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Chair: Dominique Vien



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• (1530)

[Translation]

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

Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome.

It's already meeting number 42 of the 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 or remotely using the Zoom application.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of members and witnesses:

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking.

For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your microphone and please mute yourself when you are not speaking.

For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For members on Zoom, please use the “raise hand” function.

For interpretation for those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen, you have the choice 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 witnesses that committee members may ask their questions in French or English. If you will need interpretation, please take a moment now to select the desired channel in order to take full advantage of the time allotted for questions and answers.

I would like to remind you that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. That said, I do not intervene between a member and a witness so as not to disrupt the flow. However, I am fairly strict when speaking time has expired, and I will cut off the speaker.

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, so let's try to be compassionate in our conversations.

[English]

I will now welcome our witnesses.

[Translation]

We are joined by Ms. Marilyn Matheson, executive director of Harmony House Shelter; Ms. Annick Brazeau, president of Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale, joining us by video conference; Ms. Élise Brien, co-lead on political affairs at Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale, joining us by video conference; and Ms. Aline Nizigama, national CEO of YMCA Canada, also joining us by video conference.

[English]

Welcome.

We will begin with opening statements.

Mrs. Matheson, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Thank you.

Marilyn Matheson (Executive Director, Harmony House Shelter): Thank you very much for this opportunity to appear in front of you today.

The Harmony House shelter is a second-stage shelter in Ottawa that supports women and their children fleeing gender-based violence and abuse.

• (1535)

In 2020, the City of Ottawa declared a “housing and homelessness emergency”, and the pressure continues to grow. The centralized wait-list for subsidized housing has reached more than 15,000 households, and recent data shows the average wait can stretch to seven years or more, with family-sized units especially hard to find.

For survivors of violence, this is not just a housing issue; it is a safety issue. When affordable housing is unavailable, women face impossible choices: remain in an abusive situation or move from place to place, couch surfing, without stability. If they are lucky enough to find a shelter space, they stay much longer than shelters are ever intended to support.

At Harmony House, we see this every day. Survivors who should be moving to permanent housing are instead staying with us for 18 months to two years, or longer. Families of three or more children stay for two to four years, and this is not unusual, because there's simply no suitable affordable housing available for larger families.

If you follow the journey of a typical family—no family is really typical—the mother flees with her children and ends up couch surfing with family and friends, moves to an emergency shelter for three to six months and then moves on to the second-stage shelter for two to four years. Along the way, the children are leaving friends, moving and changing schools. Their grades suffer, and so does their mental health. If they make new friends in their temporary school, they can't invite their friends to their birthday parties or to their house to play, because they live in a shelter.

A generation of children are growing up in shelters.

At Harmony House, we have 16 transitional housing units, with 11 one-bedroom, three two-bedroom and two studio units, including one that's accessible.

Our wait-list currently exceeds 130 families. Over 50 of these families have four or more members, of which 21 have six or more members. There are 18 with children under the age of two and 23 with children aged two to four.

Each bedroom has a bunk bed that sleeps three. There's a double on the bottom and a single on the top. However, this configuration does not work for families with toddlers and infants. It's also difficult for families with older children and teenagers of opposite genders to share a one-bedroom unit with their mother. Our limited number of two-bedroom units are housing families of four to seven children. Our units are not designed for the families we are now serving.

We are currently planning to expand. However, the experience of a shelter being built in Embrun, Ontario, is concerning to us. Their original plan was for the shelter to have 24 units that included several three-bedroom units. Working with CMHC, they had to change this to 35 units, cutting down the three-bedroom units to one-bedroom and studio units, which don't work for the larger families. In addition, they had to cut out the planned child care and the communal kitchen, as well as downsizing office space and consulting rooms.

Our units are rent-geared-to-income. However, many women arrive at Harmony House with no income. They've been forced to leave jobs and their communities to survive. They are ready to rebuild but face systemic barriers, including a lack of affordable child care, gaps in before- and after-school care and immigration and work permit challenges. We've seen women with professional certifications from their countries of origin who cannot afford to take equivalency tests in Canada in order to work. When women are ready to move forward, the system is not ready for them.

Every day, we turn away women and children who have already done the hardest thing: They have chosen to leave violence. They should not face a second barrier—a system that cannot meet them where they're at. Right now, too many women and children are left waiting in unsafe situations, not because we don't know what works, but because we have not funded or built it.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Brazeau and Ms. Brien, you now have the floor for five minutes.

Élise Brien (Co-Lead on Political Affairs, Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale): Good afternoon.

Madam Chair, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for this invitation.

The Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale is a wide-ranging network that has been committed to defending women's right to physical and psychological integrity since 1979. It currently includes 47 support and shelter centres spread across 16 of Quebec's administrative regions.

In 2024–2025, our shelters provided housing for over 2,700 women and more than 2,000 children. Their average occupancy rate was 96%, not including the women and children who received nearly 30,000 services beyond shelter. In total, member shelters responded to approximately 80,000 requests for services and information, primarily from women, but also from family members, professionals and other resources.

We would like to address the issue of shelters' capacity to support women overall. We identified three factors that have a fundamental impact on the experience of women who are victims of domestic violence before, during and after their stay in a shelter.

First, as frontline services, women's shelters require adequate financial resources to meet women's needs when they seek help.

Second, a dedicated shelter construction and renovation program is required to ensure a sufficient number of beds, so that all women—particularly those with disabilities—can access those resources.

Finally, women must be able to leave shelters and move into affordable, healthy and safe housing to support their children.

We believe these factors are closely interrelated and that urgent action on all three is essential.

Shelters face major challenges caused by chronic underfunding of their operations and services. In Quebec, shelters receive mission-based funding through the Ministry of Health and Social Services' community organization support program.

Between 2010 and 2020, no new investments were added to this budget. Given the growing demand for services and the rise in the cost of living during those years, that has reduced the ability to meet needs to approximately 50% of the 2009 service level.

Starting in 2020, a new investment of \$57 million for support and shelter homes, spread out through 2026–2027, allowed for some ground to be made up. However, needs were never fully met. If subsidies are not increased, managers will face difficult choices: either fail to adhere to salary scales and cut back on other working conditions—thereby risking the loss of staff—or reduce the number of positions, which could lead to service disruptions in order to meet employers' commitments. For many, the latter scenario is the most likely—but in either case, the quality and accessibility of direct services for women who are victims of domestic violence and their children will suffer.

To prevent this, we recommend supporting mission-based funding for women's shelters and support centres.

• (1540)

Annick Brazeau (President, Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale): In 2025–2026, SOS Violence Conjugale, the hotline that receives a large portion of requests for assistance and shelter in Quebec, reported a benchmark success rate of 45%. There is a significant need to create new shelter beds.

In the absence of programs dedicated to the construction and renovation of support and shelter homes—as well as second-stage housing—at both the federal and provincial levels, the creation of new shelter beds and housing units remains mired in an administrative process involving the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, or CMHC, or Build Canada Homes and the Société d'habitation du Québec, not to mention the necessary coordination with the service delivery subsidy from the Quebec Ministry of Health and Social Services—without which the shelter cannot operate.

We recommend that the Canadian government establish a program dedicated to support and shelter homes—including second-stage homes—within Build Canada Homes. This program would include grants for the construction, relocation, renovation and adaptation of shelters for women who are victims of domestic violence.

Women extend their stays in support and shelter homes because they are unable to find new housing. The housing crisis exacerbates the problem of a shortage of shelter beds. The repercussions of domestic violence hinder women's ability to meet their basic needs and secure housing. Women supported by our services have often experienced a decline in their income and financial security due to economic abuse or an impaired ability to work—often for years—as a result of the violence in their lives.

The women we support also very often have dependent children. To help women leave a violent partner, we recommend the—

The Chair: Ms. Brazeau, I sincerely apologize, but I must interrupt you. The five minutes are up.

• (1545)

[English]

Mrs. Nizigama from the YWCA is next. I said YMCA earlier, so I apologize.

You have the floor for five minutes.

Thank you.

[Translation]

Aline Nizigama (National Chief Executive Officer, YWCA Canada): Thank you, Madam Chair.

[English]

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

My name is Aline Nizigama, and I am indeed the national CEO of YWCA Canada.

Across the country, YWCAs operate 34 shelters and more than 2,800 units of affordable and supportive housing, with more than 2,000 additional units planned or in construction in 18 communities throughout the country over the next three years.

Across housing, child care, youth employment and other community programs, the YWCA movement employs more than 6,500 staff and serves more than 636,000 people annually.

For more than 150 years, YWCAs have responded to gender-based violence, homelessness, poverty and systemic inequities. Today, those pressures are converging, and survivors are facing a system that is over capacity and increasingly difficult to navigate.

The evidence is clear: A recent report from Women's Shelters Canada found that emergency shelters and transition houses have an average of 17.5 funded beds but are operating 21 beds on average. That's about 20% over their funded capacity. Second-stage shelters have an average of 8.5 funded units but operate 10.5 units on average, which is about 24% above funded capacity. Meanwhile, 64% of emergency shelters and transition houses operate beyond funded capacity more than once a month. Because affordable housing is out of reach for many, 80% of emergency shelters and 65% of second-stage shelters are extending stays beyond their usual limits.

This is not just a shelter capacity issue; it is a service coordination issue as well. When survivors cannot move quickly from emergency shelters to second-stage housing or permanent affordable housing with access to income, child care, mental health care, legal assistance and other stabilization programs, the whole system backs up. The result is longer stays, longer wait-lists, more turnaways and fewer stable, safe options for survivors. We see this across the YWCA movement, and we know that the coordination work often starts before people arrive at our doors.

Since 2022, our national emergency survivor support fund has supported more than 1,400 survivors and their children with things like moving costs, transportation, rent, utilities and housing stabilization, and 90% of participants in this program said this support was the primary reason they were able to leave violent situations and start a new life.

We cannot keep up with the demand. A recent internal survey shows an average stay of 19 months in transitional housing, with occupancy averaging above 95% at all times. More than 60% of YWCAs maintain a wait-list for housing units, and close to 9,000 women and their families are currently waiting for housing and support services in our system. These pressures fall the hardest on indigenous women, Black and racialized women, newcomer women, women with disabilities and women in rural, northern and remote communities. At the same time, more than half the organizations report a chronic shortfall in core operational funding, alongside staff burnout and turnover.

The question is really about funding shelters as essential community infrastructure. Renewing the national action plan to end gender-based violence should include plans for sustained and flexible operational funding so that shelters and transitional housing providers can maintain appropriate staffing, programming, building operations and wraparound supports. We need capital funding to expand and preserve safe, affordable and supportive permanent housing so that survivors can move through a real continuum of care instead of getting stuck in emergency spaces that were never meant to function as long-term solutions.

If we are serious about responding adequately to gender-based violence, then our policy and funding decisions must match the reality that survivors and frontline workers face every day.

Thank you for your time.

• (1550)

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Nizigama, thank you for your statement.

We'll begin with questions from the Conservatives.

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

[English]

Connie Cody (Cambridge, CPC): Thank you.

Through you, Chair, I want to thank all the witnesses for coming today. It's greatly appreciated that you can share your insights on our shelter system.

I would like to start with Ms. Matheson.

You mentioned that shelters are not designed for current needs. For those individuals fleeing violence who are housed alongside those dealing with severe mental health needs and addictions, how are shelters set up to take on responsibilities that go beyond what they were designed for, particularly when it comes to protecting those in need of additional supports while respecting those fleeing an environment of violence and addiction?

Marilyn Matheson: We work with a lot of community partners to provide mental health support, especially for children. We have a

grant from the provincial government to have child therapists through the Crossroads children's treatment centre. We're working with them and we work with a lot of the community health centres that also have counselling.

We have outreach services ourselves. We reach out to people who are on our wait-list to see if we can provide a safety plan for them and see how they can maybe move to a different place, such as a hotel that's hosted by the City of Ottawa.

However, those places are really difficult for families, because a lot of the drug dealers and human traffickers wait outside for the teenagers to come out. It's really a difficult situation for parents. I've talked to several mothers who are afraid to have their teenagers walk out after they come home from school when they're living in these hotels and motels. It's very difficult.

Connie Cody: That's terrible.

Women are staying in unsafe relationships because they simply cannot afford rent, groceries or child care on their own. Are you seeing that affordability pressures directly increase demand for shelter services?

Marilyn Matheson: We're seeing....

Do you mean the affordability of our services?

Connie Cody: Are you seeing an increase of those in need of shelters because of the affordability crisis?

Marilyn Matheson: Yes, we absolutely are. We're seeing a lot of women at our door who don't have any income. They were not allowed to work when they were married, or they weren't allowed to get any education higher than high school, and they don't qualify for anything. We're seeing all kinds of situations at our door.

Connie Cody: When a woman is in an unsafe relationship such as that—you mentioned that they're not able to work—would it not affect them later on or in their retirement years if they cannot accumulate hours of work and have income to support themselves?

Marilyn Matheson: Yes.

Connie Cody: Would that also keep them in an unsafe relationship?

Marilyn Matheson: Yes, absolutely. That keeps them in an unsafe relationship.

Several of these women will have four, five or six kids. We have a family of six kids in two bedrooms. It's very difficult for the family, especially in trying to share bedrooms and divide them among genders. Their bedrooms are very small, and they've been there for years.

Connie Cody: You would acknowledge that financial coercion and financial abuse are also barriers for women—

Marilyn Matheson: Absolutely, financial abuse is. Yes.

Connie Cody: Does your facility currently have a wait-list? If so, how long is it?

Marilyn Matheson: Yes, we do. There are over 130 families.

Connie Cody: What are the dangers of having a wait-list of over 130 families? Does that put vulnerable families at risk of experiencing more violence?

Marilyn Matheson: Yes, it does.

As I said, we have our outreach people. When you apply, if we don't have a space for you, our outreach program reaches out to you and advises you of a safety plan. Depending on your circumstances, you may end up in one of the hotels or motels that are operated by the City of Ottawa as shelters.

Connie Cody: With the different dynamics of all the shelter systems, especially those for families fleeing domestic violence, I'm hearing that the statistics do not always show everyone who's in emergency shelter support. Have you heard that?

Could you also tell me what the stats are for the current number of women in second-stage shelters? Has there been a rise in that number in the last five to 10 years?

Marilyn Matheson: I don't have the exact numbers for five or 10 years with me, but they have risen quite a bit. We started out with 16 units, and they were not full at the time, 40 years ago. Now we have 130 families on the waiting list.

A lot of these women are not being counted because they're in the city shelters. They need the support of counsellors on violence against women, but they're not able to reach them because they're being housed in city hotels and motels.

• (1555)

Connie Cody: Would you say it is an oversight not to account for everyone in the statistics—

Marilyn Matheson: Yes.

Connie Cody: —to reveal the lack of affordable housing for them?

Marilyn Matheson: Yes.

Connie Cody: I've spoken with a lot of women who feel that the shelter system can be unsafe due to the active drug abuse and violence that often occurs. Additionally, entering these spaces can be retraumatizing for women fleeing relationships with chronic drug users or domestic violence situations.

Are shelters of today truly a safe transitional housing space for women and children fleeing domestic abuse and violence?

Marilyn Matheson: Yes, there are places other than VAW shelters where women who have addiction problems can go. However, we know that if they're separated from their children when they're

suffering from addiction, it's not good for the mother and it's not good for the children. We need to seriously look at—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Matheson. That's all the time we have for Ms. Cody's questions.

Ms. Ménard, you have six minutes.

Marie-Gabrielle Ménard (Hochelaga—Rosemont-Est, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to thank these experts for enlightening us. This is an important study.

I'm not sure if you'll be able to provide us with the data. If you do have it and you'd like to send it to us later, we'd be more than happy to receive it.

I'll begin with you, Ms. Brazeau and Ms. Brien.

Since the beginning of this study, everyone has been talking to us about waiting lists. Obviously, it's heartbreaking to hear. How many beds would you estimate are missing, even just to accommodate those who come seeking first-stage support? We're really talking about emergency shelters. Can you quantify the demand?

Élise Brien: I can answer the question.

Currently, throughout Quebec, we are working on a report in partnership with others. In fact, the report falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health and Social Services, but we are contributing to its preparation. We have not yet reached any conclusions as to the number of available spots, but we know there is a shortage in 13 out of 17 regions in Quebec, and that the need is an absolute priority in six regions where refusal rates are extremely high. In the Montreal, Quebec City and Laval regions, the success rate for securing housing ranges from 20 to 30 per cent, which is very low indeed.

However, we know we would be able to create additional beds in the short term. For our coalition and our 47 members, we could create approximately 60 beds. I'm referring here to available but unfunded spots. We'll need to build new homes, and we'll need to do so fairly quickly. Currently, the average wait time is eight weeks. These are the latest figures we have, and they date back to 2024—but we know that wait times have increased.

Marie-Gabrielle Ménard: Thank you.

Incidentally, I was in Montreal on Monday for the announcement of a new shelter being built—Gabrielle House. Given my first name, I think this shelter will always hold a special place in my heart. We are indeed well aware that it is absolutely essential to quickly increase the number of available beds.

Ms. Matheson, I hadn't necessarily prepared to speak on this topic, but I was very moved when you spoke about the experience of children who are growing up and need to develop—whether during a short or longer stay—in an environment that may not be their home, namely a shelter. You mentioned, for example, that these children cannot invite friends over for their birthdays.

What kind of stories do you hear? How do you interpret the experiences of children who have to go through the shelter system?

[English]

Marilyn Matheson: In one case, we have a family who started out in an emergency shelter, and they've been with us now for over four years. They are growing up. We have seen them throughout the child care system. Now they're attending the after-school program, but they can't bring their friends back, because they're in a shelter.

The problem with housing for them is that the mother has been held back due to immigration problems.

[Translation]

Marie-Gabrielle Ménard: That's enlightening.

What we're also trying to highlight through the testimony you're providing are survivors' experiences. What concrete benefits can a stay at a shelter offer? I don't want to come across as tactless or insensitive, but are we also, at times, witnessing a revolving door phenomenon? What causes women to return there at times? There are undoubtedly factors that shape that reality. What should we bear in mind in our report?

Once again, I'm addressing these questions to you, Ms. Brazeau and Ms. Brien.

• (1600)

Annick Brazeau: In fact, what support and shelter centres also do is overcome the isolation these women face and encourage them to help one another, share tips and see that possibilities do exist. There are also women and children who don't speak French and will learn it by interacting with other women and children.

As for your other question about why some women come back, I'd say that domestic violence is truly a process. That's why it's important to be there for these women, to give them tools, and to meet with them regularly. It's a journey; things can't be rushed, and steps must be taken to build a solid foundation and help women understand the process. It may take seven visits for some women before they leave their abusive partners. That's one of the reasons; we need to take the time to properly establish a foundation and give women the tools they need.

Furthermore, it's clear that sometimes the cost of housing—or the fact that these women don't have access to affordable housing—creates situations where some of them will quickly enter into a new relationship or return to their old one. As you know, because of the cost of living—even for two people—it's hard to make ends meet these days. So it's even harder for single people or single mothers.

Those explanations may answer your question.

Marie-Gabrielle Ménard: Ms. Nizigama, would you like to add a few words about survivors' experiences? What do they share with you?

Aline Nizigama: When it comes to breaking this cycle of violence, we listen closely to survivors to determine the solutions we will implement.

The affordability crisis and the fact that it's very expensive to return to the community and find a job mean that these women are often forced to go back to their abusive partners. We're often told that the solution would be for women and children not to leave the home, and that it should be the person responsible for the violence who leaves. That's one of the solutions we need to explore, but often because it involves—

The Chair: Thank you very much. You will surely have an opportunity to finish your thought later on.

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

Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Thank you very much to the witnesses for being with us today.

Ms. Nizigama, we may have an opportunity to speak again.

Ms. Matheson, I want to come back to your experience with children and families. I've mentioned this before, but I highlighted the awarding of a children's literature prize to a book entitled *La maison cachette*. This book tells the story of an eight-year-old girl who, along with her little brother, goes to find their mother at a shelter they call “La maison cachette”, or the hideaway house, to get her away from the violence she wants to escape. What their mother is going through is described from the perspective of an eight-year-old child. To avoid giving the story away, I will simply say that there is a birthday in the book. There's not just one birthday, but two, which the family tries to mark with the staff at the shelter, who do their best to create moments of happiness for them. It's not easy for families to go through this.

I will now turn to you, Ms. Brazeau and Ms. Brien. You have spoken at length about Build Canada Homes and what you expect from that organization.

I'm also on the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, which studied Bill C-20, an act respecting the establishment of Build Canada Homes. At this point, we have been told that, to simplify the process, Quebec would have the final say. In other words, you would have to make representations to the Société d'habitation du Québec.

From what I'm hearing in your concerns, that is not entirely the message you've received so far. Is that correct?

Élise Brien: Indeed, at the moment, on the ground, the Regroupement has a few projects under way, as does our sister organization, the Alliance des maisons d'hébergement de 2^e étape, the Alliance MH2. I would say that the current relationship with Build Canada Homes is quite complex. I won't lie to you: What's happening is pretty chaotic. The directives and guidance we receive change on a weekly, if not daily, basis. At present, the forms and letters of understanding are very complex, and we're not at all at that stage with the SHQ.

Unfortunately, the issue of the two institutions having difficulty communicating persists, especially on the SHQ side. At the SHQ, we still don't have a program dedicated to the construction of transition houses and shelters, and second-stage housing. This makes things even more complex. Unfortunately, the situation is not at all resolved.

• (1605)

Annick Brazeau: If I may add something to what my colleague said, it's not financially possible to carry out a project with the Société d'habitation du Québec. Given that construction costs have increased significantly, to avoid having large mortgages, support from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation is necessary because it's not possible to do it with the SHQ alone.

Now, combining the two involves different criteria, and it's very difficult to carry out projects. It often takes several years.

Andréanne Larouche: However, we've been told that this is a need, and we all know that.

We constantly hear that the steps keep being pushed back one after another. When a woman arrives at an emergency resource, there is no space in a first-stage shelter. She stays in the emergency resource, so she takes the place of a woman who would need to be admitted on an emergency basis. She cannot continue her process of becoming independent and getting out of this cycle by moving into a shelter. All of this pushes back and delays her process of getting out of that cycle, so we need this.

My question is the following. Quebec already has an extensive network of shelters. If I understand correctly, there is a shortage of spaces in 13 out of 17 regions, and in six regions, including Montreal and Quebec City, the situation is even more problematic. You may come back to funding, but is there another reason that explains why we've reached this point?

What are the main challenges faced by first and second-stage shelters?

Ms. Brazeau, you were interrupted during your opening remarks, so I'd like to give you the opportunity to say what you didn't have time to say.

Annick Brazeau: I wanted to talk about our proposal in relation to what is being done elsewhere.

Among other things, the Australian model provides a relocation fund for women leaving shelters. It is used to purchase household appliances and furniture so that victims can re-establish themselves. That's what's missing as well. Some provinces already offer it, but it isn't available everywhere. It could help and encourage women.

I'll now come back to your first question.

You've spoken a lot about the shortage of shelters. In most of our shelters, we can accommodate 12 women and children. The larger houses can accommodate 18 women and children. That's not a lot, given that they stay for two to three months. It's important to understand that there are many victims of intimate partner violence, and we're unable to meet the demand.

I mentioned the figures from SOS violence conjugale. For almost one request out of two, they are able to find a place somewhere in Quebec. In the meantime, we work with these victims and try to see whether they can stay with friends or family. However, while some are waiting to be admitted, others are added to the waiting list, so there is a shortage of shelters.

We talked about Montreal. More than one is needed because these are small houses, and the number of spaces is limited. Often, these were houses we purchased and tried to adapt. We need new construction to allow for larger spaces so that we can provide services and accommodate more women and children.

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

That completes this round of questions.

We'll now go to Mrs. Roberts for five minutes.

[English]

Anna Roberts (King—Vaughan, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses. What you do is not easy, and I want to thank you for doing it.

I'm going to ask Mrs. Matheson the first question.

Violence against women has increased by 76%. Is there not a responsibility to protect women by ensuring that laws are in place to keep the perpetrators behind bars?

Marilyn Matheson: It is, but there are a lot of women who are afraid to report, because once they report, if the abuser is still left in the home, they can be abused again.

It's a cultural thing as well. Certain cultures just don't abuse. In rural areas, your neighbour is far away, so it's hard to run to your neighbour to phone.

The safety tips that we give are to always find a room that you can lock yourself into and to always keep your cellphone with you so you can call for help, but sometimes the police services don't show up or they don't see it as a difficult situation and they leave the abuser there.

• (1610)

Anna Roberts: You mentioned housing, and I think everybody on this panel mentioned housing. My concern is this: What percentage of women seeking transitional housing are currently unable to access your services due to the capacity constraints?

Marilyn Matheson: As I said, we have a waiting list of 130 families, and there are a lot more out there. I don't have the exact numbers of the percentage that can't access our housing, but it's stable housing that we need, not just shelters.

Anna Roberts: Here's what confuses me, and maybe you can help clarify this. I will ask this question of all the witnesses.

In July 2024, we were called back to committee because of the 76% increase in intimate partner violence. Here we are, two years later, still hearing about the lack of housing from all witnesses. How is it that this current government has a housing plan, and yet in every committee that we go into, every witness who comes forward has the same scenario—lack of housing? What is it that we need to do to make this government understand the importance of saving women and having the ability to provide them with proper housing? It's two years later, and we're still hearing the same thing.

Anyone can answer that.

We'll start with you, Mrs. Matheson.

Marilyn Matheson: If we don't provide the housing and get children out of the shelters, we're not going to end the cycle of abuse. They may continue the cycle because of this. Down the line, it's going to get worse.

Anna Roberts: I will ask everyone the same question.

Do we need to put more pressure on the government to ensure that housing is ready for these women so that they can have a safe place to raise their families, yes or no?

Aline Nizigama: I can jump in.

You asked a question about why we're not seeing any.... The stats are continuing to go up.

We know that times of economic crisis or difficulty are accompanied by increasing violence levels.

What we are not seeing in current approaches is a dedicated carve-out in the funding that we have for affordable housing, especially for shelters and transitional housing. We need to have a dedicated carve-out.

You asked a question about statistics. Current estimates are that 40% of all wait-lists for affordable housing are for women, children and families, a lot of them fleeing unsafe situations. We need to see equivalent levels of funding—a dedicated carve-out for women and families facing violence in order to have the tracking numbers that—

Anna Roberts: I'm sorry to interrupt.

What would you tell this government is the most crucial thing right now to ensure that we protect these women escaping violence? What is the number one thing?

Aline Nizigama: We need to fast-track the housing. We need Build Canada Homes to work with established organizations like YWCAs or other community partners that have shovel-ready projects and can start building right now. We have wait-lists already. Then we can start unclogging the system and have that flow. Shelter beds would be freer for whoever needs them next.

We are not seeing that yet, but we are hopeful. We've included this in our pre-budget submission.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much for your comments, Ms. Nizigama.

I'll now turn the floor over to Ms. Tesser Derksen for five minutes.

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

[English]

I want to ask a quick question of Ms. Matheson about what my colleague Ms. Roberts was saying about criminal law reform legislation.

I was in the House delivering a speech on Bill C-16, which is the protecting victims act. I'd like to follow up on your previous answer and get your take, Ms. Matheson, on the steps this bill is taking to make women feel justice is more accessible to them.

I worked in family law and the violence against women sector. A complaint we often faced was that justice is so difficult for these women to access. Even though these women might be seeking emergency housing or other types of safeguards, navigating the justice system in family courts—which often intersect with criminal courts—is so convoluted, expensive, time-consuming, puzzling and confounding for them.

We're talking about Bill C-16 and the measures we're taking to enhance victims' rights, whether it's through having testimonial aids, ensuring that the justice system moves faster or making sure we allot additional time to cases of intimate partner violence so they don't get turfed out based on Jordan rules.

Can you talk to me a bit about how you and your sector are interpreting how Bill C-16 will affect or impact these women's lives and your work?

• (1615)

Marilyn Matheson: One of the problems women are facing is the cost of getting legal counsel to help them. All of our frontline workers are tied up helping with wraparound services so that these women know where to go and how to access it. There is no free legal help out there. It's a big barrier. Then they end up falling back. There are so many other things they need to consider: their job, looking for a job or their kids. It sometimes falls off the table for them.

Kristina Tesser Derksen: Yes, I fully understand what you're talking about. It's really about those on-the-ground practical supports. Access to legal advice and some services is expensive and hard to come by, for sure.

At the federal level, the tools we have are largely legislative. When we talk about reforming criminal law, or at least making laws more.... I wouldn't say "friendly", but it's about making laws more conducive to women feeling that they can come forward and at least seek that type of assistance. It should be faster for them to navigate through the courts, for example.

I understand you have some practical concerns about how women access justice on the ground. As far as what we can do at the federal level in terms of reforming criminal legislation, do you have more suggestions for how we could flesh that out?

Marilyn Matheson: There's looking at the parole system as well, because some of the abusers are getting out too soon, or the fear of their getting out is not helpful to these women.

Kristina Tesser Derksen: Yes, and to that end we have Bill C-14, which is our bail and sentencing reform legislation. It is currently at the Senate. We're hoping to get it into the hands of law enforcement so that they can start having on-the-ground impacts as well.

I'd ask a question of Madame Nizigama, if I could.

This is about your experience in dealing with folks around equity who might have intersectional identities. I want to ask specifically about youth who may be from the 2SLGBTQIA community. How common is it to have young people seeking shelter from the YW-CA?

Aline Nizigama: We see young people come in with their families, with their parents, when they are in the same violent situations, but we can also catch some of the younger people who are facing difficult issues, for example, discrimination, because they may be trans. They're coming through our youth programming as well. We have very low-barrier expert counselling services that can catch certain issues when they present in those services.

I can share some statistics later. I don't have them at the top of my head right now. We see a fair number of those, because we know there has been rising rhetoric around queer youth that is making it unsafe for them to reveal certain situations. We're trying to catch them when they come with families, as well as through our youth programs.

Kristina Tesser Derksen: Further, for those queer youth specifically, really, the work we would like to do is just prevent all of this from happening in the first place.

Aline Nizigama: That's exactly right.

Kristina Tesser Derksen: Can you talk to us a bit about the systemic issues you're seeing that are causing these youth to seek emergency services, whether it's familial, cultural, linguistic, financial....

Aline Nizigama: It could be the situation at home—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: That will be for another round, Ms. Nizigama. Your time is up. I'm so sorry. I always seem to catch you. Thank you for your understanding.

I now give the floor to Ms. Larouche for two and a half minutes.

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Witnesses, thank you again for being with us today for this very important study. Thank you for all the work you do every day. I hope you take care of yourselves so that you don't fall prey to compassion fatigue, because that's a huge risk when you work in this environment.

I'll be quick. I'll turn to Ms. Brien. Ms. Brazeau might have something to add afterward.

We talk a lot about shelter spaces, but we also know that a lot of women are experiencing hidden homelessness before they seek help to get out of a cycle of violence in tough situations. How is that reality reflected around you? What are you hearing about hidden homelessness?

• (1620)

Annick Brazeau: Can I answer the question first? That's good.

In fact, these are often women who will stay with a bunch of different people. They will live with friends or with men they have some kind of relationship with. These are women who move from place to place. They can only stay at a shelter for a certain amount of time. Shelters can't provide long-term housing.

Since women aren't able to find other affordable housing and so on, they'll live with someone else, as I just said. Sometimes, they will couch surf or stay in a spare room and then become victims of violence by the person who is supposed to be housing them and showing them kindness. That's not what should be happening.

Sometimes women are at risk. They will experience violence again, whether by a regular or casual partner, because they can't find housing and so on. There are all kinds of relationships.

Andréanne Larouche: I see you nodding, Ms. Brien. Do we have enough data to measure the extent of the problem?

Élise Brien: Unfortunately, it's very difficult to document, given that it is hidden homelessness.

What I would add on this issue is that women are in a unique situation, especially when they have children. They're at risk of losing their children because of hidden homelessness. That leaves them even less choice, which means that they will likely return to an abusive partner because they have a real fear of their children being taken away.

Andréanne Larouche: That's the problem.

I have fewer than 10 seconds left, but beyond shelter spaces, I want your human resources to be okay. We can talk about that another time.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Larouche.

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

[English]

Connie Cody: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm going to focus my questions now on Ms. Nizigama.

Thank you for coming today.

The national shelter study's 2024 update shows that the shelter occupancy rate is increasing due to an increase in the number of users overall, as well as the length of stay. Do you see the affordability crisis and the rising cost of living as factors resulting in this increase?

Aline Nizigama: Absolutely. We always see that cross between affordability, specifically when it has to do with housing, and gender-based violence. The cross of that is what's increasing the numbers we're seeing in the shelters and in the demand for affordable housing.

Connie Cody: Have you seen this increase over the past five to 10 years?

Aline Nizigama: We've seen that increase. Also, we see it because of the lack of a continuum of care. People are not going into and moving through the system as they should when they come at the emergency point. We also see it because there's just a lack of coordination in the provincial-federal-territorial plans, so that, again, we're not getting adequate support, whether that's operational or it's funding to support people. The wait-lists are getting longer, and people are waiting longer.

Connie Cody: You're talking about wait-lists, and it looks as though it's a significant number in different areas. Have you heard of women being turned away because the shelters are full? What are the consequences to these women for their safety when there's nowhere else for them to go?

Aline Nizigama: The stats are that 1,000 women and children are being turned away every month right now because of a lack of space.

I didn't catch the last part of your question, but we have people being turned away. Actually, for the monthly stats collectively in Canada, 20,000 women and children are being turned away every month at the shelters.

Connie Cody: I'd like to focus on the last part of my question, because I really want to know what the consequences are for their safety when they have nowhere else to go.

• (1625)

Aline Nizigama: They have to go back to unsafe situations or they are on the street or in.... As I think somebody mentioned, sometimes we were able to help them and put them in a third space, like a motel, but again, that's when we start seeing some risk for human trafficking and other challenges that can happen because of that desperation.

There's the risk of retraumatizing and then intergenerational risk, as in passing on the cycle to the next generation, especially when there are children involved. We're also seeing critical risks, such as fatalities. We've seen a rise in homicides. When women are leaving unsafe situations, their abusers are likely to have the most extreme forms of violence.

Connie Cody: Would keeping the cost of living affordable better support women so that they can move away from shelters, be more self-sufficient and move away from abusive relationships?

Aline Nizigama: Yes, and we see that in our services.

Because we are a multiservice YWCA, we have the largest network of employment programs for women. We move people from that scarcity emergency into skilling, upskilling and re-skilling, and then help them attain a job and be able to rebuild their lives. We give them access to child care and give the younger people in their care access to camps and other services so that they have that wraparound service. This includes counselling and other things they may need for their mental health, and other areas as well, such as legal help. That multiservice approach is an approach that we would like to see supported and funded adequately.

Connie Cody: We see that seniors are more likely to struggle with mobility issues. With this affordability crisis, more seniors seem to be seeking the shelter system. Would you say that the shelter system is equipped to accommodate the unique mobility needs of seniors? Has the system kept pace with the growing number of seniors who now have nowhere else to go?

Aline Nizigama: No, we have gaps in that care. This is something that we are studying at YWCA. Many of our member associations are looking to build, as part of their new plan builds, facilities in which they can have that accessibility and the supports for needs that come with aging, especially for women, knowing that we don't have a lot of.... There are gaps there as well for women's health that we're not going to get into here, which we are also looking to support.

No, we haven't kept up with the fact that we have an aging population, but we are very aware of that.

Connie Cody: We should concentrate on affordability in housing at this point then.

Aline Nizigama: Yes.

Connie Cody: Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: That's it. Ms. Cody's turn is over.

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

[English]

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I want to start with you, Ms. Nizigama, because you were talking about the amount of violence that is happening and the danger if women return to where they came from. That's why our government is trying to advance Bill C-16, so we can get at such things as coercive control and prevent the femicides that are happening. I know that the national action plan on gender-based violence is up for renewal. How important is it to renew that?

Aline Nizigama: It's critical to renew that. We think that we should start some of those negotiations. We've seen the delays that happened the last time when we were having the provincial and territorial negotiations. We are calling for an urgent beginning of that process so that, when it comes to the end of the current agreements, we are ready to go and it's adequately funded. We also are calling for a commissioner to oversee that implementation, because we think that's going to come with more accountability and reporting on the numbers and the impact.

Marilyn Gladu: It's really needed. I think that, along with the \$1 billion dollars that's been put aside for shelters and transitional housing, more is needed. This is super important.

Ms. Matheson, you mentioned child care. I'm interested to know about child care in the shelter situation. What's the availability like? Is there another gap there?

Marilyn Matheson: There is. We have a small child care centre, but because of capacity, staffing and the space size, we can only help women who are taking courses or are going to court or medical appointments. We can't do permanent child care for women who are working. This is a big difficulty. The child care has to be trauma-informed child care, because the children have witnessed what their mother has gone through. That is a specialized area.

Marilyn Gladu: Ms. Nizigama, do you provide child care services as well at the YWCAs across the country?

• (1630)

Aline Nizigama: We are the second-largest non-profit provider of child care across the country. Yes, we usually do the co-location of building new housing and child care. They are often together. That's also something that we're proposing in the 2,000 units that we have planned over the next three years and that we're trying to work with Build Canada Homes on.

Marilyn Gladu: We've heard a lot of witnesses talk about the lack of transitional housing. I'm trying to get more information about what transitional housing really looks like. Is that townhouses? Is it apartments? Is it a combination of things? I would ask each of the witnesses if they could weigh in on that, starting with Ms. Nizigama.

Aline Nizigama: In our services, it really depends on the profile of the people we're helping. Sometimes it could be co-location and multiple women living together. That becomes a kind of kinship model, in which they also care for each other and help meet each other's needs. We also may need some individualized support.

It also depends on the level of trauma and whether we also have some substance use challenges that we may need to tackle. It really does depend, and we try to have that customized care for everybody.

Marilyn Gladu: Ms. Brazeau and Ms. Brien, what are your comments?

[*Translation*]

Annick Brazeau: Assistance and emergency shelters are homes with multiple rooms and common spaces where help is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We also offer outreach services at our shelters, because we can't house all the women. Meetings will be scheduled with women who don't need housing or whom we

can't accommodate. There's a waiting period there too. Sometimes women can wait three to six months to get help.

Then we have second-stage housing, which is housing with a certain amount of supervision and support. Our resources are there to support victims.

Earlier, there was a lot of talk about hotels as a solution, and I'd like to take a moment to talk about that. Sometimes, we have no choice but to use hotels. We've tried it, and the problem we've seen is that women can experience violence because partners can show up. There is no security and, worse, women get no psychological help while at the hotels. We really don't think it's a solution.

[*English*]

Marilyn Gladu: I'm just about out of time.

Ms. Matheson, could you quickly talk about transitional housing and what that looks like?

Marilyn Matheson: I don't feel that transitional housing is appropriate for children, because they have been pushed from pillar to post already. We need third-stage housing, stabilized housing and supports for that supportive housing. They still need supports, and they still need trauma-informed counselling.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you to all four of you for making yourselves available today.

Welcome back, Ms. Matheson.

I will suspend the meeting for a few moments while we welcome the second panel of witnesses.

• (1630)

(Pause)

• (1635)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

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

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mike and please mute yourself when you are not speaking.

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

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

I would like to remind witnesses that committee members may ask questions in either French or English. If you will need interpretation, please take a moment now to prepare your earpiece and select the listening channel you need so as not to waste precious seconds.

A reminder that all comments should be addressed through the chair. However, as you may have noticed, I don't take part in the discussions. I just stop them when the time is up.

[English]

I will now welcome our witnesses.

From Mercer Advocates Law Professional Corporation, we have Kirsten Mercer, lawyer and gender-based violence policy expert.

From the safe house and service hub for survivors of sex trafficking in York region, we have Carol Wildgoose, team lead.

Finally, from Women's Support Network of York Region, we have Dr. Jacqueline Benn-John, executive director.

Welcome to all.

We will begin the opening statements with Ms. Mercer.

The floor is yours for five minutes, Madame.

• (1640)

Kirsten Mercer (Lawyer and Gender-Based Violence Policy Expert, Mercer Advocates Law Professional Corporation): Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee, for the opportunity to appear before you today. Also, thank you for the work that you're undertaking on this important topic.

My name is Kirsten Mercer. I'm a lawyer who practises in the field of human rights and gender justice, as well as in GBV policy, as we sometimes refer to it. I'm privileged to work with survivors, frontline service providers, antiviolence agencies, policy-makers and other experts in an effort to develop and advocate for systemic policy and program solutions that will bring us closer to a world without violence.

I have five points I'd like to share with the committee today, but I will speak to three of those points during my opening remarks. I would be happy to speak to any of the additional recommendations during questions. Some of them have already come up in testimony you've heard from my colleagues in this work.

My first point is to fix the funding structure for gender-based violence services in order to ensure adequacy for Canadians. In order for shelter services to be delivered effectively, these critical links in the architecture of our public and community safety systems must be adequately and sustainably funded.

In most, if not all, of the country, shelter funding is allocated backwards. Typically, shelters are provided with a fixed amount of funding on a per-bed basis, and that figure has usually failed to keep up with inflation and rising costs. This funding is not based on the current reality of what it actually costs to deliver emergency shelter services, much less what is required to deliver all of the other programming that is routinely delivered by shelters across the country.

As you have already heard from my colleagues who have appeared before you, most shelters in Canada consistently operate over capacity because they cannot bear to turn survivors away. However, the funding does not stretch far enough.

It has been many years since the allocation of funding was driven by an evidence-based, ground-up understanding of what it costs to properly deliver these services. These factors must be understood, and we must understand these services as core to public safety. They are being delivered to some of the most vulnerable members of our community. In many places, services are being funded, at least in part, through raffles, T-shirt sales and donations from members of the public. We can do better than that.

Funding for these vital services should be based in reality and on what it costs to do the job properly, not on outdated funding formulas. Our approach must start with the true cost of delivering services at the standard of adequacy that Canadians deserve, with allowances for the unique needs of rural and remote communities and for the cost of delivering fully accessible services, as well as with an ability to meet the language and cultural needs of all the people who need to access these services.

My second point is to support the leadership of the anti-gender-based violence movement. Beyond providing emergency and transitional housing services, many shelters are committed to working upstream to support violence and femicide prevention. They are engaging in community coordination and high-risk case management in their communities, along with other programs that are rooted in evidence-based practices to keep survivors safer. In many cases, this work is seen as ancillary. It's a nice-to-have, not a need-to-have, and it's funded that way. Many agencies do this work off the corners of their desks with little or no core funding support for this critical prevention work.

The organizations do it because they believe that we should be working at least as hard at preventing gender-based violence as we do at trying to keep survivors safer when they flee that violence. These workers are subject matter experts in gender-based violence, and they have the knowledge and experience around what we need to do in order to prevent it. They have to be afforded the resources to lead that prevention work in their communities.

My third point is that gender-based violence infrastructure is essential physical, human and social infrastructure. It's a critical part of the care economy. The gender-based violence workforce in Canada is a huge economic and wellness driver for both survivors and the gender-based violence workforce. With over 30,000 workers, it's a critical part of the care economy in this country. Those workers exist in every riding. Real gender-based violence prevention will help unlock vast economic capacity in Canada by freeing up literally billions of dollars that are being spent to deal with gender-based violence, both the impact on survivors and the cost of delivering services. The human and physical infrastructure of this sector is a critical part of what makes our communities safe.

• (1645)

Although people may not see these workers as visible pillars in their communities—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to cut you off.

Kirsten Mercer: That's okay. I was almost done.

The Chair: You're very kind. Thank you very much.

Ms. Wildgoose, you now have the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

Carol Wildgoose (Team Lead, Safe House and Service Hub for Survivors of Sex Trafficking in York Region): Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

For six years, I have had the privilege to work in a volunteer capacity as team lead with senior leadership of York Regional Police, 360°Kids, the Women's Support Network and Victim Support Services in York region to have a purpose-built safe house and service hub for survivors of sex trafficking constructed in York region.

I am here to share with you a first-hand experience of trying to build housing for an extremely vulnerable population experiencing gender-based violence, whose needs differ from those experiencing intimate partner violence and domestic violence. They are the literally hundreds of young girls and young women who are bought and sold every day in the conduct of sex trafficking. The reality is that in York region, in the 15-month period between January 1, 2025, to the first quarter of 2026, the aforementioned agencies supported over 360 survivors. All need specialized care because of having experienced extreme trauma from physical and sexual violence, emotional manipulation causing extreme mental health issues and substance use disorders resulting from coerced use of substances for the purposes of control. In some cases, survivors are tortured; Stockholm syndrome can also be involved.

Some survivors have children with their trafficker, with children used as yet another form of control. Survivors will not leave a trafficker without a safe place to go with their children. They need security and trauma-informed care delivered 24-7 in a small, specialized, safe-house environment by experienced professionals and professionals with lived experience. Experts recommend no more than six survivors housed in one setting.

Women's gender-based violence shelters are not equipped to care for survivors whose experiences and traumas are very different and very disturbing to their clients. In York region, there are only six

beds for survivors operated by 360°Kids. These are restricted to women ages 16 to 26. There are zero crisis beds and zero new beds for those over the age of 26.

Note that SafeHope Home moved from Durham region to York region this year after fire destroyed their home last summer. While they are now located in York region, this is not new capacity. The math is very simple. There is an enormous need for specialized housing. Today, I am sharing the roadblocks we have experienced in securing funding from two levels of government for survivors. Despite six years of sustained work that resulted in all the required justified groundwork being completed, and despite securing the support of MPs, provincial cabinet ministers and regional council, there is still no approved capital funding for the critically needed safe house and service hub that would support 15 resident survivors and many more through the service hub.

One of the important messages I hope is received today regarding funding is that the unique needs of this population have not been recognized by government systems and departments. Thus, there are very few dollars allocated to housing specifically for trafficking victims. Examples of current federal and provincial housing funding application scoring questions or requirements include the cost per door, a need for funding partners, having the site already purchased and readied, etc.

As discussed, survivors need to be supported in small, home-like environments, and thus if the cost per door is considered, it will be high, and the safe house will not receive approved funding.

The Build Canada Homes and former CMHC chicken-and-egg challenge of needing partners and/or readied land before funding is approved is another roadblock. Without money, land cannot be purchased. I've secured \$500,000 in private pledges, but these cannot be exercised without a government commitment.

Not only are girls, young women and children further harmed without a safe place to live, agencies providing support experience challenges in staff retention due to burnout. Social workers must currently deliver support with the most critical piece missing—that is, safe, supported housing.

Human trafficking as a crime is second only to the traffic of guns and drugs. Unlike a drug or a gun, a girl or young woman can be sold many times each day, and they are. Without anywhere safe to go, a survivor is at a very high risk of returning to a trafficking situation, and in many cases this can mean a lifetime of harm or even death.

If cost justification is needed, a study done at the University of Manitoba in 2007 demonstrates that by providing appropriate, timely support to survivors there is a cost saving to society of \$1.7 million per survivor. That's in 2023 dollars.

This is not a partisan issue, nor is it solely a gender issue. This is an issue of our values as humans, truly owning that the worst of humanity is being demonstrated here in our country every day, when one human takes control of another using extreme violence and psychological manipulation—and then sells that victim for their own benefit.

- (1650)

Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you for providing us with this information. It's not very easy to hear things like that.

[English]

Dr. Benn-John, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Thank you.

Dr. Jacqueline Benn-John (Executive Director, Women's Support Network of York Region): Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women study.

My name is Dr. Jacqueline Benn-John and I am the executive director of the Women's Support Network of York Region. WSN was established in 1992, and it's the only community-based sexual violence support centre serving York region. It provides free and confidential support to women, trans women, youth and gender-diverse individuals impacted by sexual violence, including human trafficking.

Today, I want to highlight one critical issue: Housing insecurity, poverty and gender-based violence are deeply interconnected. A survey of 500 women and gender-diverse people experiencing homelessness across Canada conducted by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness found that 75% of respondents who were experiencing homelessness or housing needs identified themselves as survivors of gender-based violence.

Housing insecurity and poverty are drivers of gender-based violence and causes of it. Gender-based violence compels women and their children into situations in which they lose access to family and personal resources, including their own employment and financial resources. This pushes them deeper into poverty and housing insecurity. Further, nearly 80% report that unaffordable housing prevented them from leaving a violent situation. Many remain with, or return to, abusive partners, including traffickers, simply because they have nowhere else to go.

We see these realities every day in York region and across Ontario. Survivors are routinely turned away from shelters because there are no available beds. At the same time, women already in shelters cannot find affordable housing or are unable to meet the screening criteria to qualify for a lease. This creates a bottleneck that weakens the entire system intended to keep survivors safe.

To compound these challenges, survivors do not experience these barriers equally. Survivors who are indigenous, Black, racialized, newcomers, living with disabilities, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals or living in poverty often face additional barriers when seeking shelter and housing. Experiences of discrimination, racism, inaccessible services, language barriers, immigration concerns and a lack of culturally responsive supports can make it even more difficult to access safety and stable housing. As a result, those who are often at greater risk of violence are frequently those who face the greatest obstacles to finding safe places to live when fleeing from violence. Without safe housing options, leaving abuse becomes increasingly difficult and, in some cases, dangerous.

Safe housing is not simply a social support. It is a life-saving intervention. According to the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses' most recent femicide data, 79% of victims are killed inside or directly outside their residence. The Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability notes that "A woman is killed by her...partner, on average, once a week" in Canada.

At the same time, we know what works. We've been doing this work. Survivors demonstrate tremendous resilience. When they have access to stable housing and trauma-informed supports, they can heal, rebuild their lives and achieve long-term stability.

To strengthen Canada's response, we recommend four actions.

First, increase federal investment in affordable and supportive housing dedicated to individuals and families fleeing violence.

Second, expand the base funding of sexual assault centres, emergency shelters, transitional housing and second-stage housing programs to ensure that survivors can access safety when they need it.

Third, create dedicated housing pathways for survivors of sexual violence and human trafficking that prioritize safety, confidentiality and trauma-informed care. York region does not have a safe house for trafficked women, as you heard, and VAW shelters or homeless shelters cannot effectively address their unique needs.

Finally, engage sexual assault centres, shelters, housing providers and survivors themselves in designing and implementing housing solutions. Safe, stable and affordable housing is not only a housing issue. It's a violence prevention issue, a health issue and a human rights issue. No survivor should be forced to choose between homelessness and violence.

Thank you for your leadership and for the opportunity to contribute to this important study.

• (1655)

The Chair: Thank you, Madame.

[*Translation*]

We'll now go to questions from members.

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

[*English*]

Anna Roberts: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you to all the witnesses. In my eyes, you are our heroes because the work you do will help save a life.

I'm going to start with Ms. Wildgoose.

As you know, I recently did an undercover investigation with York Regional Police. I have to admit, I learned a lot. It was very educational. It was sad, but educational.

I'm going to ask you first before I move on: Are the laws tough enough to ensure that we protect women, yes or no?

Carol Wildgoose: No.

Anna Roberts: Ms. Mercer, is it yes or no?

Kirsten Mercer: I'm a lawyer, so it's hard for me to answer with one word.

The gap that really needs the attention of this committee is less the law and more the implementation. Where we're falling down isn't so much the law on paper as it is the way it is being implemented, whether it's in the courts, on the ground or bringing resources to bear on these situations.

If I were to offer any words in terms of where it is most important to place this committee's attention, it wouldn't necessarily be on reforming specific laws as it would be on ensuring that those laws are being effectively implemented and that the resources are getting to the front lines, where they're needed.

Anna Roberts: Dr. Benn-John, are the laws sufficient to protect survivors?

Dr. Jacqueline Benn-John: They are absolutely not, but laws alone cannot protect survivors. As you've just heard, it's a concern with implementation. We need to look at how laws are applied in different jurisdictions. We have to address the root problem. This is a systemic issue that goes beyond policies and laws. Addressing the systemic issues is addressing poverty, discrimination and immigration—

Anna Roberts: I'm sorry to cut you off, but I only have limited time. I do appreciate your response.

What really upset me during the undercover investigation was that within less than a minute of their posting on LeoList, as I be-

lieve it's called, the police officers had 100 requests. One of the requests was for someone younger than 13.

I met a mother in my office who was devastated. She doesn't believe that this government cares about women and survivors. Her daughter was groomed at the age of 15. By the time she found her five years later, they had to operate on her anal...and she's now on suicide watch. You know what the worst thing about it is? She was so afraid to go to court that the perpetrator got off.

When I ask the question about the law... How can we continue to protect women? Violence against women has increased 76%.

We hear it time and time again. People go to jail; they get out, and they do the same thing. We have a housing issue. We have a safety issue.

Ms. Wildgoose, I know you have been an advocate in York region to ensure that we provide shelters, but again, there's a housing issue.

What can we do here on Parliament Hill to make sure the government knows and understands?

We need a few things. We need more shelters. We need more housing. We need to educate these perpetrators to make sure that they don't become repeat offenders.

Carol Wildgoose: I'm sorry. What was the question?

Anna Roberts: What do we need to do as parliamentarians to ensure that we provide sufficient funds for housing and sufficient educational funds to ensure that these perpetrators don't continue to violate others?

Carol Wildgoose: As I mentioned when I was speaking, I just had conversations with Build Canada Homes, and several years ago I had a conversation with CMHC. Of course, there are always these things you have to have "in addition to".

First of all, when it comes to some of these things, we need to take those caveats away. If we're really serious about doing this work, we need to make sure that it isn't that difficult to do it. I've actually been doing this for more than six years, but it has been six years with the group of people I just spoke to you about.

Second, we need to educate, and we need to do a really good job of educating. One group of people who need to be educated, if you're worried about the law and how it's applied, are judges, because you can be sure.... Imagine being raped, as a woman or a man, and they find who raped you, they go into court and you have to testify as the victim. You can imagine that you are clearly the victim in that setting, usually, when they finally press charges. However, in the instance of a sex-trafficking survivor, or a wife or an intimate partner—Jacqueline would be better able to speak to this—they use language in front of the judge such as “daddy”, “boyfriend” or whatever. To the judge, that sounds like, “Hey, you actually wanted to have that relationship”, when in fact, no, it was coercion. There were different things going on there.

Then, in regard to children.... When someone first came to me with this issue, victims services said, “We need to build safe houses.” I said, “Well, we can build safe houses till the cows come home, but if we are not educating our children...” They need to know. I'm really old. When I went to school, there was Elmer the Safety Elephant. You knew never to get into a car with anybody. We didn't couch that in...the proper way to speak to somebody in intimate—

• (1700)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt your absolutely incredible oratory. You've given us a lot of information, and I commend you for that. It pains me, but I have to interrupt you, madam.

Ms. Nguyen, the floor is yours for six minutes.

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

[*English*]

Thanks very much to the witnesses for being here for this very important study.

Ms. Mercer, I know you didn't get to finish your last two points. I'm wondering, do you want to take a minute or two to add the fourth and fifth points you were speaking to?

Kirsten Mercer: Thank you very much.

I'll be brief because they've been mentioned already, but I want to add my voice to the call for the full funding and renewal of the national action plan. We know that the Liberal Party, during the last election, made a commitment to continue to support that plan. I cannot state strongly enough how important that gene rational investment and the plan that goes behind it are to tackling the issue of gender-based violence. It's a huge investment. That's been spoken to already, and I just want to add my voice to that.

The second—and again, I believe my colleague spoke about this earlier—is to add my voice to the call for a gender-based violence commissioner, at the federal level, to help oversee the implementation of the national action plan and the coordination of plans and work that's happening across various ministries, as well as to work to counteract the siloing effect that we often see in the ways that governments flow resources. I want to add my voice to the call for a gender-based violence commissioner, which I believe is a critical piece of the infrastructure.

Those were my five. Thank you.

Chi Nguyen: Thanks, Ms. Mercer.

Ms. Benn-John, you spoke a little about the role of affordable housing, and this is a theme that we have heard a number of times from other witnesses as well. Given that, in Ontario, we have fewer rental protections and challenges around affordable housing, can you talk a little about what that might mean if our systems actually made sure that we had protections in place for renters and tenants who are seeking supports and for the ability to stay in their homes?

Dr. Jacqueline Benn-John: Absolutely. It's so important to ensure that the women we're talking about, individuals who have experienced gender violence, can stay in their home, but the reality is that sometimes they are in a multi-generational home. Sometimes they are not in their own home, or they have been couch surfing. They've left an abusive situation, and they're staying elsewhere, where they are exploited again. Not everyone who experiences violence is a homeowner, and that's important to recognize.

I spoke to the intersection of poverty, for example. Many are not starting out from a place of being in the middle class or necessarily being employed. Any response has to factor in that some individuals face the additional barriers that I spoke about. Some are in a situation in which they're caregivers for children. They may also be caregivers for an elder at home. A response needs to recognize that they may need affordable housing outside and away from their original home, because it really wasn't theirs to begin with. That's really important to acknowledge. We're not all starting at the same place.

With that awareness, we will ensure that we have safe and affordable housing. I emphasize affordable, because now this individual may become a sole support parent. They may be an individual. They're on their own. They're not caregiving for anyone else but themselves, but they may be struggling with the mental health impact and the trauma associated with the violence they endured.

Some of our clients are not able to maintain housing on their own at the moment. They could not manage caregiving for themselves and may need some support. It's recognizing again that survivors are not all at the same place. The solution isn't “Here you go: Here's housing.”

Unfortunately, some have been asked to leave shelters because they're struggling to follow the communal living rules. They're dealing with addictions and mental health concerns. That, unfortunately, will result in their needing to seek other types of wraparound supports that have long waiting lists as well.

• (1705)

Chi Nguyen: Thank you, Dr. Benn-John.

Ms. Mercer, you started to describe the need for understanding this as core infrastructure, that it's social infrastructure and physical infrastructure. You also talked a bit about the care economy, the systems lens that you're starting to describe.

Can you talk about what it would take for us to take the next generational investments to address these challenges that we have and build out the systems that we need?

Kirsten Mercer: Thanks for the question.

It can be really easy to think about infrastructure investments in terms of the extractive economy, bringing things out of the ground, building things that fly in the air, building shiny rail links that connect one part of the country to the other or ships. Those things are easy for us to imagine, but we know that there is also sometimes a gendered economy, the caring economy, which is additive, in which the resources—

[*Translation*]

Marie-Gabrielle Ménard: I can't hear anything, Madam Chair, because there's too much noise. It's disrespectful to the witnesses.

The Chair: I would ask my colleagues, especially Ms. Cody and Mrs. Roberts, to keep the noise down.

Thank you in advance.

[*English*]

Kirsten Mercer: Thank you.

I was talking about how, in contrast to the extractive type of infrastructure that we sometimes imagine—pipelines are top of mind—we have an additive infrastructure that is about providing care and support. It's a very gendered kind of infrastructure. I think it's really helpful for us to think about the kinds of resources that we need to have in place in the caring economy.

We know that this economy is overwhelmingly female. In this area of work, it's work often done by women, for women, on issues that overwhelmingly impact women and other folks who are survivors. I think that we need to see that as part of our infrastructure plan.

It's been a long time since we had really good numbers at the national level about the cost of gender-based violence, but we know that, in 2009, the cost of intimate partner violence was \$7.4 billion. That's the justice system and health.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Mercer, I gave you a few extra seconds to make sure it was fair, but I have to interrupt you now.

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

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Madam Chair.

We are obviously taking copious notes. We realize that shelters are a core part of the domestic violence healing process, but as I understand it, shelters are certainly not going to solve everything. We want to empower victims to take care of themselves.

Ms. Mercer, a number of witnesses emphasized the importance of leave for victims of domestic violence, which was also mentioned in the study. What do you think an effective system would

look like? We advocate for things like a real employment insurance reform, because this type of reality must be taken into account. What would be the most effective or ideal system to help women?

Kirsten Mercer: You're talking about the women who are leaving.

Andréanne Larouche: Yes, and I'm talking about leave.

Kirsten Mercer: I'll speak in English if that's okay.

[*English*]

We have seen intimate partner violence leave or leave for people who are survivors of violence have some effectiveness. Job-protected leave is particularly important for people who are working.

Leaves are less helpful for many survivors who aren't in the workforce and who perhaps didn't have access to it. Some of the most profoundly impacted instances of intimate partner violence are folks who were prevented from engaging in the active workforce, so that may not be the best solution for folks in that situation.

As I said during my remarks, my view is that we have to shift our focus to what happens after the violence has reached a point that results in someone leaving, in the need for leave or worse, in the worst of cases. We have to switch our focus upstream. I would rather see leaves and resources being invested in prevention and in helping people get out of the situation that they're in.

One of my colleagues talked about the YWCA program. I think it's called the NESS program—the national emergency survivor support fund—which is a really small amount of money. We're hearing from survivors who say that the couple of thousand dollars made the difference. It was first and last month's rent. That money allowed them to fix their car so that they could leave. That small bit of help was what they needed to get out the door the last time and really leave the situation behind.

That echoes the recommendation that came out of the inquest in Renfrew county that took place a number of years ago. Recommendation 19 was for a similar fund. It would be a low barrier, easy-access fund referred through service providers in the community—not necessarily the justice system, because we know that many survivors don't go to the justice system looking for help. They go to other places in their community, whether it's shelter services or other services for survivors.

These are small grants. To be honest with you, these are hugely impactful for many people. The difference between staying and going can be really as simple as a few thousand dollars. I don't mean simple, but from a cost perspective, that's the best \$2,000 a government could ever spend, if that's the difference and if that's what is holding someone back.

• (1710)

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: Obviously, finances are a huge issue when it comes to leaving an abusive situation.

I want to come back to something you touched on in your opening remarks. We just talked about money, but based on your expertise as a lawyer specializing in gender-based violence, what might the other main legal barriers be that prevent women from leaving a violent situation? You briefly touched on it a little bit in your remarks. I'd like you to talk a bit more about that.

Bill C-16, which will recognize coercive control, will soon be adopted. Will it be a useful protection mechanism?

[*English*]

Kirsten Mercer: Thank you for the question. I'm glad to speak to this.

The concept of coercive control is a really important one. I know we've been talking today about Bill C-16 and the criminalization of coercive control. That's one set of tools.

We saw a couple of weeks ago, in the civil context, the Supreme Court of Canada ruling in the Ahluwalia and Ahluwalia case, in which the court created a new tort—a kind of claim for suing. One of the main factors there is around coercive control.

This is a really important concept, but I want to be clear that I don't think the solution to this problem lies in the criminal law. We need criminal law tools in order to tackle this, but I think we're fooling ourselves if we think that addressing the harm after it's happened is the way to get to where we need to go.

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: We know that the Criminal Code provides additional tools, but that the administration of justice falls under the jurisdiction of Quebec and the provinces.

Therefore, it is also important that funds be transferred so that Quebec and the provinces can have the tools to enforce the law. As you say, we already have laws, but we have trouble enforcing them because of staffing shortages and a lack of resources.

[*English*]

Kirsten Mercer: My view would be that the best money that could be spent in the justice system right now—in addition to educating the judiciary, which I think is important, is—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you. That completes the discussion.

I will now give the floor to Ms. Cody for five minutes.

[*English*]

Connie Cody: Through you, Chair, thank you to the witnesses. I'm collecting a pile of information here.

I'm going to address my questions to Carol Wildgoose.

Victims of human trafficking require unique supports to help them recover from the deep trauma and extreme abuse they experienced, and they require safe spaces to heal and recover.

Do you think the current shelter system provides this support?

• (1715)

Carol Wildgoose: Because of the unique traumas experienced, they can't be cared for in other domestic and intimate partner violence shelters. They often leave with their children as well. If I remember correctly, Dr. Benn-John said that 50% of the survivors they see have children with their traffickers.

It's really important that we have shelters geared towards trafficking victims.

Connie Cody: Recently, I received a message from someone in my riding. She told me about her horrific experience of being trafficked out of a women's shelter.

What can we do to ensure that women are not being trafficked from there and getting recruited into a life of exploitation?

Carol Wildgoose: We need to do a better job of policing what's happening outside our shelters, but that's hard to do. It's very hard to keep shelters secret. When you take someone in, you do your best so that everybody treats it as a confidential place, but you can't control what people say and do. You make it as secure as possible. We heard about Covenant House in downtown Toronto. It happens in lots of shelters where people are going for immediate care. It's about eyes and ears.

It's probably a staffing issue too. If you don't have enough staff to keep an eye on what's going on, you will have these kinds of things happening.

Connie Cody: If a shelter space is found out by an abuser, does it put the woman and other women in the shelter at high risk?

Carol Wildgoose: It does if the person is violent and has violent intentions, yes.

Connie Cody: Are women losing confidence in the system?

Carol Wildgoose: I can't speak to that.

Connie Cody: Survivors carry trauma not only from intense physical and sexual abuse but also from financial exploitation. Many are forced to use personal information tied to their credit score, which may be a barrier to accessing housing in the future.

What can we do to help survivors repair their damaged credit scores so that they can move forward on being self-sufficient and getting into housing without their past traumas following them?

Carol Wildgoose: I can't speak to that exactly.

However, there is legislation in Ontario that clears the debts of people who've been trafficked. That helps with credit scores, absolutely.

Connie Cody: I recently watched a documentary about the prevalence of human trafficking along the 401 corridor. I read that you supported 360 survivors.

Without supportive shelters specific to survivors of human trafficking, where are they being housed?

Carol Wildgoose: That's a really good question. I ask that one myself, all the time. You have to understand that I'm not one of the employees working in these wonderful places where people are being helped.

Initially, VQRP, or the victim quick response program, covers the cost of going to a hotel. Of course, as we heard earlier, that's not a safe place to go, because people can be trafficked from there. They go to shelters. The workers in agencies that support survivors look for shelters in places far afield from where a survivor came out of the trafficking situation. Spaces are found for them, or they end up going to a family or friend. Oftentimes, they end up back in a trafficking situation because they're vulnerable.

Connie Cody: In Quebec, ankle monitor bracelets have been used as a method to protect women from abusive partners.

Would you agree that nationwide provisions for using ankle monitor bracelets when violent offenders are released on bail could improve the safety of all women and perhaps encourage more women to leave an abusive relationship and seek safety?

Carol Wildgoose: I haven't done a lot of research on that, but I suppose it could be helpful.

Connie Cody: Is there anything I'm missing that you might like to add to the record while you're here?

Carol Wildgoose: It's very important that we look at this group of people who have been victimized so severely and understand how unique their traumas are.

I spoke with someone at Build Canada Homes. They'd worked in the field for 18 years and had never had anybody ask them about housing for trafficking survivors. It is really important that we understand how much this has not been seen. Everybody understands when we talk to them about how awful the situation is, but when it comes to doing something, we run into roadblocks. We have to take away the roadblocks.

[Translation]

The Chair: That will be the last word in this discussion.

I'll turn it over to Ms. Nathan for five minutes.

● (1720)

[English]

Juanita Nathan (Pickering—Brooklin, Lib.): Madam Chair, through you, I want to thank the witnesses for being here.

I understand that York region has a huge issue with trafficking. The police work very closely with the school systems and other agencies and have developed some programs for that as well.

My first question is for Ms. Wildgoose.

I know that York region is a tiered government, and the region is responsible for housing. It owns some land in the area, in different cities in York region. Have you tried to partner with the region to access some of the housing funding?

Carol Wildgoose: I work very closely with York region, with the chair and with staff, and they have put housing for sex-trafficking survivors on their list of housing that needs to be developed. Also, yes, I have looked at surplus land with them.

At the moment, there isn't any that we could use for this particular project, because, of course, where you select to have a safe house is a very specific place. Actually, we hoped to purchase two acres of land if we had the money to do so, out of an 11-acre parcel; it was almost perfect. Unfortunately, we lost it because that land got sold before I could come up with the dollars.

Juanita Nathan: I understand. Thank you for that.

In terms of Sandgate and some of the others—Yellow Brick House and those shelters that are in the York region—do they have any beds at all for trafficking survivors?

Carol Wildgoose: They are not appropriate places for trafficking survivors to go.

Juanita Nathan: Do they allocate any beds?

Carol Wildgoose: Jacqueline could better answer that question, but yes, Sandgate has had survivors there.

Juanita Nathan: Do you have to turn people away if they ever come to you? They probably won't come to you directly because they may not know where the safe houses are—

Carol Wildgoose: There is no safe house. I'm a volunteer. I don't have a house. I mean, I have a house, but it's not a safe house for survivors. I'm not being facetious. I'm just saying that we don't have it. That's the problem.

Juanita Nathan: Got it. Thank you for that.

For Ms. Benn-John, maybe I could ask you that question. I know that you're a counselling service agency. You would probably do a lot of safety planning with women who come to your centre.

The reason I'm asking this question is about prior to COVID-19 and the amount of cases. Post-COVID-19 or during COVID-19, we saw the numbers jump. Can you talk about some of the reasons for these huge numbers that we are now seeing?

Dr. Jacqueline Benn-John: Thank you so much for your question.

Absolutely. As an organization, the Women's Support Network of York Region has seen the numbers jump. We have more women and youth looking for support—specifically those who have experienced sexual violence, but also for human trafficking.

We must recognize that there's greater public attention and more awareness. We've had the #MeToo movement. We've had recent cases that we know about—for example, the Hockey Canada case. We know there are more cases coming forward. That doesn't necessarily mean they will have a successful outcome, but there's greater awareness.

There are more people seeking support. We see an increased number of referrals from local schools in York region and from the school boards. We have more self-referrals. We are receiving referrals from other organizations. As there's greater awareness regarding mental health and the connection to trauma, we see more individuals seeking practical assistance.

There's been an increase in the number of clients who need assistance with transportation in order to prioritize counselling and care for themselves. This is in combination with the poor economy we are experiencing at this time, and that has also driven up and increased cases of trafficking, in which more individuals are being exploited. There's more sextortion taking place, and unfortunately, there are different ways that individuals are being coerced.

We have seen an increase in our service data and people in need of various forms of support.

• (1725)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Benn-John. That brings us to the end of this conversation.

I will now give the floor to Ms. Larouche for two and a half minutes.

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Mercer and Ms. Wildgoose, thank you for your testimony.

Ms. Benn-John, as I was saying, your work helps women break out of the cycle of violence. A number of organizations have told us that shelters are not just places to stay, but a real chance for women to rebuild their lives. What are the essential services that should be kept in mind to enable women to regain their autonomy?

[English]

Dr. Jacqueline Benn-John: Essential services are services that could definitely work from a trauma-informed place. They are services that have flexibility on how to access them and understand why a client may miss an appointment. They are services that are not punitive, that meet clients where they are and that could offer wraparound supports or make referrals to agencies that could address the other presenting needs.

It's very rare that a client is seeking support for one issue. After an intake, you realize there are multiple complex issues at play in a case. It can include immigration issues, such as precarious status. It can include issues with mental health, unemployment or underemployment, so there are multiple issues. How do we support some-

one seeking assistance in dealing with trauma when they have all of these other presenting issues?

We must work together as a community. Community agencies collaborate. The model of a safe house that includes a service hub is important. We can't address only one need, which is the immediate safe housing, and not ensure that the same client has access to the additional supports they need not only to recover from trauma but also to be on that healing journey and to access other supports needed.

[Translation]

Andréanne Larouche: What services would be the hardest to fund right now?

[English]

Dr. Jacqueline Benn-John: The most difficult service to fund... I don't understand the difficulty. I think we've established that it is so important. We know the numbers are there. We know women are dying. We know women are not leaving abusive situations. We know they're being trafficked and exploited—

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Benn-John, I'm sorry, I have to interrupt you.

Witnesses, if you have any information to share with the committee, please feel free to do so by email. We will be pleased to have it.

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

[English]

Anna Roberts: Thank you.

Through you, Madam Chair, one thing I'm very disturbed about is the comment you made, Dr. Benn-John, that one woman is killed every single week. I know those stats are correct. I heard it during my undercover investigation.

Everyone here has said that we lack housing, and this is really troubling me. There was \$8.35 billion, in 2015-16, spent on professional services and consultants. In 2024-25, \$19.6 billion of public money was spent on consultants. That's an increase of 135%.

Do you feel that this money could have been better used? We know we need housing. We know we need to help the shelters. We know we need to provide housing for these children and these families. Would you not agree that we have enough evidence?

We've had this meeting many times. Let's forget about the consultants. You guys are the experts. Let's give you the money so that we can build the houses. Do you agree, Dr. Benn-John?

Dr. Jacqueline Benn-John: Absolutely. Thank you so much for acknowledging that the work has been done.

It's the same message. I'm sure there have been themes across all of these testimonies you've been hearing. We know the work is done. If you look back to previous inquiries, they have been very similar. At a community-based level, academically, we've researched. We've addressed these issues, and we've made recommendations. We need action. That's what we need—action. We do not need another woman dying. We do not need children dying.

Anna Roberts: I appreciate that because, on July 31, 2024, Cait Alexander, who runs an organization called EVE, End Violence Everywhere, had to leave this country because she feared for her life. Her perpetrator got off because of the Jordan rule.

I'm sick and tired of listening to stories in which survivors say they don't feel safe in this country. The sad thing about it is that 76% of intimate partner violence is against women, and we keep hearing the same story over and over again.

Carol Wildgoose, I know that you and I have chatted about this, and I've also spoken to Jasmine De Fina, who was a witness here previously. The housing is crucial for the betterment of the families and the children. The only thing we can do is ensure that we provide them with the opportunity for some kind of normal life. Would you agree to that?

• (1730)

Carol Wildgoose: Yes, housing is absolutely the issue, as we've heard from many people today.

It was mentioned by the previous witnesses that a carve-out for some of these specific things that we need would make it less difficult to get access to the dollars when the projects are ready to go. It's pretty simple, actually. I know it doesn't feel simple when you're sitting in government, but from the perspective of those of us who are doing the work, it's pretty simple. It can be done. It's not hard.

Anna Roberts: I know you mentioned earlier that there are no safe homes in York region for human trafficking—

Carol Wildgoose: Yes, there is 360°Kids; there is one safe house.

Anna Roberts: Right.

I know after speaking to Casandra Diamond that she provides a transition home for individuals coming out of human trafficking. I think you've met Casandra Diamond.

Carol Wildgoose: Yes, a number of years ago.

Anna Roberts: One of the issues she talks about is that even though they provide the counselling and the tools to help these young women and children get through this traumatic situation, she has nowhere to place them because of what you said earlier, there's no housing.

I think that what we need to do as parliamentarians is put the recommendation forward that housing is crucial in order for us to stop this intimate partner violence. The women we've spoken to have educated us that if we don't create these homes where the families are safe, we're never going to get rid of intimate partner violence.

Would you also agree with the fact that if we can combine the education with the housing, we could put a stop to this intimate partner violence?

Carol Wildgoose: I'm not sure.

I would love to say we could stop it. It's pretty entrenched. Sadly, we have 14- and 15-year-olds trafficking 11- and 12-year-olds now, and that's a fact.

We need to work really hard to do it. We can do a lot better; let's put it that way.

Anna Roberts: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, madam.

Ms. Ménard will bring up the rear with five minutes of speaking time.

Marie-Gabrielle Ménard: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll be sharing my time with my colleague Ms. Nathan. When the Prime Minister took office after he was elected, he mandated the Minister of Housing and Infrastructure to develop a housing strategy, which the Minister of Women and Gender Equality was asked to be part of from the beginning.

Since the beginning, it has been imperative and a given that shelters and second-stage housing must be part of the housing strategy. On Monday, I was at the announcement that a new shelter will be built to house survivors in 12 months. In any year, starting from the ground up, that's a pretty quick turnaround.

In Quebec, dozens of projects are currently being developed. That's how quickly the Prime Minister asked us to act, recognizing the severity of the crisis. What encourages me right now, based on what I'm hearing, is that there are a number of real estate developers who are very aware and want to help in this area.

What might encourage us right now is that the Department of Finance, the Department of Housing and Infrastructure, the Department of Justice and Women and Gender Equality Canada are working together to ensure that more housing opportunities are available.

Ms. Wildgoose, you talked in particular about the size of the type of housing you're involved in. What the sector has been telling us from the beginning is not to standardize anything. Each location has specific needs. Sometimes a shelter that can house six women is as good as one that can house 48. Each experience is different.

Ms. Wildgoose and Ms. Mercer, can you tell us what you think? Once again, do we have to be careful about what we build to avoid thinking that the silver bullet is to provide a single solution across Canada?

• (1735)

[*English*]

Kirsten Mercer: Thank you.

I think you've touched on something important, which is the need for local priorities to dictate what this looks like at the local level. In the federal government, you have a tremendous capacity to flow resources, but you have to work in partnership. The example you described earlier, with your visit, is a good example of that. What works in one community, in a rural community—for example, in Renfrew—might be very different from what's needed in Laval, Vancouver, Halifax or wherever else in the country. Those local priorities absolutely have to govern—and with the engagement of local communities.

As I mentioned in my testimony, the expertise of the people who do the work in those buildings has to be present from the very beginning of the process. This can't be housing that's developed by housing developers. It has to be purpose-built, purpose-driven housing that's going to be specifically tailored to the needs of shelters or transitional housing.

It's also important to say that you can't uncouple the emergency housing crisis that we are talking about from the broader housing crisis because, of course, eventually we want people to leave these systems and go into the “regular” housing market, if I can put it that way. If they can't get out into that housing system because they can't access housing—either it doesn't exist or it's not affordable—then that's when we have the backlogs, which I know you've heard so much about already.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Gabrielle Ménard: Thank you. You are really of the same mind.

I'll turn it over to my colleague, Ms. Nathan.

[*English*]

Juanita Nathan: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll ask the question. If you don't have enough time to answer, maybe you could write your answers and send them in.

I'll start with Ms. Mercer. We've established that this is currently an epidemic or a crisis that we are dealing with at the moment. I think we need to simultaneously work on prevention while we look for solutions to the current problem. In your opinion, if you can, what kinds of recommendations would you give for prevention, specifically, for the federal government? I ask this to all three of you, and you could send in your responses and your perspectives. However, Ms. Mercer, if you want, you can start and talk a bit.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: That's probably what you're going to do, because the time is up.

You'll have to answer quickly, madam.

[*English*]

Kirsten Mercer: I have two words: restorative justice.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

I invite you to follow up on our colleague Ms. Nathan's request. Thank you very much. You've been very enlightening.

I wish everyone a good evening, and I'll see you tomorrow. Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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