



Ontario Association of Interval & Transition Houses

Updated Provincial Budget Submission

VAW Shelter Pandemic Response:

They Stayed Open So Women Didn't Have to Stay Home

October 16th, 2020

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Submitted By: Ontario Association of Interval & Transition Houses

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The Honourable Rod Phillips
Minister of Finance
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Dear Hon. Minister Rod Phillips,

On January 31st, 2020, I had an opportunity to present to you the needs of the OAITH Membership. At this time, prior to the pandemic, I shared with you the enormous pressure the VAW shelter system is currently facing along with solutions to provide much needed relief. We stand firm on all the recommendations made to the Ministry of Finance, along with those made to the Standing Committee on Finance & Economic Affairs.

On March 16th, 2020, we all had to come to terms with the reality that a global pandemic was going to significantly impact our workplaces, families, communities and our way of life. Just one month prior, OAITH presented our urgency of a system in crisis. We shared issues of capacity surge, longer shelter stays, women unable to access a shelter when they need it, and the women and children who've lost their life to gender-based violence.

At this time, OAITH had been monitoring the impact the pandemic was having on survivors of gender-based violence, and the evidence from other parts of the globe was simply devastating. Very quickly crisis lines went quiet, intake requests went down, and survivors were literally trapped. All sources of community support shut down, with little access or opportunity to reach out for help. Shelters innovated. They found new ways to reach them and for survivors to reach us, but we know the pandemic has significantly limited how this happens.

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On March 20th, 2020, OAITH learned from our membership that over 70% of our member organizations were either over, at or nearing full capacity. As we faced this reality against the backdrop of public health messaging to *Stay Home*, OAITH organized our membership, our messaging and moved quickly to respond to what's needed. We knew immediately that staying home in a global pandemic would have lethal consequences for survivors.

Shelters persevered. *They stayed open so women didn't have to stay home.* In many cases those who did reach us, were experiencing a severity of violence that was literally minutes from lethal situations. Their courage to reach us is what motivates us. Shelters have done everything they can with what they have but the truth of the matter is there have been numerous women who have lost their lives since the pandemic began to gender-based violence.

For this submission we're going to focus on *Question 1 of the Fall Budget Consultation Process*. We're putting forth 9 additional recommendations related to the impacts COVID 19 has had on our member organizations outlining specifically what they need money for. These recommendations reflect information and data obtained from our membership over the course of 12 provincial surveys and 20 provincial calls with our members from March 20th to October 5th, 2020.

Updated COVID 19 Recommendations: Budget 2020

- 1. Additional Staffing and Wage Enhancement Options and Flexibility:** Ensuring we have staff available at all times will guarantee continuity of service based on the needs of organizations.
- 2. Shelter Upgrades and Renovations:** The pandemic has highlighted the need for a small and large capital investment fund through MCCSS to make temporary and permanent space modifications needed now and into pandemic recovery.
- 3. Prioritized Access to PPE and Testing:** Continued financial support for risk reduction strategies needed in congregate settings for children, women and staff. Those living and working in congregate settings need immediate access to testing, through an expedited testing structure.

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4. **Alternate Housing to Address Capacity Surges As They Arise:** We're seeing a steady increase from July through to September in VAW shelters reporting fewer spaces being available and increases in crisis calls from women needing to intake into shelter. Further to this, demands for outreach services are increasing significantly.
5. **Technology:** VAW Shelter technology and IT infrastructure requirements need to be considered within small capital or infrastructure funding requests. This can include digital tools in delivering services, reaching survivors and improved workplace hardware and functionality in the digital age.
6. **COVID 19 Residential Relief Fund 2.0** The COVID 19 Residential Relief Fund has been successful in ensuring our members gain access to funds for pandemic related expenses. This fund will need to continue for shelters, with increased investments to sustain the demands of the pandemic. We request that funding flexibility continues.
7. **Gender-Based Violence Services Fund:** We ask that in addition to increased funding, that a COVID 19 fund include all gender-based violence organizations funded through MCCSS and MAG, including all provincial crisis lines, family court support worker programs, transitional/second stage housing, sexual assault centres/programs, counselling programs/agencies, PAR programs, victim services and human trafficking programs.
8. **Increase Portable Benefit Table Amounts:** Ontario's Portable Housing Benefit Program isn't benefiting everyone that it could. The program is flawed particularly in municipalities with high rental amounts and low supply. The program if amended could have a significant impact on the bottleneck crisis in the shelter system, by moving from an average cost to actual cost models that will create affordability. Portable benefits in conjunction with increased affordable housing supply and increased transitional housing supply, would ensure fewer women are turned away from VAW shelter.
9. **Capacity Building for VAW Services:** Now is an opportune time for investments into capacity-building for VAW services and pandemic recovery.

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Preventing and responding to gender-based violence needs to be a priority of this government, with a pandemic focus. While there are significant challenges ahead, it allows us to work collaboratively to identify the system gaps rooted in structural barriers, and work to create better systems, supports and outcomes for survivors of gender-based violence.

The impact gender-based violence has had on our workplaces and our communities was deserving of governments attention prior to COVID 19. The support shown by MCCSS through the pandemic with the COVID 19 Residential Relief Fund, VAW Enhancement Funding, and Gender-Based Violence Services Funding, demonstrates governments knowledge that the need is there.

While these investments have been critical to our operations, investments into broader poverty reduction strategies, livable income support programs, employment training, access to jobs, affordable housing and portable benefits is what allows women and their children to actually *move out of shelter* and live lives free of violence. Both systems rely on one another to make the transition effective.

Our system pressures have accumulated over decades of inadequate funding, but there are solutions and we maintain the following recommendation we submitted on January 31st, 2020 that will solve problems:

Recommendations January 2020:

1: Annualize all fiscal enhancement investments to VAW funded agencies through MCCSS from the 2019 Provincial Budget, Into Core Operating Budgets

Fiscal enhancements received for shelter, counselling, transitional support, rural realities and for children and youth services in the 2018 and 2019 Budget have provided much needed relief to address capacity issues, safer workplaces and increasing the number of women and children we serve. Without annualizing this funding, it is not possible to plan for staffing and service-delivery in a sustainable way. The fiscal enhancements received in 2019 are directly funding core services

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and need to be added to their core funding to provide the best value for money and the best outcomes for women and their children.

2: Include mental health and addiction counselling and support services in VAW shelters as part of their core programming through the Mental Health & Addictions Strategy

OAIH's report *Shelter Realities* (2017) highlights the need for an inter-ministerial approach to funding the programs and services in shelter. These recommendations clearly outline the current tipping point of VAW shelters and the need for *trauma-informed + substance use* staffing, overdose prevention, and programming to be made available inside VAW shelters as part of their core programming.

3. Increase investments for MAG-funded Violence Against Women services, including the Family Court Support Worker Program (FCSWP).

Demand for services continues to increase, while the level of funding has remained the same. FCSWP helps to keep women safe and supported, while helping the Family Court system run more efficiently. Sexual Assault Centres are being forced to make survivors wait. Partner Assault Response Programs, Victim Witness Assistance Programs, and Victim Services are all deserving of the resources required so that we can effectively respond together. We need to ensure the whole system of support is stabilized, so that we can stop the bottleneck service crisis.

4. Move forward with a comprehensive action plan, attached to investments, to prevent, effectively respond and improve outcomes.

Gender-based violence is a complex social problem that won't be solved by one sector, or through one ministry. The approach requires collaboration between ministries and service providers, with concrete planning, strategic vision and targeted investments over the next 2 years, with clear measurements to improve outcomes guided by expert advice from the sector.

5: Invest in decent, accessible and affordable housing that offers flexibility; new transitional housing spaces, affordable stock and portable benefits.

Women can't leave if they have nowhere to go. Women can't remain free if it's not affordable. It's cheaper to invest in the short term than it is to continue responding to violence over the long term.

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6: Invest in community-based primary prevention programs.

If we want to end gender-based violence, we must prevent it from happening in the first place. While we've built up a sector to intervene early to provide immediate safety, the most efficient way is to ensure it stops before it even starts. Money invested in prevention is money saved in policing, health and social services.

7: Income support programs, employment/education opportunities and access to affordable child care that are specifically designed to support survivors of gender-based violence.

Existing income support programs are not adequately responding to the needs of women fleeing violence. We need to create the conditions to lift women and children out of poverty, so that they can move onto a violence free life for their families. Designing pilot programs specifically for survivors of gender-based violence could help us measure progress and outcomes and lead to innovate approaches to ending violence against women.

We believe that government investments to date have played an integral role in our ability to respond and provide safety for survivors at a time when they need us most. We look forward to that continued support for the duration of the pandemic and into the recovery phase.

Sincerely,



Marlene Ham, Executive Director

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