



Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women (OCTEVAW)
Coalition d'Ottawa contre la violence faite aux femmes (COCVFF)
250 City Centre, Suite 601, Ottawa, ON, K1R 6K7

June 24 2022

Dear Ottawa City Councillors,

We are writing today to comment on the City's response to the recent windstorm that ravaged Ottawa and the surrounding area on the afternoon of May 21, 2022. The storm resulted in widespread damage, worse than the ice storm of 1998 and tornado of 2018, and left 350 000 residents without power. Clearly, when a disaster like this strikes, the focus is on clean-up and restoring power. The City of Ottawa has done an excellent job with post-storm recovery - so many factors were taken into account when responding. The City mobilized quickly with emergency food aid, financial assistance for residents and Emergency Reception Centres. We are hopeful that washrooms in these centres were gender neutral, and included some of the 80 single stall washrooms designated gender neutral as a result of the Women and Gender Equity Strategy.

This points to an issue that often gets ignored amidst the shock and chaos of a severe storm - the link between natural disasters and violence against women and gender-based violence. The research is clear and irrefutable: in the social breakdown after a disaster, women are especially vulnerable to sexual and domestic violence¹. There appears to be a dearth of information regarding the impact on 2SLGBTIAQ+ communities - but know that they are often targeted for sexual violence and have significant rates of partner violence.

Research shows that call volumes related to mental health and domestic violence hotlines tend to increase post-disaster due to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, substance use and domestic violence². We also know that these traumatic events can lead to some victims of intimate partner violence leaving domestic violence shelters and returning to their abusers - thankfully this didn't happen post-Derecho in Ottawa in VAW Emergency shelters, but we don't know if this happened in City supported motels/hotels. Post-disaster, isolation is increased and social networks are disrupted or damaged - as the pandemic has shown us - these disruptions can increase incidents of gender-based violence while simultaneously shrinking a survivor's community and support network.

The City has committed to helping prevent and respond to gender-based violence and violence against women through the Women and Gender Equity Strategy and the Community Safety and Well-Being Plan. As such we recommend the following:

¹ West et al. (2006, July). *Victims of violence in times of disaster or emergency*. VAWnet.org. Retrieved June 6, 2022, from <https://vawnet.org/material/victims-violence-times-disaster-or-emergency>

² Chew and Ramdas (2006, November). *Caught in the storm: The impact of natural disasters*. Global Fund for Women. Retrieved June 6, 2022, from <https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/latest/article/impact-natural-disasters/>

- Apply the City’s Equity and Inclusion lens and intersectional analysis to ensure that the needs of gender-based violence & violence against women survivors are integrated into disaster response, crisis intervention, and take account of and contribute to resources for longer term impacts that can’t be resolved by a couple of counselling sessions.
- Ensure that a 2SLGBTIAQ+ GBV-lens is applied to this work, as this community is targeted for violence.
- Strengthen relationships between GBV/VAW organizations, first-responders, health-care facilities and other crisis response personnel.
- Educate disaster professionals recognizing signs of possible GBV/VAW trauma and intimate partner violence, and how to respond compassionately and appropriately.

The above recommendations will help ensure that a GBV/VAW-sensitive natural disaster response and intervention is in place. So what does this look like in practice?

- Increasing the safety and well-being of trans and gender diverse people by having gender neutral washrooms and shower facilities available at Emergency Centres.
- If a VAW/GBV emergency shelter or transitional housing is impacted by a natural disaster - particularly with a loss of power - its residents will be impacted and other survivors needing support will be blocked from accessing their services. The City has discussed the idea of mandating gas stations to have generators. A GBV/VAW sensitive framework would ensure that generators are made available to VAW/GBV emergency shelters. This cost should be incorporated into disaster response and not a burden to shelters that are consistently underfunded and overstretched.
- The City of Ottawa and Hydro Ottawa need to prioritize checking in with VAW service providers, especially VAW emergency shelters to determine if there has been an impact to their service delivery. We noted that the OPH website had a link to UnsafeAtHomeOttawa - a resource for survivors of partner violence. Although we appreciate these efforts, in this case UnsafeAtHomeOttawa was not accessible due to the power outages. We understand this led to callers being on hold with 3-1-1 for hours. Survivors trying to flee violence cannot afford to wait on hold for that long.

By investing in these approaches and ensuring appropriate and sufficient resources are available, the City of Ottawa can more fully uphold its commitments to the Women and Gender Equity Strategy and the Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan by protecting survivors and strengthening our community. By making these investments now, we can ensure that the needs of survivors are being met and that they are provided with the opportunity to rebuild their lives in peace.

Signatories:

1. Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women (OCTEVAW)
2. Women’s Initiatives for Safer Environments (WISE)
3. Sakeenah Homes Ottawa
4. Wisdom2Action Consulting Ltd.
5. Planned Parenthood Ottawa
6. Ottawa Victim Services

7. Jewish Family Services of Ottawa
8. Canadian Centre for Gender and Sexual Diversity
9. Interval House of Ottawa
10. Eastern Ottawa Resource Centre
11. Immigrant Women Services Ottawa (IWSO)
12. Family Services Ottawa (FSO)
13. Orléans-Cumberland Community Resource Centre
14. Counselling and Family Services Ottawa
15. The Sexual Assault Support Centre of Ottawa
16. Maison d'amitié
17. The FAM Network
18. Western Ottawa Community Resource Centre (WOCRC)
19. Women's Shelters Canada
20. Carlington Community Health Centre
21. Amethyst Women's Addiction Centre
22. Nepean, Rideau and Osgoode Community Resource Centre
23. Centretown Community Health Centre

Resources:

West et al. (2006, July). *Victims of violence in times of disaster or emergency*. VAWnet.org. Retrieved June 6, 2022, from <https://vawnet.org/material/victims-violence-times-disaster-or-emergency>

Chew and Ramdas (2006, November). *Caught in the storm: The impact of natural disasters*. Global Fund for Women. Retrieved June 6, 2022, from <https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/latest/article/impact-natural-disasters/>

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