



# Sheltering Under Pressure:

## Advocacy Guide

How to use the findings from Women's Shelters Canada's national report.



WOMEN'S  
SHELTERS  
CANADA | HÉBERGEMENT  
FEMMES  
CANADA

[ENDVAW.CA](https://endvaw.ca)

In 2026, Women’s Shelters Canada launched ***Sheltering Under Pressure: Frontline Realities of Canada’s Violence Against Women Shelters and Transition Houses***, a national report offering an overview of the state of the violence against women (VAW) and transition house sector across Canada. We’ve developed this guide to provide practical guidance and resources for shelters and transition houses on how to use the findings from this report to inform their planning, program development, funding proposals, government relations, and overall advocacy efforts.

**Note on using data from the report:** All statistics included in this guide are drawn from *Sheltering Under Pressure* (Women’s Shelters Canada, 2026). When using these statistics in communications, we encourage you to credit Women’s Shelters Canada and, where possible, link to the full report.

## Using the Report Internally and Externally

The report can support both internal planning and external advocacy.

### Internally

It can help you understand where your organization lies within national trends, support planning discussions and grant proposals, and inform program development and governance decisions.

### Externally

It provides national data to support engagement with donors, community partners, media, and elected officials.

## What You Will Find in This Guide

- 🏠 **Key statistics** to highlight, drawn directly from the report
- 🏠 **Key messages** aligned with our national calls to action (**page 10**)
- 🏠 Guidance for using the report **internally to support planning (page 3)**
- 🏠 Guidance for using the report **externally to engage donors (page 5), media (page 6), and government officials (page 8)**, including sample, ready-to-use messaging you can adapt for social media, media interviews, and donor communications
- 🏠 **Adaptable two-pagers** organized by theme that you can bring to meetings with government officials, outlining clear policy asks (**page 8**)



## Using the Report with Staff

Sharing the report with staff can help validate their experiences and build a shared understanding of the broader challenges affecting the sector, while also creating space for discussions about how these national trends show up locally.

Share this report in staff meetings or team discussions and connect the findings to existing pressures staff may already be experiencing. Use the report to identify programming and training priorities, as well as advocacy opportunities.

### A Few Stats to Highlight:

- 🏠 **64%** of emergency shelters/THs and **62%** of second stage shelters operate beyond their funded capacity more than once a month.
- 🏠 Over half of organizations (**56%**) report a chronic shortfall in core operational funding.
- 🏠 **45%** report turnover, burnout, and the emotional toll of the work as major challenges.
- 🏠 **80%** of emergency shelters/THs and **65%** of second stage shelters report extending stays, beyond their length-of-stay policies, due to the ongoing housing crisis.
- 🏠 In the past 12 months, **23%** of shelters reported reducing or cutting a program due to lack of funding.
- 🏠 **45%** of shelters require major repairs; **31%** require minor repairs. Over half lack funds to complete them
- 🏠 Indigenous-run shelters, both on- and off-reserve, are over-represented among shelters in need of repairs, with **80%** reporting major or minor repairs.

### Sample Message (Adapt as Needed):

You might introduce the report to staff with messaging such as:

“What we’re seeing in Women’s Shelters Canada’s new report is part of a national pattern: shelters are operating beyond capacity with ongoing funding shortfalls, which directly affects staff workload and survivor safety.”

## Quick Actions and Question Prompts:

- ➔ Share these stats at a staff meeting and ask: **“How does this reflect our reality, and what do you want leadership and the board to understand from this?”**
- ➔ Use staff input plus these stats to **set 1-2 internal priorities** (e.g., staffing, training, or infrastructure) for upcoming planning or funding proposals.

## Using the Report with the Board

Use the report to inform governance, risk, and fundraising decisions. The report can help boards understand the broader policy and funding landscape affecting the shelter sector.

### A Few Stats to Highlight:

- 🏠 **45%** of shelters require major repairs, and **31%** need minor repairs; **53%** of those needing repairs lack the funds to do them.
- 🏠 Only **48%** of shelters are generally accessible to survivors using a wheelchair or mobility device
- 🏠 **57%** report higher GBV rates post-pandemic; **52%** report increased severity; **75%** indicate that overall demand for services has continued to increase.
- 🏠 **84%** of shelters identify inflation and cost of living as a major challenge, citing increasing operational costs outpacing increases in operational funding.
- 🏠 **57%** of shelters report having some form of emergency or preparedness plan, **43%** do not, and many describe a lack of funding, staff time, and guidance as barriers to undertaking this planning.

### Sample Message (Adapt as Needed):

You might introduce the report to the board with messaging such as:

- 🗨️ New national data from Women’s Shelters Canada show aging, often inaccessible buildings and unfunded repair needs across the sector; our board’s decisions on capital and core funding are part of that bigger picture.”

## Quick Actions:

- ➔ **Use the stats in strategic planning and budget discussions** when weighing risks and setting fundraising targets (especially capital and accessibility).
- ➔ **Equip board members with one or two of these numbers to use in donor and government conversations.** For example: “Like many shelters nationally, we need funds just to keep our building safe and accessible.”

## Using the Report with Donors and the General Public

Use the report to show donors and the general public the realities shelters face and how their support helps fill critical gaps in a system under intense strain.

### A Few Stats to Highlight:

- 🏠 Over half of shelters (**56%**) report a chronic shortfall in core operational funding.
- 🏠 More than half of shelters cannot meet operating expenses without fundraising, and **10%** cannot meet them even with fundraising.
- 🏠 In the past 12 months, **23%** of shelters reduced or cut a program due to lack of funding.

### Sample Message (Adapt as Needed):

The message below can be adapted for donor emails, fundraising appeals, social media posts, or community presentations.



Across Canada, shelters are doing more with less. New national data from Women’s Shelters Canada shows that most face chronic funding shortfalls and must fundraise just to keep doors open, staff paid, and core programs running. At the same time, demand for services keep rising, and many survivors are staying longer because safe and affordable housing is increasingly difficult to find. Your support directly keeps survivors safe.”



## Quick Actions:

- ➔ **Use 1-2 of these stats** in donor appeals, social media posts, and newsletters to connect local stories to the national picture. For example, “Like many shelters nationally, we rely on community donations to cover basic operating costs.”
- ➔ When posting on social media, you can use or adapt the ready-to-use posts and graphics included in the communications kit developed alongside this report. **The kit includes shareable graphics and suggested messaging to help you amplify the report findings on your platforms.**
- ➔ When speaking with donors or the public, **pair a national stat with a concrete local example.** For example, “Because core funding doesn’t cover all our costs, your donation helped us avoid cutting our children’s program this year.”

[Access the Communications Kit](#)

## Using the Report with the Media

**Use the report to offer media local stories backed by national data on gender-based violence, housing, and underfunded shelters.**

When speaking with the media, frame the report as evidence of broader national trends, while connecting those trends to what is happening in your community. Reporters are often looking for clear stats, the human impact, and a local angle, so highlight one or two key findings and pair them with examples from your shelter or region.

### A Few Stats to Highlight:

- 🏠 In the post-pandemic period, **75%** of shelters report that overall demand for services has increased, and **57%** report higher rates of GBV than before the pandemic.
- 🏠 **84%** of shelters identify inflation and cost of living as a major challenge, citing increasing operational costs outpacing increases in operational funding.
- 🏠 **83%** reported supporting more people using substances over the past three years; **77%** say their communities lack adequate substance use resources.
- 🏠 **80%** of emergency shelters/TH and **65%** of second stage shelters report extending stays contributing to longer waitlists, and high turn-away rates.

## Sample Key Messages (Adapt as Needed):

These messages can be used when speaking with reporters about key issues highlighted in the report, including funding pressures, rising demand, housing challenges, and the evolving role of shelters.

### **Funding pressures:**

“ New national data from Women’s Shelters Canada show that while shelters across Canada are seeing higher demand and more severe violence, most are operating with chronic funding shortfalls and aging, often inaccessible buildings.”

### **Growing complexity of survivor needs:**

“ The report from Women’s Shelters Canada confirms what shelters have been saying for years: demand is growing, the violence survivors face is becoming more complex, and shelters are working under significant resource constraints.”

### **Shelters as core/essential infrastructure:**

“ Shelters are essential services in every community, but this report shows many are operating beyond their funded capacity and struggling to meet rising demand.”

### **Growing external pressures:**

“ New national data from Women’s Shelters Canada shows that shelters are increasingly responding to external crises that they were not designed or resourced to absorb, and without systems-level support. This includes the opioid crisis, tech-facilitated gender-based violence, and climate emergencies.”

### **The affordable housing crisis:**

“ The affordable housing crisis is directly impacting shelters. When survivors cannot find safe and affordable housing, they stay in shelters longer – which means fewer spaces are available for others seeking safety and more survivors are turned away.”



## Quick Actions:

- ➔ **Pitch a local story: send a short email to a reporter or editor with 1-2 national stats plus a brief local angle.** For example, “Our shelter is turning people away because we simply do not have enough beds or space to meet the rising demand. At the same time, we’re extending stays because there is nowhere affordable and safe for survivors to go.”
- ➔ **In interviews, pair each local example with a stat.** For example, “What we’re seeing here reflects the national picture: 75% of shelters report increased demand, and we are no exception.”

## Using the Report with Government Officials

Use the report to show government officials that shelters are essential infrastructure under strain, and pair the data with clear policy asks.

When speaking with government officials, highlight how the trends identified in the report are showing up in your community and why stable public investment in shelters is necessary to ensure shelters can continue their essential work, and survivors can access safety.

We have developed ready-to-use thematic government relations (GR) two-pagers that outline key issues and policy recommendations. You can bring these two-pagers to meetings with government officials and adapt them to reflect your local context.

[Access the GR two-pagers](#)

## A Few Stats to Highlight:

- 🏠 **64%** of emergency shelters and transition houses, and **62%** of second stage shelters, operate beyond their funded capacity more than once a month. The average number of **funded beds is 17.5**, but the average number of **operational beds is 21** for emergency shelters and transition houses. Among second stage shelters, the average number of **funded units is 8.5**, while average **actual capacity is 10.5**.
- 🏠 Over half of organizations (**56%**) report a chronic shortfall in core operational funding, and 84% identify inflation and cost of living as a major challenge.

## Sample Message (Adapt as Needed):

You can incorporate these messages into meetings with elected officials, letters or emails to MPs or MPPs, submissions, or discussions.

- “ National data from Women’s Shelters Canada show shelters routinely operating beyond funded capacity, in aging buildings and with chronic funding shortfalls. We need stable capital and operational funding so survivors in our community are not turned away.”
- “ Without safe and affordable housing options, survivors often remain in shelters longer than necessary or may face barriers to leaving abusive situations. A new Women’s Shelters Canada report stresses that investments in affordable and second stage housing are essential to support survivors’ long-term safety.”

## Quick Actions:

- ➔ **Bring the GR two-pager(s) and 1-2 of these stats to meetings, roundtables, or pre-budget consultations,** and link your local experience to the national calls for capital investment, operational funding, and affordable housing.
- ➔ **Use these stats in emails or letters to MPs/MPPs.** For example, “Like 64% of shelters nationally, we are operating beyond our funded capacity, and we face the same chronic funding gaps identified in this report. We are asking you to...”



## Calls to Action for Governments

Advocacy is strongest when we speak with a collective voice. By reinforcing shared priorities across communities, we can strengthen calls for the policies and investments survivors and the sector urgently need. We are stronger together.

The findings of Sheltering Under Pressure point to several urgent actions governments can take to strengthen the shelter sector across the country.

### Our Recommendations to Governments:

- ➔ Invest in safe, accessible, purpose-built shelter infrastructure.
- ➔ Address the housing crisis and expand second stage and longer-term options.
- ➔ Secure adequate and reliable funding for shelter operations, workforce, and inclusive, culturally grounded, and accessible services.
- ➔ Confront external crises: Opioid crisis, technology-facilitated gender-based violence, pandemic recovery and preparedness, and climate risk.
- ➔ Embed VAW shelters in a coherent national GBV framework.

[Learn more in the full report](#)



## Additional Advocacy Resources

If you're looking for more detailed guidance on advocacy activities and government relations strategies, the resources below may be helpful.

🏠 **Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ): [The Legislative Process and Advocacy](#)**  
This resource by CPJ breaks down the legislative process, mapping out how a bill passes through Parliament to eventually become law and the advocacy opportunities at each stage of the process.

🏠 **Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ): [Working with the Media](#)**  
This resource by CPJ provides recommendations for engaging with media to supplement your advocacy strategies and catch the attention of government officials.

🏠 **The National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL): [Law Reform Course](#)**  
NAWL developed this open access course to equip law students and social justice advocates, activists, and organizations with the skills and knowledge to engage in feminist law reform and advance equal rights.

🏠 **Co-operative and Mutuels Canada: [Advocacy Guide](#)**  
A resource for those looking to engage with parliamentarians and public service employees to share their stories and help advance common goals. It's focused on the federal government but can also be applied to provincial and territorial government activities.

🏠 **Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying of Canada: [Transparency matters: Know your obligations](#)**  
Learn about regulated lobbying and if your organization meets the threshold for registration.

