

November 3rd, 2023

Oxford County Council
Oxford County Area Municipalities and Councils

Re: Safe and Well Oxford Community Safety and Well-being Plan: Gender Based Violence

At the July 31st, 2023 Safe and Well Oxford Steering Committee meeting, the committee considered a resolution passed by County Council as follows:

RESOLVED that the information provided in the delegation from Ingamo Homes be received as information;

AND FURTHER, that the County of Oxford declare intimate partner violence an epidemic;

AND FURTHER, that the County refer the presentation to the Safe and Well Oxford Steering Committee for consideration throughout the implementation of the Oxford Community, Safety, and Well-being plan to address the recommendations made by the delegation.

The Safe and Well Oxford Steering Committee received a presentation from Diane Harris, Executive Director, Domestic Abuse Services Oxford (DASO) at their June 19th meeting. Diane shared the following information with the committee in relation to intimate partner violence within Oxford County:

- Domestic Abuse Services Oxford is the first stage emergency 24/7 shelter for women fleeing intimate partner violence, which offers short term shelter which usually can be from 2 weeks to 6 months, depending on the needs and risk levels of the individuals. Stats indicate that women often stay an average of 42 days in shelter. DASO also operates the only 24/7 crisis line in Oxford County.
- Ingamo Homes is second-stage transitional support and housing program assisting women who leave the shelter, or who side-step the shelter after leaving a violent relationship. Applications are received from community agencies, support, and self-referrals. The current length of stay is 1 year to 4 years, with an average of 20 months. Both facilities offer one-to-one counselling, group work,



court support and advocacy, children and youth programs, and recreational activities.

- Intimate partner violence/gender-based violence contributes negatively to all aspects of health, whether it is physical, emotional, mental and shows up in several different ways. Violence can lead to mental health problems such as Depression and Anxiety, Eating Disorders, PTSD, Suicide Ideation, and death. Violence can lead to physical disease in the body, which may present itself in a variety of ways, including stroke, heart disease, cancer, alcohol disorders as well as a myriad of other serious health consequences. It can lead to risky behaviours in youth and adulthood and lead to missing important life opportunities like unemployment, education dropouts, poverty, and homelessness. And finally, violence against women can lead to femicide, which is broadly defined as the killing of women and girls due to their gender by an intimate partner or another man known to them.
- The 401 corridor has been well documented as a primary route for sex traffickers to transport and sell victims of commercial sexual exploitation. Oxford County is situated at the intersection between highways 401 and 403, with a large number of hotels and motels based on servicing the 401 corridor. The combination of Oxford's rurality and isolation, along with significant traffic along the 400 series highways, make Oxford County particularly vulnerable.
- The OPP and Woodstock Police receive over 1,500 calls annually regarding domestic related disturbances.
- Oxford County Community Health Centre has identified 796 individuals that required/could have benefited from specialized sexual violence supports. Waitlists are expected to continue to grow as current capacity within Oxford does not come close to servicing the population needs.

With respect to challenges that Domestic Abuse Services Oxford faces, Diane Harris advised as follows:

- DASO operates a 17-bed facility which is full mostly every night (17-bed means "heads in beds" – so maximum 7 families with children and 2 singles). They housed 63 women and 56 children in the 2022-23 fiscal year. They receive 2881 calls for help on the crisis line, which translates to 7 calls a day. They must turn away women with or without children every day.
- Women are not having the choice to leave abuse due to the on-going housing crisis. There is a serious lack of adequate, affordable housing – no one has the option of moving out and starting anew in apartments or townhomes. Most women must face homelessness to leave an abusive relationship. The housing crisis means longer stays at the shelter and second stage resulting in a lack of hope for families for a better future when financial barriers don't allow for shelter, clothing and food.
- There is a serious lack of transportation between the different municipalities within Oxford. Isolation on farms and rural areas make it difficult to reach out due to poor or no internet or cell phones.



- There is a lack of specialized supports in our agencies for mental health, addictions, and human trafficking/exploitation, as well as in our community.
- Lack of legal support for women who must enter the family law system. Only one lawyer in the county takes legal aid certificates, leaving women to self-represent in court. Now that court has opened in-person appearance from virtual, means that women can no longer find representation from another county/jurisdiction.
- Education systems (boards of education) do not allow for prevention programs by their sector for youth to work on recognizing and establishing healthy relationships.
- Human trafficking and sexual exploitation cases are on the rise and the community does not have the capacity for these required specialized supports.
- Violence against women agencies are grossly under-funded. They must fundraise between \$100,000 and 200,000 to maintain current programs. The shelter operates 24/7 with one staff in the house on weekends and evenings. This is unheard of in any other 24/7 support agency in other communities.

The requests made by the delegation at County Council on July 12th included:

1. To push the Province of Ontario to officially recognize intimate partner violence as an epidemic;
2. That an epidemic of intimate partner violence be declared at the federal level;
3. Advocate for femicide to be added as a term to the Criminal Code of Canada;
4. Advocating to the provincial and federal government to provide the appropriate supports necessary to address the epidemic;
5. That this request be circulated to all municipalities within Ontario.

The Safe and Well Oxford Steering Committee is seeking endorsement from all area municipalities to include goals and objectives within the Safe and Well Oxford Community Safety and Well-being plan to address gender-based violence within the County as an additional priority risk area. Support in relation to advocacy, education and awareness is required. The Safe and Well Oxford Steering Committee received a presentation from the Domestic Abuse Response Team Oxford at their meeting held on September 14th, 2023. The following are recommended changes to the Safe and Well Oxford Community Safety and Well-being Plan:

- Establish Gender-Based Violence as an additional priority risk area within the Safe and Well Oxford Community Safety and Well-being Plan;



- Identify specific goals and objectives as outlined below, to be included in the Safe and Well Oxford Community Safety and Well-being Plan;
- Designate the Domestic Abuse Response Team (DART) Oxford as the Gender-Based Violence Action Coalition under the Safe and Well Oxford Steering Committee.

Goal #1- Strengthening Prevention Opportunities Through Training

Objectives

1. Explore expanding current programs that offer support to survivors and perpetrators.
2. Conduct a reassessment of current training models to identify gaps and opportunities for more specific education needs which are survivor centered and trauma informed.
3. Partner with stakeholders and service providers to assess existing training for justice system personnel, as well as any personnel who provide support to individuals who have experienced or are perpetrating gender-based violence. This would also include a review and enhancement of training for medical professionals including hospitals, midwife services, clinics, etc. to offer education on spotting and addressing instances of violence.
4. Explore and facilitate further training and public education opportunities. Leverage and expand early detection and prevention programs to promote a community where families can live free from violence. These include educational programs for youth, training opportunities for justice partners, and increased membership within the DART committee.

Goal # 2: Social Development Focus and Awareness

Objectives:

1. Promote participation in authentic conversations by listening to the voices of survivors and establishing a survivor network, to inform solutions and actions.
2. Leverage a variety of mediums (including social media) to disseminate key messages about gender-based violence and its risk factors.
3. Promote an inclusive, empathetic community that understands the intersections of gender-based violence as a public health issue.
4. Engage justice and children's mental health members in enhancing community understanding and responses to high-risk youth.
5. Engage in broad, multisector public education initiatives.



Thank you for your consideration and support.

Yours truly,

Marcus Ryan
Chair, Safe and Well Oxford Steering Committee
Warden, Oxford County

cc. Premier Doug Ford
Oxford MP Arpan Khanna
Oxford MPP Ernie Hardeman
Ministry of Community and Social Services
All Oxford Municipalities
All Ontario Municipalities

