



797 York Street – Unit 5
London ON N5W 6A8
t. (519) 432-2204
f. (519) 679-3918
info@lawc.on.ca

Providing counselling, advocacy and support for abused

City Of London Strategic Plan from Women with Lived Experience

March 1, 2019

Mayor Holder and Members of Council,

Re: Feedback from focus groups with women and girls accessing services at the London Abused Women's Centre

The London Abused Women's Centre (LAWC) provides immediate access to service to women and girls over the age of 12 who are abused by their intimate partners; exploited in prostitution/sex trafficking/pornography and/or subjected to sexual harassment or torture. LAWC also provides support and counselling to family members of women and girls who have been sexually exploited/prostituted/sex trafficked, including women and girls who are missing or disappeared. The agency provides service to women, girls and their family members primarily in London-Middlesex but also across Canada and internationally as requested.

- 1. The London Abused Women's Centre recommends that London's strategic plan make as one of its priorities the safety concerns of women and girls who are sexually assaulted, abused in their homes and/or trafficked/sexually exploited.**

According to the London Coordinating Committee to End Woman Abuse (LCCEWA), London Police Service reports 4,058 domestic violence incidents from January to June 2018 which was an increase of 11% over 2017. In London for this same period, 3,348 domestic violence and sexual violence crisis calls were received by crisis and helplines which was a 234% increase over 2017 (LCCEWA, Snapshot 2018). In the 2017/18 fiscal year the London Abused Women's Centre served the needs of 6,045 women and girls representing a 56% increase in service demands from 2017/17 levels.

The Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability reported in January that 148 women and girls were killed in Canada – primarily by men – in 2018. Femicide remains a serious and critical issue for women and girls around the world, including in Canada.

In regards to LAWC's specialized services for sexually-exploited, prostituted and trafficked women and girls, between July 2015 and December 2018, LAWC, in partnership with YOU and Salvation Army Correctional and Justice Services, provided long-term, trauma and victimization-informed counselling, advocacy, outreach and support to 2,015 sexually-exploited/prostituted, sex trafficked and at-risk women, girls and youth. Of the 432 women and girls who were

provided with individual counselling, 380 identified as being trafficked into the sex trade. LAWC received phone or Skype calls, emails or in-agency visits from 153 families/parents who were looking for support because their daughters had been sexually exploited into the sex trade.

London Police Service acknowledges that London is a hub for sex trafficking and reports that, between 2013 and 2018, 285 suspected traffickers were reported in London; 433 individuals were considered to be at a high risk of trafficking; contact was made with 533 individuals (including "independent" and trafficked women and girls); and 492 criminal code charges were laid relating to trafficking (<https://bit.ly/2UQAdLx>). Between October 16 and November 23, 2018, LPS joined other forces in Southwestern Ontario to conduct a trafficking sting. An online ad selling sexual services posted by LPS resulted in 9,000 views in six days. Police met with 56 women and girls between the ages of 16 and 41 including girls in secondary and post-secondary school.

2. LAWC recommends the City of London continue to listen to the voices of women and girls especially those who are vulnerable and at-risk throughout the strategic planning process.

The London Abused Women's Centre appreciates the invitation by the City of London to host roundtable discussions with women and girls attending service at LAWC to discuss the city's strategic plan. We hope this level of engagement continues throughout the entire process. Over the course of the last 10 days, LAWC facilitated two focus groups with women and girls accessing our services asking them what issues they wanted the City of London to focus on; what their priorities are; what is missing in the draft strategic plan; and what they would like the city to pay attention to. We urge the City of London to always support the voices of vulnerable citizens being heard and to make it standard process that channels for this level of engagement be provided particularly through the agencies that support these vulnerable populations.

The roundtables included 23 women with lived experience of abuse in intimate relationships, sexual assault, sexual exploitation and/or sex trafficking who attended the two focus groups at LAWC. Their feedback is included below.

3. The women with lived experience in the focus groups/roundtables and LAWC recommend the City of London prioritize the need for enhanced access to both emergency shelter and to permanent, safe, affordable housing for women subjected to male violence against women and girls.

Women in the focus group emphasized that they have not been able to access shelter beds in violence against women shelters when they needed them for themselves and their children because all local shelters were full. When they tried to access beds in homeless shelters, after failing to be able to access the VAW shelter, often the homeless shelters were full as well. The women and children were left in unsafe situations.

Women acknowledged the need for more rent-geared-to-income housing so that women leaving abusers or exiting trafficking do not have to wait so long to access permanent housing. Women recommended that, rather than primarily being offered only rent-geared-to-income (which was identified as often unsafe), that an enhanced portable housing benefit be made available to women/girls who have been subjected to male violence trying to leave the abuser or exit trafficking. This housing benefit would allow them to access market-priced housing in neighbourhoods throughout our community. The enhanced benefit would need to provide adequate funding so that they could access safe, affordable housing quickly rather than be waiting for months to be offered rent-geared-to-income housing.

The women recommended the City support the establishment of a safe house with supports for girls and women who have been sex trafficked. The women also highlighted the need for more supportive housing for women who experience multiple barriers – addictions, mental health and abuse.

- 4. The women with lived experience in the focus groups/roundtables and LAWC recommend the City of London provide additional funding through programs such as the City of London Community Grants to enhance free trauma-informed services for survivors of male violence against women and girls, that all public service providers be provided with training on being trauma-informed, and that the public be made aware of how to access these services.**

Women requested greater access to free trauma-informed counselling. They identified that waiting list and having to pay for these services were barriers to their ability to access needed counselling and therapy to address the impact of abuse, trauma and violence.

Women reported that public service providers need to be trauma-informed so that survivors/victims of sexual exploitation, trafficking and abuse accessing services have better outcomes.

- 5. The women with lived experience in the focus groups/roundtables and LAWC recommend the City of London develop strategies to increase public awareness and education about abuse and all forms of male violence against women and girls.**

Women want women and girls subjected to violence to know where they can go for safety and that there is help available. They want the public to recognize woman abuse, sexual exploitation and sex trafficking as major social issues. They suggested billboards and advertisement on buses or other forms of raising public awareness such as on social media. Raising public awareness will encourage women and girls to reach out and connect with support when they need it.

- 6. The women with lived experience in the focus groups/roundtables and LAWC recommend the City of London continue to regulate and reduce the number of licenses for adult entertainment establishments as these establishments inherently promote male violence against women and girls.**

7. The women with lived experience in the focus group/roundtables and LAWC recommend the City of London support enhanced safety of women and girls on the streets of London.

The women recommended improving street lighting, improving bus service so the service is free to those on low income, supporting the extension of bus services so buses run later and more often, enhancing safety at bus stops, and addressing the problem of street preachers harassing women and girls.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Megan Walker". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Megan" written above the last name "Walker".

Megan Walker
Executive Director
London Abused Women's Centre