



DAWSON SHELTER SOCIETY

November 12th, 2018

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

We understand that the Committee is conducting a study on the network of shelters and transition houses serving women and children affected by violence against women and intimate partner violence and that it will examine:

- the current gap between the need for and available beds in shelters and transition houses;
- current federal programs and funding in support of shelters and transition houses; and
- possible solutions to address the gap between need and supply.

I am writing to you from the Dawson Women's Shelter (DWS). We are a 5 + 4 auxiliary bed emergency shelter located in the remote and rural community of Dawson City, Yukon. We offer our supports and services upon the traditional territory of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and actively serve the First Nation community, the Dawson area, as well as the wider Northern Yukon region. We primarily serve women and children fleeing violence, single women fleeing violence, and homeless women. In addition, we have a mandate to provide emergency short term foster care for unaccompanied children in crisis. We are often single-staffed during the day and have only one staff member on site in the evenings and overnight while offering 24hr, 7 day a week residential services, as well as a 24hr crisis-support line to the community. We are understaffed in terms of our role and the services we provide to the community and lack the capacity to do them in a way that maximizes in-house safety for staff and clients alike – particularly in terms of our emergency foster care mandate. Our shelter is not physically accessible nor are we able to accommodate women fleeing violence who have companion animals due to a lack of facilities in this respect which is a considerable and all too common barrier to service.

This past June 2018, a Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Elder fleeing abuse needed safe shelter and arrived on our doorstep. As our building is not physically accessible, and the Elder had very limited mobility – all the bedrooms are up steep flights of stairs – she was unable to seek safe shelter with us and returned to an unsafe living arrangement. This is not the first time that women have been unable to stay at the DWS due to our space not being accessible.

Other vulnerable women have had to leave the Dawson area and their local supports due to the chronic housing shortage in the region and the complete lack of second stage/transitional housing services here. As our mandate is to provide emergency shelter only, we have seen many women and families need to leave the community once they were no longer able to stay with us and/or return to an unsafe living situation.

It is our understanding that shelters and transition houses do not have equitable funding across the provinces and territories. The work we do is imperative; the lives of women and children are literally at stake. We provide more than just safe shelter from abuse, which is also important. As you know, in Canada, a woman is killed by her partner or former partner every 6 days. In addition to ensuring the safety of women and children, we also offer programming and other supports such as crisis-based counseling, advocacy on a range of issues, outreach support during appointments in the community, assistance with administrative matters such as housing applications and court documents, community awareness and antiviolence campaigns/ workshops, collaborative programming with the First Nation such as on the land women's camps, and cooperative committee work with other service providers to enhance community response protocols around sexualized violence and suicidality. The Dawson Women's Shelter also operates as a local women's centre style drop-in space and serves a range of women and children that have experienced complex trauma, and that also present with substance use issues and mental health-based challenges. We do not have adequate funding in place to obtain the required training for our team members to provide specialized support in all these areas of service.

We are writing with the following recommendations:

- Given that violence against women is at an epidemic level, shelters and transition houses serving women and children affected by violence against women must be recognized as an essential service.
- Shelters and transition houses are currently grossly under-funded. We recommend a significant increase in core and sustainable funding. This funding should increase the number of beds and shelters available but must also cover staffing and service provision, as well as necessary upgrades to existing infrastructure to render spaces more accessible. Building a shelter without providing for its staffing is not helpful.
- We support Women's Shelters Canada's call for a National Action Plan. The Government of Canada should develop a National Action Plan in line with the United Nations recommendations. This National Action Plan, like the National Housing Strategy, should cover the Federal government as well as provincial/territorial governments. In Canada in 2018, every woman should have access to comparable services no matter where she lives.

We invite a member of the Committee to visit our shelter when you are in our area and/or to connect with us by phone should you have any questions or clarifications about the work we do.

Sincerely,

Jen Gibbs
Executive Director
Dawson Women's Shelter/Dawson Shelter Society