



**Presentation to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women
October 17th, 2018**

Thank you for the invitation. As the national organization representing the 500+ shelters and transition houses serving women and children affected by violence against women and intimate partner violence we commend you on this study. Following Monday's session we are, however, concerned by the fact that there was quite a bit of mis-information circulated and that there appears to be some confusion in terms of the focus of this study which is VAW shelters and transition houses.

[Women's Shelters Canada](#) was incorporated six years ago. It is the result of the work of Canada's provincial and territorial shelter associations who identified the need for a unified voice on the issue of violence against women at the national level. In addition to providing a unified voice, Women's Shelters Canada is a connector, facilitating exchanges between P/T shelter organizations, between shelters across the country and between the federal government, and P/T shelter associations and individual shelters.

Canada's first VAW shelters and transition houses opened in 1973. Within nine months, groups of extraordinary women opened transition houses in Abbotsford, Calgary, Saskatoon, Vancouver, and Toronto without any connection to one another. In 1980, 63 shelters were in operation, by 1987, there were 264. In the mid-1980's, a number of provincial governments began to fund the operational costs of shelters. The issue of domestic violence was finally beginning to be recognized as a legitimate social issue.

I believe you are aware of the statistics on violence against women. The only one I will remind us of today is the fact that in Canada, every six days a woman is killed by someone she knew and most likely at one point had an intimate relationship with. To make the last two weeks real, on October 8th, Nathalie Blais, a 48 year old woman was killed by Pierre Chaperon in Drummondville in a case of murder-suicide in the context of domestic violence. On October 14th, a 16-year-old woman died in Regina. A 15-year-old boy was charged with second-degree murder.

According to our internal database, there are approximately 550 VAW shelters in Canada today, of which two-thirds are first stage shelters and one third second stage shelters. It is important to note that there is no single model or governance structure for VAW shelters – all operate individually and all are governed by their own board of directors. Their creation was and continues to be the result of the determination and perseverance of feminists across the country.

Across Canada, how we refer to VAW shelters varies greatly. They are referred to as transition houses, emergency shelters, family violence shelters, domestic violence shelters, and First Stage shelters. For the purposes of this presentation, we will use the term shelter to refer to all VAW facilities.

First stage shelters provide women and their children with accommodations and safety, along with various programs. These shelters are staffed 24/7. The majority operate in a communal environment where residents generally have their own room as well as access to shared spaces such as a kitchen, children's playroom, and living room. There is often an administrative office on site and meeting spaces for individual and/or group counselling. Length of stay may be days, weeks, or months, depending on the shelter and location. Women do not need to stay at the shelter to receive services, such as counselling and safety planning.

Second stage shelters provide longer-term accommodations to women who still require vital security as well as other supports. They are usually apartment units, with shelters ensuring security and providing case management and at times children's programming. Residents pay rent-gated to income for their unit. Accommodation may be months or years with the maximum length of stay rarely exceeding two years.

Shelters contribute much more than a safe place to stay. They provide vital services and resources that enable women and their children who have experienced abuse, to recover from the violence, re-build self-esteem, and take steps to regain a self-determined and independent life. Shelters also contribute to awareness-raising and social change as part of broader efforts to prevent and eliminate violence against women and girls.

The distribution of shelters across the country varies widely. To be noted is the low number of shelters in the three territories despite the fact that rates of female victims of violent crime are 8 times higher in the territories and nearly 3 times higher in the Provincial North than in the South. Also of relevance is the fact that Indigenous women are 2.7 times more likely to be victims of violence than non-Indigenous women. There are four shelters in the Yukon, five in the North West Territories and five in Nunavut. Also of significance is the fact that Indigenous

Services Canada provides funding for 41 shelters to serve the 634 recognized First Nations communities in Canada. The National Aboriginal Circle on Family Violence speaks to their needs. For the 53 Inuit communities across the North, there are only 15 VAW shelters. I must note our deep disappointment in the fact that the committee has not invited Pauktuutit, the national Inuit women's organization to appear.

Given that the policy and legislation that informs the work of VAW shelters is largely governed by provincial/territorial governments, how shelters operate and are funded also varies widely across the country. The result is that women often do not have access to comparable levels of services and protection. A few weeks ago, we released a report called *Building a National Narrative* that documents the variations across the country in a number of areas. I have provided it to the clerk of the committee along with a number of our other publications.

How shelters are funded varies widely across the country. There is a distinction between operational funding and capital funding. With the exception of on reserve shelters, the federal government does not provide any funding to cover the operational expenses of VAW shelters. The bulk of federal funding from shelters is from CMHC for capital expenses, that is renovation and new builds of shelters.

One commonality is that the funding provided is insufficient for the work carried out. A number of provinces, among them Manitoba, BC, and Saskatchewan have not provided meaningful increases to VAW shelters for over 10 years. New Brunswick recently saw an increase after an 11-year freeze. All increases have been modest. Running a shelter is like running any other home. There are utilities bills to pay, insurance, property taxes, food, you name it. As you know, all of these expenses have been rising over the years but not the funding for them. I must also note that on-reserve shelters receive less operational funding via ISC than shelters funded via provinces.

Another constant across the country is that women's shelters are resourceful and creative. In our recent survey with shelters, 56% indicated that they could not meet their operating expenses without fundraising while 11% said they could not meet their operational expenses even with fundraising. Given that levels of fundraising often determines the extent of services provided, shelters in rural, remote and northern areas are clearly at a disadvantage. Fundraising in impoverished areas is extremely challenging. Once again, women across the country are left with varying levels of services.

Who pays the price? It is the workers, the great majority of whom are women. Retaining qualified staff is a significant issue for shelters. Ultimately, it is the women and children fleeing violence that pay.

I would now like to speak to the issue of capacity, or rather lack of capacity. The maximum length of stay in a first stage shelter varies from 21 days in Alberta to no set maximums in Quebec and Ontario. Although there are set standards, the reality is that shelters often exceed these time limitations, as women have nowhere to go due to the serious lack of safe and affordable housing across the country. Because of this, VAW shelters are far too often at capacity and are having to turn women and children away on a daily basis.

Every year, for the last four, we have carried out a snapshot survey where we ask shelters to provide us with information on a specific 24-hour period. In 2018, 218 women and 186 children requested shelter at 105 transition houses and shelters on a single day. Of those 404 requests, 100 requests resulted in residential intake, while 304 requests could not be accommodated due to lack of capacity and resources.

This means that 75% of those who requested and needed services and safety could not be accommodated. In 2017, the turn away rate was also 75% while in 2016 it was 73% and in 2015 it was 71%. This problem is not new and its impacts are far reaching.

These are but a few of the challenges facing shelters. It has also been widely documented, and I am sure you will hear first hand from shelters in the coming weeks, that the complexity of the work is increasing daily.

Central to the situation that shelters find themselves in is the fact that their work is not considered an essential service. The government's own data clearly shows that this is a societal issue of concern to us all, not just those fleeing abusive situations. In a 2012 report published by Justice Canada, the total cost of intimate partner violence in Canada was identified as \$7.4 billion per year.

There are many issues that I have not been able to cover for lack of time. Among them is the issue of accessibility of shelters for women living with disabilities. Our colleagues from DAWN Canada will be providing further insight on this.

Before I speak to recommendations, I would like to say that WSC believes the federal government has a leadership role to play in addressing violence against women and this includes of course the work of shelters.

Our first recommendation is that the government take a leadership role in addressing gender-based violence beyond the scope of its current gender based violence strategy. This includes

developing a national action plan that includes the provincial and territorial governments and addresses the fact that women do not have access to comparable levels of services and protection.

In terms of addressing the gap between the number of beds required and the number of beds provided, we have several recommendations:

- We recommend that funding from the National Housing Strategy's co-investment fund encourage the expansion of the number of first and second stage shelters across the country. To be successful, the gap that exists between capital funds provided by the federal government via CMHC and operational costs provided by the P/T governments must be addressed;
- As part of the National Housing Strategy, the federal government is partnering with provinces and territories to develop a \$4-billion Canada Housing Benefit (beginning in 2020) to provide affordability support directly to those in need. We recommend that there be a specific stream within this program for survivors of domestic abuse and that the federal government ensure that this is enforced within all provinces and territories; and;
- We recommend that Housing be recognized as a basic human right in the upcoming legislation.

Providing a sense of the work VAW shelters do in Canada in such a limited time period is impossible. I would like to encourage all committee members to visit a VAW shelter in their riding during the week of November 12th. I will be glad to facilitate. There is so much information we could share and I welcome the opportunity for future conversations.