

Presentation: Standing Committee on Finance & Economic Affairs, Monday January 28th, 2019.

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Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses

The Chair (Mr. Stephen Crawford): We're going to call up our next witness, the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses. Good afternoon and welcome to our committee.

Ms. Marlene Ham: Hello.

The Chair (Mr. Stephen Crawford): If you could just please state your name for the record, and you can get right into your presentation.

Ms. Marlene Ham: Great. Good afternoon. My name is Marlene Ham, and I am the executive director of the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses. OAITH is a 76-member association of violence-against-women shelters, transitional housing and community-based women's organizations. We're also joined here in the back by two shelters, Women's Resources in Lindsay and YWCA Peterborough.

Over the last 40 years, we've worked with our members to strengthen supports by offering training, public awareness, education and advocacy. We're grateful to be given the opportunity today to speak to the needs of our members and how our partnership as service providers with the Ontario government can continue to be strengthened and work towards our common goal of ending violence against all women and children.

I would like to begin by acknowledging our sound working relationship with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. Since taking office, our minister, Lisa MacLeod, and her staff have shown real and genuine interest in the complex issues facing our sector. She has demonstrated that by visiting shelters in the community, supporting our annual Wrapped in Courage campaign and continuing to listen to input from the front line.

In Ontario last year, sadly, we remembered 46 women and two children who lost their lives to gender-based violence. Those charged with these heinous crimes were mainly current or former partners or other male-identified family members. Sadly, two of those women were from this community: Sandra Finn of Peterborough and Heeley Rae Balanga of Kawartha Lakes. OAIH would like to express our deepest condolences to their loved ones and to the communities of Peterborough and Kawartha Lakes, who have been impacted by these tragedies.

Knowing that gender-based violence has taken so many lives and the incomprehensible number of women and children who are surviving it every day across Ontario, it can be difficult to place a true value on what's needed. The rates are staggering and overwhelming. We understand that tough choices are being made with the 2019 budget. We appreciate the work the standing committee is doing on behalf of all Ontarians. In your process of determining value for money, we compel you to be thoughtful and reflective about what's at stake for women and children in your budget decisions.

VAW shelters make up the foundational support for women and children experiencing violence in Ontario. There are 96 MCCSS-funded shelters, including those that provide culturally specific services to Indigenous and francophone women. But shelters are much more than a bed. In fact, they offer a range of services centred around the safety of women and children in your community. Services include 24-hour crisis lines, crisis

intervention, residential- and outreach-based counselling, Family Court support, children's programs and transitional housing workers.

Many shelters receive little to no government funding for services they employ that are vital to women and children beginning a life free of violence. These include employment programs, hub-based services, child and youth programs, prevention programs, transitional housing units and wraparound programming for women living with trauma and substance use barriers.

The demand for shelter services right across the province is very high. Many of our shelters are regularly full or are operating beyond capacity. The truth is that no shelter should be operating at capacity, and no woman should be turned away. When this happens, women experience prolonged exposure to violence, increased risk, and, sadly, our communities are faced with preventable tragedies.

Of the 70 emergency shelters in Ontario that participated in the Women's Shelters Canada national survey, 21% said that at least once a month they provided space to women and children in need of safety even though they no longer had any room to do so. Increasing our capacity to respond will require investments and solution-focused strategies.

Women fleeing violence face numerous barriers to freedom. Here are a few of them: securing shelter space in the right place and at the right time, having to stay longer in shelter, finding decent and affordable housing, finding a way to escape poverty, and being faced with long wait-lists for counselling. Women must also deal with numerous government systems, while continuing to deal with ongoing harassment and risk. This is the reality for far too many in Ontario. It doesn't last months; it can last years.

Since violence against women shelters opened their doors in Ontario, we have learned to run incredibly efficient, adaptive and lean operations by necessity. We help to keep women out of hospitals, police and emergency responders out of domestic calls and get women and children back on their feet into a new life free of violence. Our community-based responses in ending violence against women provide value, and we need the 2019 budget to value what it's actually worth and to protect and strengthen the essential services available to women and their children.

Community-based responses are not only the most economical but the most responsive, and produce the best outcomes. Shelters, sexual assault centres, victim services and programs, such as violence against women counselling, Family Court support and partner assault response, all require enhancement and stabilization to respond to the increasing demands for service.

In 2018, VAW shelters saw a base increase for the first time in 10 years. This investment allowed shelters to reduce enormous fundraising targets for basic services. It improved quality of service. Ultimately, it allowed us to serve more women and children in your community. Annualizing that funding enhancement would allow VAW services to provide the enhanced programming that's needed.

Finally, we have six key recommendations:

Annualize all fiscal enhancement investments to VAW funded agencies through MCCSS from the 2018 provincial budget.

Release and annualize enhancement investments that were planned for MAG-funded agencies from the 2018 provincial budget.

The Chair (Mr. Stephen Crawford): One minute.

Ms. Marlene Ham: Move forward with a comprehensive action plan, attached to investments, to prevent, effectively respond and improve outcomes for women.

Invest in decent, accessible and affordable housing that offers flexibility in stock, transitional housing units and portable benefits.

Invest in community-based primary prevention programs.

Increase OW and ODSP rates, access to employment programs and access to affordable child care.

Thank you for your time today. I look forward to any questions you may have.

The Chair (Mr. Stephen Crawford): Thank you very much. We're going to start questions here from the government side. Mr. Piccini.

Mr. David Piccini: Thanks very much for your presentation. I really appreciate the frankness, the understanding of the situation we're in in Ontario, and how eloquently you shared that. I participated in Walk a Mile in Her Shoes with Cornerstone back in my community of Northumberland–Peterborough South. I've been by and met with the team. They're doing remarkable work, and I can't speak highly enough of the group there. I've been very impressed, and I've learned a great deal in my capacity as an MPP. So thank you very much for your presentation.

We've heard from a number of service providers who touched on some of the issues that you talked about: housing, education, other things. I understand the confidentiality and the security risks that are unique to this circumstance, but could you elaborate perhaps on when we talk about a way to look at this across the province and see a systemic way to make improvements and—I don't know if there's anything we can do to

link and to provide wraparound linking with other services while protecting one's personal confidentiality and security.

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Ms. Marlene Ham: Yes. Confidentiality and women's safety are at the core of our work, so we need to ensure that we keep that in place. Regardless of how we look at structural changes or innovative approaches, that always needs to be our primary approach to do the work.

However, that being said, women who come into shelter are dealing with numerous systems. They're not just coming into shelter, but they're coming into shelter having to access systems like police, child welfare, family and criminal court, mental health services and health services. These are some pretty big systems that a woman needs to navigate just to leave an abusive relationship. It's very difficult for women to have that courage and strength to pick up and to come into shelter, or to find another safe place to go, and then she's faced with having to navigate all of those systems while she continues to experience harassment and abuse from an abusive partner, right?

So we certainly would advocate for increased collaboration between and among all of the systems. We know that shelters will only ever be able to serve so many women. We know that. Shelters are not adequately funded as it is—

The Chair (Mr. Stephen Crawford): One minute.

Ms. Marlene Ham: —so we do work with and we do rely on a number of different systems and services. That's why we're calling for all of the MAG-funded agencies to also receive the enhancements, because what's going to happen is you're going to have a bottleneck service crisis. That's the situation that we're dealing with. So we really need to take a look at the entire system of response, but we need to also invest in

preventive strategies as well, because this problem is only going to become bigger and more costly if we don't start to look at some preventive strategies to prevent violence from happening in the first place.

Mr. David Piccini: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Stephen Crawford): Thank you. I'm sorry, we're out of time for the government side, but we're going to go to the opposition side for questions. Ms. Shaw?

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Thank you, Marlene, for your presentation. I just want to say that I have worked in the women's sector for many years. In fact, many years ago, I worked with Eileen Morrow. I don't know if you know her. She was from Hamilton and worked in Hamilton. That was at the beginning of OAITH being formed. They did receive core funding at the time, so that was a success—a long time ago, but that was a success. So I understand the ongoing need.

I asked an earlier presenter—we seem not to be able to get the message out about how violence against women and girls and children has such a societal impact and an economic impact. We're always, as a sector, trying to justify the need, even though the need is so blatant. I am deeply disappointed that the minister disbanded the expert panel on ending violence against women. Can you briefly comment on how your sector received that news?

Ms. Marlene Ham: I think that news was in the news, so that's how we certainly became aware of it. Currently right now, we're working with our ministry. We're identifying what the issues are. We certainly understand and appreciate that, right now, it's a new government. They're trying to understand the lay of the land. But at the same time, OAITH is communicating with them that a lot of work has been done and a lot of consultation has been done. We have identified with them what the primary issues are,

what the pressures are, and so we're continuing to move forward on that. We have to remain hopeful that this government is going to listen to what we have to say.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Okay, so I would like to pick up on your two recommendations. One is annualized fiscal enhancements to the budgets for violence-against-women funded agencies through the MCCSS and also through the Ministry of the Attorney General programming. Can you tell me what your understanding is of the current state of the funding for both of those streams, for violence-against-women agencies and service providers?

Ms. Marlene Ham: How we understand it is, on the shelter side, through MCCSS—a different ministry than MAG—that funding has been released, and more of it is coming through the child and youth investment and the Indigenous Healing and Wellness Strategy. We don't have any confirmation if that's going to be annualized. I'm here today to make the recommendation that it be annualized.

In terms of the MAG-funded agencies and the MAG-funded programs, we haven't received confirmation that that money is going to be released or that it won't be released.

The Chair (Mr. Stephen Crawford): One minute.

Ms. Marlene Ham: We're recommending that that money be released and that that money be annualized for those agencies and programs.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: So you're sort of in a holding pattern right now.

You talked about increasing the OW and ODSP rates. It's a complex situation for women experiencing violence. In addition to slashing in half the projected increase—in communities across Ontario there was the Basic Income Pilot, which was going to be an

evidence-based pilot to address people trying to move from poverty. Women's experience of violence was one of the optimistic and positive things we would understand—there was a community, Lindsay, I believe, not far from here. Can you talk about that and the impact of losing that evidence-based research for understanding the complexities of poverty and violence against women?

Ms. Marlene Ham: What I can speak to is that if we want to make any changes or shifts for women, particularly around poverty, we need to create the conditions that will allow for that to happen and allow for there to be positive outcomes and for them to be able to maintain a violence-free life.

The Chair (Mr. Stephen Crawford): Thank you very much. We're out of time. We appreciate it.