



# VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN SHELTERS: CONCERNS AND ADAPTATIONS

## The Bottom Line

Violence against women (VAW) shelters are concerned about families suffering in isolation and the sustainability of service provision with capacity, funding, and service restrictions.

## VAW Shelters

VAW shelters have seen various indicators that impact gender-based violence. For example, from the onset of COVID-19 lead to a 20-30% increase in calls to shelters across Canada. Police have also reported an increase in IPV calls across Canada. In Regina, domestic-related calls to police increased from an average of 16/day to 19/day in the early months of the pandemic. The severity of violence being experienced has also increased.

Some VAW shelters—especially in isolated rural areas—may experience a quieter than normal atmosphere. This is not an indicator that IPV has decreased; rather, it may be an indicator that women and children are not able to escape abuse for various reasons associated, such as isolation and lack of available services.

Socioeconomic pathways that have allowed for an increase in violence against women include economic insecurity and poverty-related stress; exposure to and isolation in exploitative relationships; reduced health services to detect abusive situations; inability to temporarily escape abusive partners to seek help; and violence against healthcare workers (predominantly a female populated field).

## Challenge to VAW Shelters

As COVID- 19 restrictions began to ease, there was an expectation that the demand for services will increase. Concerns on the ability to sustain adaptations long-term are present.

Many VAW shelters need to fundraise on top of government funding to meet their needs. Additionally, VAW shelters pre-COVID-19 had an average turn away rate of 75% due to maxed out capacity. COVID-19 decreased the ability for fundraising and further increased capacity restrictions due to the need for physical distancing.

## Possible Responses

- 64% of VAW shelters across Canada do not receive an annual cost of living increase from government funders. Advocating for an increase in governmental funding is especially needed with the adaptations necessary to sustain services.

## Challenge to VAW Shelters

Communication barriers have arisen with contacting shelters. There is less opportunity to separate from an abusive partner to receive needed help and communication must also happen differently. If in-person follow-up visits are restricted, conversations may be shorter and there is less chance to recognize non-verbal indicators of danger. Outreach is happening at different times of the day, such as at 3 a.m. These barriers are amplified when women do not have regular access to technology.

## Possible Responses

- Develop creative ways people can connect with services, such as having an 'emergency escape' button on online platforms, a safe word to text for help, and available chatlines. Use alternative communication platforms for outreach, such as Zoom, Facebook, Skype, or writing letters for those without access to technology.
- Ensure those accessing services have access to private and confidential online platforms as well as loaned out technology to communicate.
- Reallocate staff to new communication platforms and to be available during hours with increased calls (e.g. overnight).

## Challenge to VAW Shelters

Many in-person services are being conducted virtually and some services may no longer be available through virtual communications. This means families may not be receiving the level of service they require to recover from trauma. Additionally, privacy concerns may exist with the use of virtual communications.

## Possible Responses

- Provide distractions and private outlets that may be used for accessing help. This is especially important when children are involved.
- To help families isolate successfully, include the provision of Wi-Fi, television, and technological devices such as tablets for education, communication, and entertainment.
- Plan games and activities for children, indoor scavenger hunts, art kits, and family mural designing; virtual group activities such as trauma-informed yoga and art classes via Zoom; and special opportunities such as pizza delivery on Fridays.

## Challenge to VAW Shelters

VAW shelters usually consist of communal living areas. This increases the risk of community transmission of illnesses or COVID-19. The fear of contracting various illnesses or COVID-19 may also prevent women from reaching out to shelters.

## Possible Responses

- Utilize alternative locations such as empty housing units or hotel rooms to spread out occupants and reduce community transmission. Saskatchewan and other provinces have made this option available to shelters. Within VAW shelters, restrict, rotate, and designate the use of common spaces; increase cleaning and hygiene protocols; and provide meals to reduce kitchen use.



## Challenge to VAW Shelters

Many shelters have reached agreements to use alternative locations for families to quarantine before entering shelters, to accommodate capacity overflow, and for women where shelter restrictions are not feasible (e.g., they are an essential worker). Isolation at an alternative location may decrease feelings of safety for families, reduce available services offered by the shelter, and be particularly difficult for women and families attempting to recover from trauma.

## Possible Responses

- To make women feel safer away from the shelter, some strategies include: providing women/families with panic buttons and cellphones; providing groceries, food, and if possible a suite with a kitchen for the family; providing virtual check-ins on a daily basis; and having a staff member stay in a room close by so there is someone available onsite.



For original sources and documents, please visit: [www.childtraumaresearch.ca](http://www.childtraumaresearch.ca)