

Minister of  
Families, Children and  
Social Development



Ministre de  
la Famille, des Enfants et  
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Ottawa, Canada K1A 0J9

Karen Vecchio, Member of Parliament  
Chair, Standing Committee on the Status of Women  
Sixth Floor, 131 Queen Street  
House of Commons  
Ottawa ON K1A 0A6  
Canada

Dear Ms. Vecchio:

Pursuant to Standing Order 109 of the House of Commons, I am pleased to respond on behalf of the Government of Canada to the recommendations made by the Standing Committee on the Status of Women in its report entitled, *Surviving Abuse and Building Resilience—A Study of Canada's Systems of Shelters and Transition Houses Serving Women and Children Affected by Violence*, tabled in the House of Commons on May 1, 2019.

Our Government thanks the members of the Standing Committee for their valuable study on the network of shelters and transition houses across Canada serving women and children affected by violence, which will help to inform future government policy and programs so that it may further meet the needs of women and children affected by violence. Our Government also acknowledges and thanks the many witnesses and those who provided written submissions, including government officials, community organizations, researchers, academics, front-line service providers, and survivors.

Federal, provincial and territorial governments share responsibility for housing, homelessness, preventing and addressing gender-based violence, and criminal justice. Our Government is committed to working with provinces and territories to address gender-based violence and has been proactive in taking action to support shelters and transition houses serving women and families affected by violence. We are pleased to take this opportunity to highlight the work we have undertaken with respect to the four themes identified in the Committee's report.

### **Funding for Shelters and Transition Houses Serving Women and Children Affected by Violence**

The Committee heard that shelters and transition houses serving women and children affected by violence are underfunded and often rely on funding that is project-based and limited in time. The Committee's recommendations focused on increasing funding for shelters and transition houses serving women and children affected by violence, changing the funding model of Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy to provide multi-year funding to successful programming, and adding an urban Indigenous housing stream to the National Housing Strategy.

**Canada**

As part of our commitment to helping women and children affected by domestic violence, the Government of Canada provided \$89.9 million in 2016 to support shelters for survivors of domestic violence, which resulted in the creation or repair of over 5,850 shelter spaces across Canada. Budget 2016 also invested \$10.4 million for the construction of five new shelters supporting survivors of domestic violence in First Nation communities, providing forty additional beds for individuals and families.

Building on this investment, Canada's first ever National Housing Strategy is a \$55 billion plan that provides a platform for the public, private and non-profit sectors to come together to ensure that every Canadian has a place to call home, and aims to support the needs of vulnerable populations, including women and children affected by domestic violence, through a number of complementary housing programs. The Government is targeting at least 25% of all National Housing Strategy investments to support projects that specifically target the unique needs of women and girls.

In particular, the National Housing Co-investment Fund is providing \$13.2 billion in low-cost loans and contributions for new construction and repair and renewal of existing affordable housing. A portion of the Fund is targeted to create or repair at least 4,000 shelter spaces for women and children affected by domestic violence, which is expected to reduce wait-times for beds, and help women who might otherwise return to abusive relationships or turn to the streets.

Furthermore, the National Housing Strategy commits \$2.2 billion to tackling homelessness across the country through Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy, which replaced the Homelessness Partnering Strategy on April 1, 2019. Reaching Home has increased the flexibility afforded to communities in selecting sub-projects that support initiatives offering services to women affected by violence, through the removal of Housing First investment targets, the introduction of coordinated access, and the shift to an outcomes based approach to preventing and reducing homelessness.

Reaching Home is a community-based program, with federal funding delivered through a third-party Community Entity (e.g., a municipal government or non-profit organization) that is responsible for selecting, approving, and managing projects in the community based on local priorities. Under Reaching Home, Community Entities have the flexibility to enter into multi-year agreements for sub-projects with third-party service providers, in alignment with the Committee's recommendations. Community Entities work with a Community Advisory Board to determine the parameters under which they administer a Call for Proposals and enter into sub-agreements with service providers, including the duration of the agreements.

Our Government believes that every Indigenous person, First Nations, Inuit and Métis, regardless of their residency, deserves a safe and affordable home and that affordable housing is a cornerstone of inclusive communities. In February 2019, we announced an investment of \$638 million over 10-years to ensure Indigenous peoples living in urban, rural and Northern communities have better housing outcomes. Additionally, in Budget 2018, the Government of

Canada provided \$1.5 billion to support the implementation of First Nations, Inuit and Métis distinctions-based housing strategies, which are being co-led by the Departments of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs and Indigenous Services Canada and will be implemented by National Indigenous Organizations. These distinctions-based housing strategies are co-developed on the basis of advancing the principles of self-determination, respect and cooperation.

Our Government is committed to continuous improvement in ensuring the objectives of the National Housing Strategy are met, and is supporting research initiatives to better understand the housing needs of Indigenous housing providers who serve Indigenous households in urban, rural and Northern areas to better understand policy and programming gaps and related support services.

### **Challenges Facing Women and Children Accessing Shelter and Transition Houses and Services**

The Committee heard that women and children affected by violence face a number of barriers to living free of violence, including difficulties in accessing shelter and transition houses' services. Witnesses noted that racialized and Indigenous women face greater risks of violence and homelessness, and often face additional barriers in accessing appropriate shelter, transition house, and housing services. The Committee's recommendations focused on collaboration with provinces and territories to address gender-based violence, efforts to facilitate access to culturally-appropriate services for Indigenous women and children, funding for research on trauma, mental illness and brain injuries resulting from violence, efforts to ensure that women affected by violence receive the benefits that they are entitled to, a review of the justice system, and support for survivors of human trafficking.

Our Government is proud to have introduced, *It's Time: Canada's Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence*, which coordinates federal efforts to end gender-based violence and its devastating effects, such as homelessness and trauma, through the Department for Women and Gender Equality. The Strategy works with stakeholders to respond to and support the unique needs of survivors through a survivor-focused as well as trauma and violence-informed approach. Our Government collaborates with federal, provincial and territorial partners as well as researchers, and consults frontline workers and other experts on the Strategy through an Advisory Council. The Advisory Council serves as a forum to exchange views, promising practices and research on issues related to gender-based violence and addresses particular barriers facing diverse groups such as Indigenous women and girls, young women and girls, LGBTQ2 and gender non-binary persons, newcomer women and girls, and women and girls with disabilities.

Further, we continue to work with national networks of shelter and transition house services for women and children to improve access to culturally appropriate and comparable levels of services across the country. Through Indigenous Services Canada's Family Violence Prevention Program, the Government of Canada is working to improve the safety and security of Indigenous

women, children and families. The program currently supports a network of 42 shelters on reserve across the country, which provide a vital place of refuge for First Nations women and their children, to help them escape situations of violence including human trafficking, and to provide education and support to prevent all forms of violence. The program also provides funding for community-driven prevention projects on and off reserve, such as public awareness campaigns, conferences, workshops, stress and anger management seminars, support groups, engagement of men and boys and community needs assessments.

In addition, Budget 2016 announced an investment of \$10.4 million over three years for the construction of new shelters under the Shelter Enhancement Program for survivors of domestic violence in First Nations communities. These funds supported the construction of five new shelters, which will bring the Family Violence Prevention Program's shelter network to 46. The construction of all five new shelters is complete, and the four located in Lake Babine (British Columbia), Black Lake (Saskatchewan), Wikwemikong (Ontario) and Kawawachikamach (Québec) are expected to be operational by June 2019. Finally, a new shelter in Nisichawayasihk (Manitoba) opened in November 2018.

Budget 2017 also announced an investment of \$118.5 million over five years in the Urban Programming for Indigenous Peoples, which maintains program funding at \$53 million annually (2017-18 to 2021-22). Funding supports organizations across the country, including friendship centres, in providing a wide range of holistic and culturally appropriate programs and services to Indigenous peoples living in or transitioning to an urban centre.

The National Housing Strategy also includes increased funding and support for Indigenous peoples, including women and children. Under Reaching Home, more than \$413 million over the next nine years is dedicated for addressing Indigenous homelessness in urban centres, including support for ongoing collaboration with Indigenous partners to better meet the unique needs of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. Furthermore, Inuit communities are eligible to apply to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's National Housing Co-Investment Fund, and may receive low cost loans or financial contributions to help support the construction of new shelters.

Our Government also works closely with Indigenous partners, leaders, and communities, as well as other partners in mental health such as the provinces and territories, to support First Nations and Inuit mental wellness. The Government of Canada invests \$425 million per year through community-based mental wellness programs to support services that are holistic, culturally competent, trauma informed, and inclusive of cultural and on-the-land approaches to healing, and invested \$33.1 million in 2017-18 through the Non-Insured Health Benefits Program to provide coverage of professional mental health counselling for registered First Nations and recognized Inuit.

Through Indigenous Services Canada, we are working with First Nations and Inuit partners to improve the public health response to victims of family violence and children through \$3 million annually over 10 years, from 2015-2025. Of this, \$1.5 million per year is invested in community based programming aimed to improve and strengthen access to trauma-

informed and culturally relevant health care services for victims of violence. A further \$1.5 million per year, through the Non-Insured Health Benefit Program, is dedicated to providing mental health counseling for victims of violence, including working with shelters to enhance the availability of counseling services/programming for victims of violence. Through its medical transportation benefit, the Non-Insured Health Benefit Program also provides coverage for victims who require transportation to safely access shelters or safe houses, in the event transportation is not already provided as part of that service.

Our Government is engaging an Advisory Committee on Indigenous Women's Wellbeing to seek advice on how to better support Indigenous women and girls who are experiencing gender-based violence and homelessness. We are also collaborating with the National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence, a national organization comprised of First Nations Shelter Directors, on how best to develop a culturally appropriate and competency based staff training curriculum specific to the needs of First Nations women.

We are also committed to promoting the social and economic inclusion of Canadians with disabilities. Our Government has introduced Bill C-81, *the Accessible Canada Act: An Act to Ensure a Barrier-free Canada*, which received Royal Assent on June 21, 2019. The *Act* will benefit all Canadians, especially Canadians with disabilities, by helping to create a barrier-free Canada, through the proactive identification, removal, and prevention of barriers to accessibility wherever Canadians interact with areas under federal jurisdiction.

Furthermore, in Budget 2017, our Government provided an additional \$77 million over ten years, starting in 2018-19, to expand the activities of the Enabling Accessibility Fund, a grants and contributions program that supports capital costs of construction, renovation and retrofit projects related to improving physical accessibility and safety for people with disabilities in Canada. Since the inception of the program in 2007, the Government of Canada has supported close to 4,000 accessibility projects through the Enabling Accessibility Fund, totaling over \$147 million.

Our Government also supports not-for-profit organizations in addressing the social issues and barriers that persons with disabilities face through the Social Development Partnerships Program – Disability component, a grants and contributions program that provides \$11 million annually in operating and project funding. This program supports the capacity of organizations such as the Disabled Women's Network Canada in delivering resources to women with disabilities and raising awareness on key issues, including issues related to gender-based violence. Starting in 2021-2022, the program will provide an additional \$2.7 million on an ongoing basis to support the implementation of the *Accessible Canada Act*.

The Government of Canada also recognizes that the mental health impact of violence among women is a source of significant health inequities and more research is needed to inform health care service provision for women experiencing violence. Through the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Government invests in research related to gender-based violence to inform the development of effective programming and policies within agencies that provide housing services to women affected by violence, including \$1.86 million in 2017-2018. This includes investments in a specific research project that aims to address knowledge and service gaps

among frontline workers who support brain injured women survivors of intimate partner violence, and support the development of an educational toolkit on traumatic brain injury for frontline workers.

Furthermore, through the Public Health Agency of Canada, our Government is investing over \$6 million per year in projects that deliver and test programs to support the health of survivors of family violence, and that conduct intervention research to learn and share promising practices in this field. These programs use health promotion approaches to build survivors' knowledge, skills and ability to recover and regain their health. In addition, our Government is supporting the Violence Evidence, Guidance and Action project to develop training and guidance for health and social service providers. These resources will be released in Fall 2019 and can help providers to recognize family violence in a range of settings – including shelters and transition houses – and to respond in safe and trauma-informed ways.

Family violence can also have financial impacts, including potential loss of financial security, and financial dependence is one of the most significant reasons victims stay with or return to their abusers. In Budget 2018, we announced our intention to amend the Canada Labour Code to provide five days of paid leave to workers in the federally regulated jurisdiction who are victims of family violence or the parent of a child who is the victim of family violence. This builds on job-protected leave for survivors of violence, which was introduced in Budget 2017.

The Government of Canada is also committed to ensuring that vulnerable individuals in Canada, including women and children affected by violence, receive the benefits and credits to which they are entitled. Through the Canada Revenue Agency, we continue to conduct in-person outreach visits to women's shelters and other organizations that provide services to housing-insecure individuals. In 2018-19, outreach officers conducted 85 activities with women's shelters and the organizations that support them, which were attended by over 950 participants. During these in-person visits, outreach officers typically conduct presentations and share printed materials that inform shelter residents and staff of the benefits and credits that can be accessed through tax-filing. To inform these outreach efforts, the Canada Revenue Agency conducts ethnographic studies to better understand how some segments of the vulnerable population interact with the Agency to access their benefits, including a study on homeless and housing-insecure Canadians in 2018.

Furthermore, our Government recognizes that Indigenous communities, and in particular remote and northern Indigenous communities, face distinct barriers to accessing all federal benefits, including the Canada Child Benefit. Beginning in September 2016, Service Canada and the Canada Revenue Agency collaborated on a one-year intensive outreach initiative to Indigenous communities on reserves and in the North to increase awareness and uptake of the Canada Child Benefit. Based on community specific needs, services included information sessions on the Canada Child Benefit and a comprehensive service that offered same day support for application assistance. Over the 12-month period, this pilot initiative engaged 698 Indigenous communities, with on site visits in 613 communities. Building on the success of this initiative, the Government expanded outreach efforts to all on reserve, remote and northern Indigenous communities. Between April 1, 2018 and March 31, 2019, Service Canada conducted outreach visits to

669 individual Indigenous communities, many of which received multiple visits. Of these visits, 236 were conducted jointly with the Canada Revenue Agency and an additional 84 visits were conducted by the Canada Revenue Agency alone.

We further recognize that it can be difficult for vulnerable populations to obtain the documentation that the Canada Revenue Agency needs to validate a claim to benefits. To better serve these individuals, we have reduced the documentation burden for the most vulnerable individuals to help ensure that their benefits are not interrupted during a benefit review. Through the Community Volunteer Income Tax Program, the Government also supports community organizations in offering free tax clinics to individuals with a modest income and a simple tax situation.

As a part of our efforts to address gender-based violence, the Government of Canada is also promoting responsive legal and justice systems by supporting training for law enforcement and judges, supporting the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's development of training and review of sexual assault cases to improve investigative accountability, and strengthening and clarifying relevant laws. Our Government continues to consult with experts on best practices to support survivors navigating justice, legal, health and social services, with a goal to increase the proportion of gender-based violence incidents reported to police, prevent re-victimization, hold offenders accountable, and, over the long term, contribute to reduced rates of gender-based violence.

Under the Canadian Constitution, the federal, provincial and territorial governments share the responsibility for criminal justice and responding to the needs of victims of crime. Provinces and territories are principally responsible for the administration of justice, which includes enforcing the Criminal Code, prosecuting Criminal Code offences (except in the territories), the delivery of victim services and enacting victim legislation at the provincial/territorial levels. Police and prosecutorial policies are therefore the responsibility of each respective jurisdiction.

Addressing the needs of victims and survivors of crime, while at the same time protecting fundamental human rights, is a priority for this Government. We recognize the difficulties that victims face when choosing to come forward with allegations of sexual assault. For that reason, our Government is committed to providing greater support for survivors of sexual assault with the goal of keeping them safe.

Through the Department of Justice Canada, our Government has made up to \$12 million available from 2016 to 2019 under the federal Victims Fund for projects designed to improve the criminal justice system's responses to sexual assaults against adults. This funding has been made available to provinces and territories, municipal governments, First Nations, criminal justice professional organizations and non-governmental organizations.

The Department of Justice Canada is also engaged in a number of initiatives aimed at raising awareness and understanding of family violence in the context of family law, particularly among family law lawyers. To promote family violence screening, the Department is currently supporting the creation of a family violence screening tool specifically for family law lawyers.

Screening family law clients for family violence is important, as it helps to identify what legal remedies, services and safety planning those going through the family justice system may require.

Beginning in 2016, the Government of Canada also conducted a review of the criminal justice system, which featured broad consultation with stakeholders, partners, and the Canadian public. The need for compassion and respect for victims as well as specialized supports and services to meet their unique needs was an important theme of the consultations. On December 13, 2018, former Bill C-51, *An Act to amend the Criminal Code and the Department of Justice Act and to make consequential amendments to another Act* came into force. (S.C. 2018, C.29) This Bill amended the Criminal Code to clarify and strengthen Canada's sexual assault laws.

On March 29, 2018, our Government has also introduced Bill C-75, *An Act to Amend the Criminal Code, the Youth Criminal Justice Act and other Acts, and to make Consequential Amendments to other Acts*, currently before the Canadian Senate, which proposes a number of reforms to enhance victim safety and to clarify and strengthen criminal laws in the context of intimate partner violence and sexual assault. The proposed reforms include, among others: defining "intimate partner" for all Criminal Code purposes, clarifying that strangulation, choking and suffocation is an elevated form of assault, and clarifying sentencing and bail provisions, such as allowing for the possibility of seeking a higher maximum penalty in cases involving a repeat intimate partner violence offender.

Our Government is also committed to protecting vulnerable populations from human trafficking. Building on investments announced in Budget 2018 to establish a National Human Trafficking Hotline, the Government intends to develop a new whole-of-government strategy to combat human trafficking.

### **Helping Women as They Leave Shelters**

The Committee heard that women can encounter numerous barriers in accessing housing when leaving shelters. The Committee's recommendations focus on collaborating with the provinces and territories to increase access to affordable housing and transitional support, ensuring the efficient release of federal funding, and supporting organizations in the affordable housing sector to operate as social enterprises to sustain their operational needs.

Through the National Housing Strategy, we have made a historic investment in affordable housing as we continue to work closely with provinces and territories through the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Housing Partnership Framework. Under this Framework, provinces and territories will deliver a \$7.7 billion federal investment, of which \$7.4 billion will be cost-matched by provinces and territories. A key part of this funding is a federal investment of \$2 billion (to be cost-matched) for the Canada Housing Benefit, which will provide direct financial support to low-income Canadians to improve their housing affordability. Furthermore, \$4.3 billion in federal funding (to be cost-matched) is allocated to the Canada Community



Housing Initiative to preserve the affordability of the existing community housing stock and to repair and expand this stock.

As you are aware, provinces and territories are responsible for the design of programs to deliver funding that flows under National Housing Strategy bilateral agreements. The Government of Canada advances to provinces and territories the full value of federal funding up-front for commitments they make under National Housing Strategy bilateral agreements. Provinces and territories then have the flexibility to implement operational policies to advance funding for these commitments efficiently in order to support projects and the achievement of outcomes.

Through the Affordable Rental Housing Innovation Fund, our Government also provides direct support to organizations in the affordable housing sector to encourage innovation and the development of new models and approaches to affordable housing, including innovative business models that leverage partnerships and greater involvement of the private sector. The Innovation Fund was launched in 2016-2017 and provides \$200 million over five years with a goal of creating 4,000 new units.

In addition, the recently announced Social Innovation and Social Finance Strategy will offer further support to community organizations through a ten-year, \$755 million Social Finance Fund, and a two-year, \$50 million capacity-building program to improve their ability to successfully participate in the social finance market. Budget 2019 announced that a minimum of \$100 million under the Social Finance Fund will be allocated to projects that support greater gender equality. Additionally, the Social Finance Fund will make a \$50 million investment in the new Indigenous Growth Fund to support Indigenous entrepreneurs. These measures will mean that community organizations, including social enterprises, can access supports in order to become 'investment-ready,' and will have access to repayable financing to address important issues in their communities, including the availability of affordable housing.

### **Preventing Violence Against Women and Intimate Partner Violence**

Witnesses appearing before the Committee argued that addressing and ending violence against women and intimate partner violence requires investments in prevention programs and services, including education and awareness initiatives. The Committee's recommendations emphasized the establishment of a national action plan on gender-based violence, and the implementation of culturally sensitive awareness campaigns and education programs across Canada on gender-based violence.

We know that prevention is the most effective way to end gender-based violence and its devastating effects. To date, our Government has invested over \$200 million towards preventing and addressing gender-based violence, including through the first federal strategy to prevent and address gender-based violence, released in 2017.

A key component of this Strategy is the Gender-Based Violence Program, a grant and contribution program that, using a Gender-based Analysis Plus approach, supports organizations

working in the gender-based violence sector in developing and implementing promising practices to address gaps in supports for Indigenous women and their communities, and other underserved groups of survivors in Canada identified as being at an increased risk of gender-based violence and/or who are facing barriers to accessing services.

In recognition of the well-established links between child maltreatment and adult experiences of intimate partner violence, our Government is also investing in initiatives to prevent child maltreatment through parenting support programs. This investment funds organizations to build the evidence base of effective programs to prevent child maltreatment through programs that teach positive parenting and alternatives to harsh discipline, foster strong attachment, and promote parent-child involvement.

While education is the responsibility of provincial and territorial governments, our Government is investing over \$9 million per year to deliver and test programs, many of which are delivered in school settings, aimed at promoting healthy and safe relationships and preventing teen dating violence. These programs teach consent, respect and skills for safe and healthy relationships. This investment supports intervention research to learn “what works” in this field, so that effective approaches can be incorporated into policy and practice.

We continue to undertake broad engagement with various groups to raise awareness and take action on gender equality, including young people, men and boys, and with people living in Indigenous and Northern communities. Budget 2018 announced an investment of \$7.2 million over five years to engage young Canadians in dialogue and action on gender equality. To spearhead this work, the Government of Canada is directly collaborating with a Youth Working Group on Gender Equality, made up of young Canadians from diverse backgrounds and life experiences.

In support of this engagement work, Budget 2018 also announced an investment of \$1.8M over two years, starting in 2018-19, to develop an engagement strategy for men and boys that promotes equality and pilots innovative, targeted approaches to addressing inequality. This work has included a series of roundtables across the country and work is currently underway on a ‘What We Heard’ report to inform next steps on an engagement strategy.

Furthermore, through Public Safety Canada's National Crime Prevention Strategy, and in coordination with provinces, territories and other key stakeholders, our Government provides time limited funding for community-based crime prevention initiatives, and supports the development and dissemination of practical knowledge to help Canadian communities adopt effective crime prevention practices. With a budget of over \$40 million annually, the National Crime Prevention Strategy supports communities to address priority issues such as youth gangs and youth violence, hate crimes, bullying, and exiting the sex trade.

One of the National Crime Prevention Strategy's four funding programs is the Northern and Aboriginal Crime Prevention Fund, which was created to directly support the adaptation, development and implementation of innovative and culturally sensitive crime prevention

practices directed towards crime issues being faced in Indigenous communities. From 2012 - 2017, 46% of the Strategy's projects involved Indigenous people or communities.

I want to extend my personal thanks to you for your hard work on this difficult and important study. You have my personal commitment on behalf of our Government to continue to advance programs and initiatives that support women and children affected by violence. I look forward to further collaboration on this important issue in the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jean-Yves Duclos". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jean" and last name "Duclos" clearly distinguishable.

Jean-Yves Duclos, P.C., M.P.  
Minister of Families, Children and Social Development

c.c.: Kenza Gamassi, Clerk, Standing Committee on the Status of Women