

## **OAITH Deputation: Standing Committee on Finance & Economic Affairs**

### **2022 Provincial Budget**

**January 26th, 2022**

**Ms. Marlene Ham:** Hello. My name is Marlene Ham, and I'm the executive director at the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses. Thank you to the Chair and members of the committee for accepting my request to be here today.

OAITH is a provincial association representing 80 violence-against-women shelters, transitional housing and community-based organizations. Our vision is for an Ontario that is safe, equitable and just for all women, girls and gender-diverse communities. OAITH works towards ending all forms of gender-based violence and oppression through advocacy, education, research and training.

I do want to start off by acknowledging the investments made into the sector by the provincial government. These funds have kept the doors of shelters open for survivors across Ontario. Through the good working relationship with the minister, the Honourable Jane McKenna, and the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, we saw a new investment over three years in 2021-22 of \$18.5 million for the Transitional and Housing Support Program, and we've continued to see in-year funding, such as the rural and remote child and youth investments. On behalf of our member organizations, we thank you for listening to our needs.

The last two years have brought terrible tragedies from both COVID-19 and gender-based violence. It takes more than money to prevent further tragedies, but rather investments in system planning, measurable outcomes and budgeting based on actual and true costs, to ensure we remain sustainable. It should not be weighted against how much an organization can fundraise to offset or how they can do more with less. Our services centre on care and safety for women, for children, for infants and for your communities. We need quality and we need better outcomes.

Increased investment in community-based services creates early intervention opportunities to avoid costly system entrenchment that takes years to untangle. This problem is not unique to shelters, but rather we see these pressures across various systems and services. Sadly, the results have been deadly for Ontario. When we examine the deaths due to COVID-19, trauma and mental health, the opioid crisis and gender-based violence, they are linked and interconnected.

When we compare 2020 to 2021, we've seen a 53% increase in the number of women killed by their intimate male partners, their sons and other men closely known to them. Indigenous women, Black and racialized women, and older women are overrepresented on the 2021 femicide list, which further solidifies our calls that the systems designed 40 years ago are failing those living today with gender-based violence.

In the last 26 days of this month, there have been five women murdered. There are an additional two women murdered who have yet to be confirmed as a femicide. It is my hope that the committee will connect these dots between the prevalence and societal impacts of gender-based violence and

the positive social and economic outcomes that the 2022 provincial budget has the opportunity to deliver for Ontarians as we prepare for a post-pandemic recovery.

For today, I want to bring forward that gender-based violence shelters and programs are in need of stability and sustainability, with the following recommendations: Annualize all in-year investments, including the Rural Realities Fund, early intervention and prevention for children and youth and the Transitional and Housing Support Program in the 2022 core operating budgets of transfer payment agencies. Abused women and their children can't wait until the fourth quarter to know if their safety planning and counselling will continue.

Further, we request an additional \$30-million investment to the core operating budgets to match inflation and the rising costs of operating shelters, including wages, transportation, groceries, insurance, benefits, administration and accountability requirements. Innovation is born out of ideas and supported by special projects, but lives are saved through quality programs and require sustainable core operating funding to effectively deliver them.

Recruitment, retention and training needs have reached a crisis. On January 11, we heard from 70% of our members on their staffing crisis, and 84% indicated they were experiencing some level of staffing shortage, simply due to COVID-19. In the last 22 months alone, 30% of our executive leadership in shelters have moved on to different roles, creating instability and uncertainty for many organizations.

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OAITH hears regularly from our members that direct service staff are moving on to jobs where PPE doesn't have to be worn for 12 hours a day, and where the conditions and requirements are different. Some are leaving for more money. Some are leaving for less money, where there is less risk of contracting COVID-19. Our staff teams are diminishing as each day passes in this pandemic.

Operating funding for VAW transitional housing programs and organizations is required to sustain their services. About 30% of our member organizations offer transitional housing programs, but with no funding offered to operate them, relying solely on fees from service users to sustain their operations. Transitional housing is foundational for survivors to move out of shelter, while still maintaining support and safety, before living independently. This will further assist with the bottleneck on housing wait-lists and emergency shelters.

COVID-19 infection prevention and control investments for shelters have been paramount to the success of remaining operational. As we look forward, we will need to continue to ensure shelters are able to adhere to public health requirements for the health and safety of staff and survivors accessing these services.

Repeal Bill 124, so that public services can effectively manage with autonomy and utilize their flexibility to respond to the compensation needs of our organizations. We employ an educated workforce, but that needs to be

matched with fair compensation that reflects the conditions of their environment.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Marlene Ham:** Survivors in Ontario deserve quality services. Invest into employment training and education, support and programs to help women return to the workforce.

Investing in the care economy and into non-profit organizations requires an understanding of their value to attract and retain them. Government needs to make considerations beyond women in STEM industries: Who will care for them or their children? Who will provide quality care to our aging population or advocate for them if we continue to diminish and undervalue the care economy?

And finally, income support programs, such as increasing OW and ODSP rates and ensuring 10 paid sick days a year, along with access to child care and a place to live, are foundational to lifting women and their children out of poverty and ultimately out of the violent homes they are living in today.

Thank you for listening.

### **Questions from Members of the Standing Committee on Finance & Economic Affairs**

#### **LIBERAL MEMBER**

**Ms. Mitzie Hunter:** Do you want me to help you out, Chair?

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Yes. It has been a long week. Good afternoon.

**Ms. Mitzie Hunter:** It has been a long week, I know—a long couple of weeks.

I'm MPP Mitzie Hunter from Scarborough–Guildwood. I want to start off with the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses, because this is the silent pandemic. I hope everyone heard you when you said five women in this province have been murdered, and two—we're not sure yet if it was femicide. I can tell you that, two nights ago, a woman in Scarborough–Guildwood, at Markham Road and Ellesmere Road, was stabbed to death. A male was arrested, and we don't know all the details yet. But when I saw that story, I thought about that woman. Did she have the supports? We do have the Scarborough Women's Centre, located across the street.

I wanted to ask you about—and you've been very specific in your asks. There are dollars associated with your request. But I'm just wondering, in terms of—oftentimes, with the nature of the pandemic, a lot isn't being reported, and we're not seeing the risks very clearly. So I'm just wondering what more you believe we should be doing for women who are in vulnerable situations, in addition to the asks that you've had today in terms of funding the shelter system and bringing it up to match inflation and other pressures. Are there other aspects that we should be doing?

**Ms. Marlene Ham:** Thank you for the question. Like I said in my presentation, we have investments that we're here to ask for, but we also ask for a plan, because we need to be able to monitor and measure investments, and we need a path to really figure that out. We know that there are a number of

systems, provincial ministries and government ministries that are involved and invested in this issue of gender-based violence. But we don't all understand gender-based violence under the same framework. If we could do that, if we could move towards finding a way to measure outcomes across all of these systems in a way that's much more interconnected, I do believe that we could reach better outcomes.

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We can't simply throw money at a societal problem and think that something good is going to come out of that. We do need a plan and a path to be able to get from A to B. So in addition to the investments, that's why we've included that in my remarks, around needing a plan forward to be able to get some different outcomes.

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Mitzie Hunter:** I'm wondering if you're supportive as well of the \$10-a-day child care program that all provinces and territories across Canada have now signed onto. Ontario has not done that yet, but how would that assist women who are in potentially vulnerable situations and worried about child care?

**Ms. Marlene Ham:** Yes, for sure, we support \$10-a-day child care. We have to connect pieces around the economy—access to child care, access to jobs, a safe place to live, adequate income supports—all together. We can't look at these as individual social programs. They are interconnected. When we create these independent of one another, then we're just kind of going in a circle. So yes, we obviously would support—

**Mr. Jeremy Roberts:** For sure. I appreciate that and appreciate the good work you're doing. I have definitely taken note of your request for the committee.

I'll pivot over now to Marlene. Marlene, good to see you again, albeit virtually. Hopefully, we'll get a chance in person before too long. As you well know, as I think I've told you before, when I look out my constituency office window, I look down and see Nelson House in Nepean, which I believe is one of your member organizations. I know the phenomenal work that they've been doing there, both throughout COVID and before the pandemic.

One of the things I'd like to ask you about is, during the pandemic, I sat as the provincial representative on the United Way of Ottawa's community response table, which tried to identify different gaps throughout the pandemic for vulnerable groups and come up with innovative solutions. At the end of 2021, the United Way met with a number of ministers and presented some of those findings of some innovative solutions that had come out of the pandemic, one of which was around gender-based violence and the use of encrypted texts throughout the pandemic to try to allow women who were in dangerous situations to reach out and ask for help. That certainly seemed to be a good lesson learned.

I'm wondering if your association has looked at anything like that, in terms of lessons learned from the pandemic, that we should take going forward and beyond, to best support some of the vulnerable populations that your member organizations do on a daily basis.

**Ms. Marlene Ham:** Great. Yes, thank you for the question. They've come up with a variety of different strategies. I think what's important to understand is



that violence-against-women shelters have stayed open this entire pandemic. They've gone through every single pivot, every single public health measure change over and over and over again. What they're doing has to fit the context of the time.

As we know, every single wave has brought with it different challenges. So certainly they've innovated. They've found new ways to reach women, to connect with them, to provide service to them; they've found ways to reach them in their communities. They've evolved. They've done all of those pieces. That's everything from—we now have text support lines. They've digitized in particular ways that some of them didn't have to really think about before. So they're trying to meet those needs the best that they can.

But I think an important piece for the committee to understand is that survivors are living in an environment that is about power and control, right? And shelters provide freedom from that environment of power and control. But in this pandemic, they are having to come into environments that are very, very challenging and very, very difficult. It is the absolute opposite of how shelters, at our core, are designed to operate.

The public health measures have been extraordinarily difficult. It's been extraordinarily difficult for survivors to even get out of their current situations—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute left.

**Ms. Marlene Ham:** —let alone be able to figure their way through our very complicated gender-based violence system.

**Mr. Jeremy Roberts:** For sure. No, I appreciate that.

Sorry, Chair. You said less than a minute remaining?

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** Yes.

**Mr. Jeremy Roberts:** Okay. Well, Marlene, I really appreciate that. I think your comments on staff retention are certainly very important pieces that the committee will take note of. I know we're facing staffing challenges across social services sectors, and this is something we need to approach. Again, I appreciate all the work that you are doing and that your organizations are doing to help support some of our most vulnerable. It's so, so critical, especially during these difficult times, so thank you.

**Mr. Stephen Crawford:** Thank you to all of our presenters today. I'd like to focus my questions on the chamber of commerce. I'd first like to thank the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses for being here today. I know my colleague asked you some questions, and I've been in quite a bit of contact with our community house, the Halton Women's Place, which does fantastic work for our community, so we've certainly made notes of your comments and appreciate your input today.

**Ms. Catherine Fife:** Thanks to all presenters. I appreciate the information you're sharing today.

I'm going to start with Marlene. Marlene, thank you very much for the presentation. We have Anselma House and Haven House here in Waterloo region, and they are busy. They are full, and they are stretched thin. I just wonder how much longer we can fundraise to keep women safe in this region, in this province and in this country.

I want to thank you for giving a presentation that specifically outlines what your funding asks are, particularly around employment supports and training opportunities, because we've heard from various delegations from across—this is our seventh day of this committee. If you empower women, if you support women, then you support children. I wanted to give you an opportunity to address the employment supports and training opportunities that could be part of a more hopeful solution, with targeted programs specifically for survivors of gender-based violence, so that women and children can get out of poverty, first of all, and also so that they can live a violence-free life. Please go ahead.

**Ms. Marlene Ham:** Great. Thank you for the question. I think we have to look at some of the pathways that occur when women are trying to get out of a violent situation. That traditional pathway of leaving, going into a shelter—we need to have more employment and training opportunities available at the beginning of that process as much as possible. We do have some employment and training programs focused on women, but we certainly don't have enough of them, so we need more of them. And this does help to reduce barriers.

A woman coming into a shelter and having to go onto OW and ODSP and then having to rely on going into subsidized housing—that's not going to produce very good outcomes, because OW and ODSP rates—

**Ms. Catherine Fife:** They don't work.

**Ms. Marlene Ham:** They don't work. This doesn't work. If we want to create different conditions and different outcomes, we've got to change the way

we're doing that, because it is not working for them. They are living in poverty, and they are left with very few to no choices. We're not going to see our return there, and we're not going to see safe communities, and we're not going to see women and children who are safe when we don't have the conditions to create those outcomes.

We would definitely call for very targeted employment and training programs specifically for survivors that can be made available through women's organizations, which we have a range of. It's not just shelters, but there are women's centres. There are all kinds of women's organizations that could be working together to be building these bridges so that people have different opportunities. That is really what we need. We need some different opportunities to ensure women are safe—

**Ms. Catherine Fife:** And the not-for-profit sector is poised to be part of that solution. They just need the sustainable funding that removes the waiting for that fourth quarter of funding to see if you can retain staff. That whole funding model has to change, right?

I just saw this quote about how trauma can be life-changing and so can healing. Healing is—I know that it happens at Anselma House and Haven House, with mental health supports so that women can actually move forward and also lift up their children along with them.

Thank you for your presentation, and we'll bring that forward during report writing.

**Mr. Sol Mamakwa:**

I think maybe I'll go to Marlene. I know that in northwestern Ontario in 2018—and Sioux Lookout is a town of 5,000 people—I know we lost, I believe, about 10 people without homes within that community. I know the importance of transitional homes and how important they are. I'm just wondering if you can articulate and maybe go into detail on some of the work that needs to be done, especially in northwestern Ontario, of your knowledge and the people that you work with. I know the Kenora services board is working hard to do that. If you can share some of that.

**Ms. Marlene Ham:** Thank you for the question. Yes, and we do have some members in northwestern Ontario. Transportation, dealing with some pretty significant barriers, working within fly-in communities, trying to reduce these—definitely—we can't compare what happens in northwestern Ontario to other parts of the province. We also have fewer availability of shelters, particularly Indigenous shelters—

**The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman):** One minute.

**Ms. Marlene Ham:** —that are available in northwestern Ontario. We also have fewer transitional housing organizations in northern Ontario—very few, actually. We actually seem to have more of that in southwestern Ontario. So there are definitely many more barriers that are faced, particularly in northwestern Ontario and particularly for Indigenous women. We continue to see this disproportionate number of Indigenous women showing up on our femicide list. We know that's because of the systemic failings, the systemic barriers that are present today, not about what happens prior to today. It's real. It's today. It's happening now.