

June 21, 2021

Chair and Members
Strategic Priorities and Planning Committee

Dear Committee Members,

Re: Recommendations by the Brescia University College Housing and Gender-Based Violence Project

Students in the Family Studies and Human Development program at Brescia University College at Western University were engaged in a 4-month research project as part of their course work in *Diversity and the Canadian Family* (FSHD 3325B) in Winter 2021. The project, which concluded in April 2021 addressed challenges facing Londoners, including the issue of housing and homelessness as it impacts women and girls affected by or fleeing family violence. This experiential learning opportunity was built on a partnership with CityStudio London, Housing Services and London Community Recovery Network (LCRN), City Planning at the City of London, as well as community leaders working in the local violence against women sector. Based on London's Strategic Plan 2019-23, one of the priorities that the LCRN has identified is that there needs to be an urgent action on homelessness, with a focus on more accessible and safer housing options for women and girls. In addition, there is a need to maintain or increase the number of shelter beds available to abused women and their children, and to homeless women and girls.

Research Questions

The City of London is committed to providing a safe place for women and girls. However, with domestic violence on the rise since the beginning of the pandemic, this project addressed the following research questions:

1. What special support should be put in place to help women and girls fleeing violence access / retain housing in response? More specifically, how does the housing system meet the needs of women and girls fleeing violence?
2. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the risk for family violence and access to needed housing services?

Students worked in groups to coordinate an environmental scan for programs and services, conducted a gap analysis and needs assessment, and engaged in in-depth interviews with community leaders who work within the violence against women sector to discuss the homeless prevention and housing system in London-Middlesex. Local leaders working within the violence against women sector responded to an "expression of interest" memo sent out by Housing Services within the City of London. Eight leaders from London's Coordinating Committee to End Women Abuse (LCCEWA) and Safe Cities participated in semi-structured interviews, resulting in a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) of all programming offered in the City. Each LCCEWA leader also provided a set of recommendations to help improve the current housing system for women facing gender-based violence.

Building on the project findings, a team comprised of Brescia University College and London Abused Women's Centre leadership, Megan Walker, Jennifer Dunn and Sandra-Lynn Coulter got together and collated a summary of the recommendations for action.

The Brescia University College Housing and Gender-Based Violence Project recommend the following actions by the Strategic Planning and Priorities Committee be taken:

1. Ongoing opportunities be provided by the city to engage with women and girls with lived experiences

During the strategic planning process, the City of London collaborated with agencies to ensure the voices of women and girls with lived experiences were heard. Their voices contributed to the city's specific area of focus to create a safe London for women and girls.

The housing crisis for women and girls fleeing gender-based violence is a complex issue that a one-size-fits-all approach will not solve.

Just as women and girls with lived experience of violence contributed to the strategic plan, they too must be provided with on-going opportunities to have their safety concerns heard and addressed.

The City of London can improve the housing system and its services by involving victims and survivors in developing better housing solutions and services.

2. Funding be provided by the City of London for priority access to housing, shelter and community services for women and girls fleeing violence

There is an urgent need for the City of London to support funding to provide supports to women and girls fleeing violence by funding access to an emergency shelter, transitional and second stage housing, safe housing for sex trafficked girls and young women, housing first supports; long-term safe and affordable housing, community supports, and to ensure enough housing stock so women and girls can flee violence. Lack of immediate access to these services place women, girls and women's children at risk of further violence.

Increasing the number of shelter beds will ensure women and girls needing emergency shelter to escape violence have immediate access to space and supports and thereby contribute to their safety.

3. Prioritizing funding immediate access to longer-term, trauma-informed counselling, safety planning and emotional support

The City of London must ensure all women and girls have immediate access to services by funding the organizations, programs and resources providing trauma-informed, long-term counselling, support, advocacy and safety planning. These services are important because they assist women in escaping violence and transitioning to a life free from violence for themselves and their children without necessarily having to access shelters.

The City of London can work with all levels of government to provide stable and long-term funding to meet the safety needs of women and girls fleeing violence.

4. Proactive policies, planning and development for better housing infrastructure be implemented

The City of London is encouraged to continue its work with all levels of government and agencies to proactively plan and develop policies to improve the infrastructure (shelters/housing) and develop strategies to address the post-pandemic increased demand for shelter and housing.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the housing crisis as women and girls experiencing increased violence including by their partners and those lured into prostitution and into online pornography seek safety. However, the housing crisis in London predates the pandemic. Lack of shelter beds, transitional housing, a safe house for trafficked girls and women, and affordable housing has resulted in long-term safety issues for women. It is anticipated that the city will see a major increase in housing demands in the post-pandemic years and beyond. The City of London must act now, pre-emptively, by working collaboratively with all levels of government and agencies to prioritize shelter, housing and support to create safety for women and girls.

5. An investment be made for a public relations campaign

The City of London is encouraged to develop a public awareness campaign to increase community knowledge of the severity of male violence against women and girls and the housing crisis in London.

There needs to be public recognition that the housing crisis disproportionately affects women and girls especially those who have faced violence.

Landlords need education and training about male violence against woman and girls and the resulting urgent need for housing thereby increasing landlords' understanding of what these women and children have experienced and expanding their willingness to provide them with safe housing.

Increased public knowledge of the severity of the problem of gender-based violence and homelessness, the lack of access to safe housing and what community services and supports are available can help ensure the safety of women and children experiencing violence and homelessness.

Non-profit agencies providing shelter and support services to women and girls are partially dependent on fundraising, so it is important that the public have increased awareness of the issue.

6. Provide emergency shelter specific to the needs of women and girls escaping violence

Women and girls who are survivors of violence should not be housed in hotels and motels where human trafficking is known. Housing women in hotels and motels could put abused and

trafficked women and girls at risk. Further, being sheltered in the same facility as homeless men may put women and girls who are survivors of violence at risk of further violence.

The only safe spaces for women and girls seeking safety from violence are violence against women-specific shelters with security and 24-hour staffing.

The City of London must also recognize that women and girls and women with children fleeing violence are often living in poverty and increase funding to provide access to adequate food and nutrition.

As a recognized diverse community, the City of London has a responsibility to ensure they are accommodating access to housing and supports for women and girls fleeing violence whose first language is other than English and French. The inclusion of additional languages will help to continue the promotion of safety for women and children regardless of language.

7. Increased safety and affordability of long-term housing

The City of London must recognize the need for, and the provision of, increased funding for safe, high quality, long-term housing support for women and girls fleeing violence; and increased funding for rent-geared to income (RGI) and public housing in locations dispersed throughout the city in diverse communities. The city's current subsidized housing is primarily in clusters, stigmatized, largely segregated from the rest of the community and located in inconvenient locations where basic needs are not easily accessible.

A direct investment in portable housing benefits such as the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB) which can be used to access market-priced units throughout London and area as well as RGI units in private market buildings is essential.

Affordable housing must be promoted within new developments by working directly with developers to ensure sufficient units are rented at affordable rates, including those units reserved for women with children and single women escaping from violence.

Although shelter and temporary housing is necessary to support those at immediate risk, additional funds must be extended by the city to meet the requirements of those needing continued support. If long-term housing is unavailable and unaffordable, women have to stay longer in shelters and transitional housing meaning much longer waits for other women and girls fleeing violence. Prioritizing funding and support for affordable, safe long-term housing will permit women and girls fleeing violence to move more quickly from shelters and transitional housing to stable housing. Increased funding is needed for both emergency and transitional housing, for long-term supported housing and safe houses, and for safe affordable long-term housing for women and girls fleeing violence.

Creating long-term affordable/subsidized housing with quality units available in safe diverse neighborhoods will help overcome the barrier for women and girls of not wanting to leave the perpetrator due to the fear of potentially being housed in lower quality and unsafe housing and living in poverty.

8. Addressing lack of services for male perpetrators of abuse and violence against women and girls

The City of London is encouraged to support programs that provide early intervention and services for male perpetrators of abuse against women and girls to reduce the possibility of further violence.

If the justice system begins to order male perpetrators removed from their homes and required to live in a shelter, the City of London could support the creation of a shelter for male abusers. Potentially women and children would not have to leave their homes to flee the violence; however, even if these abusers are sheltered, resources must be put in place to move the victims to a safe location or shelter if it is still unsafe or becomes unsafe for them to stay in their homes where the abuser can gain access to them.

9. Provide training on being trauma-informed to housing and homeless prevention staff

The City of London, in conjunction with the violence against women sector, provide mandatory comprehensive training to all city staff on providing trauma-informed services and supports to survivors of domestic violence and human trafficking to help them access rent-geared-to-income social housing through the SPP (Special Priority Program), the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB) portable housing benefit to access market-priced housing, and emergency shelters or homeless prevention programs.

Staff training on providing trauma-informed housing services and supports would increase staff capacity to support survivors to make the applications for SPP and COHB less complicated (e.g., not requiring signature of VAW manager) and traumatizing (e.g., women not having to share their stories of trauma as part of SPP application); and increase the capacity of city staff and their housing managers to advocate for provincial housing policies to be more trauma-informed.

The training would allow for the prioritization of housing and supports for women and girls fleeing violence. City of London staff, managers and leadership can be champions for the creation of safety for women and girls in London which the City of London committed to in its Strategic Plan.

Many thanks for your consideration of our recommendations. We are happy to appear as a delegation before the committee and senior leadership team, if necessary.

Sincerely,



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