

BRIEF TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

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Thank you for the opportunity to present information to the committee on the needs and gaps for transition houses providing services to women affected by violence from their intimate partner, and to their children who have witnessed and/or experienced violence.

Overview of the YWCA Metro Vancouver and our Relevant Services

The YWCA Metro Vancouver began in 1897 and has longstanding experience in delivering services to women affected by violence from an intimate partner, and to their children who have witnessed and/or experience abuse.

We operate 2 second stage transition houses* and are currently building 15 more units of second stage transition housing in Vancouver, to be completed in early 2019.

YWCA Munroe House, located in Vancouver, was the first second stage transition house in Canada. It has been operating since 1979, has 10 units and is funded under a BC Housing Transition House contract. Munroe House also has a PEACE program onsite which serves children from the general community who have witnessed and/or experienced abuse from as well as residents of Munroe House.

YWCA Arbour House in Surrey, has been operating since 2012 and has 8 units. It is funded under a BC Housing Provincial Homelessness Initiative (PHI) contract, which was the available source of operating funding at the time it was under construction.

The operating funding disparities between YWCA Metro Vancouver second stage transition house programs reflect the way that transition houses across the province and across the country do not have access to standardized funding to ensure equitable services to women leaving abusive partners, and to their children.

**Please note that I use the term transition house, rather than shelter, as in British Columbia, transition houses provide specialized services to women who have experienced violence from an intimate relationship, while shelters are for any person experiencing homelessness.*

Need for Second Stage Transition Houses

“It’s now been a year since I first went to Munroe House in the very early stages of my pregnancy. At the time, I had no idea how to handle my situation of what my options for life were. Now a year later I have a new daughter my two daughters and I have permanent YWCA housing... [and] my daughter is still receiving art therapy support from Munroe House staff. And every day that I wake up and see the beautiful life my family now has, I can’t believe how blessed we are. But I know it was Munroe House that took me from fear and uncertainty to safety and beauty.” - Ex-resident of YWCA Munroe House

Second stage transition houses are essential to supporting women to successfully leave their abusive partner. They provide physical safety, in the form of confidential addresses and assistance with safety planning, long term emotional support and assistance navigating what often are long processes in the family justice system to ensure the ongoing safety of themselves and their children, and to a lesser extent, through the criminal justice system, as well as other systems women encounter like child protection and income assistance. Last but not least, they serve an essential economic role by providing affordable housing for up to 2 years, while women wait to get into permanent subsidized housing. Without housing that they can afford, women are frequently left with no choice but to return to their abuser, or to enter into a new relationship that they might not otherwise choose just to survive.

As an example of the need second stage, in 2017, 24 women and 39 children resided at the 10-unit YWCA Munroe House. 128 non-residents accessed support from the program on an outreach basis (most of them are former residents or women without legal status.) Staff responded to 975 calls for support, information and referrals. However, Munroe House turned away 178 women, and 210 children because of lack of space.

Gaps in Services

The two most significant issues are inter-related: the need for more transition house spaces (both first and second stage) so that women able to economically leave their abusive partners and have the support they need; and the need for an affordable place for women and their children to move to after their stay in a transition house. Women’s income and the housing crisis make it very challenging to find long term housing. The housing crisis across British Columbia has exacerbated this. In 2017, not a single resident of Munroe House was offered subsidized housing anywhere except our own YWCA Single Mothers’ Housing (long term, rent geared to income), and none of them could find market housing that would only cost 30% of their incomes. We are fortunate to have opened 3 new long term housing sites in 2017, so 60% of the women who moved out of Munroe House were housed there, but there need to be options for all women leaving abusive partners.

While generally speaking, all women have challenges finding space in transition houses, there are some that have additional barriers to accessing space, including: women with mental health issues; substance

use issues; newcomer women; indigenous women; women with multiple children; women with teenage sons; senior women; and women with pets. Although we provide only second stage housing we often receive calls from women experiencing challenges finding *any* transitional housing for various combinations of these reasons, and the YWCA Metro Vancouver has a hotel which can offer stays free of charge, or at significantly reduced rates when there are no other options available. The biggest drawbacks to relying on the hotel is that there are no trained support staff, and that stays are limited by when the hotel is fully booked.

As I know other groups will be addressing many of these gaps, I want to focus on an area that the YWCA Metro Vancouver has unique expertise in addressing. The need for additional supports for a group we have, for brevity, called Mothers Without Legal Status (MWLS).

MWLS are women with children who have precarious, or no legal status in Canada who are experiencing abuse from their Canadian intimate partner. These women's intimate partners often used their immigration status to maintain power over them; drawing out sponsorships, or promising to sponsor them but not doing it. They are afraid to seek help, because they don't know what their options are, and they are afraid of being deported. When they leave their abuser, they are caught between the family justice system and the immigration system. They often cannot work, or even legally continue to reside in Canada, but because of family court orders, they are unable to remove their children from this jurisdiction. These women rely on transition houses and second stage transition houses to bridge the gap while they apply to remain in Canada on Humanitarian and Compassionate grounds. This process can take two to three years. We conducted a study in 2008 as we were seeing more mothers without legal status accessing our services, available on our website ywcavan.org. Following the report, we successfully advocated for women in this situation to be able to access income assistance once their applications for permanent residence have been submitted; to be able to access subsidized housing once on income assistance; to have their children attend BC schools without paying international fees; assist them to navigate the family law and immigration law issues; and YWCA Munroe House can provide them with free second stage housing and food gift certificates until they are eligible for income assistance or to work. An outstanding issue is the long wait times for their status to be regulated, which negatively impact them and their children, and mean that they need longer stays in first and second stage transition houses than other women due to lack of income.

Recommendations

1. Increase the scope of the Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence to include the provincial and territorial governments, and to ensure equitable funding of services across the country for women who have experienced violence from an intimate partner, and for their children.

2. Ensure access to all women who need space in transition houses and who need long term housing (which could include federal government standards for adequate income assistance levels across the country.)
3. Work with Immigration and Citizenship Canada to adopt an expedited process for applications for Permanent Resident Status on Humanitarian and Compassionate (H &C) grounds for “Women-at-Risk” similar to the VAWA program in the US. An expedited process would reduce the exposure to harm by making it easier for women without status, or with precarious stays to leave their abusive partner. It would also potentially result in some process efficiencies because it may no longer be necessary for women to apply for a Temporary Resident Permit as well as an H & C, and it would enable them to work sooner.

