



# **THE ROLE AND CAPACITY OF WOMEN'S SHELTERS AND TRANSITIONAL HOUSING TO SUPPORT WOMEN AND GIRLS IN CANADA**

**A Brief for the Standing Committee on the Status of  
Women, June 11, 2026**

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Huron Transition Homes**

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Huron Transition Homes (HTH) has been serving women and children in Simcoe County since 1984 and has since evolved from a traditional emergency shelter model into a multi-service anti-violence organization with local and provincial reach. HTH provides a continuum of supports, including emergency shelter, longer-term supportive housing supports, counselling and advocacy, children's programming, wellness services, anti-human trafficking supports, and economic empowerment and employability programming. In rural and semi-rural communities, this continuum is especially important given that women often face fewer housing options, transportation barriers, reduced service availability, isolation from support networks, and limited access to culturally responsive or specialized services.



## Summary of key messages

This brief draws on more than 40 years of experience, research, and practice-based evidence at HTH to underscore the essential role women's shelters and feminist anti-violence organizations play in supporting women and girls who have experienced violence. Women's shelters are not only places of safety in moments of crisis, rather, they are vital community-based infrastructure that provides women and girls a place to breathe and have their basic needs met during a time of crisis. Shelter services are coordinated, survivor-centered support, offering safety planning, parenting supports and ultimately services that help women build pathways to longer-term stability free from violence. HTH's experience demonstrates that effective responses to gender-based violence (GBV) must be grounded in the expertise of organizations that work alongside women and girls every day and understand the complex intersections of violence with trauma, housing insecurity, poverty, and systemic inequality.

Building on decades of direct service and survivor-informed practice, women's shelters have developed specialized knowledge about the impacts of abuse, and the realities women and girls face when leaving violence. Shelters understand firsthand the barriers created by unsafe housing, economic abuse, limited income, childcare needs, and gaps in community services in the lives of women. The role of shelters extends beyond emergency response; shelters ultimately exist because they want to end GBV, and organizations operating shelters have always led the way in prevention, early intervention, systems navigation, public education, and policy advocacy. Women's shelters must be recognized and funded as leaders in Canada's response to GBV, with the capacity to shape policy and deliver the integrated supports women and girls need to rebuild their lives safely and with dignity.

# Why women's shelters are essential

For nearly 50 years, women's shelters and transitional housing providers have been essential infrastructure in Canada's response to GBV. They do far more than provide emergency accommodation; offering quantifiable services such as safety planning, crisis intervention, counselling, advocacy, housing navigation, children's supports, and pathways to longer-term stability and unquantifiable supports such as hope and community. Without shelters, these integrated supports would be fragmented or inaccessible to women, and in moments of crisis women need to be able to access wrap-around specialized services at one touch point. Because shelters help close gaps when other systems fail, they are not optional; rather, they are critical to responding to a national growing need for services. Shelters are also sites of specialized expertise, grounded in daily work with women and girls navigating violence, trauma, housing insecurity, and the barriers to leaving abuse safely.

Shelters and feminist anti-violence organizations contribute practice-based expertise, survivor-informed service models and prevention efforts. HTH's work shows that women's shelters are part of a broader, integrated response to both responding to the needs of women who have survived GBV and working to prevent all forms of GBV. At HTH for example, the organization's work has evolved in response to women's voices, needs, and lived experience, leading to innovative approaches such as Operation Grow, a hydroponic farm-based social enterprise focused on economic opportunities and pathways forward for women who have experienced violence.

At the same time, shelters provide essential but temporary support. They are not designed to solve the structural inequalities that drive poverty, housing precarity, and ongoing vulnerability to violence. Their capacity is further constrained by chronic underfunding, workforce pressures, inadequate operational funding, insufficient affordable housing, and regional inequities in access to services. Strengthening the sector therefore requires not only support for shelters themselves, but broader investments in the systems women need to live safely and independently.

## Housing insecurity, poverty, and gender-based violence

Poverty and GBV are widespread across Canada, yet policy responses do not always address how deeply these issues are interconnected. Access to safe, affordable housing remains one of the biggest barriers for women leaving violence, while GBV is also a leading driver of women's homelessness and unsafe living conditions. Housing insecurity and violence are mutually reinforcing in that violence can force women into housing instability, and housing instability can increase their risk of further harm.

GBV can include economic abuse, including coerced debt, damaged credit, restricted access to finances, and interference with employment or education. As a result, women leaving violence may have limited savings, poor credit, rent arrears, and few supports such as transportation, childcare, or income assistance. Without immediate access to stable housing and ongoing support, they remain at a heightened risk of homelessness, exploitation, and renewed violence.

Federal responses to GBV must treat housing insecurity and poverty as core drivers of women's vulnerability, not secondary issues. To support women effectively, shelters must be equipped not only to respond to violence, but also to address the conditions that make it difficult to leave safely and rebuild. Shelters such as HTH already provide critical infrastructure for this work, including counselling, safety planning, support groups, childcare, education, and connections to longer-term housing and economic supports.



# Recommendations

- Provide stable, multi-year operational funding to feminist anti-violence organizations. Recognize these organizations as essential social infrastructure in Canada's response to GBV.
- Provide capital dollars for shelters, to complete the significant repairs and renovations needed to continue providing services. The median year of shelter construction is 1981, and almost half of shelters require major repairs.
- Invest in specialized supportive housing. Women need access to stable housing with integrated, trauma-informed supports that can respond to the long-term impacts of violence. Expanding supportive housing options can help improve housing stability and reduce the risk of eviction after women leave shelter.
- Increase investment in safe, affordable, and deeply affordable housing for women fleeing violence. Prioritize access for women with children, women in rural and northern communities, and women facing multiple barriers.
- Align GBV policy with housing, income security, childcare, and employment measures. Address poverty and housing insecurity as core drivers of women's vulnerability.
- Strengthen women's long-term economic security. Invest in income supports (e.g., a basic income guarantee), education, employability programming, and financial empowerment for women leaving violence.
- Require trauma-informed, feminist, intersectional, and harm-reduction approaches in federally funded responses. Move beyond symbolic inclusion by building accountability for equity into funding and reporting structures.
- Recognize hidden homelessness and the links between homelessness and GBV in federal policy. Design responses that reflect women's lived realities.

# CONTACT

Huronion Transition Homes (HTH) is a community-based organization serving women and children across Simcoe County who have experienced violence, abuse, homelessness, exploitation, and other forms of systemic oppression and marginalization.

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