



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on the Status of Women

FEWO • NUMBER 117 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Wednesday, October 24, 2018

—
Chair

Mrs. Karen Vecchio

Standing Committee on the Status of Women

Wednesday, October 24, 2018

• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC)): Good afternoon, everyone.

Welcome to the 117th meeting of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women. This meeting of course is in public.

Today, we'll resume our study on the system of shelters and transition houses serving women and children affected by violence against women and intimate partner violence.

For this, I am pleased to welcome our two panellists for today.

From the Beausejour Family Crisis Resource Centre, we have Kristal LeBlanc, Executive Director. If I've said that incorrectly, please make sure you change that.

From the YWCA Lethbridge and District, we have Jennifer Lepko, Chief Executive Officer.

We are going to allow each of you seven minutes.

We'll begin with Kristal. The floor is yours for seven minutes.

Ms. Kristal LeBlanc (Executive Director, Beausejour Family Crisis Resource Centre): I want to thank you for the invitation and the privilege of being able to share our experiences in providing services to female victims of violence and their children. I commend you for undertaking this study and caution you that the results and recommendations must include immediate action, as we are certainly at a time of crisis for the sector, and we are failing these women in many ways each and every day.

Women have long been the warriors and crusaders fighting for such services as shelters, sexual assault centres and domestic violence outreach services, to name but a few. In 2018, do we not think it is the time for others to join us in this fight?

When I began preparing for my statement today, I simply could not stop thinking about a quote from Evelyn Cunningham, an American journalist who extensively covered the civil rights movement. She said, "Women are the only oppressed group in our society that lives in intimate association with their oppressors."

I'd like for each of you to keep this statement top of mind as you continue to understand the realities of our domestic violence shelter system across the country.

The Beausejour Family Crisis Resource Centre is a registered charitable organization located in Shediac, New Brunswick, whose mission is the elimination of family violence through intervention, prevention and education. The centre opened—

The Chair: Excuse me.

Can I have you slow down just a tad for our interpreters?

Ms. Kristal LeBlanc: Sure.

The centre opened its doors in 1997 with 1.5 staff. In 2017, with a staff of five, more than 2,000 interventions were completed, of which more than 700 were with victims of family violence; 78 of those were women, along with 32 children, who remained in the abusive relationship since our organization currently has no—that is zero—emergency beds.

Almost six years ago, in 2012, we began to reflect on the revolving door that was our service delivery model. Female victims would come to the centre for outreach services, but we had no beds. In our rural communities, there are more than 29 fish-processing plants, which employ the vast majority of our victims. As it stood, abused women from our communities had to go to the nearest urban shelter, which led to immediate job loss. Female victims were simply staying in the relationship or returning multiple times because it was too difficult to break free.

I began advocating for change locally but was told time and again that shelters in New Brunswick had not received an increase in over 10 years, and that there was no new money. One civil servant advised me that the day I would get a dime from her government would be the day they paid for her gym membership. Faced with this kind of resistance, the project was constantly delayed, and yet I continued to witness the devastating consequences of not offering housing supports.

Thirty-three women in New Brunswick are our "silent witnesses"—that is, women who have been murdered by their partners. I was not about to stand idly by and add another number to this list.

We are now coming out on the other end of a \$4.2-million capital campaign called “Courage”, of which \$1.5 million came directly from both the provincial and federal governments. It was not easy to secure, to say the least. I was never more aware that I was a woman in the working world than during the time I spent advocating for this project. I have been called such things as pushy, annoying and persistent, and I simply do not think I would have been so labelled if my name were Larry, Bobby or Joe. It seems that those working in this sector are also the subject of gender discrimination. As columnist Lois Wyse once said, “Men are taught to apologize for their weaknesses, women for their strengths.”

Our new facility will include, among other features, a provincial pilot model of a six-bed emergency relief wing divided into two three-bedroom apartments, as well as an increase in our second-stage housing units from two to seven. We put a nail gun to wood on October 8 and are in the middle of construction, with \$600,000 left to raise. It has been the most valuable, albeit difficult, work we have ever undertaken as a grassroots community organization.

The question that women-based organizations are often asking themselves is why it has to be so damn hard. Women have been fighting since the 1970s for domestic violence services, and it's discouraging that this has not changed. There is, however, a beacon of hope in New Brunswick, as this past year domestic violence shelters in our province did receive a 10% increase, the first since 2010. Further, our provincial government supported a portion of our capital cost and will be providing an operational grant to help cover the cost of the emergency wing.

Much like other expert witnesses who have stood before this committee, I too must enforce that women across the country are not receiving comparable access to services since each shelter operates independently. This reality also makes it next to impossible to look at outcome measurements since services and supports vary widely across the country.

As pointed out by Lise Martin, executive director of Women's Shelters Canada, rural women are at an increased disadvantage since shelters in rural regions struggle to fundraise in a catchment area that has high poverty rates. Therefore, rural shelters are often limited in the supports they can provide.

Lack of funding and adequate services and spaces to meet the ever-growing demands of shelters for female victims is a reality in New Brunswick. Due to our aging population, more and more women over 55 are seeking shelter services, yet the original shelter system built in the 1980s was mostly designed to accommodate a younger generation.

Many of our female victims are turned away if they have complex mental health and addiction issues since shelters lack the capacity to deal with these issues. Furthermore, due to a large newcomer population, it can be increasingly challenging for shelter staff to accommodate the various linguistic and cultural needs because of limited resources.

I also urge the members of the standing committee to invite women with lived experiences to speak. While front-line providers can certainly offer you important insight on the realities of the sector,

I would recommend that you also listen to the very women who wish to be truly free from violence.

● (1535)

In closing, I harbour the hope that one day soon the entire shelter system will be flipped on its head and that we will go boldly into uncharted waters, much like Interval House in Toronto did, the first women's shelter in Canada. This must involve a strong commitment from our federal government to invest heavily and consistently not only in capital contributions but, more importantly, in a cost-sharing arrangement with the provinces for core operational support. Domestic violence is a social disease, and it needs to be treated as such.

Thank you for your time.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Kristal.

Jennifer Lepko is next, for seven minutes.

Ms. Jennifer Lepko (Chief Executive Officer, YWCA Lethbridge and District): Thank you.

Lethbridge is located in southern Alberta. We are a city with a population of just under 100,000. We are neighbours to the largest reserve in Canada, and per capita have one of the highest populations of immigrants and new Canadians.

The YWCA Lethbridge and District has been providing supports and services to southern Alberta for nearly 70 years. We specialize in domestic and sexual violence, housing and homelessness, crisis prevention and intervention, leadership and empowerment, and advocacy and awareness.

I would like to share some numbers: 6,490, 519, and 2,094. These numbers are from our YWCA Harbour House women's emergency shelter. Our outreach services provided support to 6,490 people in our last fiscal year; 519 is how many women and children we were able to provide safe beds for in our shelter; and 2,094 is how many women and children we did not have safe beds for.

The need in our area is great, and we do not have the resources we require to meet the needs in our community. We currently do not have transitional housing in our area, which is a significant gap. We are only subsidized by the government to run our shelter and require nearly \$50 per day, per bed of donations in order to provide these services.

Statistics, although important, are just numbers. We are working with humans. Numbers and statistics dehumanize the individuals with whom we are working. We are talking about lives; we are talking about human beings. We need to remember that we are working with and supporting people, not numbers.

Imagine having to run for your life in the middle of the night to escape being beaten to death. For many, escaping is the time when they would be most at risk of losing their life. You show up at the front door of a shelter with nothing but the clothes on your back. You then have to share your story with complete strangers, and tell them about the horrors you have experienced, all the while blaming yourself for much of the abuse you have endured. You are then told that the shelter is full. Now what? You will likely return to your abuser, not because you want to but because if you had any other option you would have tried it before coming to a shelter.

Or maybe there was a bed available. You get shown to your room. It is a crowded room with six beds. You are now sharing your space with five complete strangers. You are safe, possibly for the first time in your life. Now you can take a minute to breathe, but not more than a minute, because you have only 21 days to completely reinvent yourself, overcome the trauma you have experienced, find somewhere to live, clothes for the next day, and so much more. By the way, you've been beaten, belittled, and made to feel that you have no value. You have no money, no friends; you feel like you are nothing and you have nothing. Now, go. I know I certainly wouldn't be able to do it, and I have resources and have not been subjected to extreme terror, trauma and violence.

I am sure you have heard the phrase, "Give a person a fish and they will eat for a day; teach them how to fish and they will eat for a lifetime." That is what we need to do. We need to teach them and provide the time, support and resources for these human beings to restart.

The first thing we need is more shelter spaces, and along with that we need to ensure that there is supported transitional housing available for all shelters. We need to start at the beginning and teach, rebuild, and empower. The national housing strategy is a great start. It is investing in capital with the aim to build more affordable housing, but if you simply build more places to live and do not adequately support the individuals, there will not be success. There will be more empty, damaged houses.

We need to create homes. We need to walk alongside these individuals to provide them with the supports they need to succeed. When you moved into your first home, did you know when to take the garbage out? Did you know how to change the furnace filter? Were you gifted with the knowledge of how to cook a healthy meal? Did you have more than \$30 left at the end of the month to feed your family?

Many of the individuals who are homeless or at risk of being homeless are living in survival mode. How do we expect them to understand all that it takes to live in and maintain a home when we don't provide them with the tools to do so? When someone is fleeing violence, their control has been taken from them, their ability to make decisions removed. They have been terrorized, and yet, we expect success in a short period of time.

What is required is programming that focuses on steps or stages: a step to heal from the bruises; a step to realize what just happened and to grieve what you have lost; a step to discover what the cycle of violence is and how it affects you and your children; a step to figure out what's next.

We need to provide safety and ongoing support. Just like children, they reach milestones and have to grow and develop. We don't expect them to do things before they are developmentally ready. When you have experienced trauma associated with violence, you are not developmentally ready to do the work required to start over again. We are forgetting the building blocks. Abuse is not an event; it is a process, just as it is a process to recover from the place that violence has taken a person. We need to teach them to crawl, to stand, and then to walk on their own.

• (1540)

The solution is that we need to invest in people. We need to make sure that shelters are provided with the necessary resources to provide that initial shelter, but also have the opportunity to transition them along their journey on a timeline that works for them. This isn't about deciding how long it takes. It's about empowering them to know they are capable and they are worthy. It's about starting over. This may seem very simple, but sometimes that's what we need to go back to. Just like when a child starts school, they don't start in grade 9 or 12. They start at grade 1 and build on the skills they learn at each step of the way.

What is needed? Support. But in order to be able to offer the support, what we need to do is invest.

Invest in the staff. By investing in the staff, we are able to effectively train staff, reduce turnover, provide reasonable wages, and support them through the vicarious trauma that occurs. They can't unhear a story. They live this life with their clients.

Invest in shelters. Shelters should not be rooms with multiple beds. Personal space and boundaries are one thing abusers take away from victims, and then we put them in a shared space. We need to invest in the physical space of shelters. They are not holding cells. They are places where an individual has an opportunity to regroup. We need to be strategic in the design of shelters.

Invest in people. We need to support individuals through programs that teach, understand, and empower. We need holistic programming that develops skills, from basic living skills to employment training.

Invest in supported transitional housing. Transitional housing should be available wherever a shelter is available. This is a crucial step in fleeing violence. This is where the growth and empowerment can happen. This is where they learn and grow.

Invest in the organization. Organizations know the work. They are invested in the people they serve. We need less filtering of the funds through multiple agencies. The organizations know how to most effectively meet the needs of the people they serve.

Again, this may appear as a simplistic view, but the solution is simple; it is support. Through support, we help people who have been broken to heal. By investing in people up front, we reduce the long-term costs. If we teach them to fish, they will eat for a lifetime.

Thank you.

• (1545)

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you so much.

We're going to begin with our seven-minute rounds of questioning. We're going to start with Pam Damoff.

You have the floor for seven minutes.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, both, for being here, and more importantly for the work you're doing in both of our communities. What you're doing is very important, and I know you do a lot with a little. Thank you.

I'm going to start with you, Ms. LeBlanc. You mentioned that you do work with older women and women in rural settings. If you do as well, Ms. Lepko, please pipe in.

Quite often, rural and older women are overlooked when we're looking at this. I wonder if you could provide us with some specific recommendations aimed at that demographic.

Ms. Kristal LeBlanc: Absolutely. First, when it comes to how shelters are built, we need to take into consideration that we have women staying across the lifespan. That might mean that if an older woman is to feel comfortable to come stay at the shelter, she has her independent space so that she's not having to deal with little kids running around when she has gone through that stage of her life. Structurally, there are things that we need to take into consideration, and that's what we did with our new build.

Second, when it comes to programming, I think it's really important to tailor programming to women over 55. When I was doing my graduate work, we did studies on women over 55 and how shelters were adapting to older women. We were noticing that they'd love to, but they just didn't have the financing needed. We offer a support group in our community, and the youngest woman is 49 years old, so we make sure that the topics we're covering are exactly what they need for where they are at their stage of life.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Did you want to add to that?

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: I would love to just add that one of the things we see is that we're serving individual whose bodies are those of seniors. They need the supports of seniors because of the lifestyle they have been put through.

One piece that is a huge gap is the medical treatment. It's about being able to connect with services that offer the medical resources that we don't offer in a shelter. Again, in designing those shelters, we need to take this into consideration because, for somebody who has been abused significantly, their body needs that medical approach, and that's not in our wheelhouse.

Ms. Pam Damoff: One of the challenges we run into, as I'm sure you recognize—for example, with the national housing strategy—is that the money comes from the federal government and then it feeds through the province. In my area, it goes to the region of Halton, and

then it eventually gets to the organizations. Up here, we have very little control over how that money is being spent. There's a logical reason behind that, because the thinking is that the municipalities and the regions know best what's needed.

When we're looking at the gaps that currently exist all across the country, can you focus on what we can do up here to assist you where you are? You mentioned operational funding being one of the things. Are there any other areas where you can see specifically that the federal government could step in to try to fill that gap?

Ms. Kristal LeBlanc: I do feel that by conducting this study and doing the research you are doing to better understand what's going on.... Perhaps when that transfer payment is done, there is still some say from the federal government.

It is a national housing strategy, and as much as the province should know—and they do.... One of our biggest challenges was that when we tried to get funding, both the federal and the provincial governments were claiming that it was their money, and it can't be both. That was a large challenge that we encountered for quite some time.

If there could be a bit more transparency there and we could still have some involvement from the federal government on how those funds should be disbursed, I think that would be important.

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: It's about eliminating some of those steps. I realize it's about engagement from all those levels. As an example, a few years ago, the federal government announced \$39 million going towards housing in Alberta. When it hit our doorstep, we had our programming cut in half. We think that the money is going to the housing, but in Lethbridge, significant programming was actually reduced or eliminated altogether. We have these news articles going out to the public that we're trying to look for donations from them, and they're saying, "Well, you just got \$39 million. Why do you need our help?" Where that \$39 million is being filtered to is not necessarily where it needs to hit.

• (1550)

Ms. Pam Damoff: You need some accountability there as well, so that people can see where that money is being spent.

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: Absolutely.

Ms. Pam Damoff: We had DAWN Canada, the DisAbleD Women's Network, here saying that 35% to 80% of women who are coming to shelters have had some kind of a traumatic brain injury.

Do you have any programs or screening for women when they come in to be able to deal with that?

Ms. Kristal LeBlanc: We'll screen for it, but programs...? No. It's lack of funding; it's not because we shouldn't be doing it.

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: We screen as well. We partner up where we can with additional agencies, but our programming is designed around the individual. When we offer programming, it is about building the building blocks for that individual, and if that is assistance with a traumatic brain injury, that can be supported by the same means. I'd say we're looking at a trauma in 100% of the people who are accessing our services.

Ms. Pam Damoff: You mentioned 21 days, that when someone comes in they're there for 21 days. Why is it so short? Is it funding?

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: A large part is funding, the need. You'll see 21 days, 28 days. It does vary to some degree. The idea of the shelter is to provide that initial emergency support. Shelters are not just a band-aid. They're a very significant piece. They're about women and children being able to regroup and figure out what is happening next.

The need is for the supported transitional housing or second-stage housing that I talked about. We need stages in the development of this new person who is overcoming this trauma.

You will see a variance. It is largely due to funding.

Ms. Pam Damoff: The only reason I ask is that I think at Halton Women's Place, in my area, the women are there for about six months.

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: That would be more of a defined second-stage shelter type of placement, as opposed to an emergency shelter. Again, it's how it is defined and what services are in the area.

Ms. Pam Damoff: I think I'm out of time.

The Chair: You have six seconds left.

Thanks very much.

We're now going to move over to Rachael Harder for seven minutes. The floor is yours.

Ms. Rachael Harder (Lethbridge, CPC): Awesome.

Welcome. It's good to have both of you. Of course, Ms. Lepko from Lethbridge, I'm happy to have you here in Ottawa.

My question is going to Jennifer. You used the phrase, "We need to...teach, rebuild, and empower." You've chosen some really strong words, and each of them is significant.

Would you be willing to lead us through what each of those means? When you say we need to teach, we need to rebuild and we need to empower, what would that look like?

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: Absolutely.

First, we need to teach individuals a bunch of different skills. When people have experienced some sort of trauma or come from a traumatic experience, they're living in a survival mode and they don't necessarily look at what's happening around them. It really is about what is happening right here, right now. We need to be able to give them the skills they need, and it's going to be very individual as to what types of skills they need to move forward. It might be learning about how the violence has affected them. It might be learning how to cook a meal that isn't just a quick and easy get-away type of meal. We need to provide skills, actual real-life skills.

On rebuilding, we need to rebuild this individual. As I stated earlier, they've been stripped down. They've had their decision-

making processes taken away from them. Abuse is about power and control, so they're starting fresh, and it's about how we rebuild that individual so they know they are capable of making these changes, learning these skills, moving forward, and doing it on their own.

As for empowering, each of us needs to be empowered. We need to have purpose. We need to feel like we're valued, and that's how we're going to make it in our life. It's about those opportunities of being empowered.

Ms. Rachael Harder: Could you maybe talk a bit about the partnerships that would be involved in being able to pull off something such as that?

From the federal government flows funding that comes through the province, through the municipality, and then finally now you have your small chunk that's left over. As an organization on the ground, is there potential for partnership with private industry? Is there potential with not-for-profits or with faith organizations, just caring individuals who want to come in and volunteer? What does that practically look like in terms of the delivery of services on the ground?

● (1555)

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: Partnering is very crucial, especially when you come from a non-profit world. It is something that you have to use to survive. By all means, we partner with a number of agencies and organizations within Lethbridge to provide these services.

As a YWCA, we offer multiple programs within the umbrella of the YWCA. We see the impact that each program has on these individuals, because we do offer multiple services in one location. It's those wrap-around supports, and that's what these individuals need. When we're in a location such as Lethbridge, we're able to have those relationships with our other partners that we can connect with and do that warm transfer. It's very nice to be able to have those within the building. You know these people and they don't even necessarily have to leave the building in order to access these services.

All of these pieces are crucial. We need to be able to have them learn about employment. Because we don't have enough funding to provide staffing to help support them with that, we need to access other organizations that might provide that. As with anything, if we had the people power to provide the supports, which is funding, we'd be able to do a much more holistic, wholesome support from one area.

Ms. Rachael Harder: For sure.

I would like to return to the topic of transition housing, and maybe each of you can comment separately on this.

Ms. Lepko, you mentioned, of course, that it's lacking in our community.

Ms. LeBlanc, I missed part of your presentation and I apologize for that. I'm not sure if you referred to it at all.

From my estimation, that is a really key component. We don't want individuals to reside in a shelter as a long-term solution, so that transitional housing is really important. Ideally, we'd want people to move along the housing continuum to a place where they're in independent housing that is safe and secure, where they feel empowered to live a life of dignity, worth, value and significance.

Maybe each of you can comment on that for a moment.

Ms. Kristal LeBlanc: In our rural community, we didn't have any transitional housing. We had two second-stage units. What I spoke about was our \$4-million campaign that we've been doing for quite some time.

It is all transitional housing; it's just at different stages. Across the country, there are stage 1, stage 2, and stage 3. Stage 1 is anywhere from 30 to 90 days. That's the variety we were speaking of. Sometimes it's 21 days, depending on how busy it is. Stage 2 is up to a year. It can be extended to two years. Stage 3 is really, at that point, helping her transition out into regular subsidized housing or independent market living.

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: Yes, it's crucial to have those stepping stones.

One of the biggest things, which often gets overlooked when we think of transitional or second-stage housing, is the safety mechanisms that need to be put in place. In many cases, these women and children are being hunted, and buildings are not made to protect them. The individuals who are hunting them are very smart and can manipulate all sorts of situations. Therefore, not only do we need to put the supports in place, but we need to make sure that there is adequate safety as they move forward.

As I said, fleeing violence is the most dangerous time for women and children. We need to be very cognizant of that and make sure that we are putting the safety pieces in place as well—and yes, to eventually go beyond that. The reality is that some may never be completely safe without those safety mechanisms put in place for them, and we need to invest in that.

The Chair: You have four more seconds for a quick question.

Ms. Rachael Harder: Oh my gosh, I have only four more seconds.

Ms. Lepko, really quickly here, we're without that transitional piece. What would an ideal scenario look like in our context?

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: An ideal scenario would be money to build a building. We don't have the space on our site. We need investment in capital and investment in the operations to provide the support, along with the investment in security pieces. That would be built into the capital piece.

Ms. Rachael Harder: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to move on to Jenny Kwan.

You have your seven minutes, and you have the floor.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to both our witnesses for their excellent presentations.

Both of you mentioned the need for the three stages of housing—first, second, and third—and I think you explained quite clearly why that is necessary. Just to impress a point on the committee about the lack of those services, it was mentioned—I think you mentioned it, Ms. Lepko—that 2,094 women were turned away. What happens to them when they're turned away?

• (1600)

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: We often refer to it as our turnaway rates. When someone comes to us and we do not have that safe bed, we sit with them and we safety-plan with them. We look at other safe options. We also connect them with our outreach team. Our outreach team will continue to work with them from that day onward, trying to access somewhere safe they can be, whether that's in the city or in another city. They will give them the resources to other community agencies that may be useful, try to seek some funding for housing, look for housing, and all of those pieces.

We connect them, but the reality is, if they're showing up in the middle of the night battered, bruised and bleeding, with their child standing right there crying, and you have to tell them you do not have a space for them, that's probably one of the hardest things that our staff ever have to do. It's just a reality. Where does that individual go? Typically they return and often pay the consequences for returning.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: For communities and even for organizations like yours, without funding, you're not able to provide that necessary support for women and children who are fleeing violence, and this is their outcome.

I come from British Columbia. I come from Vancouver, so we have a variety of supports in place, but, even then, we run into that situation where there are no beds available. I'm very cognizant of the fact that in rural communities there are simply no services available. In their situation, the risk and the danger that the women and the children face are just unimaginable, but that is their reality each and every day.

If you had your wish, your dream, to say to the government that you need X, Y and Z to be done, what would you say to them? Should the government be looking to make sure that rural communities have first- and second-stage housing, that you have core funding, for example? I don't want to put these words in your mouth, but maybe you can tell us. What is it that you need?

Ms. Kristal LeBlanc: I think that core funding is always going to be something that women's organizations are going to fight for across the country. I'm sure I'm not the first to say it, nor the last in this committee study, because at the end of the day, we can't do our jobs effectively if we don't have that core funding. The amount of bugging and pushing in trying to get a small grant to operate our first transitional housing in a rural community is unbelievable, when we were turning people away.

Perhaps someone else who has been a witness at the committee has already mentioned it, but when the adequate supports aren't there for wraparound services, we know that statistically women will come to a shelter and leave seven to eight times before they leave for good. Perhaps if we had that core operational funding to get the job done right the first time, we wouldn't have that statistic of them coming and going. Not only does that impact them for their trauma and the long-term consequences, but think about what it's doing to child witnesses.

First and foremost, it's core funding, and doing what's being done today, listening to experts who work in the field and deal with clients. We were told year after year that there was no money. We got to a point where a woman came to see us and she was in extreme danger, but we couldn't offer her a bed because we just didn't have one. She chose to go back home. She thought she was safe to do so, but she wasn't. He shot at her repeatedly through the house and if it wasn't for her child, she'd be dead today.

We built our building from that consequence, saying that we have to do something, and it's going to be hard, but we can't keep going with the status quo.

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: I think, again, that's key. We need that investment from the federal government. Safety is a right. We all deserve to be safe, and the women and children's voices are not being heard. They're the ones who are being pushed under the table.

We're hearing a lot about the opioid crisis. We're hearing a lot about housing and the homeless population. The majority is identified as male, but it's not. Women are homeless, too, and it looks very different for women. We need to recognize that we're not looking at the place where it needs to come from. We need to look right from the source, which is, again, women.

We also need to be adequately funded. It's not just about funding. Our staff are among the lowest-paid staff, and they're helping people live. They're helping human beings. We need an investment in the capital to build more space, effective space. We need to be smart in our design. We need adequate funding to employ our staff. We need to make sure that the services are there for our clients.

• (1605)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I have less than two minutes left, I think.

I wonder whether, after the committee meeting, you could provide a submission to this committee to give some examples of what adequate funding looks like, so that we could actually have something. Would it be your recommendation for this committee, with the budget coming up, that this be in budget 2019, with no more stalling and saying, "It's not me, but the provincial government" or someone else, everybody else except for us? We all have responsibility; let's get on with it.

Could you do that for us, please?

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: Absolutely.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I want to touch on something else. I think I still have one minute.

I come from the non-profit sector. I dealt with a woman fleeing violence, a Chinese woman who didn't speak English very well. We

didn't even have access in Vancouver to that language capacity. She went back to the abuser.

Maybe you could expand on that, the crucial supports that are necessary for the cultural differences and the language capacity.

Ms. Kristal LeBlanc: We need translators and people who can help us connect with people from different cultures. I'm in a rural community in which the vast majority of people who are working in the fish-processing plants are from different cultures. It's hard enough as it is to connect with a survivor, because we're never going to say that we truly get what they've gone through, but an additional barrier is created when the cultural barrier is there. We need those wraparound supports as well.

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: Absolutely, we need to invest in those.

It's not just about their ethnic culture, but the culture they come with, whether from their family or wherever, and their attitudinal belief about where they stand as individuals in their pecking order. Again, it's really about meeting them at whatever point they're at, educating them, teaching them their value and their worth so that they can move forward and have options.

It's not about us making decisions for those individuals; it's about providing them the options, so that even if they do leave, they know they have a place to go.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you so much for the work you do.

Ms. Kristal LeBlanc: Thank you.

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: Thank you.

The Chair: We will now continue with Marc Serré for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Madam witnesses, thank you very much for the work that you do in your field, and for the recommendations you made. This will help us in our study.

My first question, which is addressed to both of you, concerns the level of services provided to indigenous communities and particularly to indigenous women. Other studies have cited percentages regarding violence and the various needs according to cultures. Do your organizations have any statistics on that?

I would also like to know if you have any particular training needs. When it comes to culture, do some of your employees need additional training to support indigenous women or provide services to children? That's a serious issue in several provinces.

[*English*]

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: Yes. We work very closely with a number of first nations organizations around our community. One thing that we at the YWCA take into consideration is that we are not specialists in being a first nations organization; we work in trauma and in domestic and sexual violence. We partner with our first nations communities in order to provide effective services.

I think we sometimes have to be careful. We have a project, a child recovery program, which is a trauma program, running on the reserve in Stand Off, right next to us, at multiple schools. One young boy was asked to tell us about his culture. He said, “My culture is about addiction and violence.” That throws you back. That's how he defines his culture. So we need to be careful about saying, “You need your culture”, when that's how he's defining it.

Again, we need to speak to the specialists, the people who understand that culture, the people who live it. Instead of trying as an organization to give them their culture, we need to connect them with the elders in their community.

That being said, we have a large population of first nations clients—I'd say more than 50% of those we serve—simply because of our location.

There is a shelter on the reserve, right next door to us; however, we hear from many survivors that they do not like to be there simply because everyone is well known. It may be their aunt who's providing the services; it may be a friend. It's too close, so they come to access the services in Lethbridge.

•(1610)

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Serré: And what do you say, Ms. LeBlanc?

Ms. Kristal LeBlanc: I agree that one of the biggest problems in homes or shelters in indigenous communities is the lack of confidentiality. The women are not necessarily comfortable because they are located close to their aggressor, and there is a relationship between the aggressor and the extended family. It's a big challenge. It's not surprising that many indigenous persons turn to various services outside of their community.

Mr. Marc Serré: You have a capital campaign called “Courage”, with a view to settling in a new building. Do you have any recommendations to make on how the federal government can elicit the participation of the private sector and obtain other things besides money? Are there other things that could help to build more dwellings and also increase the number of beds? Do you have any recommendations to make on that?

Ms. Kristal LeBlanc: For our funding campaign, since this is a rural community, we decided that it was really important to provide various services in the same building. Previously, women victims of violence were forced to go to various places. They had to go to an RCMP office, although that was a location that is more suited to aggressors. They had to go to the hospital to consult a forensic nurse. They had to meet a lawyer. They had to go and speak with a social worker. They then had to go to a shelter. It was too much.

The new building will allow us to group all of the services the women need, from A to Z, in a single building. There will be an investigation room for the RCMP. A forensic nurse will come and provide all the necessary care to victims of sexual assault. There will even be a centre for joint custody children. That service exists elsewhere in Canada, but it will be the first in New Brunswick. Over the years, we have seen that in cases of domestic violence, it is preferable that there be a supervised area when children go from one parent to the other. There are greater risks of violence if the exchange takes place in a parking lot or grocery store, rather than in a place designed for that purpose. We decided that if we were to build

something, we would have a place where joint custody children could go from one parent to the other without their having to communicate with each other; this prevents further conflict in cases where parents are really in daily conflict.

Mr. Marc Serré: Our committee wants to submit specific recommendations. You made several yourself. However, what recommendation would you make regarding transition beds, temporary beds and affordable housing? The three services are linked; it's a continuum. Some witnesses told us that the lack of affordable housing could have repercussions. That said, if you were to ask the federal government to act urgently in only one of those intervention sectors, which one would you choose?

Ms. Kristal LeBlanc: You need to invest in the initial services. If you decide to simply increase the number of affordable housing units, you bring the victim back to poverty. You don't help her get out of poverty.

When we provide our services, our purpose is not to place a victim in affordable housing for the rest of her life. The idea is that she will regain control, acquire the tools she needs to be financially independent and be able to afford other housing. The idea is not to leave her in affordable housing. It's a second or third step solution.

By investing in services provided upstream, we can better equip the victim and we won't need as much affordable housing.

[English]

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: Absolutely, it's investing in the shelter and the second-stage housing. It's about the empowering, the growth, the learning of skills.

We know that economic development is hugely correlated with violence, and violence against women in particular, and so if we empower them to have employment skills and to better themselves, the affordable housing is not going to be needed. That's just putting them in a placement and that's not what we need to do. We need to empower them to move forward.

The Chair: We're now going to begin our five-minute rounds. We'll start with Steven Blaney.

You have the floor for five minutes.

[Translation]

Hon. Steven Blaney (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

This is really fascinating.

I live in Lévis, across from Quebec City, and one of the first organizations to come to meet with me was La Jonction pour Elle. I told the representatives that their organization was interesting, and asked where they were located. They replied that they could not tell me.

My first question is whether it is the same for you. You ensure confidentiality. Do you keep your location secret, or is it known?

•(1615)

Ms. Kristal LeBlanc: It is possible that many of those responsible for shelters will not like what I'm going to say today, but under our new model, we don't want to hide our location. We visited a lot of rural communities, and it is impossible to hide. In two seconds people find out where we are.

The idea is also to engage the community and lead it to take on some responsibility for the victims. This isn't a problem that only falls on the women who work in this field; it's a community problem.

Hon. Steven Blaney: You feel that if the location of your centre were hidden it would almost be as though it were something shameful. You say that that is not the case, it's a situation that happens and you take it on.

[English]

In your case, is it confidential?

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: Absolutely not. I know there's that debate, but we want people to know where we are. We want the victims and the survivors to know how to access it, and we want the offenders to know we're protecting these women.

Hon. Steven Blaney: That's good to know. Thank you for sharing that.

[Translation]

Ms. LeBlanc, I want to congratulate you for having been so insistent and tenacious and for having made your voice heard loudly, because you have brought a fabulous project to fruition.

Ms. Kristal LeBlanc: Thank you.

Hon. Steven Blaney: At first, I thought it was strictly for shelter, but I was impressed to hear about all of the other services you provide. Basically, it's a sort of single-window approach for women and other persons who are victims of violence.

You said something that surprised me a bit. I'm 53. You said that your centre has a wing for women of 55 and more. Would you tell me a bit about the profile of those women? Do they have particular needs?

Ms. Kristal LeBlanc: We see that there are three categories of older women who are victims of violence.

The first category is made up of women who experienced a violent relationship during all of their coupled life, and once their children reach adulthood and leave the home, they decide to get out of that relationship. So, those women were victims of violence during their entire marriage.

The second category is made up of women who never had relationships when they were younger but then met someone, on an Internet site for instance, and then experienced violence. So, they are older when they are subjected to that violence.

The next category is made up of women who were in a sound relationship while it lasted, until there was a life crisis. For instance, the violence may have begun after one of the two spouses became ill, or after one spouse lost their job. Imagine someone who was in a healthy relationship for 27 years and then begins to experience violence.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Basically, even though the population is aging, we can expect that there will always be a need to provide support for women in vulnerable situations.

[English]

Madam Lepko, you mentioned in your statement that you need to rebuild someone. You mentioned stages, but you said you need to put people to work on their own. How long does it take to put someone back on their feet?

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: That will depend on the individual and the damage that has been done.

We were talking about permanent brain trauma. They may need support for the rest of their life. That's the reality of what violence does. Ideally, we'd like to stop the violence and then we don't have to worry about this, but the reality is that it's going to be a lifetime of support for some in trying to overcome this, and they may not get there.

Hon. Steven Blaney: I heard that, typically, the shelter could be used up to seven or eight times. Is that the case for you too? They're always going to be fine or everything will be all right, and it's not. How do you get through?

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: As I said, abuse is a process. It's not a one-time event. Yes, that does happen, but it's a process. Many times these individuals believe they deserve the abuse. They don't know any different. If they leave suddenly, as we look at the cycle of violence, we see a honeymoon stage and we see the coerciveness of the offender trying to get the individual back, putting blame on them, saying they shouldn't have left. So there's a real draw to come back to that situation.

We as humans have an absolute need to belong and to be belonging to something. That's our first instinct, to try to belong. If we're not having the needs met in a shelter, in our day-to-day life, we're going to go where that basic need is going to be met.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Even though this need to belong destroys your life, you will seek it because this is your only link.

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: In the mind of someone who has been victimized by violence, they may see that they deserve it. They may not understand that it is in their control not to be abused.

[Translation]

Hon. Steven Blaney: Ms. LeBlanc, you mentioned...

[English]

The Chair: We love hearing from you, but we're at five minutes.

Hon. Steven Blaney: I love hearing from them.

Thank you.

The Chair: Sonia, you have the floor now for five minutes.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu (Brampton South, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, panellists, for being here.

We heard about a huge gap in medical treatment. Last week, we had a panel that said the national housing strategy is great, the poverty strategy is good, but we need social support. In order to have social support, what kind of model...? You said the cost-sharing model is good. What kind of model is good? What kind of support system is the ideal support system?

• (1620)

Ms. Kristal LeBlanc: I think one of the biggest challenges is that, because the funding is not there, the vast majority of people working in transitional housing can't hire people who are specialized to deal with complex trauma. We know that over 80% of victims of domestic and intimate partner violence suffer from mental health and addiction issues, and they are often using their addiction to cope with their mental health issues, so it's a vicious circle.

If the non-profit organization that's managing the transition house has to refer someone for mental health services and is being told by government that the wait-list is 10 months to a year and a half, how do we expect that person to be able to move along into her phases of recovery if she's not getting the specialized supports she needs?

Also, can we even say that government mental health services are specialized in trauma-informed treatment? A lot of them, ironically, will refer back to us. I'll say that this is very flattering; however, we need the mental health services to provide long-term support for this person. I would say that I'm a general mental health professional, but I'm not really specialized to deal with trauma.

We need to have people who are trained in complex trauma and who can deal with the interrelationship between domestic violence, addictions and mental health.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: This is the medical support we talked about. What about financial literacy?

There is a Regeneration Outreach in my area, and I went there last year. There was a person who was a survivor of human trafficking and drug addiction, and she did not know about the expense of things. She didn't know anything, so someone would have to go with that person to say, for example, "This is expensive", because she didn't know how to buy.

Do you have any examples like that? How can we give this support system?

Ms. Kristal LeBlanc: As a crisis centre, we see more than 2,000 people a year, and a big bulk of those are people with financial issues—for example, their electricity has been cut off and they come to us when they have an outstanding bill and they're in the cold. The honest answer is that they need that education and not the handout, so we need to be walking away from providing funding to non-profits that just want to write the cheque and think they're going to fix it.

We need to look at her budget and say, "Listen, do you think this is something you can save on and cut? If you choose to do so, I'm able to help you with x amount." However, if I see that her ins and outs aren't going to change and she's still going to.... I'm not going to pay Mr. NB Power, because that's not really pulling her out of poverty.

A lot of what we have to do is financial literacy and education.

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: Again, it comes back to those building blocks that we need to put in place to teach them how to start again. We can't just assume somebody knows these life skills. We need to teach them, especially if they have been in generations of violence or generations of a culture of women not being allowed to make decisions and learn and be independent. We need to teach them the skills they need to have.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Does your staff have special training, or is it just you?

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: We train all our staff. We do a number of trainings that are available across the country, but we do a lot of on-site training. YWCA Lethbridge has been providing services for nearly 70 years.

Also, to speak a little bit to what you were talking about in terms of a model, we very much provide a crisis response model. One example is our Amethyst Project, which is a sexual violence advocacy program. We designed that. It's now two and a half years old. It is one of the most low-cost and effective programs in response to sexual violence. It is about meeting the victims where they're at. It is about empowering them to make the decisions and to seek what they think they need. It's not about us making those decisions for them, but about us supporting them along the way. They have 24-7 access to that support.

Also, they get to decide what their healing looks like, again, giving them back the power and control. The same can be said for domestic violence. It's about giving them power and control and teaching them that they have the skills and the ability to move forward. It's really just meeting them where they're at.

• (1625)

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much.

We do have a few extra minutes, so I'm going to give each group one minute for a quick question and a quick response.

I'm going to start with the CPC, then Jenny, and then back to the LPC.

You guys have one minute, start to finish.

Ms. Rachael Harder: All right.

Ms. Lepko, can you talk a bit more about the Amethyst program? What is it? What exactly does it do and what does it address?

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: Absolutely. Typically at the hospital, if you've disclosed sexual violence at any sort of emergency room, you are either treated medically or you are going through the criminal justice system where you have a sexual assault kit done and you're working with the police. What Amethyst has done is bring in a third option, which allows an individual to have a sexual assault kit completed and they have up to a year to decide whether they want to pursue charges.

They meet with every single individual who comes in with a disclosure, no matter what age or gender, and provide support right from the word go. They also do all follow-up appointments. They will do referral to clinical support, but it's really meeting that individual in the crisis and giving them the support they need right then.

They work with a number of our domestic violence clients as well, simply because we know that more than 80% of those who have experienced domestic violence are also experiencing some form of sexual violence.

It's a 24-7 service, with advocates who are advocating on behalf of the victims and supporting them.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much.

Jenny, you have one minute, start to finish.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

As we know, the threat of financial insecurity often prevents a woman from leaving, and at the federal level we're still waiting for the federal government to act on the five days of paid leave for women in those situations. We don't know when it's coming or how it can be accessed. There is no money budgeted for it.

How important is this component for women who are faced with domestic violence?

Ms. Kristal LeBlanc: It depends on how it's rolled out. In our rural community, the biggest challenge will be that people are on seasonal employment, so it will depend on whether that applies to everybody or just certain sectors. We hope that low-income people in certain sectors aren't at a disadvantage and that they, too, can receive that leave.

In our province, they released a new act in May about emergency intervention orders, and that has provided some remedies for victims of domestic violence, such as removal of firearms, temporary custody of the children, or temporary possession of the home so they can get their belongings. In the meantime, that has helped. It's not a perfect system, but it is a step in the right direction.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much.

We're going to move over to Pam, for one minute.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Do you find that municipalities have a lack of understanding of what transitional housing is? In my area, there is a complete understanding of the affordable housing piece, and people get the emergency shelter, but one of the reasons women are staying longer in the emergency shelter is that they don't have that piece to go to.

Do you think there is a real lack of understanding of the need of that transitional piece?

Ms. Kristal LeBlanc: I think they gloss over it a little bit. I don't want to say they don't care. I think they are scared of it. The stories we tell can sometimes be disturbing, and they just say, "You just keep doing your job. Good job, keep it up every day." Yes, but you're not listening. These are the things that aren't necessarily working in your region, and these are your citizens. This is just as important as a festival or something else that is being offered to the community.

I don't think there is complete investment there. We have come a long way, but they need to be at the table more frequently.

Ms. Jennifer Lepko: I believe there is a very large lack of understanding from many people, simply to understand the complexities of somebody who has been victimized. When we have been given the privilege of power and decision-making on our own, we cannot understand what that person has gone through in terms of trauma. We don't get it. Unless you're living it and working with it daily, you really don't get it.

So how do we educate them? They need to invest in the education and need to want to know it, and I don't think this is a priority. In reality, it's an issue that we want to put out of sight, out of mind.

The Chair: I'd really like to thank Kristal LeBlanc and Jennifer Lepko for being here. This has been an excellent panel with great information.

We are going to suspend for about two minutes, and we'll be right back.

• (1625)

(Pause)

• (1630)

The Chair: I'd like to welcome you back to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

We are ready to begin our second panel. For the second hour, I am pleased to invite Lyda Fuller, executive director of the YWCA Northwest Territories.

I'm going to pass the floor to you for seven minutes. Thank you.

Ms. Lyda Fuller (Executive Director, YWCA NWT): Thank you very much for inviting me to present at this meeting.

First, I want to talk a bit about the context in the Northwest Territories. We are remote, and women describe that remoteness as having no place to hide and no place to go. They are isolated. They have no telephones. There's limited transportation, and it's an expensive place to live.

Remoteness makes you think of places that are far away with sparse population, and that is for sure the case in the Northwest Territories. Twenty-seven of our 33 communities in the NWT have a population of 1,000 or less, and 15 communities have less than 500 people.

Barriers that women face include not having access to telephones and not having a central emergency number. We don't have 911 in the territory. In fact, if it's after hours and you phone the RCMP from your community, you get the dispatch in Yellowknife.

Community helpers cite struggles in remote communities for women to access shelters. These include logistics, anonymity and weather dependence. Imagine yourself as a woman with two or three small children in a tiny airport in a community, waiting to fly out to a shelter. You're not sure if the plane is going to be able to land or take off again. What will you do if it can't? What are the challenges you have to face in leaving that community?

The geographic isolation is the reality in many northern communities, and it creates risks for women above and beyond what you would see in southern Canada in the more populated centres. We've had women skidoo out or walk out and have somebody extract them.

It's a real challenge. There's no privacy and no confidentiality in those kinds of circumstances in the small communities. Everywhere you go, everybody knows you and you're visible to everyone. Because of the lack of confidentiality, the gossip, and the shaming and blaming that happen toward women, they're reluctant to share accounts of abuse and violence. They're reluctant to take part in anything where their personal information is going to be disclosed and they might hear it at the Northern store later on.

When they seek help, they often have a different reason for seeking help. They might go to the health centre and say they have an earache or a sore throat, but what they really want is to talk about the violence they're experiencing. Living in northern communities makes it much more difficult for women to seek help.

In 2014-15, indigenous women made up 94% of all the admissions to the five shelters in the Northwest Territories. When you look at reported incidents of intimate partner violence across the three territories, 75% of the victims were indigenous, and 93% of those individuals suffered "the most severe forms of spousal violence, that is, having been beaten, choked, threatened with a weapon or sexually assaulted." We can certainly say that in the NWT, we see this frequently. NWT shelters serve women who have a high risk of lethality.

There's also the scarcity of resources in the northern communities. For the 33 communities we have, 33% of them, or a third, have no RCMP presence, 80% have no victim services, and 85% do not have a women's shelter. The women's shelters are only in Yellowknife, Hay River, Inuvik, Fort Smith and Tuktoyaktuk.

• (1635)

Women have a lot to lose if they attempt to leave the abusive partner. They worry about whether their children will be apprehended, whether they'll lose their housing, and in communities where there are no police or victims services, they need immediate access to safety and to support, a place to sleep, and food.

Women have been kicked out of their homes in the middle of the night with no shoes or boots in the winter; they've been beaten and left for dead; they've been choked and pursued as they fled for help. We actually did a transfer of a woman from one shelter to the shelter here in Yellowknife by forming a caravan to escort her the distance, because she was being pursued by her partner.

There are five women's shelters in the NWT, with 45 beds and 21 rooms. Shelters are the only resource for women with a wide variety of needs, and they're not well funded. They run at capacity, and two-

thirds of women are turned away. For every 300 women we see, we turn away 200 women.

The lack of funding for shelters is a serious issue. There are no shelters in three regions in the NWT, namely the Sahtu, Dehcho and Tlicho regions, and the shelters that are here serve many square kilometres. Funding for the shelters is insufficient to provide ongoing maintenance, operation, repairs, and recruitment and retention of staff.

In fact, we had a recent meeting of the shelters, because we're the capacity organization for the five shelters. The shelter in Tuktoyaktuk was telling us that they don't think they have enough money for food to last throughout this year. Shelters have had to close here for lack of funding.

Even with five shelters, help is not consistently available to women, for several reasons, including shortages in funding, recruitment and retention of staff, and beds.

The recommendation we would have for this essential life-saving service in northern Canada is to find a way to better fund the shelters. I know that the three territorial premiers have asked the federal government to look at whether in fact they can have accessible funding. We don't have reserves; the federal funding goes to reserves in the southern provinces, but that's not available here. Maybe shelter services can be included as a mandatory service in transfer payments.

We need to find a way to have annual growth for the shelters, and we need to continue to fund repairs and maintenance. The money that rolled out for shelter enhancement in the last couple of years was a lifesaver in northern Canada, but only one of the five shelters can serve women with physical mobility impairments. We need to fast-track some construction. The Hay River shelter has demolished its building and is looking to rebuild. We need to be able to do that, and to have shelters in the Dehcho and the Sahtu.

Our other recommendations are to promote affordable housing, consider options for alleviating poverty for women leaving violent relationships, and develop a national action plan on violence against women, with a particular section on meeting the needs of northern Canada.

Thank you.

• (1640)

The Chair: Lyda, thank you very much.

I'll just let the committee know that we're going to be doing only one round of questioning. If you wish to split your time, each group gets seven minutes.

Also, we'll have to do about five minutes in camera. There's something that just came up.

We're going to start with seven minutes for Eva Nassif. Split it as you wish.

[Translation]

Mrs. Eva Nassif (Vimy, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Fuller, thank you very much for all the services you provide in your territory, and all of the things you manage to do despite the lack of funding. I'm not going to ask you what's missing, since there is almost nothing. You said that for 33 communities, there are only five shelters for women victims of violence and their children.

What do you do if a large number of women come to you for help and you have no available beds?

[English]

Ms. Lyda Fuller: That can be a real challenge for the shelters. If we don't have a bed at the closest shelter, we'll call the other shelters and see if there are beds in those shelters, and then transport the women to another shelter.

In Yellowknife, we also do overflow in our shelters, so we might take more women than we have space for. For example, we have a list of women who are so high-risk that no matter when they present, we would take them in, even if we have to put mats on the floor.

We've had women leap out of taxi cabs at the liquor store, because their partners have driven them to the community, and that's the only way they can get away from them. It's a real problem in terms of having to turn women away. We say to them, "Call back." We also do emergency protection orders. We'll get phone calls from across the territory from women seeking emergency protection orders. We facilitate those.

If you live in a community with no RCMP, we don't recommend an emergency protection order, because there's nobody to enforce it, but if you are in a community with RCMP, we will often also recommend that as an option.

• (1645)

[Translation]

Mrs. Eva Nassif: Tell us a bit about the services provided in those five shelters. What type of staff do you have? Are they social interveners? Are they often indigenous persons who experienced family violence and come to offer their help? Can you tell us a bit more about that?

[English]

Ms. Lyda Fuller: The staff are generally indigenous women who have had experiences of violence. We do training with the staff, and we also get the staff together from all five shelters in the NWT. We do training as a larger group and bring in resources to do that training.

[Translation]

Mrs. Eva Nassif: You said that these were often small communities of 500 to 1,000 persons. Can you tell us a bit about their needs? How many additional shelters would be required to meet their needs? You said that five shelters were not enough. How many shelters would you require to answer the needs of the 33 communities in your catchment area?

[English]

Ms. Lyda Fuller: I think there should be a shelter in each of the regions. That would mean probably three more shelters: in Fort Simpson, Norman Wells and Behchoko. It would be nice to see if there could be some form of a safe house in some of the other communities. Sometimes that happens informally, where a woman in the community will take other women in, but it poses some risk to that woman.

It would be good to see if the communities could come up with options themselves for how they might do that. Perhaps there are safer options for women. While it wouldn't necessarily be a shelter, it may be a place the women could go and spend the night, and have some level of protection, because we've certainly seen the consequences of not having that in terms of women being killed.

[Translation]

Mrs. Eva Nassif: According to what you said earlier, 75% of the women in your shelters are indigenous, and 80% of them have been subjected to a lot of violence. You referred to cases of strangling, sexual assault and many acts of family violence.

How do you explain that?

[English]

Ms. Lyda Fuller: How would I explain the fact that it's so high in northern Canada?

[Translation]

Mrs. Eva Nassif: I'm not only talking about the fact that the figures are that high.

[English]

The type of violence is also incredible. It's not only about asking for consent; it's horrible.

Ms. Lyda Fuller: Yes, it is horrible.

Mrs. Eva Nassif: Tell us what you think about concentrating on education for boys, please.

Ms. Lyda Fuller: Yes, I definitely think education for boys and young girls.... We do that piece in Yellowknife, but I'd like to see that throughout the territory, to help boys understand that violence is not the answer. It's so prevalent here that you need to give that message strongly and continuously, that there are other ways to solve problems that don't harm people.

• (1650)

The Chair: That's excellent.

We're now going to pass it over to Rachael Harder for seven minutes.

Ms. Rachael Harder: Thank you so much.

Thank you for giving us your time today; we really appreciate hearing from you about your experience in the north.

It's certainly a unique area in our country. Of course, you've hit on a lot of that with regard to the isolation and the vastness. One of my questions comes from this, and it's about transportation. If women have to fly or come on a snowmobile or some other form of transportation that would cost them money—flying, in particular, is a significant cost—how does that work and how does that impact a woman's access to help, to a shelter?

Ms. Lyda Fuller: The flights would be paid for by the government, but you have to go through the social worker in your community and that person might be related to you or your partner so that poses a problem. If you get approval to fly out, that cost is covered. Our staff and the staff of the other shelters spend a good bit of time working with the social workers in the communities to get women out of those communities when they need to.

Ms. Rachael Harder: I have one last question before I pass it over to my colleague. Could you comment a little on housing availability in the north? I have had the chance to go to Nunavut, and I know the scenario there, but it's a little different in the territories. I'm sure there are many similarities, though.

Can you comment with regard to these women? They flee violence; they're in a shelter but then their hope would be, I would imagine, to have their own secure, independent housing. What's the situation in the north, and what can be done to make it better?

Ms. Lyda Fuller: That's an excellent question. We absolutely need more safe, affordable housing. We have one second-stage housing facility here in Yellowknife. I know Whitehorse has one second-stage housing facility. Nunavut has none, and I know Iqaluit is trying to have a second-stage facility. We need more housing, especially affordable, safe housing.

[Translation]

Hon. Steven Blaney: Thank you.

Thank you very much for your testimony, Ms. Fuller. I must say that this is troubling. As Ms. Nassif said, the gravity of these assaults and the circumstances of the women affected by violence seem particularly traumatic. Moreover, resources are limited.

You mentioned the need for long-term affordable housing, but did you also say that there was what is called zone 2 housing?

Can you tell us a bit about how the transition occurs when people who live in your five shelters reintegrate the community?

[English]

Ms. Lyda Fuller: Likely women go back to their partners and their communities because of the housing situation. That's the most common outcome. We've had women coming into our shelter 14 times or more, because it's their respite from the abuse. They come with their children, and then when they feel rested and healed, they go back for a while again.

We definitely need more options for women. We opened our second-stage housing in 2014, after 10 years of planning and fundraising for it to happen, and I think Whitehorse opened theirs the year before.

We need options for women that are safe. You may have heard that we just had a fire in Yellowknife, and our transitional housing

facility burned down to the ground. Some of the options we have had are now gone, which is very sad for us.

• (1655)

Hon. Steven Blaney: If I hear you well, basically what you're saying is that you can offer a temporary shelter, but the women in crisis return to hell.

Ms. Lyda Fuller: Yes.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Okay. That's quite clear, but not pleasant to hear.

You mentioned that there could be three more shelters, one per region, in the three territories. Still, that transition bugs me. There has to be an exit. It seems like a cycle here; you just go back into it. It seems quite problematic.

What is the way out? What do you propose? How do you see a way for those women to get out definitively from the very difficult situations they experience?

Ms. Lyda Fuller: I think the way out is at the community level; it's for communities to really tackle the issue of violence in the communities.

We did a piece of work—it's several years ago now—where we went into some of the small communities with indigenous staff and just talked to women about how they could see a future without violence. But it's long-term work; it's real community development work, and I think it needs to happen.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Okay, thank you.

Basically, you have to make violence not socially acceptable in communities. Is that what you're suggesting?

Ms. Lyda Fuller: Yes, that's right.

The Chair: Now we're moving on to Jenny Kwan. You have your seven minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Fuller, for your presentation.

“The north has some of the highest rates of family and gendered violence in the country.” Status of Women Canada acknowledged this, saying that there is “a lack of shelter services in indigenous communities” and that “[c]onstruction and maintenance costs lead to crowded living conditions, which are a risk factor for violence.”

They went on to say, “We do know that, despite efforts to date, more than 70% of the 53 Inuit communities spread across four geographic regions of the Canadian Arctic still don't have access to shelters”.

That's the reality, and you have shared some of it with us.

The government knows about the lack of shelters, because Status of Women Canada acknowledges it. The question is why this problem is persisting. Why is there no action taken? Given that budget 2019 is just coming up, in February, what is your recommendation? What do you call on the government to do? What are the must-dos that they have to have in this budget in 2019?

Ms. Lyda Fuller: I would say they need to better support the shelters that exist so that they don't have to close for part of the year, and also to construct shelters in areas where there aren't shelters.

The three regions I referenced are all in the Northwest Territories. I know the Yukon has only three women's shelters, and I believe Nunavut has five. I'm not sure they're open all year, either.

Many times, they might be person-dependent. We would hear, for example, that the executive directive of the shelter in Cape Dorset was being treated for cancer, so the shelter closed while she was away. Then you have very iffy services.

We need to build capacity in northern Canada, not only with bricks and mortar but with people who are there to run the shelters, and we need to invest in them and in their training.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: With the presentation from the last group, I asked them to send something to the committee on what sufficient funding would look like. I wonder if you can do the same for northern communities, particularly from your region, so that we can get a sense, as a committee, of what those demands are and be able to extrapolate that information for other communities as well.

Is that something you can do for us?

• (1700)

Ms. Lyda Fuller: Yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

We also note that the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, article 22(2), states:

States shall take measures, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, to ensure that indigenous women and children enjoy the full protection and guarantees against all forms of violence and discrimination.

We know that is not the case. The National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence also found that indigenous women's shelters are significantly underfunded, at far lower levels than their provincially funded counterparts.

Can you comment on that, please?

Ms. Lyda Fuller: Our shelters in the Northwest Territories are variably funded, for sure. It's fascinating to me that the most northern shelters, with the highest cost of things like food and utilities, have the lowest funding.

Across the north, expenses are high, and the funding just doesn't seem to be there for the shelters. I don't know what else we can say. I know there's some federal funding for shelters on reserves, but I don't know what the funding levels are for those shelters.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: There are only 41 shelters serving approximately 330 first nations communities, which represent approximately 55% of all first nations communities, so it is wholly inadequate.

From your experience, would you say that indigenous women and girls have access to comparable levels of services and protection no matter where they live, or do you think there's a difference?

Ms. Lyda Fuller: I absolutely think there's a difference. I don't think indigenous women have the same access as you would find in southern Canada, for sure.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: A nation-to-nation relationship, as the government has said, is the most important relationship. What do you think the government should do about that with budget 2019?

Ms. Lyda Fuller: I'd like to see more shelter services for indigenous women, because they face such high rates of violence and such high lethality. I think we need to ensure that they're better protected and have options available to them.

I'm not familiar, for example, with the shelter system in Nunavik, in northern Quebec, but I would venture to say they probably have some of the same issues that we have here around funding and access. We just need to do better with that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: One of the issues is around core funding, which was raised previously. Is that something that is absolutely a necessity for you? Do we need to have the government get through this finger-pointing process of saying, "No, it's not me. Go to the province," and then everybody else just saying, "Not me"?

Guess what, it is the people who are doing the hardest work, such as you, who don't have the resources to provide for some of the most vulnerable people, the women and children who are faced with violence in our communities.

Ms. Lyda Fuller: Yes, I would like to see core funding. I'd like there to be a funding model that is fair across the country and provides adequately for shelters for women. Right now, the funding models across Canada vary widely. I would like to see it be much better and more standardized, so that women have access no matter where they live in Canada.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much.

I'd really like to thank you for appearing today, Lyda Fuller, executive director of the YWCA Northwest Territories. You've provided us with a great amount of information.

• (1705)

[*Translation*]

We will now take a short break for about five minutes before we resume our meeting in camera.

[*English*]

That is it for my French, people.

We're going to suspend for about two minutes. I'm going to ask for one staff per person, one person per party, and that the rest of the room close off.

Thank you very much once again, Lyda. Have a good night.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the *Copyright Act*. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a Committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the *Copyright Act*.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its Committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <http://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante : <http://www.noscommunes.ca>