

'Shelters are saving lives'

But report finds not enough women have access

By SARAH GREEN, TORONTO SUN

For every seven women who call Toronto's YWCA Arise shelter, six are turned away.

"It's devastating," said Silvia Samsa, manager of the 27-bed shelter, which is always full. Staff try to find other accommodations for women who are turned away, from another shelter to a friend's home.

It is usually a violent incident in the previous 24 to 48 hours that prompts the women to make the call: "I've got to get out now," Samsa said.

A YWCA Canada report, released yesterday in Ottawa, found 77% of the 368 women surveyed in 10 shelters across the country had been at "imminent" risk of being murdered by their partners.

"We know shelters are saving lives," said Amanda Dale, director of advocacy and communications with YWCA Toronto.

The report follows several high-profile domestic murders in the GTA this year, including last week's death of a 19-year-old college student, allegedly thrown from the 10th floor by her estranged husband.

"For one woman to die, it's a bad year," said Samsa, adding the response of many women in shelters to recent murders was "that could have been me."

NEED NATIONAL STRATEGY

The two-year survey is the first to look at the impact of shelters on abused women, 70% of whom suffered physical injuries including cuts, bruises, broken bones and miscarriages. The report's findings led yesterday to a call for a national strategy on domestic violence. What exists now is a patchwork of funding and programs -- both in short supply -- for women trying to rebuild their lives. At some shelters, women are discharged after three weeks.

"We all know their risk of dying does not drop," Dale said. "They're right back where they started, whether they go back with their abuser or not. We're letting them out with no housing, no social assistance."

The average length of stay at Toronto's Arise shelter is four months, but women often stay much longer, Samsa said.

Robyn Rogers' ex-husband once held a rifle to her head, threatening "you'll never leave."

"I was used to that. It seemed natural. I stayed for 23 years," said Rogers, 53, who grew up in an abusive home. "I was taught at a very young age, you don't talk."

Rogers, who told her story in Ottawa yesterday, fled her marriage six years ago with the help of a crisis line and an Alberta shelter. "If I hadn't called them, I don't think I would be here."