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Chair: Dominique Vien



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• (1100)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Dominique Vien (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC)): I call this meeting to order.

Good morning, everyone.

Welcome to meeting number 41 of the House of Commons' Standing Committee on the Status of Women. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, April 23, 2026, the committee will resume its study of women's shelters and transitional housing.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

To ensure that the meeting runs smoothly, I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of members and witnesses. We are not terribly strict, but certain instructions should be followed.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For interpretation, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

I would like to remind witnesses that committee members may ask their questions in French or English. If you will need interpretation, please take a moment now to prepare your earpiece and select the listening channel so that we can save precious minutes and seconds.

I remind you that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. However, I won't break the pace of a conversation between members and witnesses.

Before we welcome our witnesses, I'd like to provide this trigger warning. We will be discussing topics related to gender-based violence. This may be triggering to viewers with similar experiences. If any participants feel distressed or need help, please advise the clerk. For all witnesses and for all members of Parliament, it is important to recognize that these are difficult discussions. Let's try to be compassionate, as we always are in our conversations.

[*English*]

I will now welcome our witnesses.

From the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, we have Catherine Champagne, executive director. We have, from Lanark County

Interval House and Community Support, Erin Lee, executive director. Welcome.

We will begin with opening statements.

Ms. Champagne, the floor is yours for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

I apologize, Ms. Ménard, I didn't notice that you had your hand up. The floor is yours.

Marie-Gabrielle Ménard (Hochelaga—Rosemont-Est, Lib.): Good morning, Madam Chair. I keep a lower profile when attending remotely.

Following a discussion with my colleagues, and before hearing from our witnesses with great interest, I would like to propose to committee members that we add a meeting to this important and fascinating study.

The Chair: Is it the will of the committee to add a meeting to this study?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ménard.

Ms. Champagne now has the floor.

[*English*]

Catherine Champagne (Executive Director, Alberta Council of Women's Shelters): Good morning, Madam Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear today as part of your study on the role and capacity of women's shelters and transitional housing.

My name is Catherine, or Cat, Champagne, and I'm the executive director of the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters. The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters represents over 40 members serving over 60 women's emergency shelters across the province of Alberta, where we serve children, seniors, women, gender-diverse individuals and others fleeing domestic abuse in Alberta.

I commend this committee for undertaking this important study, because the relationship between gender-based violence, housing insecurity and shelter capacity is undeniable.

For many women, intimate partner violence is one of the leading pathways to homelessness. Every day, shelters across Alberta support women who are faced with impossible choices, including remaining in an abusive relationship or becoming at risk of homelessness. For indigenous women, newcomers, women with disabilities, older women and women living in rural, remote and northern communities, these barriers are often even greater. The reality is simple. Survivors cannot leave violence if they have nowhere safe and affordable to go. The question is no longer whether women and children are ready to leave violence. The question becomes whether there is somewhere for them to go when they decide to leave.

Over the past several years, access to safe and affordable housing has been one of the most significant challenges identified by shelters in Alberta. The shortage of housing means survivors are remaining in shelters longer while they search for somewhere to go next. For many women, leaving shelter is no longer determined by whether they are ready but whether the appropriate housing is available. The challenge is particularly significant for women with children. Families stay longer in both emergency and second-stage shelters because affordable housing options that can accommodate families are becoming increasingly hard to find.

As a result, the housing crisis has fundamentally changed the role of women's shelters. Shelters were designed to provide short-term safety and crisis support. Increasingly, however, they are functioning as long-term housing providers because survivors cannot find safe and affordable housing after leaving shelter.

In Alberta, the average length of stay in an emergency shelter has increased by 22% since 2019. When survivors stay in shelters longer, fewer beds become available for new arrivals. The consequences of that capacity are significant. In the 2023-24 fiscal year, Alberta shelters were unable to provide accommodation to more than 31,000 individuals seeking safety, and more than 40% of those individuals were children. Between 2021 and 2024, one in every two people who requested admission to an Alberta shelter could not be accommodated. To meet our current demand, we would need to more than double emergency shelter capacity in our province. These numbers do not indicate that violence is decreasing. They demonstrate that shelters are increasingly constrained by housing shortages and growing demand.

The housing crisis and shelter capacity cannot be discussed separately. When affordable housing disappears, women's shelters become the waiting room for a housing system that simply can't keep up. When housing systems are constrained, women's shelters become that pressure-release valve. Survivors stay longer because housing is unavailable, shelter capacity decreases, turnaways increase and operational pressures grow. Every turnaway represents someone who found the courage to ask for help. Our concern is not whether women are reaching out. Our concern is whether the system is ready to respond when they do. Without investment in both of these services, the system becomes increasingly unable to support women, seniors and children fleeing violence.

I'd also like to highlight the importance of transportation in this conversation. Earlier this year, we released a report examining the transportation barriers survivors found in rural and northern Alberta. The report, entitled "A Ride Can Save a Life", found that transportation is one of the most common barriers preventing survivors

from accessing shelter, housing, health care, employment, child care, legal services and other essential supports. In many rural communities, there is no transportation available. Survivors may need to travel hundreds of kilometres to reach safety. Even when shelter beds or housing units exist, survivors may become physically unable to access them without reliable transportation. For survivors in rural communities, a shelter bed that cannot be reached might as well not exist.

Survivors do not experience government services in silos. They experience the gaps between them. This is where most women and children are at risk.

From my perspective, there are four key priorities.

First is to increase investments in affordable and supportive housing options that make housing more accessible to survivors of gender-based violence.

Second is to strengthen funding for emergency shelters and transitional housing so that services can meet current capacity demands.

Third is to support transportation solutions for rural, remote, northern and indigenous communities to ensure that survivors can access the services they need.

Last is to recognize women's shelters as essential social infrastructure that plays a critical role in the homelessness response system.

The women we serve do not experience violence, housing insecurity and transportation barriers as separate issues. They experience them all at once.

Thank you so much for your attention to this important issue and for your commitment to improving safety and stability for survivors across Canada, and specifically in Alberta.

• (1105)

[Translation]

The Chair: We are the ones who thank you for your remarks, Ms. Champagne.

[English]

Ms. Lee, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Erin Lee (Executive Director, Lanark County Interval House and Community Support): Thank you to the chair and to the members for the opportunity to present today as you undertake a study on the role and capacity of women's shelters and transitional housing.

My name is Erin Lee, and I'm the executive director of Lanark County Interval House and Community Support, the only dedicated anti-violence agency in rural Lanark County. In addition, I'm a current member of the Ontario domestic violence death review committee.

Safe, stable and affordable housing is central to a woman's capacity to access her courage to flee. It is part of the survival tools for women attempting to break the cycle, and it often forces women to choose between enduring violence or attempting to leave and facing unplanned homelessness. Safe refuge and shelter reduce the isolation and provide the physical sanctuary for women to land, to find their strength, to begin to heal and to rebuild their lives.

In rural communities, the realities are layered. There is often only one shelter or dedicated service. Many are consistently full. Remote and rural shelters and transitional housing are not adequately funded. Distance for women to be safer, lack of transportation, gun use, generational families, court delays and lack of dedicated justice support, coupled with the lack of affordable housing, are among the top barriers to a permanent disruption of the cycle of violence. However, rural communities have capacity to lean in, and we have, together with local politicians on the municipal level as well as local businesses, created second-stage and beyond second-stage housing in our community.

Housing insecurity, poverty and gender-based violence are all interconnected, and they perpetuate the cycle of violence. Financial realities in an abusive relationship often limit access. Women cannot flee poverty without having a safe place to go. Accessing housing is challenging, and that reality often leads back to returning to an abusive situation.

Finding the courage to leave often means leaving everything behind, resulting in unplanned homelessness. The cycle then impacts employment, separation of bills and increased risk at separation. Added to this scenario are family court, criminal court and children. In up to 30% of the cases we receive, women report they return to the abusive situation due to the systemic challenges once they've fled. Basic income and investment in transitional and second-stage housing options create pathways to break this cycle permanently.

As a member of the Ontario domestic violence death review committee, I see the ultimate price women pay when adequate supports are missing. The reality is that lethality is at its highest point at the time of separation. Women could make safer decisions if there were adequate, appropriate housing options available. There are hundreds of recommendations that have been made to change the lived realities of women and their children across the system. Unfortunately, the recommendations are not enforceable, so advocates continue their efforts to make things change and encourage implementation.

As a witness who provided testimony at the CKW inquest in Renfrew, Ontario, in 2022, I can say that oversight, implementation and creation of a commission on IPV and GBV are critical. Having experts informing the government and making evidence-based recommendations to effect meaningful change in community is essential.

Amplifying the lived experience of survivors is also a pathway that must be considered. The reality is that women's shelters and transitional housing sectors have a long history and proven capacity. Shelters have been doing the work for 40-plus years, and they are the experts.

Intentional and modified funding equations must be in place to recognize the differential realities across the country, especially for rural, remote and fly-in communities. Shelters and transitional housing organizations must have adequate funding, as they are often the keepers in elevated risk and emergency situations. The ultimate price women pay when adequate supports are not available is death.

Recommendations must be considered as solutions and pathways to change, from the 231 calls for justice to the Mass Casualty Commission. Please, I implore you to engage and work united to build an IPV and GBV commission rooted in expert voices informing direction.

Thank you very much for your time and your attention.

• (1110)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you for sharing your remarks with us.

Mrs. Goodridge, the floor is yours for six minutes.

Laila Goodridge (Fort McMurray—Cold Lake, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

Thank you to both witnesses for being here today.

It's remarkable that both of you, who are from very different parts of Canada and very different provinces, have very similar testimonies. It goes to show that, in many of these cases, while the location might be different, it is clear that the problems are very similar. Having forums like this, where we can get together and hear best practices, is of the utmost importance.

I want to start off by asking if you are seeing the ever-increasing cost of living having an impact on the shelters. Is that having an impact on people, preventing them from leaving abuse sooner or from being able to get out on their own?

Perhaps I'll start with Ms. Champagne.

Catherine Champagne: Yes, 100%, you can see it on both sides. The biggest thing is that it's affecting the cost of how you get out.

Look at your own life and the difference in cost from 10 years ago. We're seeing that for survivors. We see it when there isn't any increase in the supports provided to them. Even in Alberta, with income support, that number hasn't changed. This doesn't allow them more flexibility in terms of what they put into the properties they're looking into or the way they support their families.

There are more costs as far as our shelters are concerned, even for those working at shelters. The ability to keep shelters open and to have the operational capacity to deal with the number of survivors.... When the cost of living keeps going up, and when increases to wages and funding to shelters do not align with that, it makes it really hard for them to stay up to date. Then, think about the cost, more and more, for a survivor to leave, as my counterpart indicated. The worst time is when they choose to leave. It's so expensive. If you don't have your damage deposit, utilities deposit and everything else set up and ready to go at that time, it is really discouraging. We see a lot of women staying.

The cost of living applies to everyone right across the board.

• (1115)

Laila Goodridge: All right.

Ms. Lee.

Erin Lee: I will add that in rural communities, we often see more women living in community with their families rather than living in a shelter. We have had to be really creative. We've established a perseverance pantry, which is like a mini food bank, because people are unable to afford the groceries they need in terms of survival and living in community.

Transportation, as my colleague mentioned, is hugely problematic in our rural communities. We see that as a barrier for women trying to get out safely. Escape planning is much more intricate. The details of the escape plan have to be much more intricate so we can help people land safely.

Laila Goodridge: Do you think it's incumbent on the Liberal government to tackle inflation so we can bring the cost of living down?

Erin Lee: The cost of living is a reality that always needs to be considered in any kind of planning or any kind of government decision-making that occurs. I think that's a great question. The world is floating around, trying to figure out what to do.

The correlation between financial realities and the ability of people to flee violence is 100% aligned.

Laila Goodridge: The reason I ask this is.... Look at gasoline. Gasoline prices have skyrocketed. I'm from a rural community. The cost of getting around is exponentially higher. If you are someone who is now on a very fixed budget....

Conservatives put forward a proposal to cut gasoline prices by 25¢ per litre for the rest of the year. The government rejected that idea. Twenty-five cents per litre would make a huge difference for families. Do you think the government should adopt that policy, Ms. Champagne?

Catherine Champagne: I believe there's a definite need for that.

You're completely right. When you're in a small, remote or rural community, access to anything needs to be through transportation, which is an added cost. The cost of living is definitely affecting shelters. I look at this in two ways. It affects an individual survivor when they leave and secure their own property or place—all those pieces—but it also affects a shelter's ability to deliver services. If a shelter doesn't have the ability to put gas in the tank to pick those women up or get them to services, it's lose-lose for both situations.

The cost of living, from one end to another, even if you loop in the staff who work, it's every part of women's shelters and how we support survivors.

Laila Goodridge: Thank you.

Ms. Lee.

Erin Lee: It's really important to consider the establishment of a commission that can explore the issues related to finance, gasoline and other realities, in terms of the number of incidents of intimate partner violence in our country, the resources currently put into shelters and how to change the equations for funding. I think that is part and parcel.

Laila Goodridge: I fully appreciate that.

I had the opportunity to meet Cat for the first time in Cold Lake. I had my son at the groundbreaking of the newest women's shelter in Cold Lake. I brought him when we cut the ribbon on the brand new building. A number of women who were survivors from that shelter came up to me and said, "I had no choice but to bring my child. The fact that you brought your child makes this more normal, so thank you for showing that leadership." Actually, Cat's husband helped wrangle my son when he decided it was no longer fun for him—so, thank you, Matthew, for that.

It goes to show that there is really a community that's required. These are spaces where.... If you have any best practices you want to share—my time is very quickly running out—please send them in writing to our committee. It would be ridiculously helpful. One of the reasons I bring up the gasoline piece is that there are a lot of things—there are systemic problems—but this could be solved today by a government with the stroke of a pen and could make a huge difference.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, honourable member. Your recommendation to provide us with this additional information is a good one.

Ms. Gladu, the floor is yours.

Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton—Bkejwanong, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

Welcome to our witnesses. Thank you for being here today.

I'm going to start with Catherine Champagne.

You had four priorities that you wanted to put forward, and one of them was strengthening funding for shelters. Our government was pleased to support your organization with almost \$3 million. What other sources of funding are the shelters getting?

• (1120)

Catherine Champagne: When I comment that, I'm looking at all levels of government. Whether that's federal, provincial or municipal, there's a requirement to contribute to that, especially when you look at some of those rural communities. I'll use the example of Cold Lake again. It's a very rural community in Alberta. There is an expectation that the municipality supports what's happening there, because you do always have to make sure that you have space for your local survivors who may attend.

As far as provincial government goes, in Alberta, the majority of our shelters are funded through the provincial government for about 80% of the work they do. We're always grateful for that funding, but there is a large gap there that needs to be filled by fundraising.

We just did a study with our shelters. As of last week, we're in the tens of millions of dollars that shelters in Alberta need to fundraise in order to operate on a regular basis. Their deficits are growing in between. It's something that we need to look at, at all levels, as well as how you contribute. Again, we're grateful for the funding that comes from the federal government in very different ways because we can use it for different types of things.

Looking at how we can, if the funding isn't available.... I'm an Albertan. I know we're in a deficit, but are there other things that can be done to cut back on some of those costs as opposed to injecting more funds when there isn't an unlimited amount of funds to be put in?

Marilyn Gladu: Thank you.

My next question is going to be about transportation because both of you mentioned that as a real barrier, especially in rural areas.

Do you have any ideas about what kinds of solutions you would need? It seems to me that when you're in crisis and have to go, you can't just book a bus that eventually leaves. If you're in a fly-in zone, that could be problematic as well.

I'll start with you, Ms. Lee.

Erin Lee: In fly-in communities, one of the layers includes bans. Getting permission to leave a community is one thing. It's not just flying, and it's not just making arrangements for transportation. It's also about getting permission to leave. That is a reality for many women.

In our rural community, we are trying a new project where we are working with our local transportation provider to help people who are not in need of an ambulance but need service to get to a hospital or to an appointment. We have been looking at how we employ—and I'm sure this happens in Alberta as well—creative solutions to get people free. That could be the police attending or the police sitting at the end of the very long rural driveway to help her once she gets to the end. We're limited in taxis; we don't have very many. We once used, and on occasion will consider using, a mail delivery truck because we really need to be creative in terms of how we keep the whole of the community safe when we are trying to navigate a situation where gun violence is a reality.

In rural communities, you're 30% more likely to be threatened with a rifle. I know that experience as an advocate. I watched a

woman and her children arrive and watched the father arrive with a rifle right behind—

Marilyn Gladu: Thank you. My time is a bit limited.

Ms. Champagne, I'm back on the subject of transportation. Could you tell me what kinds of solutions you think would be workable in Alberta?

Catherine Champagne: Last year, we were graciously given about \$140,000 of additional transportation funding through the national action plan dollars. We actually have a report that came out. It's attached to my submission from today, and I would encourage you all to read it. It came out earlier this year. It talks about rural transportation and what some of those recommendations are.

One of the top recommendations from us is, first of all, more flexibility when it comes to transportation dollars. There are real restrictions. For example, you can pay for gas and for oil changes on a vehicle, but our funding doesn't allow you to buy a vehicle. That doesn't really align very well.

A second recommendation is that we have more service providers that we work with. We had a couple of organizations in Alberta that we worked with that were trained on how to do this specific type of transportation, where you would sometimes have respite care and be taking a mom for a few hours at the same time. We also recommend that all ride-sharing companies have domestic violence training, some type of training, so that they can better support survivors in that time.

Ultimately, we recommend just more injections of dollars into transportation. Then, without adding additional services, we can at least support some of those gaps with transportation as opposed to putting up a bunch more small services in small communities that might not have the full need that they respond to.

Marilyn Gladu: Excellent.

Now I'm going to try to hit transitional housing, which is so important in order to move people out of the shelter so there's capacity, but the question is always about what kind of transitional housing is going to be appropriate. Either of you could comment.

Catherine Champagne: I think transitional housing is important in many ways. I look at Alberta, and mine's more in the sector—as far as shelters go—where we would look to see more second-stage housing. I just feel that we're missing that piece of the housing continuum right now, where we don't have that next step from the second stage. We used to have what was called “third stage” to a point, which is more safe and affordable housing, but that has just disappeared, because women are filling the second-stage housing and we're filling emergency shelters.

I think “safe” is the big piece there. Even in small rural communities, there is affordable housing, but is it the type of place that a woman wants to go to? Is it something that's not maintained or where there are no safety precautions put into place? Even just looking at our current stock of housing and how we can make it more safe and accessible to women might increase that as well. That would be the biggest thing for me in transitional: more of the second stage.

• (1125)

Marilyn Gladu: Okay.

Quickly, Ms. Lee, I think I have only a few seconds.

Erin Lee: I would suggest looking at creative opportunities in investing. Attracting builders to want to build in our communities is really difficult.... That's all I have to say.

Voices: Oh, oh!

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lee, for paying close attention to my cues.

Ms. Larouche, you have the floor.

Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank the two witnesses, Ms. Lee and Ms. Champagne, for joining us today.

We are conducting this study at a time when we're hearing more and more about inflation and the cost of living, which are affecting women in all sorts of ways. This morning, I attended the presentation of Food Banks Canada's poverty report card, during which I was reminded how much harder it is to make ends meet, given the rising cost of living.

We know the connection to women who are victims of violence, because if they feel they won't be able to house and feed their families if they leave a cycle of domestic violence and go to a shelter, they will hesitate to do so, not knowing what lies ahead for them.

I'd like to revisit some questions that you were previously asked. To me, the figures I saw this morning confirm that it is difficult to break the cycle of violence right now, given the current inflationary environment.

Do you agree with that observation?

[*English*]

Erin Lee: I would agree with your remarks and the realities. I would suggest that revisiting basic income and investment in traditional support services would be a really good next step for the government to continue to pursue in terms of what basic income provides and how it develops the freedom for women who are living in abusive situations to make a choice to flee.

Catherine Champagne: I would echo that and agree 100%.

I agree that we need to look at some of those basic social services, at the income is provided through that. As I mentioned, when you look at Alberta Works, for example, that number hasn't changed. That number is barely enough to get a damage deposit, let

alone all the things you need to support your family and children once you've moved in. It's reassessing the dollar amounts, reassessing those allocations and determining if they actually align with the cost of living and allow a woman to start her life over.

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: Have you noticed a change in the shelters' clientele?

For our part, we're raising awareness about the fact that women who haven't been able to work their whole lives and who are victims of violence, once they reach a certain age, can no longer make ends meet and end up on the streets. More and more people are struggling to make ends meet, even if they are working—especially older women.

Would it be important to promote women's economic empowerment early on so that they are financially stable enough to make the decision to break the cycle of violence?

Would it also be important to have programs to promote this and a social safety net that provides them with sufficient support?

[*English*]

Erin Lee: Again, I'm going to reiterate that I think it's really important to consider basic income. Basic income on all levels and in all life cycles is really important.

The reality is that our community is aging. We are seeing more femicides and more incidents of volatile violence that involve seniors. We need to be reaching out to hospitals. We need to be thinking about memory loss. We need to be thinking about how that triggers a change in behaviour that escalates violence, and how that will impact both of the members in that relationship in terms of their capacity to continue to afford to be together or separate. Heaven forbid that there be a femicide as a result of that.

Seniors are overrepresented, and we need to invest more money into protecting our seniors in aging communities.

Catherine Champagne: I would echo that.

We have two seniors shelters in Alberta that are ACWS members, one in Calgary and one in Edmonton. Most people don't know those even exist. They are spectacular. They make the best food. They are the best ladies. The shelters are overflowing. There's just not enough space there. Have more supports for women in community—but maybe not at the shelter level, because what we see at those seniors shelters, of course, is more about familial violence than intimate partner violence.

I will add another thing to the financial piece. In Alberta's recent 10-year strategy, one of the pillars is providing more financial stability for women. For example, some women do shift work. Add more ability for them to do that. It's not a Monday-to-Friday thing. How does a mom do respite care or day care when she works overnight? Look at those different facets, and look at different ways women make a living. How do we support them in all those different areas? It's not a cookie-cutter situation.

Again, I'm echoing that we need to look at the basics provided in social funding to support women.

• (1130)

[Translation]

Andréanne Larouche: It is also necessary to review old-age benefits for older women and recognize that these are fixed incomes that do not keep pace with inflation. The methods used to index all these incomes are often inadequate.

I have one minute left to address the issue of transportation. Once again, thank you for sharing your very rural perspective with us. I represent a district located between Sherbrooke and Montreal that includes rural areas where transportation poses challenges for women, and for everyone.

An investment in public transit in Quebec was announced today, but these programs are often tailored to large cities. They're for subways and streetcars. They rarely seek to provide alternatives for more rural areas.

What needs to be developed in this respect?

[English]

Catherine Champagne: The biggest thing I would say is this: Look at the other individuals who can benefit from this. It's not just domestic violence survivors but also seniors, those with mental health concerns and those with transportation concerns. That's where we're going to see the volume. One of the biggest reasons we don't see a lot for transportation is that there isn't the volume. Shelter clients are transient, and it's not always what we expect.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Champagne.

Mrs. Roberts, you have the floor for five minutes.

[English]

Anna Roberts (King—Vaughan, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for what you do.

As you know, intimate partner violence is up 76%. I'm not sure if you've come across a young woman called Cait Alexander. She runs an organization called EVE, which stands for End Violence Everywhere.

She says, "I was nearly beaten to death with a rolling pin. Then the criminal justice system failed me" and "I should be dead. He should be behind bars. Remarkably, neither is true." Cait had to leave this country because she did not feel safe.

Do you feel our justice system is letting women down because of weak laws?

If both of you could answer this, I'd appreciate it.

Catherine Champagne: I feel that, 100%. I worked in justice for 15 years before I moved to women's shelters, and that's the biggest intersect I see, over and over. They're being released on conditions, or bail is being provided to people who shouldn't have bail. It's a big reason we see these femicides. How many individuals arrested for domestic violence have a criminal history? They could have stayed in custody because they breached the conditions of their release document, which they needed to follow.

I think we are failing women in that capacity. There is more and more in the news about women who are subject to violence through someone who has a criminal record: He is out on bail or was not properly reintegrated back into society.

Anna Roberts: Thank you very much.

I'll give Ms. Lee the same opportunity to respond.

Erin Lee: I echo my colleague.

It is important for us to start considering the intersections between restorative and transformative justice as pathways to healing for victims of violence that are outside the criminal justice system.

Anna Roberts: Thank you for that.

I'm the shadow minister for seniors. I have to tell you that I'm a little disappointed. One thing I recently did was an undercover investigation of human trafficking. A police officer shared with me that they're now going after seniors because of the affordability crisis. The issue I'm concerned about is their going after the ones with either dementia or Alzheimer's, who are therefore not able to testify.

What suggestions would you have to ensure that we protect our seniors? Because of the affordability crisis, a lot of them are too ashamed to go to their families.

Catherine Champagne: In a situation where someone doesn't have the ability to testify.... We see this not just with seniors but also with victims in general. It's about compiling data that shows all the signs that lead to this. You just listed a lot of those things. When we're looking at financial availability.... We're talking about pensions. How much access do they have to dollars that could support them? How much are they supported by external supports, even just community supports? When I look at the domestic violence world in Alberta, I see that there are a lot of supports, but specific supports for seniors are not identified or made broad enough, so they're not aware of them.

We're at a point where we need to take care of our seniors. Maybe we need to do more on our end to make sure they have access to those specific supports, because they don't always know how to go out and get them. As I said before, it's not always intimate partner violence. Sometimes it's interfamily violence, where you have kids stopping them from accessing those. It's about more funding to support seniors shelters—not that I wish we had more seniors shelters. It's about doing that work for them when they don't have the ability to do it at that stage of their lives.

• (1135)

Anna Roberts: Thank you for saying that—and not because I'm a senior.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Anna Roberts: We're all going to get there one day. We need to ensure that for the seniors in this country. They built this country. We learned from our seniors to be the people we are today. I have to say that we're not doing justice for them.

What can we do to support shelters? Better yet, the perpetrators should be financially responsible, so how can we change it to ensure that the perpetrators are financially responsible for the women they abuse?

Erin Lee: I think that's a really great idea. I think the function of that really comes down to how the courts navigate that and what the courts will find in terms of offering fines. The Supreme Court decision will also help us look at how we navigate that, especially with aging women who are in situations.

I think we do have to think about the realities of how we get upstream and how those programs, whether they're partner assault response programs or men's programs, can enforce the notion of their contributing to the cause.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: You show great discipline. Thank you very much.

Ms. Nguyen, you have the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

Chi Nguyen (Spadina—Harbourfront, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you very much to the witnesses for joining us today for this very important study.

Ms. Champagne, obviously the provinces and the municipalities and regions have a very important role in delivering shelter services. I understand that there has been a round of cutbacks in Alberta and that this is something you've noted as an association. Could you talk a little bit more about how that might impact rural communities and the service offerings there?

Catherine Champagne: Yes, 100%. The Alberta government did cut funding to some of our rural shelters. There was an increase for additional shelters. I want to be very clear that there were not straight cuts across the board. They did increase some of our other shelters in bigger centres, but I think we need to look at the supports we're providing. If we're pulling those out, what are the ancillary effects? Shelters aren't just women's shelters. They're the hubs of so many communities. They become homeless shelters. They be-

come crisis locations. They become where people meet and where people go for any type of refuge.

I think when we look at cutting funding or look at how we can support, we need to look at the full role of a women's shelter. It is not to support just domestic violence. There are outreach workers. There are supports to their communities. Some women don't even come into shelters. I think as a community, provincially or even federally, when we're looking at funding as a whole, the ripple effect of cutting back is more than just closed beds.

Chi Nguyen: Ms. Lee, you started to talk a little bit about other forms of justice, such as transformative justice. Could you share a little bit about what that might look like, how we might consider that and how that might address some of the pain points we're seeing in our society?

Erin Lee: I appreciate the question. I think at this time and at this juncture, in terms of looking at violence prevention and healing pathways, we need to move outside the traditional criminal system. As I think my colleague said, the system is failing. It's failing victims. Victims are being retraumatized. The notion of restorative and transformative justice allows a victim an empowering position in that process. It allows them to talk about what it is they want. Most victims will tell you that what they want is for that never to happen to anybody else.

The criminal system does not engage in that. We need to be talking about how we work across systems and how we offer various pathways and various realities looking at all the safeguards, looking at coercive control and looking at all those realities, but also really surrounding the victim with the opportunity to face accountability. The criminal system doesn't really give that notion of accountability. How do we shift that? How do we intersect systems and create pathways so that women can actually find the healing they so deserve? How do we work upstream with perpetrators and look at how they can hold themselves accountable, make amends and perhaps make different choices so that we don't have to stay in the wrong systems all the time?

• (1140)

Chi Nguyen: I have a systems question for both of you now. Given that this issue has women intersecting with all kinds of departments, such as from a health perspective, etc., how do we better understand the pathways and align these systems so that they're more focused on the experience of survivors?

Catherine Champagne: I think my colleague has a suggestion, so I'll let her go ahead.

Erin Lee: I think it's important to invest in an IPV and GBV commission. I think it's important for the government to be informed by survivors and informed by experts who are doing the work in the grassroots communities. I think it's important to look at the recommendations that come from various places and let that inform how we move forward. We need to work alongside each other more.

Catherine Champagne: I would add that the survivor lens is the most important part there. It's not just at a bureaucrat level. It's at a survivor level too.

Chi Nguyen: Very quickly, are there any last best practices that we need to be thinking about adopting and putting into our reports and recommendations as they go forward?

Erin Lee: If you're looking at second-stage or beyond second-stage housing and at investing in that area, I think it is important to go into communities and find the models that involve communities, municipal government and provincial and federal governments to build sanctuaries that will work better for senior women and for women along the spectrum.

Catherine Champagne: I would agree. Really quickly, for example, in Red Deer, Alberta, we have a spot where a woman goes from shelter to transitional housing to long-term housing in the same building. She's fully supported throughout. It's a beautiful building and a beautiful model.

I think it's about looking at what's working and about fewer barriers, less retelling of stories and more support for those survivors.

Erin Lee: I also want to say that the model of working intergenerationally is a model that we really should be considering and investing in. If we have women from across the age spectrum and they can deliver each other support and give each other lessons, I think that would be a fantastic opportunity that we would love to explore.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: My sincere thanks.

Ms. Larouche, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Lee and Ms. Champagne, thank you again for your testimony. You provide an equally interesting perspective from more rural communities. It's a reality faced by women in remote areas.

I will now return to the funding for the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence, which is set to expire. From what you've said, we really need to invest to create more shelters and beds.

If this funding is not renewed, what concrete impacts might that have?

[*English*]

Catherine Champagne: I think it's sustainability. Sustainability for those shelters, for those communities and for those survivors is the first thing that jumps out at me.

If there's not a reinvestment, they don't have that familiarity of where to go and what supports have been provided before. We talk a lot about how in this world it might not be today that a woman

needs support, but she may down the road, and if she has those conversations and knows those supports exist, whether they're small shelters in small rural communities.... If it's not today, then it's going to be tomorrow. Removing that or removing any of that funding is where you're going to see the loss.

Erin Lee: I think that if there's a lack of investment in shelters, we're going to see an increase in femicides, and we're going to see an increase in deaths of children. I think that is a reality across our country. If we recognize the issue as an epidemic, we have to make sure that we support the functioning of all of our shelters, both remote and urban.

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: Very well.

Currently, we are witnessing the impact of the lack of funding and the uncertainty surrounding this program's renewal: women are spending longer at each stage. During the first stage in an emergency shelter, they are unable to move on to the second stage—and after that, there is often no third-stage housing suited to their needs, with support services for them and their families, who are in a vulnerable situation.

How does the delay at each stage hinder your ability to take in new victims?

[*English*]

Catherine Champagne: In Alberta, it's a backup. It's showing that the housing continuum doesn't.... You said it properly: If we don't have safe and affordable housing, women are staying in second-stage longer and they're staying in emergency shelters longer. What we're also seeing there is that it affects the number of people accounted for in those shelters, because they're staying in shelters longer. They're still being supported the whole time—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Davies, you have the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

Fred Davies (Niagara South, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

This is my first visit to this committee, and I'm honoured to be here.

If I can give a bit of a preamble, one of the reasons I'm very happy to be here today is that last week, I hosted a group of survivors at a round table here in the House of Commons. These are survivors from the Niagara region, survivors of sexual abuse as children and as adults. At the time, as they told their stories...and I'm grateful to my colleague Ms. Roberts for participating in this round table. It was historic for them, because several of them had never been out of the Niagara region. One individual said it was the highlight of her life to be able to come here and tell her story of survival to parliamentarians.

We often lose sight of how people from our communities would appreciate having that voice and being able to come to a committee like this and express their concerns and tell their story. One of the things that was revealed that day was that, at that time, many of them didn't have shelters. It was a different time when shelters also implied a stigma of some sort, and people avoided shelters because of that.

This group was called Our Heart on Our Sleeve, and they really did wear their hearts on their sleeves that day.

I'm curious. Their biggest issue was follow-up. They didn't have access to services. Even those who had been to a shelter said that after they left, they were on their own. I'm wondering how both of you might be able to fill that narrative in for me a bit. What, if any, post-shelter services do you engage in, and is there sufficient funding for those services?

I can start with Ms. Champagne.

• (1145)

Catherine Champagne: First of all, thank you for being here and for being part of what you did previously. It's really important to have those survivors get that opportunity.

We do outreach. That's a big part of shelter work in Alberta. Outreach becomes something where women don't even have to attend shelter. It doesn't have to be a bricks-and-mortar situation. They can have that person meet them at a coffee shop downtown or somewhere that's available to them.

Outreach does wraparound services. For a woman who is in shelter, usually about halfway through her time in shelter, she'll start to work with an outreach worker to transition her out. That can be to help her with food security, housing, court, getting her kids into school—all of the life skills she might need. At the same time, we offer that to those who aren't in shelters. If they self-present that they need that support, we do that as well.

It is funded in a different model. We're even seeing in Alberta that there's a shift in that funding. That's part of public education as well. More funding in that area, I think, would be good, because what happens a lot of times is that it's just the work that shelters are doing off the side of their desks. They're trying to run an emergency shelter at the same time, and they're also trying to support those women through outreach. We should be looking at the full funding model as a whole and funding them as two separate things, because they are serving two very different purposes.

Fred Davies: That funding is provincial, however—is that correct?

Catherine Champagne: For us, it's provincial. It's all intertwined.

Fred Davies: Ms. Lee, do you have similar services?

Erin Lee: Yes, we have the same services.

We provide outreach services. We might see 120 people in the shelter annually, but we'll see 500 families in outreach. We work in all of our outreach communities and in far-reaching communities. We'll go to people. We'll have them come to us. We also offer group services and counselling services in person and online, and we have

a phone-in group for seniors to reduce isolation so that people are still able to be engaged.

I think the funding envelope and the equation, as it relates to rural communities and the vast geography, are really things that need to be given a lot of consideration.

I want to congratulate you on your success meeting with survivors and say that another model of best practice is survivor forums. We have survivor forums with police and justice partners, where they meet with survivors who give them the good, the bad and the ugly of their experience with those systems to inform them in terms of how they could modify their service.

Fred Davies: I know that a few of the ladies who came to this forum last week will be watching and will very much appreciate what you've just said. I'm grateful for that because, as I said to them, it was just day one for me. They have suffered a lifetime. They carry their wounds and their scars with them every day. They have trust problems and relationship problems, but they are the most courageous people I've ever met in my life. I'm grateful for their visit here, but it is only day one.

Forums like this also add value to awareness across the country. Again, I'm grateful to have been here to help with that.

I have one other question: Our justice system often heavily favours the offender over the victim—

• (1150)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I'm sorry, colleague. Your time is up, but perhaps your question will be taken up by one of your colleagues.

Ms. Ménard, you have the floor.

Marie-Gabrielle Ménard: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Ms. Champagne, Ms. Lee, I am amazed by your aplomb. What you've shared today sheds new light on the committee's work.

I'd like to echo your words, Ms. Champagne, and I'll keep them in mind: women's shelters are, in fact, sanctuaries. Of course, the beds come to mind. For some women, entering a shelter means it's the first night in a very long time that they'll sleep without fearing for their lives. That's not insignificant.

These shelters—these sanctuaries—are kept afloat by trained and passionate staff. I don't want to put words in your mouth, but that staff is likely also running on fumes. That's what I'm hearing in conversations here in Quebec, anyway.

Can you give us an overview of the situation for support workers—on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to support those women? I think it's important to address this in the report and in the recommendations we'll be presenting to the government.

[English]

Catherine Champagne: One hundred per cent, and it's the same across the country. It's the same as it is in Alberta as well. As someone who worked on the front line and went all the way up within women's shelters, I know how difficult that work can be, and it's very daunting for them. If you look at something like turnaways, on a regular day, the rest of us go to work, and we're not having to turn women and their children away from the place where we work. That can be really heavy for them to deal with.

At ACWS, we had an initiative, also funded through the national action plan dollars a couple of years ago, that was counselling frontline shelter staff. This is something that gets overlooked and lumped into their regular EAP, whereas this is really specific. It talks about debriefing, how to deal with those strategies and how to come back to work the next day and do the same job that is extremely hard and heavy. I think we need to look at investing money into that.

As well, we see really high turnover rates when it comes to staff in shelters across the province. We as an organization try to find ways to support shelters to alleviate that, but it's going to continue to happen. The work is heavy, and the ability to do it for a long time is really hard, so I think we need to invest more into how we support them. Also, pay them a living wage. It's such a big part of it, even in Alberta. They're not paid enough. We don't have people who have more expertise or experience to come in to take some of those roles, because the pay is just not enough.

Including frontline shelter support workers in everything that you do and every recommendation that this committee makes is so vital and so important. They're the ones who are going to enact this work and support survivors directly on the worst days of their lives.

[Translation]

Marie-Gabrielle Ménard: Ms. Lee, I'd like to take the conversation a step further: Does the fact that survivors must, at times, try to quickly rebuild a bond of trust with support workers have an impact on them?

[English]

Erin Lee: I would like to say that I feel like our staff are very well trained, very passionate and do everything and use every strategy. I think compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma is a reality, as well as the fact that we know women carry trauma and our staff carry trauma. I think we have to invest and recognize that people should be allowed paid time off, that people should be encouraged to take a break and that the funding necessitates training and breaks and recognizes there is compassion fatigue.

We have groups that we'll have our staff go to for two hours a week just to sit down and unload things so that they can be healthier, because when they're not healthy, they're going to put clients at risk. We're not going to do that. We're going to mitigate that at every road.

[Translation]

Marie-Gabrielle Ménard: Thank you very much.

In Quebec, specialized courts were established a few years ago. The success of their implementation was also linked to training received by judges and socio-legal workers, to ensure adequate support for victims and survivors.

When women take that courageous step of fleeing a violent home, they encounter all kinds of support workers along the way—in shelters, of course, but also outside of them. I am thinking in particular of the staff from the Transit Secours organization who were with us a few days ago.

Ms. Champagne, Ms. Lee, in your opinion, who should receive trauma-informed training to fully understand and effectively support domestic violence survivors?

[English]

Erin Lee: That's a very large question given I saw a sign that indicates there is very little time left.

I think we need public education and to create awareness campaigns in the community to mobilize our community to recognize when they see violence and that they should name violence so we can change violence. We need to be doing it in school. We need to be doing it all the way through. That is a huge investment we need to make. Judicial training on the other end of that spectrum is also quite critical.

• (1155)

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Ménard, thank you very much for that exchange.

Ms. Champagne and Ms. Lee, thank you for making yourselves available today. We've learned a great deal from your testimony.

Colleagues, we will suspend for a few moments while we welcome the second panel.

• (1155)

(Pause)

• (1200)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Welcome to each and every one of you.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses and members.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. If you are attending remotely, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. Please mute yourself when you are not speaking.

If you wish to speak, just raise your hand. For members on Zoom, please use the "raise hand" function.

For interpretation for those on Zoom, you have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

I would like to remind the witnesses that members may ask their questions in English or French. If you will need interpretation, please take a moment now to select the desired channel.

I also remind you that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. That said, I won't interrupt exchanges between members and witnesses, so as not to break the pace.

[English]

I will now welcome our witnesses.

We have, from Elspeth Heyworth Centre for Women, Sunder Singh, executive director. From the Denise House, we have Julia Fiddes, executive director. From the YMCA Cambridge, we have Kim Decker, chief executive officer.

Welcome. We will begin now with opening statements.

Ms. Singh, the floor is yours for five minutes. Thank you.

Sunder Singh (Executive Director, Elspeth Heyworth Centre for Women): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Honourable Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the urgent need for additional shelters and transitional housing for women and children escaping violence.

For more than 20 years, I have served with the Elspeth Heyworth Centre for Women. During that time, I have witnessed the courage of women who have made the difficult decision to leave abusive relationships in search of safety and a better future for their children. I've also witnessed the heartbreaking reality that many women cannot find a safe place to go. Their children live in fear, witnessing violence in their homes and carrying emotional scars that can last a lifetime.

Many women who seek safety are turned away because shelters are full. Shelters are not merely emergency housing; they are a critical violence-prevention service. When shelter space is unavailable, women and children are often forced to remain in dangerous situations or face homelessness.

Statistics Canada has reported that women continue to be turned away primarily because facilities are operating at capacity. This remains a significant challenge across Canada, particularly in major urban centres. However, I believe we have an opportunity to address two major challenges facing our country at the same time.

Canada faces a chronic shortage of skilled trades workers. Employers across the country are searching for qualified people in construction, welding, carpentry, heavy equipment operation, electrical work and many other trades. At the same time, thousands of women leaving violence are seeking a pathway to independence.

Shelters need to become not only places of safety but also centres of opportunity for the women seeking to start a new life. By integrating skilled trades training into shelter programs, women could gain valuable skills while rebuilding their lives. Through partner-

ships with unions, employers, colleges and apprenticeship programs, shelters could become gateways to meaningful careers.

Women should not be limited to minimum wage employment when they have the potential to become skilled professionals with stable incomes, benefits, pensions and long-term career prospects. A woman who seeks safety and enters a shelter can leave with a trade, an apprenticeship opportunity and the ability to support herself and her family with dignity and confidence.

I would like to share a practical example. The Elspeth Heyworth Centre for Women recently had an opportunity to partner with the County of Simcoe and the Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury to establish a shelter in Bradford, Ontario. This area has a high need for a shelter. Seventy women were placed in hotels because shelter space was not available.

A municipally owned property is available and could accommodate up to 20 women and their children at a time. The shelter could provide safe housing, children's programming, personal development opportunities and training in construction craft worker skills. The estimated investment would be approximately \$13,000 per woman, including both shelter accommodation and training. Within a matter of months, many participants could be employment-ready, moving toward apprenticeships and long-term careers.

The benefits extend far beyond the individual woman. When women secure meaningful employment, they gain financial independence. They begin planning for home ownership, transportation, further education and a brighter future for their children. Communities gain skilled workers. Employers gain much-needed talent. Governments benefit through reduced reliance on social assistance and increased tax revenues. This is not simply a social investment; it is an economic investment with measurable returns.

The vision for the Bradford shelter received strong support from municipal leaders, community partners and labour organizations. The need is clear, and the opportunity is real. The only barrier is funding.

Today, I urge the government to view shelters not as a cost but as an investment in public safety, workforce development, economic growth and the future of Canadian families. Every shelter space represents more than a bed. It represents—

• (1205)

The Chair: Thank you, Madam.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Fiddes, you have the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

Julia Fiddes (Executive Director, The Denise House): Good morning, Madam Chair and honourable members of the committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today as part of your study on the role and capacity of women's shelters in transitional housing.

I'm appearing today from the perspective of Durham region, where four gender-based violence shelters serve a rapidly growing population. Although each organization works tirelessly to support women and children fleeing violence, demand continues to exceed available capacity. Each day, shelters across our region and across Canada are forced to make untenable decisions because there are simply not enough safe and affordable housing options available to survivors.

Women fleeing violence are remaining in emergency shelters longer, not because they continue to require emergency intervention, but because affordable and appropriate housing is too often unavailable as a next step. Emergency shelters in effect have become overflow housing for a system under severe strain. At the same time, women are increasingly presenting with overlapping challenges, including trauma, mental health concerns, substance use, precarious employment, family court involvement, caregiving responsibilities and systemic barriers related to race, disability, immigration status or indigenous identity.

When women cannot afford housing, they are more likely to remain in unsafe relationships, placing both themselves and their children at continued risk. When rents are unaffordable, when child care is inaccessible and when income supports are inadequate, leaving violence becomes significantly more difficult. For many survivors, the question is not simply, "Can I leave?", but rather, "Where will I go, how will I support my children and will we be safe tomorrow?"

The lack of affordable housing is now one of the greatest barriers to safety for survivors of gender-based violence. While emergency shelter beds are essential, shelters alone cannot resolve this crisis. Women need a continuum of support that includes prevention, emergency response, transitional and deeply affordable housing, mental health supports, child care, employment assistance and long-term stabilization.

In Durham region, intimate partner violence was formally declared an epidemic in 2023. Community organizations, municipalities and service providers have mobilized in response. However, local action alone cannot resolve a national housing crisis. If we are serious about ending gender-based violence, housing must be recognized as a central part of the solution.

Transitional housing is particularly important, because recovery from violence does not occur within three to six months. Survivors need time to regain stability, support their children and heal from their trauma.

I would respectfully offer the following recommendations for the committee's consideration.

First, the federal government must significantly increase investment in deeply affordable and supportive housing designated for women and children fleeing violence. Access to safe, affordable housing is one of the most effective means of preventing gender-based violence.

Second, funding models for shelters and transitional housing must reflect current realities, including longer shelter stays, increasingly complex client needs and staffing pressures.

Third, greater investment is needed in supportive, transitional and second-stage housing. Emergency shelter is only the first step. Without safe, longer-term options, women remain trapped in cycles of instability.

Fourth, funding models must account for regional realities. Communities such as Durham region are experiencing rapid growth and rising housing costs, as well as increasing demand for services. Women cannot rebuild their lives if social assistance and housing benefits remain far below market rates.

Finally, survivors require integrated supports, including child care, legal support, trauma counselling, income support and transportation, as well as culturally responsive services.

In closing, gender-based violence is not only a crisis occurring behind closed doors. It's a huge housing issue, a public health issue, an economic issue and a public safety issue. When women and children cannot access safe housing, they remain vulnerable to violence, including the risk of lethal harm. When women's shelters operate above capacity, the entire support system becomes strained.

We know what works: investment in affordable housing, transitional supports, prevention and coordinated services. These investments give women and children the opportunity not only to survive violence but to rebuild their lives and move towards a future free from violence. Lasting safety requires lasting solutions.

Thank you for having me as part of the opportunity to contribute to this important study. I'm happy to respond to any questions.

● (1210)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you for your remarks, Ms. Fiddes.

We'll now move to our last speaker.

[*English*]

Ms. Decker, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Kim Decker (Chief Executive Officer, YWCA Cambridge): Honourable Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this study.

My name is Kim Decker, and I'm the CEO of YWCA Cambridge. We are a member association of YWCA Canada, the nation's oldest and largest gender equity organization, and the largest provider of housing and shelter for women and gender-diverse people.

YWCA Cambridge operates the first and only women's emergency shelter for unhoused women in Cambridge. Our own research led us to build a model that differs significantly from traditional overnight-only emergency shelters. We operate a 24-7 facility with on-site wraparound supports.

We do this because our own local research—the findings of which are echoed by provincial and national research—reveals that nearly two-thirds of women experiencing homelessness experience violence on a weekly basis. This tells us that forced daytime discharge is unsafe and makes it impossible to have any semblance of stability, therefore increasing the risk of violence and other challenges in the shelter. The overnight-only service model is a key reason why homelessness shelters have the reputation of being so unsafe. It's not the service; it's the funding model.

I want to speak about the problematic and artificial distinction between homeless shelters and domestic violence shelters. A woman staying in a violence against women shelter is homeless—if she had a safe alternative, she would be there—yet funders and policy-makers continue treating these as two separate systems. This silos funding and results in a significant discrepancy in the level of support a woman receives, depending on which door she enters. This distinction is rooted in an outdated belief that someone leaving abuse is more worthy of support than someone who loses their housing for other reasons or, indeed, someone who loses their housing before they can access a VAW shelter.

This system failure is hidden by current data collection methods. Federally mandated point-in-time counts focus on street homelessness, which is more visible and tends to be male-dominated. Women are far more likely to experience hidden homelessness—couch surfing, staying in unsafe situations or remaining with an abusive partner to avoid the street.

Further, because there are fewer shelter beds and services dedicated to women, they are effectively made invisible. More than one million women in Canada have experienced this form of housing insecurity. They are not visible on a sidewalk, so there are fewer shelter beds for them versus men—a key source of point-in-time data. They are uncounted and, consequently, unfunded.

Housing insecurity is not only a result of violence but a major driver of it. Without a front door that locks, women are forced into survival sex or other exploitive situations just to secure a roof for the night to avoid the often greater or less predictable risks of violence.

Since opening our shelter in February 2025, we have been at capacity. Since August 2025, when we began tracking this number, we've had to turn away more than 230 requests for service because we were full. There was and still is nowhere else in our city to direct these women.

We also see a growing crisis of accessibility that disproportionately affects unhoused senior women, a demographic increasingly

falling into homelessness. National data shows that only 66% of women's shelters have wheelchair-accessible rooms. For the 79% of women in housing need who live with a disability, the system is physically inaccessible. It's also important to note that housing that is both accessible and affordable is nearly impossible to find. In fact, a significant factor in the lengthening terms of stay in shelters is the fact that there is no appropriate housing into which women can move.

The national housing strategy is seven years in, yet significant gender equity gaps remain. Across Canada, there are over 4,800 emergency shelter beds dedicated to men, compared to just over 2,000 for women.

To address this, the federal government must formally expand the definition of “homelessness” in the Reaching Home strategy to include hidden homelessness.

We need a mandatory gender-based carve-out in the national housing strategy that reflects the actual scale of women's housing needs.

Federal infrastructure funding must be contingent on universal design standards to ensure that seniors and women with disabilities are never turned away because a facility lacks an elevator or an accessible washroom.

Finally, we must stop dichotomizing homelessness and violence against women. They are two sides of the same coin.

● (1215)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much for your thoughts, Ms. Decker.

Mrs. Roberts, you have the floor for six minutes.

[*English*]

Anna Roberts: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses. I think you are definitely our heroes for helping women, so thank you for that.

I'm going to speak with Sunder. I have visited your organization on several occasions. I know you've been the executive director since 2005, advocating for women, seniors and newcomers. I also know that you help over 4,000 individuals each year, and that there has been a 45% increase in annual visits—up to over 14,500. You support almost 15,000 seniors each year.

I also know that you have a program to educate girls and women about human trafficking. A testimony from one individual you have helped is a testament to what your organization does, and I want to read this testimony: "I am a mom of a beautiful girl and recently came out of a violence relationship. I knew nothing about the law or anything in Canada. A good friend of mine with the same experience referred me to EHCW. As soon as I called them, I got a wonderful worker named Sona on the phone. Right away she met me through a zoom meeting and took the time to listen to me and promised to help me...."

This particular individual was able to escape the violence she was accustomed to, I guess, if you want to call it that.

Sunder, I know that you've requested some assistance for additional shelters. What does the government need to do to ensure that the perpetrators are kept behind bars and that survivors feel safe? As well, how can we as a government put rules in place so that the shelters are there to help women?

• (1220)

Sunder Singh: Thank you, MP Roberts, for shedding light on the services we provide.

The topic of perpetrators and where they should be is an important one to talk about. When they are caught, perpetrators should get a full sentence. They should not be jeopardizing the well-being of survivors, who are now going to go to a shelter where they can feel safe and comfortable in order to get back into life and onto the road to recovery.

When I say "full sentence", I mean that perpetrators need to be charged \$200,000, or whatever, and then they should remain in jail—no parole, no bail. The charges that are put on the perpetrators should go directly back to the shelter. There should be strict punishments for the perpetrators, without letting them go after two weeks or a month and having women feeling unsafe. It's important that they get the full sentence.

Also, the government is looking for innovative ways to look after the population. What more can be done than to bring the women back to employability? Train them. Don't just keep them in shelters, and then ask what is next. Women are still feeling lost. As soon as a woman is registered in a shelter, she should go through training. There's a long list of skilled trades that are available to women. They can choose what suits them and then go through the training. Unions are willing to work. Colleges and universities are willing to provide training to women. Unions have training centres with child care systems in place to help women focus on training to build their skills.

This is a very innovative way in the long run. It helps the government. It gives a return to the government on the initial investment in shelters to expand and increase the number of shelters so that there is no waiting for women and their children.

It will certainly help women who are fleeing from violence. As soon as they have space in a shelter, they can build their skills, and they can then work and build the lives of their children, rather than feeling that sense of homelessness or of not having a goal or knowing where to go next. We need to provide that space for women.

Anna Roberts: Thank you very much, Ms. Singh.

My next question is for Kim Decker.

Your shelter operated at more than 94% occupancy during its first year and still had to turn away 160 requests for services. How common is this level in your experience?

Kim Decker: As I said, our shelter has been open just a year, and since August of 2025 we've had over 230 requests for service that we've not been able to fill.

When we first looked at opening the shelter, I'm not sure that we had a clear picture of the extent of women's homelessness in our community. I think that given the fact that we have been full and the fact that we've had to turn away so many requests for service, we're starting to see the true picture of what women's homelessness looks like in our community, and I believe that it is going to continue to grow.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Decker, I'm sorry, but I have to interrupt you, as the time is up.

Ms. Tesser Derksen, you now have the floor.

• (1225)

Kristina Tesser Derksen (Milton East—Halton Hills South, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

Thanks so much, everyone, for welcoming me. It's my first time on this committee. I represent the riding of Milton East—Halton Hills South.

My question is for Ms. Fiddes.

I believe you have some background in that area with Halton Women's Place and SAVIS as well. I was at a survivors panel that SAVIS hosted just a few weeks ago. Thank you so much for your work. They're very lucky to have you in Durham region now.

We've heard a lot of folks talking about the criminal justice system in particular. Our previous witnesses did as well. I worked for years as a family law lawyer. At the beginning of my career, a lot of the work I did intersected with what we then commonly called the violence against women sector, which in turn often intersected with the criminal courts.

Previous witnesses commented on how the justice system needs to serve women in order to preserve their safety. Noting that provincial justice systems also play a significant operational role in administering justice, we want to give them the sentencing tools they need to keep women safe. Last year, Canadians elected our government on a platform of criminal justice reform. To keep that promise, our government has introduced bail and sentencing reform legislation as well as Bill C-16, which is the protecting victims act. This creates new offences for coercive control and also recognizes femicide as automatic first-degree murder, among many other things. I presume you've heard about this legislation.

In my legal work, I met women who would ask themselves how they got in that situation. You work with women every day who are probably asking themselves the same thing. They're living lives that they never imagined they'd be in. Often I found that the early steps that brought them to those places were imperceptibly small. It usually started with control and manipulation by an intimate partner.

I'd ask you to answer two questions for me from your experience. First, how pervasive is coercive control and financial and social isolation by coercive intimate partners in the women you work with? Second, how do you think the protecting victims act will impact your work and the lives of the women and children you assist?

Julia Fiddes: That's a great question. I'll start with the coercive control.

There are a lot of things that are different across the continuum of violence against women and gender-based violence. The one thing that is prevalent in any part of the gender-based violence and violence against women movement is coercive control. On every level of violence against women, you will find coercive control at work. It is something that we often have a very hard time working with women about. Because it is so pervasive and so much a part of their day-to-day experience of their gender-based violence, it's very hard to get to the root of.

With the changes to the laws, I can't even imagine.... We're so excited as a sector to have these laws change, because this is something we've been trying to say. You can't have violence against women exist if you don't have coercive control. It's much harder to try to have somebody charged with the larger assaults and the bigger name things. Coercive control is relevant. It's prevalent. It is something that we can see every abuser being held accountable for.

When someone is held accountable for something, it changes something in the survivor. It gives the survivor a bit more to say, "I'm not imagining this. This is actually something that is a problem that isn't just about me." It gives survivors some control over their own lives, and it gives them some power back. We try very hard as a sector to give women power back over their lives and some autonomy. Having this recognized as something dangerous and pervasive, as we as a sector have known for many years, is a game-changer. It's going to make things much more respectful for survivors.

Kristina Tesser Derksen: Thank you so much for that. It's much appreciated.

I also want to ask about the role of second-stage or transitional housing. I'm a former municipal councillor. Oftentimes, we will get

calls or emails from people in the community who had seen folks who were unhoused and were looking for help. In my community, the region was responsible for emergency housing. We have several organizations, but one really great one, Milton Transitional Housing, which has had tremendous success in filling that gap between emergency housing and stable long-term housing.

How underfunded is that gap, that transitional space? There's always room for more funding and support in these spaces, but what I think has happened is that the emergency housing and the shelters have been overstretched because people just automatically think that's going to be the long-term fix.

Can you comment about the role that second-stage and transitional housing plays, and perhaps a little bit, as well, about the roles municipalities and other levels of government play and the dialogue they share amongst themselves to get this gap filled?

• (1230)

Julia Fiddes: Transitional housing, as I said in my speech, is probably my favourite topic right now. We can't do this work and we can't change gender-based violence if we don't have transitional housing. Shelters have become de facto transitional homes. It is not ideal to live in a room no bigger than this table with your children for more than three months. We have women staying in our shelters for eight, nine, 10 and 12 months now. We don't have the capacity to do that kind of work and help women move through it.

Our shelter has asked for permission from the ministry, and we've received permission, to turn two of our beds into transitional beds, so we can connect women with employment programs, get them connected with life skills and help them move out of the shelter system permanently.

Municipalities, like Durham Region, do not fund.... I heard my colleagues describe the difference between gender-based violence and homelessness. It's very real. These women are homeless women, but regions don't fund gender-based violence. There is a huge lack of—

[Translation]

The Chair: I'm sorry to have to interrupt you, colleague, but your time is already up. That's the frustration we all share here—time goes by too quickly.

Ms. Larouche, you have the floor for six minutes.

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Ms. Singh, Ms. Fiddes and Ms. Decker, thank you so much for joining us today for this study.

What are we doing for these shelters and these women who are victims of violence? That seems to be the key question right now. You work in the shadows, but you work miracles—and you do so with inadequate resources. You're changing people's lives.

In fact, I've seen the impact of your work first-hand. Just last weekend, at the Granby Book Fair, I presented the intercollegiate youth literature award to Erika Soucy for her book, *La maison cachette*. It's the story of an eight-year-old girl who lives with her mother in a shelter for women who are victims of domestic violence, but it's told from the girl's perspective. We tend to forget, but there are collateral victims of violence against women. It's an absolutely magnificent story, and the intercollegiate youth literature award was well deserved. This book sheds light on that reality, and I like the title: *La maison cachette*, or the hideaway house. That's what it becomes: a safe haven where women can finally rest.

I'd also like to thank the witnesses for reminding us that it takes a whole continuum of services, and I'll come back to that.

Ms. Decker, you spoke about senior women who also find themselves in these situations. We're hearing more and more about senior women who find themselves experiencing housing insecurity following a separation, the death of a spouse or a violent situation. We're also trying to think outside the box and see how we can ensure a continuum of services earlier on.

In your view, is the income currently available to people aged 65 to 74 sufficient for them to secure adequate housing?

Do you see any links between inadequate income and the increase in requests for assistance from your organizations?

[English]

Kim Decker: What we are seeing with senior women who are accessing homeless shelters is the result of the gender wage gap. We are seeing women who stayed at home to raise their children, women who worked in low-paying jobs and couldn't save money for retirement, women who worked in jobs with no pensions, or women who were married and their partners passed away, so they no longer have an income and can't afford to live in the housing they were in. They find themselves homeless for the very first time.

We need to have a closer look at—and my colleagues have talked about it—building out a continuum of housing for women and deeply affordable housing.

For the women in our shelter who are leaving and moving into housing, even with their pensions, ODSP and OW, would they still require a rent supplement? Without that, they can't afford housing. We need to really invest in deeply affordable housing for all women in our community.

[Translation]

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much for your comments, Ms. Decker.

Ms. Fiddes or Ms. Singh, do you have anything to add regarding this particular trend, increasingly observed among senior women?

[English]

Sunder Singh: What I would like to say is that in a country called Bhutan, the monarchy measures the public not through gross

domestic product but through gross domestic happiness, and it makes sure that every citizen gets the feeling they are useful in the society. Therefore, when we build shelters, we must have room for the seniors who need housing, who need shelter space, but there are children in the shelters as well. A program needs to be created where the seniors feel useful while they are in the shelters. They can look after the children while the women are focusing on building skills. When we build shelters, the shelters should be open for senior women as well, so that then they are given responsibilities as well and they feel useful, and are not just in the homes. That's my take on it.

• (1235)

[Translation]

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much, Ms. Singh.

I may revisit this during the second round of questions, but since I only have one minute left, I'd really like to talk about the importance of having a continuum of services.

Even with a magic wand, we wouldn't be able to solve the problem with the shelter situation. As Ms. Fiddes said, what's needed first and foremost is greater economic empowerment for women. That's the starting point.

Next, we clearly need shelter beds—and we need them at the right time. Yes, we need emergency shelter beds, but we have to think about the second stage and the stages that follow. I'm thinking specifically of supportive housing. It also requires a justice system that is prepared to support victims, provide help with children and offer income assistance. In short, there must be a continuum of services.

Ms. Fiddes, what can we do upstream to improve women's economic empowerment?

[English]

Julia Fiddes: Prevention work is very important. We are doing a lot of catch-up work. We're doing a lot of band-aid solutions. We're doing a lot of fixing the problem. The best thing we can do is alleviate and eliminate the problem.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mrs. Goodridge, you have the floor for five minutes.

Laila Goodridge: Thank you, Madam Chair.

[English]

Thank you to all our witnesses for being here today.

I want to start out on something you said, Ms. Singh, in your opening statement and that you elaborated on, which is the importance of getting women into the trades. I'm the member of Parliament for Fort McMurray—Cold Lake. I am the proud daughter of two spectacular tradespeople, two Red Seal tradespeople, and I have been able to see in my community women entering the trades since long before I was born and the value that organizations like Women Building Futures have on not just that woman but her entire family unit.

Often it's women leaving poverty or abuse, so I was wondering if you could speak to some of the important things being done and the things that perhaps the government could do a little better.

Sunder Singh: There are organizations, such as Toronto Community Benefits Network, that encourage women to join skilled trades. There are unions, such as LIUNA Local 183, which has a huge training centre where women are given the chance to be trained as skilled trade workers. Not only that, but we spoke to the union, LIUNA Local 183, about how women who come into shelters can be trained while school-going children are sent to school. Right after they're sent to school, the mothers can take the shuttle bus, go to the training centre and get the basic construction or craftsmanship training. It could be a couple of months. If the cost is \$400, for example, they are willing to waive that cost so the women can get the training. Maybe the economy is down right now, but as soon as it picks up, the demand for the construction work will become heavy.

During the COVID time and after, we continued to hear that there was a lack of carpenters, welders and lots of the skilled trades. If the women are ready and trained, they can be taken into apprenticeship immediately. They get paid. They get benefits.

The best and easiest way to empower women after they have experienced violence is to get them into employment so that they can start earning income. That starts the dream of owning a home. It starts the dream of owning a car. It starts the dream of looking after their children, giving them a better education and building their career. It's a long-term goal, but it works. Once the government focuses on building the skills of the women who are breaking away from violence, then the empowerment starts.

• (1240)

Laila Goodridge: I couldn't agree more. I think it's so spectacularly important. I've had the privilege of seeing first-hand in my own community the difference it makes in not just the lives of those women but the community writ large. Frankly, oftentimes those women are some of the best tradespeople out there, because they're a bit better at attention to detail or different pieces like that. They bring a different skill set to the workplace.

In the last panel, I asked a question about the cost of living and how that is impacting shelters. Recently we've seen gas prices just skyrocket right across the country. That's having an immediate impact on a lot of shelters and their ability to operate and also on the people who are accessing those services. As Conservatives, we brought forward a proposal to immediately cut all gas taxes, which would save Canadians 25¢ a litre for the rest of the year.

Ms. Fiddes, do you believe that this would be a good temporary solution?

Julia Fiddes: It's definitely a step in the right direction. When women—and people—who are fleeing violence, living in our shelters and staying longer are given any opportunity to save money and put it in their pocket toward their housing, that moves them toward a life free from violence. There's nothing that can be said negatively about that. Any penny saved is a penny that gets a woman out of our building.

Laila Goodridge: Ms. Decker, really quickly, do you have any ideas or thoughts on that?

Kim Decker: Sure. I would agree with my colleague that any opportunity for women to have access to more funding leads them to have more success in finding affordable housing, so—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Decker, I'm sorry but Mrs. Goodridge's time is up. You may have an opportunity to expand on your thoughts later.

Ms. Nathan, you have the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

Juanita Nathan (Pickering—Brooklin, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you, I want to thank all of the witnesses here today for their testimony.

Ms. Fiddes, thank you for being here. You mentioned that in 2023, the Durham Region declared IPV to be an epidemic. Can you talk a bit about that?

You talked about the community organizations, the municipalities and the service providers coming together in mobilizing a response for this. Can you talk a bit about if and how that made a change in tackling this problem?

Julia Fiddes: I think that having what we in the sector know—that gender-based violence is an epidemic—said publicly to the people who don't work in our field and aren't part of this work is very important. It normalizes it. It makes it not just happening behind closed doors or to “those women” or “those people”. It's happening to everyone. It's happening to every social demographic. I think that's very important for people to hear. It also brings different people to the table. Oftentimes, at our tables, it's us. It's the women doing this work, and we are talking to each other over and over and saying the same things. It's about bringing different people to the table.

I'm on several regional tables in Durham, and we have different people at the table now. It's not just the people who are doing only gender-based violence work, because now people realize that if you're doing work in employment or you're doing work in health care, you are doing work with intimate partner violence survivors. You need to come together to talk with us so we can help you. That's not to teach you, necessarily, but to help you do your work better. I think that declaration was very important.

Juanita Nathan: Thank you.

In a tiered government, the region is usually responsible for building or making available more deeply affordable housing. Are you seeing that in Durham region? Is the region building more affordable houses and are you able to access them for the women who are in the shelter?

Julia Fiddes: Frankly, no. On what we are seeing in Durham region, I'll speak from our experience at the Denise House. We recently lost the almost \$100,000 in funding for our shelter that we were getting from the region. We were the only gender-based violence shelter getting this funding, but we lost it because we were considered, as my colleague said, "gender-based violence" versus "homeless", and they only fund homeless. No, we are not seeing that housing being built for the women and children we work with. It's an unfortunate reality. We try really hard to work with the region, but no, we are not seeing it.

Also, on the housing that is being built, when we say "deeply affordable", market rent is not affordable to the people we work with. Market rent is not affordable to a woman who has children and one income or to an elderly woman who has recently left her 50-year relationship. No, realistically, we are not seeing a positive impact on housing in Durham region.

• (1245)

Juanita Nathan: Thank you.

You talked about women who are seeking shelter staying there for a period of time. Now you're seeing people there for eight months and 12 months. What does this mean for the new people seeking shelter? How many people have you turned away because you're not able to accommodate them? What is the number like for the other shelters in the region?

Julia Fiddes: In Durham region, we have four gender-based violence shelters. We are the largest. We are a very close-knit group. Our shelter served almost 200 women last year. We turned away close to double that.

That's our shelter, so if you add the other three shelters who are seeing many of the same people.... Durham region, for those who don't know, is quite large. Many of the people who are reaching out to the Ajax shelter are probably going to Toronto, not us, and they are seeing at least the same number of turnaways that we are.

I heard someone say it in the earlier panel: that has a very huge impact on our staff. Knowing that a woman's life is potentially at risk—and when I say "at risk", I mean death—and having to say no to her is probably one of the harder parts of this work, and working in this field is hard enough.

Yes, we're seeing a huge number, and that's because we can't move women out, quite frankly.

Juanita Nathan: I know that in Durham, it being in the 401 corridor, we see a lot of trafficking in that region. The average age of recruitment into sex trafficking is often cited as about 13, although I've heard another witness talk about an 8-year-old and much younger. Durham organizations continue to report significant numbers of youth victims and at-risk youth—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Nathan, I am so sorry to interrupt you, but your time is up. I know it flies by.

Ms. Larouche, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I first want to thank Ms. Decker, Ms. Singh and Ms. Fiddes.

The more I listen to the witnesses, the more I see connections with the study we are currently conducting at the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Here, we are specifically discussing shelter spaces for women who are victims of violence, and at the other committee, we are considering the issue of homelessness more generally. In both cases, we're hearing about the importance of having a continuum of services and working proactively, all the way through to support services.

Ms. Fiddes, you said that you've lost funding for your shelter spaces, but I didn't quite understand the reason. Could you explain that to me a little more?

[*English*]

Julia Fiddes: The region of Durham used to fund our gender-based violence shelter \$91,000 for our work on housing. We lost that funding because we are not considered, now, to be working with homeless folks. We are considered to be working specifically with gender-based violence survivors. The region decided to separate these.

As Ms. Decker, I think, said earlier, there is a very clear divide—in more recent years, in my experience—between funding going to gender-based violence survivors and funding going to folks experiencing homelessness, which we all know is the same. We also know women in the homeless sector were most definitely survivors of gender-based violence at some point in their lives.

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: The goal is to achieve better alignment and a better understanding. In other words, we need to understand that your work is complementary, not separate, and funding should not be reduced. I hear what you're saying. Once again, the goal is to have a continuum of services that includes services for women who are victims of violence and services for people experiencing homelessness, rather than pitting them against each other. That's very important.

I have less than 30 seconds left.

Yesterday, witnesses told us that, despite them having found spaces to accommodate more homeless people, the waiting list and the need for services have nearly doubled. That's sort of what I'm hearing from you, as well, Ms. Decker. You're confirming that the waiting lists are getting longer, aren't you?

• (1250)

[*English*]

Kim Decker: That's exactly correct. What's happening is that women are staying longer in the shelter. We cannot move women out and into—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Decker.

Mr. Davies, the floor is yours for five minutes.

[*English*]

Fred Davies: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Singh, regarding economic conditions—particularly in our current situation here in Canada—is there a correlation between affordability and shelter usage?

Sunder Singh: Again, we're looking at the long-term impact on women who break away from violence and come to a shelter.

Yes, there is definitely a correlation. The cost of living has gone up.

However, there are opportunities for women to combat the cost of living. If we take a few months—whether it's two months, four months or six months—to train them in a skill, they become immediately employable and start to contribute to the economy of the country, making the country more prosperous. Women, once trained, are able to combat affordability issues. It's very important that we look at what we can do. What kinds of skills can we provide to these women once they come to the shelter? What can we do to make them employable?

We talked about the epidemic in Durham region, but it's all over the country. Six thousand women and children are staying in emergency shelters on a typical day, but many thousands of them are waiting. This is an epidemic. If there is an epidemic, what does a government do? It has to create a task force. It has to get a group of people together from government sources to go throughout Canada and see why vulnerable women are ignored. Why are there limited funds available for these women to break away from violence? Then, it can come back with a report and a recommendation.

This is what I recommend should take place.

Fred Davies: Thank you, Ms. Singh. I have limited time. I want to get to a pretty broad question.

In my previous incarnation, before coming here as a member of Parliament, I was a regional councillor in the region of Niagara. We declared a state of emergency regarding homelessness and addiction in the region, as did many regions and municipalities. It was across the province, not just in Niagara. We knew it was fundamentally outside some of our jurisdictions. It was an effort—as you said, Ms. Singh—to get people together to start talking about some solutions.

I want to ask all of you whether you could briefly tell me how we can bridge the gaps among funding, policy and delivery. Every level of government has tried to play a role, but we struggle with infrastructure and funding. If you had a wish list, what would your three top priorities be for solving the key problems you encounter? Give me your top three suggestions for government.

I'll start with you, Ms. Fiddes.

Julia Fiddes: For me, it would be deeply affordable housing, putting funding towards actually affordable housing; funding towards transitional housing so that women are actually getting the life skills and the employment training that they need; and funding towards prevention. I think we need to put a lot more money towards prevention so that shelters like ours and services like ours don't exist anymore.

Fred Davies: Ms. Singh, could you go next, please?

Sunder Singh: Sure.

The three top priorities would be increasing housing to be able to help the women break away from violence smoothly; partnering with unions, universities and colleges so that training can start to build the skills of the women; and then getting the women into employment as soon as possible.

• (1255)

Fred Davies: Thank you.

Who do we have next?

Go ahead, Ms. Decker.

Kim Decker: I think that three things for us, and specifically related to homelessness, are that the federal Reaching Home program must formally include hidden homelessness so that allocation formulas reflect the true scale of women's housing needs; that we hold the CMHC accountable to its promise that at least 25% of national—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Decker. I'm sorry to interrupt you again.

We'll now move on to the last exchange.

Ms. Ménard, you have the floor.

Marie-Gabrielle Ménard: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank the witnesses who are joining us.

I'll pick up where you left off by quoting you, Ms. Fiddes. You've made it clear: Support for prevention is essential.

I'd like to urge us to be cautious because, in the context of this study, there's a lot of talk about the housing crisis, and I get the impression that we're reducing this crisis to having a roof over one's head. As we've heard from a number of witnesses, shelters are not dormitories. Women fleeing violence also need space and support to rebuild their lives.

Could you elaborate on your response and reframe the issue of the services provided?

Even if we add a lot of affordable housing, families escaping violence need support to rebuild their lives.

I invite you to respond first, Ms. Fiddes, and then I will have the opportunity to pass the microphone to your colleagues Ms. Singh and Ms. Decker.

[*English*]

Julia Fiddes: I appreciate the question.

I think part of the prevention issue is about teaching girls and boys what it means to be non-violent. It goes deeper than just saying, "Don't hit." We need to train our children to understand what it means to have confidence, to have self-worth and to give other people the same things. Respect is taught. It is not something that we are born with. I think prevention goes much deeper than just going into the schools and talking about this. It starts at home. It also is a community issue.

I think a huge part of what we need to do is to take the prevention issue deeper, because, yes, putting a roof over someone's head is not the answer. We need to teach people that they deserve to be respected and what that truly looks like, and we need to have it at all levels of government and every level of society.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Gabrielle Ménard: Thank you, Ms. Fiddes.

Ms. Decker, would you like to add your thoughts to this comment?

[*English*]

Kim Decker: Yes, there are a couple of comments I would make.

One of the largest pieces of work that we do at the YWCA is around gender-based violence prevention. We're one of the only organizations that start working with kids around eight years old, and we do it in an age-appropriate way that looks at consent, at bystander intervention and at healthy relationships. If we're ever going to break the cycle of violence, starting with kids as young as we can to develop those skills is really important.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Gabrielle Ménard: Ms. Singh, would you like to speak?

[*English*]

Sunder Singh: We partner with a university in Toronto. Every woman who faces domestic violence needs psychological support.

She needs to let it out of her system. Through the associate professor there at York University, every student who is going through that psychological training is connected with the women of the centre so that these women can get psychological help while they are breaking away from violence. This is a solutions-based organization, and we always look at innovative ways to help women.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Gabrielle Ménard: In that regard, this same committee has just completed its study on the consequences of the rise of anti-feminism. The focus was on the root causes of gender-based violence. I think there's likely a point of intersection between these two studies.

The Department of Justice has really been working closely with the Department for Women and Gender Equality, in particular, as well as the Department of Public Safety, to develop Bill C-16. We're almost at the finish line.

In your opinion, is strengthening the Criminal Code alone sufficient to combat gender-based violence?

Ms. Singh, you can start.

[*English*]

Sunder Singh: Absolutely. Severe punishment has to be in place in Canada. It's heavily lacking, causing a lot of criminal activities where women are hurting, children are hurting and seniors are hurting.

• (1300)

[*Translation*]

Marie-Gabrielle Ménard: Ms. Decker, do you want to answer?

[*English*]

Kim Decker: I think this is an issue that can't be siloed. It needs to work across ministries. There's a role for a number of ministries in the federal government to work on this collectively.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Gabrielle Ménard: I'll quickly follow up.

Yesterday, I was with Caroline Desrochers, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Housing and Infrastructure. We announced the construction of a new shelter—

The Chair: Ms. Ménard, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but your time is up.

Thank you very much to the witnesses for making themselves available today, and I wish those who must get back on the road a safe trip home.

Before we adjourn, colleagues, I want to talk to you about two or three administrative matters. Since we have added a meeting on the topic of shelters, you'll understand that this has disrupted our schedule slightly.

On Thursday, we'll continue our discussions on women's shelters. However, next week, we were scheduled to finish our study on shelters and begin our study on menopause, continuing through June 16. We already have guests lined up for the meetings on June 9, 11 and 16 as part of the study on menopause. So I recommend leaving that as is, as it will be complicated for the committee staff to undo all that.

Furthermore, regarding June 18, we have not yet confirmed the attendance of witnesses for the study on menopause. In any case, as you can imagine, we'll have to resume the study on shelters in the fall because, if our last meeting on shelters is on June 18, we won't have finished the entire study. We will have to continue in the fall.

The same reasoning applies to the study on menopause. We're scheduled to hold a meeting on that topic on June 18, but if we decide to devote that meeting to the study on shelters, the same scenario will apply: We will have to resume the study on menopause in the fall.

In short, we have to decide whether, on June 18, we will discuss menopause or whether we will conclude the hearings on shelters. It is understood that, in either case, we will have to continue these studies in the fall anyway. In addition, we must discuss our report concerning our study on seniors, since the hearings have concluded.

As for June 18, assuming we will continue to meet until June 19, would you agree to have the clerk continue to make calls regarding the study on menopause? We would add a final meeting on shelters in the fall, as requested by our colleague Ms. Ménard.

Does that scenario work for you, or would you prefer that, on June 18, we hold the final meeting on shelters—which wasn't originally scheduled but which we've added—and hold the final meeting on menopause in the fall?

You can also let us make the decision.

Chi Nguyen: Personally, I'd prefer to continue the study on shelters on June 18 and resume the one on menopause in the fall.

The Chair: Okay. However, please be aware that we will not be changing the plans for the meetings on June 9, 11 and 16. For June 18, we have to choose one of the two studies, and the other one will be postponed until the fall anyway.

Does everyone agree?

Ms. Ménard, this is all because of you. Does this work for you, too?

Marie-Gabrielle Ménard: It gives you a chance to work on your agility, Madam Chair. You like that.

The Chair: That's exactly right.

Everyone seems to agree.

Have a good day, everyone. We'll see each other again on Thursday.

(Meeting adjourned)

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