

# **Women's Interval House**

## Needs Assessment for Transitional Housing for Women and Children Fleeing Domestic Violence

### **Executive Summary**

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# Executive Summary

Women's Interval Home of Sarnia and Lambton Inc. is interested in developing transitional housing for women and children fleeing domestic violence to better serve residents exiting its emergency shelter. To inform its planning for future developments, Women's Interval Home commissioned a needs assessment for transitional housing for women and children fleeing domestic violence in the County of Lambton.

Transitional housing, also referred to as second stage housing, is an integral aspect of the continuum of supports to address the needs of survivors of intimate partner violence. This housing is a form of transitional supportive housing for survivors of intimate partner violence who are at risk of danger post-separation and need additional time and support to heal from their trauma and rebuild their lives. Transitional housing offers wrap-around support and affords survivors additional time and space to heal, develop independence, establish long-term goals, build community and networks of support, access programming, and transition to a life free from violence. Transitional housing typically provides longer term accommodation to women and children, usually between a few months and up to two years.

Key findings based on the data collection that informed the need for transitional housing for women and children fleeing domestic violence in the County of Lambton included:

- Between 2016 and 2021, an average of 108 different women and their children accessed shelter services from Women's Interval Home each year.
- Based on the County of Lambton's population of women aged 15 and over as a proportion of the national figure, it is estimated that approximately 310 women aged 15 and over report intimate partner violence to police annually in the County of Lambton. However, people who experience intimate partner violence often do not report it to the police for a variety of reasons, including: fear of stigma/shame, the belief that abuse is a private matter, fear of court system intervention, or lack of trust in the criminal justice system.
- Based on self-reported data, 12% of women in Canada report experiencing intimate partner violence in the past year<sup>1</sup>. Applying this figure to the County of Lambton's population of women aged 15 and over, it is estimated that approximately 6,600 women experience intimate partner violence in the County of Lambton each year.
- Occupancy rates of Women's Interval Home's 17 bed shelter have been consistently high, including rates of 85% and above between 2017 and 2020. The 2020/21 fiscal year was an exception; the shelter had lower occupancy rates, likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, despite domestic violence and femicide increasing overall<sup>2</sup>. These occupancy rates suggest that there were many instances when women could not be served as a result of capacity. Having transitional housing would help address the issue of the shelter sometimes being at capacity and unable to accommodate women and their children seeking shelter. Fleeing an abusive relationship takes strength and courage, as the moments after women and children flee an abusive relationship is the most dangerous time for them. It is therefore crucial that housing options and support services, such as shelter and transitional housing, be available so that women and children fleeing abusive relationships have somewhere safe to go.

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada, Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces, 2018

<sup>2</sup> Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses

- There is currently no transitional housing for women and children fleeing violence in Lambton County. The nearest transitional housing for women and children fleeing violence is a duplex located in Strathroy (70km from Sarnia). The duplex is operated by The Women's Rural Resource Centre and provides second stage housing to women moving out of its shelter who require continued security and support.
- Statistics Canada's Survey of Residential Facilities for Victims of Abuse identified 1,314 transitional housing units for victims of abuse across Canada. This means that just to reach the average service level provided in other communities across the Country, the County of Lambton should have five units of transitional housing for women and children fleeing domestic violence. This number, however, does not represent the full extent of need for transitional housing for women and children fleeing domestic violence. It is widely recognized that the supply of shelter beds and transitional housing units across the Country is insufficient to meet demands.
- A range of data on housing supply and demand points to a gap in supply of affordable housing in Lambton County:
  - Just over one quarter (25.5%) of Lambton County households rent<sup>3</sup> and in 2021 the overall vacancy rates for purpose-built apartments was 2.2%
  - There has been limited creation of rental housing in recent years.
  - 51% of renter households cannot afford the median market rent in Lambton County<sup>4</sup>.
  - As of October 2019, 547 households were on the wait list for Rent-Geared-to-Income assistance in Lambton County. In Ontario, survivors of domestic violence who have been abused by someone they are living with or have lived with can receive priority access to rent-geared-to-income social housing under the Special Priority Policy (SPP) category, however survivors of domestic violence can face barriers to qualifying under the SPP category. In 2015 in the County of Lambton, applicants under the SPP category waited an average of three months to obtain housing<sup>5</sup>. Wait times for applicants under the SPP category have no doubt increased since 2015 along with the increase in overall number of households on the wait list.
  - There are several supportive housing options for persons with special needs within the County of Lambton, but none are targeted at women and children fleeing violence.
  - Based on the 2016 Census, 3,545 households were renting and living in housing that is unsuitable, inadequate, or unaffordable, are not receiving rental assistance and need affordable rental housing.
  - Point-In-Time homelessness count data shows that there is an estimated 345 households currently experiencing homelessness.

Altogether, 3,890 households currently lack affordable rental housing in Lambton County but need affordable rental housing. This undeniably creates barriers for survivors to leave their abusers. This makes transitional housing for women and their children fleeing domestic violence even more integral to meeting the needs of these women and children.

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<sup>3</sup> Statistics Canada, Census, 2016

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada, Census, 2016

<sup>5</sup> Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association, 2016 Waiting List Survey Report, 2016

- Women's Interval House generally only permits a six week stay within its shelter. However, finding alternative housing within this timeframe can be challenging for residents. Women leave Women's Interval House for a variety of housing and other destinations upon discharge. Women's Interval House's data on housing destination at discharge suggests that a minimum of approximately half of the women leaving shelter, including many of those leaving to stay with family or friends, those moving to transitional housing for youth, many of those renting a room, some of those moving to market rental housing, and some of those returning to their abuser, could benefit from transitional housing.

Based on the collection and analysis of existing data on the need for transitional housing, the needs assessment identified the need for 15-18 units of transitional housing for women and children fleeing domestic violence in the County of Lambton.

The household composition of women and children accessing shelter suggests that approximately 57% of the spaces in transitional housing should be targeted at single women, but there is also a need for spaces for women one to two children (28%) as well as the need to accommodate larger households (15%).

The profile of women and their children accessing Women's Interval Homes' shelter as well as other residential facilities for victims of abuse across Canada points to the need for the transitional housing units to be culturally-safe for Indigenous women and children and 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, accessible and appropriate for women without permanent residency, who are unable to speak English, visible minorities, women with disabilities, and women with pets or service animals.

Best practices related to the services provided in transitional housing for women and children fleeing domestic violence suggest that transitional housing should provide services that are tailored to the diverse needs of those seeking support and may include: crisis intervention, risk assessment and safety planning, emotional support, medical treatment, case planning, financial and economic assistance, legal assistance, long-term housing support, counseling and therapeutic supports for women and for children accompanying their mothers, and support groups. Services may also include support, individual advocacy, and navigation or access a variety of systems, including but not limited to justice, employment, housing supports, health, police, education, child welfare services, and traditional knowledge holders for Indigenous women.

Transitional housing should be located in proximity to services, employment, and existing social connections to support resident's regaining independence. Considerations should also be made as to whether the neighbourhood feels safe, particularly when women are walking with children.