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**Submission to the House of Commons' Standing Committee
on the Status of Women:
Study on the System of Shelters and Transition Houses
Serving Women and Children Affected by Violence Against
Women and Intimate Partner Violence**

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CONTEXT

Victims, victim-serving agencies and other experts have been clear that there is a VAW shelterⁱ shortage, and the evidence on that point is undeniable:

- VAW shelters are at capacity or overcapacity. On a single day in 2018, nearly half (47%) of VAW shelters that participated in a national survey were full, with no available beds. Three-quarters (75%) of women and children who needed services could not be accommodated that day due to a lack of capacity and resources.ⁱⁱ The results were consistent with previous survey years.
- Women and children are being sent to unsafe alternatives to crowded VAW shelters, such as homeless shelters and hotels.ⁱⁱⁱ
- In some communities, there are no options or inadequate ones. For example, more than 70% of Inuit communities across the Canadian Arctic do not have a safe VAW shelter.^{iv}

What We Heard on Shelters

Last year, the OFOVC held a national engagement process on Canada's criminal justice system to hear from victims of crime, victim service providers, victim advocacy organizations and other experts about how Canada could better support victims and survivors of crime. Issues around VAW shelters were collectively described as:

- Underfunded and reliant on uncertain and unsustainable funding sources (e.g., fundraising efforts, short-term grants).
- Overburdened, inconsistent from one community or jurisdiction to the next or, in some communities simply unavailable.

The OFOVC also heard clearly that there are unique barriers in rural and remote communities. Needs are particularly dire in the North^v – in Nunavut, for example, where there is just a handful of VAW shelters with a small number of beds despite large numbers of victims in need; police-reported rates of violence against women^{vi}, including family violence^{vii}, are the highest in the country. Participants also said that there is a need for services that are intersectional (taking into account identity factors such as gender, age, disability and sexual orientation) and responsive to people's circumstances and needs. As the Committee has heard, this includes things like VAW shelters that are culturally appropriate; accessible for women with disabilities; and able to meet the unique needs of human trafficking victims. It can also include being able to accommodate a woman's pet.^{viii}

RECOMMENDATIONS

The current gaps put the lives of victims and their children at risk each day. The OFOVC recommends that the federal government:

- 1. Giving particular attention to gaps in rural, remote and Northern communities, consider additional targeted investments to address recent recommendations made by the Standing Committee on the Status of Women, specifically:**
 - “That the Government of Canada provide greater access to shelters (including funding, number of spaces, and accessibility) and legal resources for young women and girls who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless and who are survivors of gender-based violence”. (Taking Action to End Violence Against Young Women and Girls in Canada, recommendation 23)^{ix}
 - “That the Government of Canada make long-term operational funding for front-line community organizations, shelters and transition houses working to protect victims and survivors of violence and end violence against Indigenous women and girls eligible for federal support”. (A Call to Action: Reconciliation with Indigenous Women in the Federal Justice and Correctional Systems, recommendation 7)^x

- 2. Ensure that a victim’s lens – one that is intersectional in its approach and grounded in human rights – is brought to the legislation being developed to support the National Housing Strategy (NHS) and to initiatives under the NHS.**
 - Safe and affordable housing is key to reducing the demand for VAW shelters, both by providing an alternative to shelters and a safe place to which to transition from them. The federal government has indicated that the first priority of its NHS will be to address the housing needs of vulnerable Canadians, including “women and children fleeing violence”^{xi}. This will require ongoing meaningful engagement of victims/survivors and the organizations that represent them including to set targets and funding that adequately respond to their needs.

- 3. Prioritize leadership on the development of a coordinated, well-resourced National Action Plan to Address and Prevent Gender-Based Violence in Canada – one that creates equitable distribution of supports and services across the country.** Calls for a National Plan have come from international^{xii} and domestic^{xiii} stakeholders for years, with guidance provided that:
 - prevention, awareness, and training should be a central focus of a Plan;
 - the overall approach be grounded in human rights, trauma-informed, culturally relevant, intersectional, and involve those with lived experiences, including marginalized communities and individuals, as well as representative organizations, in all aspects of its development.^{xiv}

OFFICE OF THE FEDERAL OMBUDSMAN FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME (OFOVC)

The OFOVC helps victims to address their needs, promotes their interests and makes recommendations to the federal government on issues that affect victims. For more information visit: www.victimfirst.gc.ca.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ VAW shelters provide residential services and other forms of support to women and their children; they're intended to provide a temporary and safe place to live and/or access services.

ⁱⁱ Women's Shelters Canada, June 2018, [Shelter Voices 2018](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ See, example, Maki, Krystle (Women's Shelters Canada), August 2017, [Housing, Homelessness, and Violence Against Women: A Discussion Paper](#).

^{iv} O'Hearn, Tracy, October 26, 2016, [Evidence to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women](#); Pauktutit Inuit Women of Canada, "[Shelters and Transitional Housing](#)".

^v For example, women living in the Territories and women in the Provincial North experience violence at rates eight times and three times higher, respectively, than women living in the South; Allen, Mary and Samuel Perrault, May 2015, "[Police-reported crime in Canada's Provincial North and Territories, 2013](#)". *Juristat*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85-002-X.

^{vi} Sinha, Maire (Ed.), February 25, 2013, [Measuring violence against women: Statistical trends](#). *Juristat*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85-002-X.

^{vii} See, example, Burczycka, Marta and Shana Conroy, January 17, 2018, [Family violence in Canada: A statistical profile](#), *Juristat*, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85-002-X, Table 2.6.

^{viii} For example, based on research conducted with Canadian shelters, the [Animals and Interpersonal Abuse Research Group](#) has found that concerns about their pet's safety can have impacts such as delaying women from leaving and considering to return back to the home.

^{ix} Standing Committee on the Status of Women, March 2017, [Taking Action to End Violence Against Young Women and Girls in Canada](#).

^x Standing Committee on the Status of Women, June 2018, [A Call to Action: Reconciliation with Indigenous Women in the Federal Justice and Correctional Systems](#).

^{xi} Government of Canada, [National Housing Strategy, "Who will it help?"](#) and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, [National Housing Strategy, "Priority areas for action"](#).

^{xii} The United Nations called on countries to enact a national action plan on gender-based violence by 2015, and in its 2016 review of Canada, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) called on Canada to "expeditiously" adopt a national action plan, in consultation with civil society organizations, especially Indigenous women's organizations, to combat gender-based violence against women. In April 2018, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, in her end of [mission statement](#) following her official visit to Canada, having spent significant time visiting VAW shelters, stated that Canada should consider adopting a national Action Plan on violence against women and domestic violence and a separate national Action Plan on Indigenous women, "in order to ensure that women in all areas of the country have access to comparable levels of services and protection in line with international human rights standards accepted by Canada." Australia already has a national action plan, which includes a specific section focused on violence against Indigenous women.

^{xiii} See, example, [Joint Letter calling on the Prime Minister to Enact a National Action Plan on Gender-based Violence](#), March 8, 2018, signed by 25 organizations.

^{xiv} See, for example, [A Blueprint for Canada's National Action Plan on Violence Against Women and Girls](#), published by the Canadian Network of Women's Shelters and Transition Houses.