



**Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs  
From the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH)**

**January, 2008**

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## **Introduction**

The Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH) is the provincial network primarily of first stage emergency shelters for women and their children experiencing woman abuse.

Among other things, such as support, training and policy analysis for member shelters, OAITH provides governments, public systems and the public at large with information on the issues that concern women who experience violence and the impact of exposure to violence on children.

OAITH has been working on issues of concern to abused women and their children for over 30 years and is an acknowledged expert on policy and funding issues for survivors of violence and the shelters they use to escape it.

## **Summary**

This brief will outline some of the provincial budgeting issues that affect women and children in Ontario who are attempting to address violence in their relationships and to support their children to move to a safe, non-violent and healthy environment. We will not address every issue for women and children as violence against women affects every aspect of women's lives and this brief is too short to capture the true lived realities of women's lives and the impact of social and economic policy on them.

OAITH is a sponsor and member of the province-wide Step it Up Campaign, a campaign started in 2006 to create information and recommendations for action to end violence against all women in Ontario. In our submission last year, we outlined in detail the 10 Steps to End Violence Against Women developed by the organizations involved in the campaign. Some steps were announced in the pre-election budget of the government that made a start on the issues outlined by the campaign, but there is still much to do. In this brief we would like to follow up on some of the commitments made by the Liberal Party during the election campaign and additional work that is very critical to responding to violence against women.

## **Positive moves and appealing promises**

In the budget last year, the provincial government set out an agenda that took some steps that positively affect abused women in Ontario and their children, including:

- A new \$2.1 billion Ontario Child Benefit, spread out over five years
- 2% increase in Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program rates to help “manage the increased cost of living”
- An increase in the minimum wage to \$10.25 by 2010

- Continued funding for child care spaces already created and some additional funds for child care in the future
- Some smaller supports for marginalized communities, such as increased housing and education supports for Aboriginal people, \$3.5 million to address the backlog of uninvestigated complaints under the *Employment Standards Act*, small initiatives to improve employment and training for newcomers and token increases in funding for English and French as a second language programs for 2007/08
- Increased funding for developmental services
- Funding for the newly established Human Right Legal Support Centre
- Some increased funding for civil legal aid and the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board

During the election, in response to Step it Up Campaign representations, government officials also promised important initiatives that affect women and children experiencing violence, including:

- Increase annual funding to women's shelters and second stage housing to pre-1995 levels
- Increase annual funding levels to sexual assault centres across Ontario and develop a province sexual violence action plan
- Develop a broader Poverty Reduction Strategy for Ontario with timetables and targets
- Increase housing and housing supplements
- Increase funding for child care and develop full-day pre-kindergarten

These promised initiatives and already announced positive steps are welcome, of course, and set out a progressive direction for the current government budget process to follow. We would like to thank the Province of Ontario for addressing some of these important areas for survivors of violence and their children in Ontario and for marginalized women and children who struggle to meet the needs of their families on a daily basis.

### **Suggested implementation and improvement of budget announcements and promises**

While the 2007/08 budget included positive measures affecting women and children, we would suggest that they could be improved in the coming budget process.

***Poverty reduction: Minimum wage, and pay equity and social assistance:*** Women in emergency shelters in Ontario identify poverty and lack of adequate, affordable or social housing as their top two systemic concerns. Economic security policy and budgeting, therefore, is a serious concern for women working in the anti-violence area. A decent minimum wage, liveable social assistance rates and action to ensure women receive their pay equity rights are all critical issues for OAITH.

Minimum wage: It is time to increase the minimum wage to \$10 immediately, rather than wait until 2010 to achieve it, by which time it will likely no more than represent cost of living increases on current minimum wage standards. Moreover, this must be only a “downpayment” for women and marginalized communities who do not have pay equity, even 20 years after the *Pay Equity Act* was passed in Ontario.

Pay equity: Despite laws requiring gendered pay equity, women still receive at least 29% less for their work than their male counterparts. For Aboriginal women, racialized women, women with disabilities and women who are newcomers to Canada (regardless of the level of their skills and education) good jobs and pay equity may be up to twice as distant a reality. Survivors of violence cannot re-start their lives and protect their children from abuse without the means to pay the rent and feed their children. This should be self-evident, yet each year women’s advocates and anti-poverty groups must continue to prove the case for better financial supports for women and marginalized citizens of the province. With particular regard to women’s shelters workers, who are part of the proxy pay equity system, it is critical that the Province address the serious financial burdens that are increasing yearly for women’s services who cannot meet their responsibilities to both meet pay equity requirements and pay frontline and support staff appropriately for their essential work with women and children. When will the Province begin to address the shortfalls that continue on salary lines within women’s shelters budgets and the budgets of other primarily women workplaces, such as child care centres and home care services?

Social assistance: While an increase to meet cost of living needs is very important, and introduction of the Ontario Child Benefit is welcome, Ontario Works and ODSP rates still do not come close to addressing poverty in Ontario—especially the poverty of women and children. Indeed, introducing the Child Benefit, while at the same time restructuring social assistance delivery, provides only a minimal difference in support to women and children struggling to make ends meet, as it is rolled out of a number of years. Women and children need much more than that and they need it now. Of course we are pleased to see the government of Ontario make a commitment to develop a much-needed poverty reduction strategy, but we need that process to move without delay, without endless study and discussion, to making a real and immediate difference in the lives of the women and children we work with. Women leaving abusive situations or attempting to recover from traumatic violence represent a large percentage of the women and children on social assistance and they deserve better than a life of making impossible choices between food and shelter, medicine or clothing.

***Housing and housing supplements:*** The Liberal government of Ontario has been promising new housing units and increased supplements for some time now but women and children staying in shelters still find it difficult to find safe, adequate low-income housing options in most of Ontario. In

larger urban centres it would not be exaggerating to say women and children face real struggles to find housing regardless of having a priority on social housing lists and many social housing units are, to put it frankly, falling apart because there isn't enough funding to maintain them. The Step it Up Campaign supported the Ontario Alternative budget recommendation that the government of Ontario commit to "more than \$830 million and another \$260 million to rehabilitate the existing stock of social housing," provide funding for 45,000 rent supplements reflecting true rental costs, and reverse the \$600 million download of provincial responsibility for social housing operating costs to Ontario municipalities. Clearly all levels of government have a role to play in creating a sustainable social housing policy but the government of must dedicate substantial funds in this next budget to send a clear message that housing is a right and that low-income women and children who are forced from their homes by violence, in particular, will not have theirs denied in Ontario.

**Child care:** Regardless of any movement of caregiving responsibilities from mothers to fathers, women are still the primary caregivers of children. For women leaving an abusive partner who are trying to protect their children from exposure to abuse, this could not be more appropriate. At the same time, the responsibility to care for children who will be the future of our community is an awesome one and one with often impoverishes women as a result of deadbeat fathers, inadequate public policy on the economic equality of women and men and little attention to the marginalization of mothers in disenfranchised communities. This is all exacerbated by the continuing lack of adequate, affordable and subsidized child care in this province. This is not unique to Ontario, of course. We know that the federal Conservative government has been responsible for the abandoning of the National Child Care Program and that it has had an impact on the child care development plans of Ontario. We welcome and thank the Province for the commitment to providing new full time child care space, but would like to see that commitment expanded so that women in all parts of the province have adequate child care services. In addition, it is critical for the Province to insist that new spaces be provided by non-profit community based child care centres, and that profiting on the care of children has no place in Ontario. Ensure that the Day Nurseries Act deny funding to "big box" private child care operators, such as ABC Learning Centres or any other private operation designed to take profits from the care of children.

Women's Services—Shelters, sexual assault centres and women's centres: In the work to address and end violence against women, women's shelters, women's community-based rape crisis centres and women's neighbourhood centres are the most important element in any continuity of response. Yet, these small, cost effective and dedicated services have been struggling for over a decade now to survive and continue the tireless work they do. Everyone applauds their dedication, as they should. But the essential nature of their work is not acknowledged with the respect and funding support they

deserve.

Women's emergency shelters and second stage programs: After eight years of neglect by the Progressive Conservative governments between 1995 and 2003, women's shelters and sexual assault centres have received some recognition of their dire straits. Shelters have received some increases to their base budgets based on general cost of living increases. Some new initiatives, in particular the Transitional Housing and Support Program, have given some additional funding to shelters. There has been some funding available yearly for "capacity building" (not direct service) that shelters can access through a proposal process, but this funding was created by shifting the money from a previous initiative to provide support for school-based education on issues of woman abuse. In addition, shelters have been able to apply for some minor capital funding for badly needed repairs and improvement to facilities. While clearly needed and positive, these initiatives have not addressed the serious lack of funding in women's shelters. Indeed, every year, women's shelters face larger and larger fundraising targets to meet basic budgets for core services to women, not to mention to disastrous impacts of the eight years of funding cuts and frozen budgeting.

Second stage housing funding for second stage shelters that can provide longer term housing for abused women for three months to a year after they leave the abusive situation was, as you may know, also cut back in 1995 with elimination of all funding for programs within these facilities. Second stages have been decimated by the cuts and are badly in need of an immediate infusion of \$4 million into their core budgets to restore funding lost since the cuts to their programs.

Needless to say, we were thrilled to see a commitment in the Liberal Party election platform to increase shelter and second stage funding and we would like to see the current budget include all of our recommended funding to address this promise.

Based on restoration of the original cuts—made in 1995/96 and 1996/97—and cost of living increases during subsequent years of frozen funding, that women's emergency shelters in existence in 1995 have lost a minimum of \$13 million dollars in base budget funding for core services. This is a minimum because costs of some critical items in residential shelters, such as utilities and insurance have risen much higher than the cost of living generally. In addition, our calculations don't factor in the legal requirement to fund pay equity that shelters face. Finally, women's shelter funding has been the subject of two inquests into the deaths of women in Ontario (the first was held a decade ago) wherein recommendations were made to the Ministry of Community and Social Services to review and adequately fund women's shelters. Recommendations were also made to fund second stage housing and to increase second stage housing units for women. These recommendations have not been

implemented.

We strenuously recommend, therefore, that the current budget year include at least the \$13 million recommendation of OAITH and the Step it Up Campaign and that further funding be dedicated to working towards funding increased wages in women's shelters and appropriate funding of the true costs of providing safety and crisis intervention to women and children in Ontario's women's shelters and second stage housing programs.

Women's sexual assault and harassment services: The second promise made by the Liberal Party in the election was to increase funding for community-based sexual assault centres across Ontario and to create a province-wide sexual violence action plan. Ontario's sexual assault centres have had only a 3% increase in their funding until last year's announcement of some increases to offset their expenses. OAITH, in support of the Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres, recommends that the Ministry of Finance, in the upcoming budget announce:

- increase in funding of a minimum of \$3 million for direct service in women's rape crisis centres
- specific support to fund a comprehensive process for development of a Sexual Violence Action Plan that financially supports women's sexual assault services, women's shelters and women's centres across Ontario to have access to the creation of the plan
- specific funding to provide province-wide response to sexual harassment in workplaces, schools and in the community

Women's centres: Across Ontario, women's centres and women's neighbourhood groups offer many supports for women who are reaching out in a new country, needing to break the isolation that prevents them from moving forward and responding to many of the needs of women that are not addressed in other services or centres. Woman positive women's centres respond to the needs of women as they identify them and work to build support that address local issues for women and children. Historically, they have also taken on the role of monitoring women's equality rights and the movement (or sometimes lack of it) of women in local communities and larger arenas. Yet, women's centres that focus on meeting these needs and having the unique ability to raise emerging issues for women in a diversity of issues, have never been appropriately funding in Ontario. Largely funding has been project based with little to no core support for these important centres. We would like to see the new Liberal budget start to recognize the importance of women's centre work to women's equality and in particular to addressing the needs of women in marginalized and disenfranchised communities. We would support the recommendation of the Step it Up Campaign to provide in this budget a minimum of \$2 million in core funding support to women's centres and grassroots women's community groups across

the province, with particular attention to women who are organized around the needs of marginalized women's communities such as Aboriginal women, women of colour, immigrant women and women with disabilities and Deaf women.

Legal advocate support for women, training and education support and services for Francophone women: As recommended in the Step it Up Platform for Parties, we would like to support the funding recommendations of the campaign for \$5 million for the establishment of legal advocates for women in women's services across Ontario, for \$2.5 additional core funding dollars for access to appropriate French language services for women in Ontario who experience woman abuse and sexual violence and for \$10 million to provide support for training, education and research work by women for women to improve policy and services for women and children who experience violence.

Interpreter services and support for survivor involvement: Within the current budget we would like to see a commitment of \$2.5 million additional dollars for interpreter services for abused women and their children as well as \$1.5 million to support new emerging groups of women who, as survivors, want to network and share their ideas for improvements to services and systems within their own communities.

Public advocacy and social policy analysis: Finally, with regard to women's services, we want to point out the need for the government of Ontario to recognize and support the work of women's provincial associations and networks, such as OAITH, which provide many hours of information and consultation to government on policy initiatives, provide expertise to systems and services throughout Ontario on addressing women's equality and safety rights and monitor social policy and program practices to ensure they are effective supports for women and children. Funding for OAITH was provided annually until the elimination of all funding for advocacy by the Progressive Conservative government in 1995/96. That cut eliminated a third of the OAITH budget and caused staff layoffs. Currently, the federal government has also taken the position that advocacy for women is not needed and created further financial distress for our association work. Work to end violence against women, beyond the creation of services and service delivery coordination, requires advocacy as does any work to promote equality rights. Without advocacy women would not have the vote, and advocacy to address violence against women is as necessary today and women's suffrage work was in the past.

The Step it Up Campaign has recommended that the Government of Ontario recognize the value and contributions of networks that coordinate services on public policy issues and provide government and systems with expertise on how to most effectively address the needs expressed by women and children. We support the campaign recommendation that the budget of Ontario contain financial support for continuing work within OAITH, the Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centers, the DisAbled

Women's Network of Ontario, the Ontario Native Women's Association, the Ontario Women's Centres Association, the Ontario Women's Network and Action Ontarienne contre la violence faite aux femmes with the provision of \$3 million in core annualized funding support.

In the year 2000, then leader of the Opposition Dalton McGuinty signed a pledge in support of \$50 million for women's anti-violence services. We continue to hope that his pledge was genuine and that we can expect significant advances in funding for women's anti-violence work in Ontario now that the province has conquered the deficit and move into surplus budgeting positions.

In conclusion, we would urge the Standing Committee members to support our suggestions and recommendations on behalf of women and children all over Ontario, in every constituency, who are waiting for your signal that the Province of Ontario is truly serious about supporting them to escape violence and to protect their children from abuse.