

Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the Upcoming 2025 Federal Budget

July 30, 2024



WOMEN'S | HÉBERGEMENT
SHELTERS | FEMMES
CANADA | CANADA

List of Recommendations:

Recommendation 1: That the Women and Children's Shelter and Transitional Housing Initiative, announced in Budget 2021 and housed at Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), be renewed as an ongoing initiative of the National Housing Strategy.

In Budget 2025, we recommend that an allocation be made to this initiative in the amount of:

- \$250 million in capital funding
- \$75 million operational funding top-up for new construction

Recommendation 2: Stabilize the violence against women (VAW) shelter and transition house sector and address fundamental funding gaps in the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence (GBV) by adequately funding the core community-based, feminist, survivor-serving organizations. We recommend an allocation of \$120 million in operational funds from the department of Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) for three years for VAW shelters/transition houses, similar to that allocated through the WAGE Response and Recovery funding program.

Recommendation 3: A commitment to establish and fund a GBV Commissioner to act as an accountability mechanism to monitor and report on the implementation of the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence and the Federal GBV Strategy. We envision the GBV Commissioner having powers similar to that of an ombuds institution.

Recommendation 4: An initial investment of \$1 million for WAGE and Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) to launch consultations on the development of a National Strategy for the Gender-Based Violence Workforce that addresses issues of precarious work; access to decent salaries, pensions, benefits, and supports for workers; and retention and recruitment issues.

About Women's Shelters Canada (WSC)

WSC provides a strong, unified, pan-Canadian voice on the issue of violence against women. WSC brings together 16 provincial and territorial shelter organizations and supports over 600 shelters across the country for women and children fleeing violence. WSC increases awareness to ensure that policies, legislation, and regulations are informed by the experiences and insights of our members. WSC connects knowledgeable and dedicated individuals from coast to coast to coast, so that new ideas are born, best practices are promoted and transferred, and those who work in our challenging field feel more connected and supported. All of this helps to ensure that the women and children who turn to shelters and transition houses receive the most effective and compassionate support possible.

Justification for Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Need for Renewal of the Women and Children's Shelter and Transitional Housing Initiative

Across the country, VAW shelters are turning away almost 1,000 women and children every night due to lack of space.¹ Of all the programs under the National Housing Strategy (NHS), the Women and Children Shelter and Transitional Housing Initiative (WCSTHI) was the most impactful in meeting the needs of women and their children.

The WCSTHI was a \$250 million investment supporting the construction, renovation, and repair of shelter beds and transitional housing units. Crucially, the program allocated funding for both capital and top-up operational costs.

More than \$1 billion was requested of the WCSTHI by shelters that offer safe and affordable shelter space to women and children fleeing violence. This is four-times oversubscribed. Many projects that were shovel-ready, supported by other levels of government, and financially feasible were not funded simply because there was not enough money in the initiative.

It is widely known that the COVID pandemic has been accompanied by higher rates of violence against women. For women and children living with violence, the anguish is indescribable. On average one woman is killed every five days by a current or previous intimate partner.²

¹ Schwan, K., Vaccaro, M., Reid, L., Ali, N., & Baig, K. (2021). The Pan-Canadian Women's Housing & Homelessness Survey. Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness.

² Andermann, A. et al. (2021) Evidence-informed interventions and best practices for supporting women experiencing or at risk of homelessness: a scoping review with gender and equity analysis. Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Prevention in Canada: Research, Policy and Practice. 41:1

Shelters play a key role in the continuum of services desperately needed by women and children fleeing violence and to rebuild their lives. Shelters contribute much more than a safe place to stay. They provide vital services and resources that enable women and their children who have experienced abuse to recover from that violence, rebuild self-esteem, and take steps to regain a self-determined and independent life.

For these reasons, we strongly recommend that the WCSTHI be an integral part of the NHS and that funding in the order of \$325 million be allocated in the 2025 budget towards the initiative.

Recommendation 2: Need for Stabilization Funds for VAW Shelters

VAW shelters and transition houses are in crisis. The demands that they are experiencing are higher than ever, yet rising costs of operating, declining donations,³ and the end of pandemic recovery funding mean that the financial situation in VAW shelters across the country is dire. As an organization that administered COVID-19 Response and Recovery funding, we have heard directly from shelters about the positive impact of these funds, as well as how difficult it will be to continue operating at their current level with the loss of this revenue.

WSC distributed approximately \$135 million over three and a half years to over 300 shelter organizations across the country, which brought greater stability to the VAW shelter sector. While we may not be in the midst of an emerging and changing health pandemic, shelters face the epidemic of gender-based violence every day. With the issues raised above, as well as the mental toll taken on workers in the shelter sector over the last four years,⁴ we need ongoing funding to ensure that shelters can continue to offer a high quality of service to those fleeing violence. With the end of the pandemic funds, we have already seen organizations cut programming, lay off staff, reduce shelter spaces, and express concern about keeping their doors open. Each day, a high number of individuals are turned away from shelters due to a lack of available beds. According to Statistics Canada, on a single day in 2023, 918 women and children were turned away from shelters because they were already operating at maximum capacity.⁵ This number will continue to grow without funds to stabilize the sector. We recommend \$120 million over three years as the very least needed to keep shelters open and operating effectively across the country.

³ CanadaHelps. (2024) "2024 Giving Report: From Disconnection to Collective Action." CanadaHelps. <https://www.canadahelps.org/en/the-giving-report/>

⁴ Hoogendam, R. & Maki, K. (2024) "Feminist Brain Drain: Labour Issues and Worker Wellness in the VAW Shelter Sector." Ottawa, ON: Women's Shelters Canada. <https://endvaw.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/FBD-Final-Report.pdf>

⁵ Statistics Canada. (2023). Trends in police-reported family violence and intimate partner violence in Canada, 2022. The Daily. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/231121/dq231121b-eng.htm>.

What is needed to stabilize the sector:

- Flexible operational funding with a commitment to be maintained past the remaining three years of the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence.
- A funding model that extends beyond project-based funding and covers operational costs while allowing for flexibility.
- Funding reflective of cost-of-living increases and inflation.
- Addressing significant service gaps in rural, remote, and Northern communities, including the territories.
- Recognition of the expertise of long-standing, community-based, feminist, survivor-serving, grassroots organizations.

Recommendation 3: Accountability Mechanism for the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence and the Federal GBV Strategy

For the National Action Plan to meet its ambitious objectives, it requires an independent body to provide oversight and ensure accountability. The Mass Casualty Commission (MCC)'s Recommendation V.17 calls for a National Accountability Framework.

The Commission recommends that

- (a) The federal government establish by statute an independent and impartial gender-based violence commissioner with adequate, stable funding, and effective powers, including the responsibility to make an annual report to Parliament.
- (b) The federal government develop the mandate for the gender-based violence commissioner in consultation with provincial and territorial governments, women survivors including women from marginalized and precarious communities, and the gender-based violence advocacy and support sector.⁶

To fulfill the MCC recommendation, the government should commit to establishing and funding a GBV Commissioner position and office with powers similar to those of an ombuds institution. While this institution would have more expansive powers than only overseeing the NAP, including ensuring Canada met international obligations (e.g. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls' recommendations), this would provide needed transparency and accountability for the NAP and the federal GBV strategy. With improved transparency and accountability, there is potential for increased consistency across jurisdictions, and for best practices/effective strategies to be shared nationally.

⁶ Mass Casualty Commission. (2023) "Final Report of the Mass Casualty Commission: Recommendations." <https://masscasualtycommission.ca/files/documents/Turning-the-Tide-Together-List-of-Recommendations.pdf>

Recommendation 4: Need for Initial Investment in a National Strategy for the GBV Sector Workforce

From 2022-2024, WSC undertook a study of labour issues and worker wellness in the VAW shelter sector.⁷ This study documented a long-standing issue in the sector, one that has grown with rising rates and severity of violence amidst the pandemic. While labour challenges are not new, organizations are increasingly unable to recruit and retain staff to do this critical work. Shelters are unable to compete with other sectors for workers due to low rates of pay and the difficulty of the work, particularly with government agencies. While increased funding is one path toward addressing the growing labour crisis, we also need to develop a national strategy for the anti-violence sector workforce.

Care work has seen increased attention, including through the 2024 federal government commitment to launch consultations into the development of a National Caregiving Strategy. Despite being similar to care work (highly gendered and comprised of high numbers of Black, Indigenous, and other women of colour⁸), GBV work has not been raised in discussions of the care economy. The Ontario government has recently committed to a Shelter Workforce Strategy, which we see as an opportunity for similar investment across the country. We would recommend that, at a national level, the Ontario strategy be expanded to encompass a wider range of anti-violence workers, including those from sexual and domestic violence organizations.

This strategy needs to address the following areas:

- Precarious working conditions and lack of job security that result from short-term, project-based funding.
- The lack of access to pensions, benefits, and supports for workers.
- Inconsistencies in salaries and compensation and shortcomings related to paying a living wage and ensuring decent work.
- The ongoing sectoral challenges with staff recruitment and retention.
- The devaluing of care work, its highly gendered nature, and the overrepresentation of Black, Indigenous, and other women of colour women in precarious work conditions.
- Occupational health and safety concerns in anti-violence work, particularly psychological health and safety impacts that result from ongoing trauma exposure, such as compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma.

⁷ Hoogendam, R. & Maki, K. (2024) "Feminist Brain Drain: Labour Issues and Worker Wellness in the VAW Shelter Sector." Ottawa, ON: Women's Shelters Canada. <https://endvaw.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/FBD-Final-Report.pdf>

⁸ Fernandes, S. & Lanthier, S. (2024). Roadmap to A Stronger Gender-Based Violence Workforce. Ottawa, ON: Ending Violence Association of Canada.