and responds. Two years ago, OAIH's *Locked In, Left Out* report outlined in detail for the Ontario

Government the cuts that affect abused women and the impacts of them on women and children's lives and safety.

Abused women themselves also contributed to the report their struggles, and the despair they felt for themselves and their children. Yet information collected from shelters two years later shows that Ontario government policy and practice is still failing women and children trying to leave violent relationships.

This report will demonstrate that abused women are still falling through the gender gap. As we approach another provincial election and another government session, we are calling on all political parties to take real action to stop the violence and death facing thousands of women and children in Ontario today.

Information collection for this report

Shelters for abused women and their children are the primary front line social service working with women and child witnesses in Ontario. According to the 1993 Statistics Canada national survey on "wife assault", the vast majority of women (81%) find women's shelters to be one of the most supportive and helpful community services they have used¹⁰.

In Ontario, women's shelters see and speak to thousands upon thousands of women and children each year, providing safe refuge, crisis intervention, counselling and emotional support, information and advocacy. Within OAITH member shelters, the primary principle guiding all front line work is respect for women's choice. Women's shelters also continue to provide public awareness, school-based education to young people and coordination work at local community levels. Working under extreme stress, however, women's shelters in Ontario today are straining under the weight of government cutbacks, coupled with increasing demands for service to maintain our service levels and quality.

OAITH is a 63-member association of primarily first stage shelters for abused women and their children, representing the majority of all women's shelters operating in the province. It is by far the largest shelter association in Canada.

A survey sent in mid-October to 55 members of OAITH shows the pressures currently facing women's shelters in Ontario, compared to those of 1994/95 before current government policy and cutbacks took effect.

The survey collected information in two parts. Part I sought information largely about the type of services provided to women and children, as well as the levels of front line direct services to women and children in 1994/95, 1997/98, and 1998/99 to the time of the survey, approximately six and a half months. Part II asked the same shelters (plus two safe-home program members) to provide information on more general issues affecting abused women and their children, such as the impact on shelter and community services,

housing, criminal and family law issues, and service gaps in support for women and children.

Second stage shelter members of OAITH were surveyed in a separate questionnaire sent by the Second Stage Alliance of Ontario to a number of second stages throughout the province. The second stage questionnaire collected information on the same issues adapted from the OAITH survey. OAITH also sought information from the Assaulted Women's Helpline, a 24-hour crisis line in Toronto, regarding service provided by the line to assaulted women.

Of 53 first stage shelters receiving Part I of the survey, OAITH received 42 responses to all or part of the survey, for a response rate of 80%. Part II of the survey was distributed to 55 members with a response rate of 44, or 80%. Survey information comes from every region of the province, from both urban and rural shelters and from both smaller and larger agencies.

Direct shelter services to women and children

In Part I of the survey, the 42 respondents provided information on their services, as well as their statistics for the years surveyed. Since not all categories of information were counted statistically in both 1994/95 and 1997/98, we have made comparisons only for those respondents providing information for both years and response rates for purposes of comparison, therefore, differ from overall response to the survey. Therefore, response rates for purposes of comparison differ from overall response to the survey.

In the province of Ontario, women's shelters are Approved for provincial funding only for what the Ministry of Community and Social Services deems a Core service. Those services primarily consist of residential refuge and counselling support for both women and children, crisis telephone line response, basic administrative supports such as the agency director and administrative support staff and funding for outreach and crisis transportation services, especially in rural and isolated communities.

In addition, women's shelters may, from time to time, receive one-time grants for projects such as creation of educational materials and developmental projects. Even for basic core services, women's shelters must fundraise a portion of their costs, and for additional services women and children may need, fundraising and volunteer services are a critical part of many shelter activities.

The following table gives a picture of the type and range of services women and children receive in Ontario's women's shelters.

Table 1: Types of services provided by women's shelter respondents

Type of service provided by shelter respondents total respondents	Number of respondents providing service	% of total respondents
Residential shelter for women	42*	100
Residential shelter for children	42	100
Crisis telephone services	42	100
Outreach services to women	38	90
Outreach services to children	29	69
Support groups for women	36	86
Support groups for children	26	62
Follow-up calls to women	25	60
Court support	19	45
Housing advocacy	8	19
Food and/or clothing support	38	90
Public/ community education	37	88
Volunteer program in agency	31	74

* This figure represents **42 shelter agencies**, operating **45 shelter sites**. Information from the Ministry of Community and Social Services indicates that the Ontario Government counts shelter sites, rather than agencies when calculating the number of government funded shelters in Ontario, currently totalling 98. Using this calculation method, our survey respondents, operating 45 shelter sites, represent almost half of all shelters funded in Ontario.

The primary work of women's shelters in all of their services revolves around crisis intervention

counselling and support--responding on demand to women's and children's immediate needs as much as humanly possible. Women's shelters also attempt to provide support and advocacy to women and children within the community by working with other services and systems to coordinate services or remove barriers.

Accessibility issues for women's shelter services

Over the last 20 years, as women's shelters have evolved, they have been challenged to be inclusive to all women in all of the diverse communities in Ontario. Yet many shelters are still not able to provide sufficient services to accommodate even basic accessibility issues, such as language translation and sign language services for abused women.

In Part II of our survey, we asked shelters to report on their ability to provide one basic form of accessibility and to assess whether that ability has changed since the massive cuts to funding and programs since 1995. Responses indicated that many shelters are struggling to provide these basic services, but that they are falling behind in their attempts to improve service provision as a result of cuts.

For example, we asked if shelters were providing language interpretation for women whose first language is not English and sign language for deaf and hard of hearing women. Eighty-six percent of the 44 agencies responding to the question said they do provide or arrange for language translation. Fifty-seven reported they provide or arrange for sign language interpretation.

Shelters provide interpretation services in a number of different ways: by volunteers, shelter staff, purchase of interpretation services, or use of funded community interpretation services. A majority of shelters (64%) were able to provide some languages through shelter staff. About half used volunteers from community. Another half (48%) purchased services from interpreters or community services and 39% used funded community services to provide language interpretation or sign language.

When asked if service provision had changed, 41% of shelters reported that interpretation services for the shelter had declined since 1995. Two percent reported that interpretation services had increased in their shelter and 25% reported that they had remained the same. (Sixteen percent did not respond to this question.) Forty-six percent of respondents said that the services did not meet the need in their shelter. Only 25% thought that interpretation services in their shelter were sufficient. (Twenty-nine percent did not respond.)

Sample comments:

Before the cuts, we had a good interpretation pool. After the cuts they had to charge fees and services have to operate over the phone.@

We can't always find appropriate service and usually have to look to Toronto. Services are limited and it can take great effort to arrange interpretation and we are not always successful because services are not readily available. @

There's a huge demand, and children and friends are being used as interpreters. @

We only have access to some languages and have difficulty in meeting extra child care and advocacy needs. Many more hours of service are needed to address language and cultural access barriers. @

Our survey addressed only one example of the issues facing the many women in Ontario experiencing compounding barriers to achieving an independent life free of violence. The significant reports of deterioration in service provision, along with reports of an already existing failure in meeting women's needs in this area, are great cause for concern.

We have requested information on only one access barrier. There are many more, including physical accessibility to shelters for women with disabilities, barriers caused by racism and homophobia, lack of services for both young and older women, among others. If shelters are unable to maintain basic language provision services, we worry about the safety and support needs of the many women in Ontario who face additional barriers to using both women's and community services generally. Our survey clearly illustrates that greater funding support is still required to improve access to shelter services for all women and children.

Before and after cuts to social programs

First stage emergency shelters

At the same time that abused women and women's shelters have experienced reductions in support from public funding sources, the need for support to women and children and the demand on shelter services has grown.

A sample comparison of 1994/95 service provision with 1997/98 service levels show that residential figures dropped slightly in 1997/98 by 2.3% for women, but somewhat more significantly, by 11%, for children. At the same time, however, overall requests for services from women on crisis lines, at in-person shelter visits, ex-resident counselling, and outreach to women in the community, has increased dramatically. Crisis line calls rose by 10.8%, outreach services to women--on-site counselling, ex-resident counselling, counselling and support for women and children outside the shelter--increased by 15.6% and outreach services to children (in-person visits, school programs, community support) rose by approximately 30.5%.

The following table illustrates a comparison sample of requests for service in five basic shelter services in 1994/95, before cuts to services, and in 1997/98, the most recent full year of service for which statistics were available.

Table 2: Service levels comparison between 1994/95 and 1997/98

Type of service	# comparison responses	% of all responses	1994/95	1997/98	%inc.	%dec.
Residential service--women	40	95	5528	5402		2.3
Residential services--children	40	95	5475	4867		11
Crisis telephone calls	36	86	55617	61634	10.8	
Outreach services--women	32	76	9202	10639	15.6	
Outreach services--children	15	36	1698	2217	30.5*	

* Small number of respondents providing statistical information on this service will affect accuracy of this percentage.

The slight decrease for women seeking residential stays in shelter may not, taken alone, be cause for concern. Almost half of shelter respondents in the average had experienced *increases* in the number of women seeking shelter. At the same time, the Ministry of Community and Social Services has changed the method of statistics collection in some areas, asking shelters to count women in the shelter only *once* in a year, whether or not a woman seeks shelter more than once. We would expect this to result in a small overall decrease in numbers. (The amount of counselling time and service work must be delivered for each *admission*, however, whether the woman is returning to the shelter or seeking shelter for the first time that year.)

Coupled with the rather larger drop in children's stay, the difference between the percentage decreases for women compared to children give cause for some concern, however, that women with children, in particular, may be somewhat less likely to seek safety since 1995.

In our 1996 report, *Locked In, Left Out*, two-thirds of shelters reported that they knew of abused women for whom government cuts to social assistance were a deciding factor in their decision to remain with or return to abusive partners. They also cited increases in crisis calls from women who needed support, but who felt unable to leave abusers at this time or who were having experiencing increasing barriers in their efforts to remain independent. We are concerned that statistics indicating a decline in the number of children seeking shelter may bear out the information we collected two years ago.

Increasing difficulty for women and children seeking an independent life away from an abuser is also demonstrated by statistics collected from shelters on the rate of occupancy of shelter beds, as well as the average length of residential stay of women and children in the shelter.

(Occupancy rate is a figure calculated by comparing the total potential bed-nights of shelter stay to the actual number of nights beds in the shelter were occupied.) Comparison figures for 1994/95 and 1997/98 indicate that the overall occupancy rate of shelters in Ontario has risen by 6%. At the same time, average length of stay for residents had risen by 18%.

Given that there was a small decrease in the number of women seeking residential shelter in 1997/98 compared to 1994/95, an increased occupancy rate and average length of stay indicate that women and children were finding it harder in 1997/98 to move on from the shelter after seeking safety there. Critical factors such as availability of housing, financial support and legal aid are among those factors which most often delay women's ability to move out of the shelter into appropriate independent living situations.

Table 3 below illustrates the comparison increases.

Table 3: Comparison sample of occupancy rates and average lengths of stay

Type of calculation	# comparison responses	% of all responses	1994/95	1997/98	%inc.
Occupancy rate*	36	86	73%	77%	6
Average length of stay**	31	74	23 days	27 days	18

* Average yearly occupancy rates included in the calculation range from normally very high urban areas rates (up to over 100%) to lower rates in rural, northern and isolated areas. In rural communities, occupancy may reflect this same wide range, while in urban communities occupancy is more likely to remain fairly consistently high.

** As with occupancy rates, lengths of stay may range from several months in large urban areas such as Toronto, to shorter stays in rural, northern and isolated communities.

Looking ahead

Statistics collected from our shelter respondents clearly show that abused women and their children are seeking services from women's shelters in increasing numbers. And that trend appears to be continuing in the year 1998/99. Our questionnaire asked shelters to report the numbers of women and children they were seeing in their various programs for the period of April 1, 1998 to the time of the survey, which was sent in mid-October. Then we estimated the annual overall service statistics shelters might expect by the end of March by pro-rating the numbers.

Estimates from shelters reporting on *both* 1997/98 and 1998/99 indicate that there will increases in all areas of services shelters provide: an estimated 2% increase in residential services to women, an increase of 5% in children's residential stays and increases of 6%, 7% and 10% respectively in crisis telephone calls, outreach services to women and outreach to children.

The table below provides an illustration of these estimates.

Table 4: Service level comparison between 1997/98 and 1998/99 estimated

Type of service	# comparison responses	% of all responses	1997/98	1998/99 estimated	%inc.	%dec.
Residential service--women	42	100	6034	6126	1.5	
Residential services--children	42	100	5393	5671	5	
Crisis telephone calls	39	90	72127	76554	6	
Outreach services--women				34	81	11894
	12753	7				
Outreach services--children	15	36	2797	3089	10*	

* Small number of respondents providing statistical information on this service will affect accuracy of this percentage.

Numbers of women seeking residential service has now increased in the calculation as compared to the 1994/95 and 1997/98 comparison, lending support to our assertion that changes in method of information collection may have affected the decrease in service figures for women and children in the first comparison. The gap between increases in women as compared to children seeking service is still a concern, however.

Shelters were also asked to calculate the occupancy rate and length of stay for their shelter for the period of April 1, 1998 to the time of the survey and these calculation, estimated for the whole year indicate the same trend: overall occupancy rate for 1998/99 was estimated at a 6% increase over 1997/98, while length of stay remained fairly stable at an average of 26 days.

It would appear that demands of women's shelter services generally can be expected to remain high or increase in the future. This increasing demand and need for services has serious implications for women and children's safety unless public policy shifts in a more supportive direction and women's services are adequately resourced to meet these growing needs.

The Assaulted Women's Helpline, Toronto

The statistical data of the Toronto-based Assaulted Women's Helpline is appropriate to mention

separately as an indicator of service growth needs because of the unique volume of calls it takes from the large and diverse population of Toronto. As a free-standing 24-hour crisis line providing support, information and referral to women experiencing violence, the line has been operating in Toronto for 12 years. The line, through the A T & T language line, can provide response in up to 151 languages.

According to the agency's 1998 Annual Report, the line received 26,380 calls in 1997¹¹. It also reported, however, that a survey by Bell Business Services showed a serious loss of potential in service provision. Monitoring the activity on the line over a 24-hour period for a week, the Bell service estimated that over a year, the line could expect to miss an *additional* 75,000 calls because the line was busy. The survey confirmed what the Line had already heard from community professionals, shelters and other community services. Overflow calls to emergency shelters were increasing and women were having trouble accessing the line. The Line is continually searching for funding and fundraising support to increase its service levels.

The Assaulted Women's Helpline example, although reflective of the lack of services particular to the Toronto area, is an illustration that abused women are not receiving the level of services they need, even on a crisis basis, and that women's community services are not being properly funded to address those needs.

Service and staffing issues in shelters since the cuts

In Part II of our survey to OAITH members, we asked for anecdotal information on changes to both program availability and level of service delivery within programs for women and children. *Sixty percent* of the 44 agencies reporting said services or service levels had decreased since 1994/95, a serious concern given increases in demands for services.

Increases in services or service levels were reported by 18% of respondents and 30% reported that they were able to maintain services unchanged. Service increases were in response to increases in service demands by women and children. Explanations of how and shelters had managed to accommodate the demand or maintain 1994/95 service levels included:

- < increased fundraising
- < increasing the number volunteers
- < increasing use of part-time staff
- < staff working extra volunteer hours
- < increasing the workload and responsibilities of staff
- < grants from United Way
- < cutting administrative staff
- < cuts to staff benefits and pay
- < using reserve funds for exceptional costs
- < cuts to staff training, travel and costs for Board of Directors
- < increased efforts by all staff

Decreases in services and service levels were primarily attributed to cuts in provincial funding and restructuring within the organization as a result of the cuts. Shelters reporting decreases in service levels also reported implementing most of the strategies listed above, but service demand and availability continued to translate into less service for women and children. Shelters reporting decreases in service levels also cited some additional elements in the decline of service provision, such as:

- < reduction in staff hours
 - < loss of ability to cover sick days and leaves
 - < decrease from double shifting to single shifting of frontline staff
 - < increasing inability to address women's needs because of lack of community supports for women such as social assistance, housing and other critical supports.
 - < longer stays in shelter and increases in demand leading to less service available to each woman/child
 - < decline in public education and community/provincial work
 - < closing of rural satellite office to save on facility costs
 - < rural amalgamation of other community services resulting in more distance between services and fewer referrals to the shelter
 - < some layoffs of staff
-

Sample comments:

Our shelter has had to develop sophisticated funding strategies and increase our energies in these areas, which should be going to direct services. @

Demand has increased phenomenally and everything is more difficult, legal aid, welfare, it all takes more time now. @

We survive on a shoestring budget which limits our services and programs. Staff have not had a raise since 1992. @

We have increased our fundraising, we work understaffed, without hiring when someone is on maternity leave or sick leave. @

Our survey asked shelters to report on the indicators of pressure within the shelter workload and working conditions, such as staff turnover, sick days and leaves of absence and overtime worked. Responses indicate that increasing workloads and responsibilities are having a serious effect on shelter staff members. Sick days and leaves of absence had increased in 78% of shelters responding to our questionnaire. Fifty percent reported increases in overtime hours

worked and 32% reported increased turnover of staff.

Many surveys explained that workloads and responsibilities had become excessive, but that staff were committed to remaining in the work, or resigned to the fact that opportunities and conditions in other social program sectors would be comparable. Others reported that overtime hours had remained unchanged in spite of workload demands because the agency could not afford to pay for overtime work. (Quite a contrast to Ontario Provincial Police overtime billing, as reported by the Provincial Auditor of Ontario, which rose 140% between the 1993/94 and 1996/97 fiscal years despite a relatively stable level of calls for service.¹²)

Shelters reported that the increasing workloads and lack of community services for the women they are working with have led to more stress, burnout and loss of morale within the shelter.

More staff are getting chronically ill and there are more claims for disability leaves and longer leaves of absence. Some shelters have had to spend more time than usual on team-building and morale boosting activities to cope with the stress, while money for professional development has not kept pace.

Sample comments:

Our stress is due to increasing workloads and despair related to reduced ability to help women escape violence because of cuts to housing, legal aid, social assistance. Workers are physically and emotionally drained. @

More staff are talking about taking a leave because of stress and front line staff are taking up to the maximum sick time, which never used to happen before. @

Staff are getting sick more often and they are putting in more and more unpaid time due to the high needs of women and children. @

Longer term staff are getting very tired. @

Public funding mechanism for first stage women's shelters

The one bright spot in the picture appears to be the shift in the way shelters are funded resulting from the uploading of first stage emergency shelters for abused women to the provincial level, eliminating the need for shelters to receive per diem (or daily rate) funding for individual women and children staying at the shelter.

The Province of Ontario now provides block funding to shelters by taking over the per diem ordinarily provided at the local level. Within 55% our survey respondent group, determination of the amount of the per diem was calculated on the highest per diem over the last five years. For 20% of respondents, the average over the last five years was used. For another 7%, other methods were used, such as a median between the highest and the average and so on.

Most shelters reported that the new mechanism would simplify administration, create less paper work, and provide some stability and consistency for budget and program planning. Some shelters had experienced lack of support at the local level or restrictive funding for individual women, so the shift provided more security and flexibility for serving individual women's and children's needs for shelter space.

While the shift was reported largely as a positive step, however, over half (55%) of respondents said it would not provide adequate funding for this fiscal year. As a result of increases in demands for services, a number of shelters had already exceeded the highest per diem rate amount on which the block funding had been based and were experiencing a shortfall. In such situations, there is no way to offset the lack of funds, short of increased fundraising efforts and the other strategies already listed in this report. Increasing demands in services as reported by our respondents will not result in corresponding increases in government funding to provide for the need.

Shelters stated that the shift would not address the inadequate overall funding of shelters which has been a chronic problem in Ontario. Some expressed concern about the centralization of one public funding source, especially given the climate of spending cuts, and the continuing disparities in funding between communities across the province.

Second stage shelters for women and children

Cuts to direct services were felt particularly hard in second stage shelters for abused women, shelters for women who require stays of from three months to a year while they search for housing and other community supports or receive additional counselling and advocacy support.

Although the Government of Ontario continues to abandon second stage shelters for abused women who require these longer stays, second stage housing projects in Ontario have tenaciously held on since the 1995 elimination of their counselling and advocacy funding. The services now spend a great deal of time fundraising just to scrape by and have continued to provide support to women despite severely cut programs and staffing.

The cuts to programs at second stage shelters fly in the face of abused women who value the services and want them to exist. A 1997 study of the extent and effectiveness of second stage programs in Canada, for example, reported that women who have stayed in second stage shelters overwhelmingly endorsed the programs and credited them with increasing and improving their family life, feelings of self-esteem, independence and security, involvement in their community and positive impacts on their children.¹³

A survey of second stages, however, shows a dramatic decrease in services offered. In collaboration with OAITH, the Second Stage Alliance of Ontario sent questionnaires to 17 second stage shelters which the Alliance was able to contact. Eight surveys were returned for a response rate of 47%.

Although the sample response number is small, its similarity to results from OAITH's first stage survey indicates an accurate reflection of the situation facing abused women. (Before the 1995 cut to second stage funding, OAITH had contacted 24 second stage programs. We know that at least three programs have closed since then and are now concerned that more may be gone.) Second stages responding to the Alliance survey provided an average of 18 apartments for women and children.

Of the second stages reporting, 75% had experienced a decrease in service provision to women and children within the housing units operated by the project. The 25% who had not experienced this decline had not been funded by the Ministry of Community and Social Services. Sixty-two percent reported a decline in the level of counselling support for women and children. Other decreases in support included:

- < inability to follow up with women leaving the units
- < inability to deal with more than the practical support or crisis issues of the women
- < cancellation of sexual assault counselling and recreation programs
- < inability to develop programs for which women and children expressed a need

Some second stages also reported less ability to maintain the apartment buildings and less public awareness of the second stage programs as a result of reduced public education and community work. Similar to surveys of first stage shelters, the Alliance reports that comparison of occupancy rates and lengths of stay for women in the units for the years 1994/95 and 1997/98 show an increase in both occupancy and length of stay.

Comparison figures from the Second Stage Alliance respondents show that in 1997/98 second stages also offered less service to abused women and their children who were living in the community. The chart below illustrates the dramatic decline in these services to women and children between the year 1994/95 and the year 1997/98.

Table 5: Second stage sample comparison between 1994/95 and 1997/98

Type of service	% of Second Stages providing in 1994/95	% of Second Stages providing in 1997/98
Non-residential counselling--women	62.5%	50%
Non-residential counselling--children	62.5%	37.5%
Follow-up calls to ex-residents	50%	12.5%
Support groups for women	62.5%	37.5%
Support groups for children	75%	50%
Court advocate program	12.5%	0%
Public education/ community work	87.5%	37.5%
Volunteer Program	87.5%	75%

All respondents to the second stage survey reported that the elimination of funding from the Ministry of Community and Social Services was the cause of the decreased service provision. To cope with the cut, some agencies cut the number of units available to abused women, laid off staff, increased workloads and responsibilities for remaining staff, increased fundraising and reduced response time for non-emergency unit maintenance.

The Alliance reports that on average, second stage shelters responding to their questionnaire reported an approximately 50% reduction in staffing since the cut in 1995.

With the exception of staff reductions, staffing issues within second stage shelters compared with those in first stage shelters. Second stages reported burnout, increases in frustration as a result of seeing deeper crisis for women and less ability to respond, despair and frustration at lack of time available for children's services and overall emotional fatigue as a result of the general decline in ability to fully respond to women's needs.

Apart from layoffs which occurred in second stages as a result of the elimination of Ministry of Community and Social Services funding, second stages have experienced increases in staff turnover rates, sick days and leaves of absence and overtime worked. Twenty-five percent of second stages reported increased turnover in staff. Sick time and absences increased for 50% of the second stage reporting and 100% of second stage respondents said staff were working more overtime hours.

Community services and supports

It is clear from this report that direct services for abused women and their children in both first and second stage women's shelters cannot currently address the need, although women and children are requesting services at shelters more than ever. For all abused women, however, whether or not they seek support from women's shelters, community supports and services have declined and women are finding it harder to move on into a life free from violence. In Part II of our survey, shelters were asked to report on changes to community supports such as ongoing counselling for women and children, housing, legal aid/ legal representation and so on.

Local community counselling and support services

Of the 44 respondents to this question on Part II of our survey, an overwhelming majority of agencies reported that overall, local community services and supports used by abused women and their children had declined since 1995. Eighty-four percent of respondents noted that services reported decreased service to women, repeatedly citing a number of common causes:

- < reduction of services by local agencies, both programs and numbers served
- < increasing demands for services without corresponding increased staff or funding
- < longer waiting lists for services
- < narrowing of eligibility for access to local services
- < amalgamation and centralization of services
- < closure or moving of services out of accessible range for women
- < increases in fees charged for services
- < decrease in women's ability to pay for services, especially on social assistance

Some of the services now less accessible to women and children included:

- < community-based counselling for abused women after crisis intervention in shelter
- < children's mental health counselling (this was mentioned by many respondents)
- < second stage programs
- < housing registry support for women seeking housing
- < adult mental health services, including hospital beds
- < counselling for youth
- < transportation
- < addictions counselling
- < subsidized day care
- < child development programs
- < abuser counselling

Only 14% of shelters reported that service levels in the local community had not changed, some indicating that this was not positive since services had not been adequate before the cuts and were still not meeting needs. Two percent reported an increase in service levels.

Sample comments:

AWe experienced a loss in children's mental health services, longer waiting lists, fewer beds for adult mental health services. Our housing support program vanished. There's less day care, less funding to the women's centre, less counselling for children, no abuser counselling program and resources in the education sector have decreased significantly--there's one social worker for 3000 kids.@

AServices now have longer waiting lists--from 6 to 12 months. There is no (other) crisis intervention for children except in private practice and women can't afford that, so the children don't receive the service.@

ACuts to school budgets mean the schools in our area are no longer willing to provide transportation so that children in the shelter can remain in their school and avoid one less disruption in their lives.@

AMany services have centralized=and/or decreased the number of their staff. There are long waiting lists and women with no transportation are often excluded from services at the new centralized=location.@

Questionnaires distributed by the Second Stage Alliance of Ontario confirm the decrease in services to women and children in local communities. Sixty-two percent of respondents to that survey indicated a loss in services in their area. According to this sample, service delivery was again affected by closures and reductions in programs as well as longer waiting lists for services for women and children.

Housing availability for abused women

If women and children are to escape violence situations, they must have not only access to emergency and second stage shelters, but subsequently, reasonable access to safe, affordable permanent housing. According to our survey of women's shelters across the province, however, lack of housing is becoming an increasing problem, one which drives some women back to abusers, while others try to cope in either unsuitable or excessively expensive permanent housing.

We asked OAITH shelters to estimate the availability of both subsidized and market rental housing for women and children and to provide information on the average length of time women sit on housing waiting lists before finding permanent housing.

Of the 42 surveys responding to Part I of our questionnaire, 29 shelters indicated waiting list

times for a 69% response rate. Time on housing waiting lists ranged from three or four weeks, to up to one to five years, depending on subsidized housing availability and numbers on the list. Average time on the waiting list overall was 20 weeks. (Clearly, compared to the average length of stay for women in emergency shelter, this period is too long and many women may be unable to move directly from first stage shelter to housing.)

In Part II of our survey, 44 agencies assessed changes in the availability of permanent subsidized and market rental housing since 1995. Half (50%) of these respondents reported that availability of subsidized housing had decreased in their community for women and children leaving abusive situations. According to 68% of respondents, market rental housing was even less available. One shelter reported that there had been a 15% drop in women accessing permanent subsidized housing directly from the shelter. Another also reported that 13% fewer women were moving out into their own place after their shelter stay.

Seven percent of shelters responded that both subsidized and market rental housing availability had increased. The small number of increases were attributed largely to shrinking populations resulting from industry closures and layoffs in a few communities in Northern Ontario, or to the building of one or two new apartment buildings. Thirty-six percent of shelters reported that availability of subsidized housing for women was unchanged and 23% reported no change in rental market housing availability. In both cases, some comments indicated that this was not necessarily positive, since overall availability continued to be poor.

In response to questions about difficulties for women accessing subsidized housing, shelters outlined some of the reasons why women were finding it harder to move into a subsidized unit since 1995. Responses generally fell within the following explanations:

- < fewer available subsidized units
- < long waiting lists
- < lack of availability for single/ mature women without dependent children
- < poor availability for women and children needing larger units
- < rapid population growth, eg. in communities just outside Toronto, but no additional subsidized units being built
- < some units sold to the private sector
- < more restrictive access to waiting lists
- < loss of co-op housing in the community

Decline in market rental housing availability for abused women and their children was attributed primarily to:

- < the 1995 reduction in social assistance and basic shelter allowance for women and children receiving welfare, making decent housing almost impossible to afford
- < increasing rents well in excess of what women can afford with low-paying jobs
- < changes to the rent control guidelines allowing landlords to increase rents for new

- tenants
 - < scarcity of new market rental housing that is affordable
 - < low cost rental housing that is increasingly dirty, unsafe and poorly maintained
 - < increasing discrimination against people on social assistance or unemployed, or increasingly restrictive demands by landlords before renting to tenants
-

Sample comments:

AWomen give up phones to pay for rent and are paying up to 50% or 60% of their monthly budget on rent, well above the 30% guideline. For young women 16-19 in abusive situations, independent living is next to impossible.@

AMany families are underfed and go cold in winter because so much of their resource money goes for rent.@

AMany landlords of privately owned apartment buildings refuse to rent to abused women, fearing the wrath of their partners and believing women are on drugs.@
 AWe lost a lot of second stage from 30 units to 18. Women are constantly having to move and this is unhealthy for women and children.@

Second Stage Alliance survey information parallels that of OAITH shelter responses. Of second stage respondents, 62.5% reported a decrease in the availability of subsidized housing for abused women leaving the second stage. Fifty percent said market rental housing was less available to women in their community. Decline in availability was generally linked to longer waiting lists and lack of new units being built to address the increased need for subsidized housing. Market rental housing was too expensive as a result of lower social assistance and changes to rent controls.

Impact of the housing availability gap

The impacts on abused women of the lack of permanent housing are all negative. Shelters responding to our questionnaire reported common themes from region to region of Ontario. When abused women and children fail to find safe, affordable and adequate housing, they are most likely to end up in these situations:

- < they may return to their abusive partner (said one response: Awomen who return often say, he's right, I can't make it without him.@
- < moving into unsuitable or unsafe housing, poorly maintained or with fewer bedrooms than needed (said one respondent: Athey have the worst housing in town@

- < moving to housing that is too expensive, beyond their budget, and then spending money for food, clothing and other basic needs to cover the rent, or having to go to food banks
- < moving in with family or friends, which often leads to crowding and unsuitable conditions for them and their children
- < sharing with other women, sometimes doubling or tripling up, often with the same results as above, then having to move again
- < staying longer in shelters, or moving from shelter to shelter
- < leaving their community for other areas of the province, or looking for cheaper housing in rural communities that may be isolated from services
- < moving into a homeless shelter or rooming house
- < being unable to pay their rent, getting evicted and then struggling against a reputation as a bad tenant

Special Priority Policy for abused women seeking subsidized housing

In recognition of the specific safety needs of abused women escaping violence with their children, the Ministry of Housing in 1986 created a priority policy for women and children in danger that would allow them to move up the long waiting lists for subsidized housing. The intention of the priority policy at the time was to move abused women into permanent subsidized housing within three or four weeks of application for a unit. In 1988, an evaluation of the policy by the ministry show that it was working well and that in the first 18 months of implementation, 784 out of 1616 abused women were housing, 65% of whom had been staying in an abused women's emergency shelter prior to placement¹⁴.

The introduction of the special priority policy was meant to smooth women's and children's path away from danger. Since the current Government of Ontario decided to down load social housing to local communities, however, shelters report that local subsidized housing authorities are narrowing access for abused women. The special priority policy is technically still in place, but Ministry of Housing proposals suggest it will not be protected when social housing down loading is finally complete, and each municipality will ultimately decide to keep or reject priority for women and children in danger.

Local decision making for the priority policy access is already having a negative impact on housing availability for abused women. Eligibility for access in the past has generally been granted with supporting letters from a shelter, lawyer or other community professional. In recent years, however, almost half (46%) of shelters responding to Part II of our survey report that women are being asked for increasing documentation of abuse, more proof that the woman has actually been residing in the same housing as the abuser, that the woman has sustained physical abuse and, in one case, the suggestion that the abused woman should be involved with police. Housing office staff in some cases appear to be more suspicious of women, less flexible and more critical of women's applications. One shelter reported that a housing office official was concerned about women reconciling after receiving housing (the 1988 Ministry of Housing evaluation of the policy debunked this myth) and had used the motto, *A need not greed* in

relation to women applying under the policy.

Over half of our respondents (53%) said that local housing authorities are asking for more graphic details of the abuse and, despite their often lack of training in the area, making their own determination about whether the woman is sufficiently abused to deserve quick access to housing. Despite changes to the priority policy making women experiencing threats, criminal harassment, psychological abuse and other non-physical forms of violence, some local housing offices have restricted application for the priority to physical abuse.

Survey results received from the Second Stage Alliance again supported shelter assessments of housing availability. Half of second stage shelters reporting said that both verification levels and requests for greater details of abuse were being requested for women in the second stage.

Legal aid services

Since 1995, lack of access to legal aid has been a serious concern in Ontario, but no more so than in the family law area where most abused women seek assistance to legally separate from abusive partners. Women hire family law lawyers to advocate in matters of child custody and access, restraining orders and orders for sole possession of their home, child support, property division and divorce. As outlined at the beginning of this report, the number of family law legal aid certificates has dropped by 77% between 1995 and 1997.¹⁵

Although the Ontario Legal Aid Plan still has a priority for family law legal aid assistance based on spouse or child at risk as well as matters where the parent/child bond is at risk, abused women are still having problems receiving assistance, according to shelters responding to Part II of our survey.

In our 1996 report, *Locked In, Left Out*, we reported that there was significant variation in how local Legal Aid Plan offices were interpreting the definition of at risk. The Ontario Legal Aid Plan provided guidelines to local offices and, in response to the enormous decrease in certificate funding, provided some additional money to provide legal aid in these cases. Under the *Agenda for Action* on prevention of violence against women, a smaller amount of additional funding was also provided for emergency legal aid for abused women. In spite of these cosmetic changes, lack of family law legal aid support for women presents a serious barrier to women's escape from violence.

Approximately 76% of shelters responding to our survey still knew abused women in their service who had been denied legal aid. Although some had income exceeding legal aid financial eligibility criteria, shelters reported that women exceeding the limit were often not able to afford a lawyer. Increasing restriction of eligibility was often attributed to the denial of aid. Examples of women being denied included: a woman who had a Canada Savings Bond in the name of her child, a woman who had a college fund, but no liquid assets, a woman who was eligible for a bank loan and so was told to take one out to pay for the services, rather than apply for legal aid, and women who have joint assets with their partner, but no access to them.

Other problems cited with legal aid included:

- < legal aid not covering all the issues women need to address to leave the abuser
- < women without children having difficulties because child custody is not an issue
- < legal aid not covering the time required for lawyers to complete women's cases
- < women denied because they have changed lawyer too often
- < women denied because they have been to court before regarding the same partner

Criteria for determining whether women are at risk under the legal aid priority for assistance continues to vary from community to community. In some offices, involvement with shelter or information from the woman's lawyer might be sufficient to make an assessment of risk. In others, offices are requiring physical violence, possible abduction of the children, police involvement or medical proofs. Some shelters reported very cooperative and supportive local Legal Aid Plan offices, others suspicious and hostile. One office required that both the priority for abuse and the danger to the child/parent bond be satisfied before legal aid was granted. Discrepancies in policy implementation, attitude to women and criteria for priority appear to be similar to those reported by OAITH in 1996.

Sample comments:

Our local office is very good. We have a good, cooperative relationship and the staff are great to women I have attended with.

Police intervention or charges get quicker service, seen as more legitimate. Otherwise, it's four weeks to get the application and two weeks to process it.

There's a narrow definition, there has to be a possible abduction or threat of abduction of the children. It's not enough that he is a threat to the woman. Legal aid workers treat the women like dirt and we must accompany them to the office.

In the last three months, they've restricted it to physical abuse. Advocacy helps in the process, but workers in the office are rude and not helpful to the women, even when a shelter staff member is present.

The Ontario Legal Aid Plan restricts the kind of legal matters for which women may seek assistance and limits the number of hours lawyers can bill the Plan for services on each matter. We asked shelters to report on some of the most common legal matters women need to address as they leave an abusive situation and whether the Legal Aid Plan office in their community grants assistance for them. The following table indicates that abused women do not have all legal matters covered, even when they qualify as a priority case for legal aid assistance.

Table 6: Legal matters covered for abused women using shelters

Type of legal matter	Shelters reporting coverage by local Legal Aid Plan office
Custody and access	96%*
Restraining order	96%
Child support	82%
Property division	53%
Divorce	16%

* Four percent of respondents did not respond to this question.

Reports from the Second Stage Alliance survey respondents indicated that the same pattern occurs for women in second stage. One hundred percent reported that women are receiving legal aid assistance for custody/access matters and restraining orders. For child support, the figure drops to 87.5% and for property division to 62.5%. Only 25% report that women have received legal aid for divorce.

Suggestions that abused women go into mediation to resolve family law issues continues to be a problem in a large number of Legal Aid Plan offices in Ontario. In our survey, almost half (48%) of shelters responding reported that women are pressured to enter mediation by the Legal Aid Plan. The same percentage say that the Legal Aid Plan office *does not* pressure women into mediation on family law issues. (4% did not respond)

One shelter reported that in the local office, if both parties are eligible for legal aid assistance, they must go to mediation before using court. Many shelters reported that the pressure to mediate was increasing and that it was being suggested not only by the Legal Aid Plan, but by lawyers themselves. One said: "Family law lawyers now have a government video, "Separate Ways," to show their clients, which advocates for mediation. Only one or two sentences in the whole video state that if abuse is involved, then mediation may not be appropriate."

Other family law issues

[intro section for other computer]

In Part II of our survey of shelters, 68% of respondents reported that women had been told to serve their own papers on abusive partners. In 25% of shelters, women had not experienced this problem. (Seven percent did not respond to this question.)

In some cases where women had been told to serve the papers, the shelter tried to work out safe

ways for papers to be served. Some women who had lawyers had them served through the lawyer and this was deducted from her legal aid assistance through the lawyer's certificate, but some women were advised by the lawyer to serve papers themselves to save money on their legal aid assistance. One community set up a fund to help pay for women to have process servers deliver the papers, and for one shelter a process server volunteered to serve the papers free of charge. Women who could afford it paid to have registered mail deliver the documents, or paid a process server to do it.

Women who had not qualified for legal aid and had no legal representation experienced the most difficulty. Many women told to serve their court orders or documents experienced fear and traumatization. Some shelters reported that women had been assaulted or threatened by abusive partners when they tried to serve the papers. Many women used family and friends or acquaintances to serve the papers, which put these people in potential danger as well.

Sample comments:

One woman took a friend with her, but the papers were refused and the woman was screamed at. She went to the Children's Aid Society and they served the papers. @

Women were very fearful, traumatized. It was a nightmare each time and women were threatened. @

There were a lot of confrontations and one woman was assaulted in the process. @

As far as the women are aware, it is being suggested by the lawyers. One lawyer sent an abuser to the shelter to serve papers on a woman. @

When the New Democratic Party raised the issue of women being abused while trying to serve court papers in the Ontario Legislature, the Attorney General at first rejected the criticism of the policy and reminded the Legislature that women could hire a process server or send the papers in the mail. [cite Hansard] When subsequently a woman was injured when an abuser ran her down with his car, the policy was changed and regional offices were informed that they were to serve papers of women in danger. [cite Hansard] We would hope that policies dangerous to abused women and their children will not be altered in future only when women have sustained enough damage to warrant attention by the government.

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