Strategic Day
October 1, 2015

Catalyst Research and Communications
Ottawa
October 7, 2015
A. Introduction

The Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH) held a Strategic Day on October 1, 2015 following the AGM. This session was intended to discuss a range of key issues of strategic concern to the VAW sector, and to identify actions for OAITH to move forward on over the next year. The session was attended by representatives from OAITH member shelters, OAITH staff and non-OAITH shelters, and was facilitated by Joan Riggs of Catalyst Research and Communications. This report summarizes the highlights of the discussion.

B. The Ontario VAW Roundtable

Sly Castaldi, VAW Roundtable Co-Chair, and Charlene Catchpole, Chair of OAITH, provided an update on the VAW Roundtable convened by the Ontario government. The Roundtable has had only four meetings since its inception in the spring of 2015. While most of its focus has been on sexual violence there are many areas that the Roundtable will focus on over its mandate.

The Roundtable has identified eight priority areas that it will be focusing its discussions on. There is a working table for each. The eight areas are:

- Inclusive initiatives for women with disabilities, Deaf and hard of hearing women,
- Sexual harassment,
- Sustainable funding for the VAW sector,
- Education, research and data availability,
- Access to services for diverse communities,
- Violence in the workplace,
- Enforcement of legislation,
- Role of the Roundtable/how the Roundtables advice will be applied in practice.

Sly Castaldi with Sue Weir, OAITH member from the Lennox-Addington Interval House.
C. Setting the Context: Strategic Opportunities and Issues

In addition to the VAW Roundtable where OAITH has a seat at the table, there are other strategic opportunities in Ontario that OAITH has the opportunity to influence over the next year, including:

- Let’s Talk – A forum for Shelter Executive Directors, which many of the OAITH Board of Directors attend.
- OEDG – A lobbying effort that has now become a part of the work of OAITH.
- Building a Bigger Wave – A network that brings together the VAW coordinating committees and VAW organizations.
- Joint Working Group to End Violence Against Aboriginal Women – A government forum for provincial Aboriginal organizations and specific provincial Ministries.

Given that broader context, Strategic Day participants moved into breakout groups for a discussion on the following question:

**What areas would you like to see OAITH focus on in the next year?**

As each group shared their points with the larger gathering, several areas of common focus emerged.

Overall, OAITH has three main outcomes for its work:

- Influence and change systems that impact women,
- Support the capacity for informed conversations, on an ongoing basis, at the political level and in the public on violence against women,
• Increase the capacity of service and political partners to understand and carry forward our objectives in a knowledgeable and principled manner.

Specific work that OAITH will need to do to achieve those outcomes include:

1. **Create critical knowledge**
The femicide list continues to be a good example of how OAITH data is very important to many people, particularly when they are developing their campaigns around December 6th each year. This ability to collect key data that tells the story of what is happening to women and children in Ontario around intimate partner violence was seen as something to build upon.

OAITH will:
   a) Hold strategic discussions with members about what information is important to collect,
   b) Collect strategic research, data and statistics based on what knowledge is needed in the public and political forums and within shelters,
   c) Use a diversity lens in the definition of what is important information to collect and how data is collected,
   d) Create collective messages and knowledge through a diversity-informed interpretation of the data,
   e) Share the knowledge with members, with partners, and with the media.

2. **Education of public, partners and political leadership**
There remains a need for a consistent and visible voice for the VAW sector in Ontario. Also, accurate data is key to combat incorrect information promoted by groups such as CAFÉ. As such OAITH will:
   a) Be a credible voice for the VAW sector,
   b) Use critical knowledge that OAITH has created to inform and educate our partners,
   c) Work through media, partners and political leaders to educate the public, and
   d) Provide training to relevant services, e.g. work with Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association and housing co-ops to update and offer VAW training modules from several years ago.

3. **Strategic partnerships**
Recognizing that shelters, in order to support women, are continuously doing systems navigation, it is important that the systems become more competent at dealing with the complex and diverse needs of women accessing shelters. As such OAITH needs to establish partnerships in key systems and at different roundtables. OAITH will:
   a) Ensure representation and participation in roundtables in the VAW sector and beyond, such as the education system, legal system, criminal justice system, housing, etc,
   b) Ensure visible minority representation and participation at key tables,
   c) Develop partnerships that can help us in our various objectives, e.g. research and knowledge creation, and
   d) Work towards system-wide impacts, including supporting the creation of funding for housing to provide women with options.
4. Sustainable funding
Shelters continue to be asked to deal with more complexity when women are leaving violent relationships. While the complexity increases, the funding has not. Sustainable funding needs to incorporate the following:
   a) Operational infrastructure and standard administrative roles need to be covered,
   b) Restore shelter enhancement, and
   c) Staffing costs need to address pay equity, the new Ontario pension plan and other essential human resource elements.

D. Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women

Dawn Harvard, President of the Native Women’s Association of Canada and of the Ontario Native Women’s Association, provided an inspirational and moving presentation on the need for Canadians to mobilize not only an inquiry on missing and murdered Indigenous women but address the root causes of this tragedy. She spoke of the upstream investments that are needed in areas such as education, healing programs, preventative health and housing which will help improve women’s lives in concrete ways.

The question that was asked of OAITH members was: “What can OAITH do to support Indigenous women?”

A number of suggestions were made of ways in which OAITH and member shelters can take action:

1. Participate in Indigenous women led initiatives:
   • Sisters in Spirit campaign: embrace it, promote it, support it and feature it more often,
   • Highlight the inequity for Indigenous women in the child welfare system and work with Cindy Blackstock and the First Nation Child and Family Caring Society’s campaigns,
   • Recognize the experiences of Indigenous women and don’t speak for them.
2. Within a shelter
   • Introduce a harm reduction policy in each shelter,
   • Ask different questions in risk assessment processes that reflect a culturally appropriate lens.

3. Community initiatives
   • Be conscious of human trafficking of women from the North,
   • Arrange staff exchanges between shelters in the North and the South,
   • Have Aboriginal representatives at CAS/VAW coordinating bodies,
   • Raise the issues in the federal election campaign.

4. Support Aboriginal Shelters
   • Recognize inequity in funding for Indigenous Shelters. Advocate for equal funding and emphasize disparity with funders,
   • OAITH and individual shelters can join the Aboriginal Shelters of Ontario as an associate member.

**E. Minister of Community and Social Services.**

Dr. Helena Jaczek, Minister of Community and Social Services, spoke to the group about the provincial government’s commitment to moving forward on issues related to violence against women. She emphasized that many ministries have a part to play, with their own respective mandates and responsibilities. In this regard, she outlined some of the investments by certain ministries, such as MCSS, Ontario Women’s Directorate and Health and Long Term Care.

Although there are many initiatives to improve services, such as through training, only minor capital funding is available at this time.

There was some discussion of the Sexual Violence Action Plan, including the incredible success of the Youtube, Twitter and television ads.
F. National Action Plan to End VAW

Lise Martin, the Executive Director of the Canadian Network of Women’s Shelters and Transition Houses, gave a brief presentation on the need for a National Action Plan to End Violence Against Women.

Under international law, every country has an obligation to address violence against women. The United Nations has called on all countries to have a National Action Plan by 2015. Currently, Canada has no comprehensive national plan or strategy to deal with violence against women.

Starting in early 2014, the Network initiated a collaborative process with over 20 organizations representing most sectors in the VAW sector. This engagement led to “A Blueprint for Canada’s National Action Plan (NAP) on Violence Against Women and Girls”. The Blueprint outlines what Canada’s NAP needs to cover, and how it should be developed and implemented. The Network has been building a base of support for the Blueprint, and has asked all federal parties to commit to creating a National Action Plan.

G. Shelter Standards

The session discussed the standards for shelters being introduced by the Ministry, and identified some challenges as well as a series of suggested actions to address these. Shelters want the standards to be successful, and the recommendations for action were framed with a view to assisting in ensuring they are implemented in an effective way that maintains and strengthens the quality of services to women in need. The main areas covered are summarized below.

1. **Track emerging trends in implementation:** As the process of implementing the standards on the ground rolls out, there will be a number of challenges and developments, some of which can be anticipated and many of which may be unforeseeable. By tracking the challenges as well as positive developments that come with implementation, and sharing this information with shelters, OAITH will have a greater sense of where changes might be needed, and what can be done to improve the implementation process and the way the standards are understood and put in place. It was also mentioned that additional staff time will be needed to implement the standards and to meet the reporting requirements, leading to the need for additional staff funding.

2. **Advocate:** Based on the information that arises from tracking emerging trends in implementation, OAITH will be able to identify the key issues and concerns related to implementation, and can then undertake advocacy as needed on these issues. Also,
OAITH needs to advocate on the other Auditor General’s recommendation around MCSS accountability.

3. **Keep the focus on supporting the women who use our shelters:** Look at the shelter standards through the lens of a survivor and examine their value to supporting women who are moving out of intimate partner relationships.

4. **Monitor:** Participants were asked if there were any standards that they wished to see particularly monitored, and two areas were highlighted:
   
a) Outcome measurement and connection to funding,
   b) Length of stay: it will be important to monitor not only the length of stay but the reasons that women stay longer and the impact on the staff, women and other shelters in the area. Length of stay is linked to larger issues (e.g. lack of affordable permanent housing, lack of financial resources and supports for women, lack of a living wage, lack of legal immigration status, etc.)

There was another need identified that was not necessarily seen as a role of OAITH but needed to be considered:

5. **Ensure that shelters can meet the shelter standard requirements:** A number of suggestions were offered to support this need:
   • Develop templates for policies.
   • Establish a clearinghouse of policies and best practices that would be made available to shelters across the province. One group suggested that shelters, both members and non-members, be asked to contribute monetarily to the work of assembling this clearinghouse (e.g. $150 for members and $300 for non-members).
   • Develop policies for shelters.

**H. Closing**

The meeting closed with thanks to all participants and a renewed commitment to move forward in all of the areas identified by participants and agreed upon for action.