

November 14, 2018

Attention:

Members of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women

FEWO@parl.gc.ca

Dear members of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women,

Re: The dire needs of women's shelters

We understand that the Committee is conducting a *Study on the System of Shelters and Transition Houses Serving Women and Children Affected by Violence Against Women and Intimate Partner Violence* and that the Committee will focus on:

- the current gap between the number of beds required and the number of beds offered in shelters and transition houses;
- existing federal programs and funding for shelters and transition houses; and
- possible solutions to fill the gap between supply and demand.

I am writing you on behalf of the Pavillon Marguerite de Champlain. We are an 18-bed shelter located in Montérégie, near five cities (Brossard, St. Hubert, St. Lambert and Greenfield Park). These cities consist of multi-ethnic communities and some of them have a very high poverty rate. There was an increase in referrals from outside our area this year, which happens when other sectors are full and we have availability. We accept these women when there is a potential threat. We primarily serve abused women and their children. Last year, we served 97 women and 72 children. In addition, 145 women used our outreach services. Unfortunately, we refused 165 requests because of a lack of available space at the time of the call.

Testimony of an in-house client

"I am 34 years old, I have a seven-year-old daughter and I am a Canadian of Moroccan origin. In my country, I was an active woman involved in studies, training and sports. I had an active social life and was happy living with my parents, brother and sister. In 2008, I married a Moroccan residing in Canada who sponsored me. In 2009, I obtained my visa, we got married, and I came to live with him. I believed that I was going to live a beautiful life full of love, respect and sharing, but my dream was shattered the first week. He subjected me to all types of violence (psychological, economic and social). I was isolated from the outside world, without a telephone, Internet, friends or family. I stayed in this situation for eight years because I had hopes that one day he would change. On the contrary, however, each day was worse than the last and the violence grew in intensity.

I filed a complaint against him and was escorted by police to the Pavillon Marguerite de Champlain. The first day, I was always afraid of what would happen: What would my future be? After the first meeting with my case worker, I stopped being afraid because I obtained the psychological and material support that I needed for my daughter and myself. I received guidance on how to improve my life and prepare for the upcoming legal proceedings.

I learned a lot of things here: to affirm myself in the face of violence, regain my self-confidence, communicate without fear of being judged by others. I regained my identity: an independent, confident, strong and bold woman. My daughter was depressed when she arrived and would not speak or play with others.

She witnessed violence all these years and thought she couldn't do anything by herself. She has changed a lot, she has also regained her self-confidence, is more open to the outside world and more comfortable in her own skin, like her mom. The mothers' and children's activities were very important because when a mother sees joy in her children's eyes, she feels relieved of negative energy.

What I liked was that workers are there, day, evening and night to support me. Even when my case worker is not there, there is always someone there who knows and understands my situation and is prepared to help me.

Living at the Pavillon, I realized that other women had experienced the same type of situation as me, and it helped me to be surrounded by and be able to talk with them. We are like a family that shares everything, the tough times as well as the moments of joy. The workshops and groups are important in helping me understand what I am experiencing; it's an opportunity to express myself. I even facilitated my own group!

I can see now that my future will be exceptional. I have managed to overcome my fears and the challenges that life has brought me. I am now ready to live alone with my daughter without fear or anxiety. Going to a shelter and rediscovering myself has really changed my entire life for the better. I am truly very grateful and I would like to thank all of the Pavillon Marguerite de Champlain employees."

Testimony of an outreach client

On that cloudy night I hardly suspected that a mere call to the Pavillon Marguerite de Champlain would mark the beginning of the end. The beginning of what some might describe as the way of the cross, but what felt to me more like the most beautiful liberation.

In nine years of living together, I often felt that there was an unhealthy basis in our relationship, something that was amiss. For lots of reasons, I accepted and contributed to a relationship that was meant to be loving, but turned out to be more of an emotional dependency.

An "executioner/victim/rescuer" relationship in which I completely lost myself and was transformed; during which I was afraid, accepted the unacceptable and finally died a slow death.

So, I rolled with the punches, hoping it would change. Despite the efforts and energy spent trying to make this man who was my husband understand that his behaviour was hurting me, I stayed waiting for a peace that never came, until I completely forgot myself.

I recently had the opportunity to meet a person who guided me in the right direction. With lots of empathy, the workers from the Centre listened to me, supported me and validated what I was experiencing. Thanks to these women, the past six months helped me to see my situation clearly and finally have the strength to make a decision for myself.

At the time of writing these words, I am now separated. We sold our family home and I am preparing to settle into my small condo with my children. The day of my liberation has finally come and I can now see the light at the end of a tunnel that was too dark for too long. Thanks to the assistance and support of the Pavillon Marguerite de Champlain, I am regaining my confidence in myself and my values and I can finally envision a happy future with my children."

In our view, safe houses do not receive equitable funding from one province or territory to another. In our case, we have not had an increase in funding since 2003, other than variable indexing below system costs, which represents a shortfall of 20% in current dollars. The work that we do is essential; the lives of women and children are literally at stake. We offer more than a simple shelter from violence, a very important aspect in itself. As you know, one woman is killed by her partner or former partner every six days in Canada. In addition to ensuring the safety of women and children, we also offer the following services:

In-house services

- * Shelter
- * Crisis intervention
- * Information
- * Family intervention
- * Mothers' groups
- * Individual and group intervention
- * 24 / 7 telephone services
- * Reception / threat assessment
- * Moral and emotional support
- * Coaching
- * Children's groups and activities
- * Awareness and prevention

Outreach services

- *Consultation
- *Individual intervention
- *Family meetings (mother-child)
- *Referrals
- *Support groups
- *Multicultural groups

In addition, all of our services are offered in English to meet the needs of our English-speaking population. We offer our services to the immigrant population as well.

We would like to make the following recommendations:

- Since violence against women persists at an epidemic level, shelters and transition houses for abused women and their children must be recognized as an essential service.
- Shelters and transition houses are currently seriously underfunded. We recommend a significant, sustainable increase in core funding. This funding should increase the number of available beds and safe houses as well as cover staffing and services. Building a safe house without the necessary staff is futile.
- We support the appeal of Women's Shelters Canada in favour of a national action plan; the Government of Canada should develop a national action plan aligned with the United Nations' recommendations. This national action plan, like the National Housing Strategy, should involve the federal government as well as the provincial and territorial governments. In 2018, every woman should have access to comparable services wherever she lives in Canada.
- We also support the notice sent to you by the Fédération des Maisons d'hébergement pour femmes (FMHF) calling for a significant increase in funding for the overall mission of our organizations, which lost 20% of their funding over 15 years because indexing did not fully cover operating expenses.
- Finally, we support the recommendations of the FMHF.

We invite the Committee members to visit our safe house if you are passing through our area and/or contact us by telephone if you have any questions or would like further information on the work that we do.

Sincerely,

Deborah Pearson, Director, Pavillon Marguerite de Champlain

c.c.: Ian Lafrenière, MP for Vachon – ian.lafreniere.vachon@assnat.qc.ca

c.c.: Sherry Romanado, MP for Longueuil-Charles-LeMoyne – sherry.romanado@parl.qc.ca

c.c.: FMHF – mhsenay@fede.qc.ca