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FOR WOMEN



## **Written Brief Submitted to the Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology**

*Study on the Government's Response to the COVID-19 pandemic*

*June 19, 2020*

### **Introduction**

YWCA Toronto is pleased to provide this brief to the Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology on the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This brief forms YWCA Toronto's written submission to the Senate Committee.

YWCA Toronto is one of Canada's leading multi-service women's organizations. Each year, we help over 13,000 women and their families find safety, gain meaningful employment, and access affordable housing. We operate almost 550 units of permanent, supportive housing for women and their families, a transitional housing project, and four shelters, including two Violence Against Women shelters. We are one of the largest housing providers for women-led families in the country.

We welcome the level of cooperation between all levels of governments demonstrated during this pandemic and the leadership exhibited by the federal government. Considering the enormity of the issue and the complexity of the challenges involved, the measured and thoughtful leadership of the federal government has been reassuring. The economic relief measures introduced by the government and enhanced investments in the social services sector have been critical to our organization, as well as the survival of many Canadians.

However, the enormity of challenges before us threaten to undermine the social fabric of our country. The pandemic has laid bare gender and racial inequalities and while measures are robust, they are also temporary. We are concerned for the future of our organization, our sector, and the communities we work with and serve – and the regressive impact of this pandemic on gender and racial equality in this country.

### **COVID-19's impact on YWCA Toronto**

During this pandemic, we have remained committed to supporting women, girls and gender-diverse people in Toronto communities. Our shelters and supportive housing programs have remained open, and we have modified many of our non-essential services to deliver programming online. Some of our services have temporarily closed, including our child care centre, camp and venue rentals programs.

Many of the challenges we have experienced over the past few months are shared by other organizations in our sector and are related not only to increased expenses but to substantial loss of

revenue. Notably, the increase in expenses relate to I) implementing physical and social distancing measures, II) procuring PPE equipment, and III) challenging human resource issues.

### **I. Implementing physical and social distancing measures**

While the wellbeing of our residents and staff remains our top priority, it has been difficult to implement social and physical distancing guidelines in our housing portfolio. Through a donation from a private foundation and close collaboration with the City, we were able to move some shelter residents into two hotels which enabled us to adhere to public health guidelines more effectively. The pandemic has underlined the importance of affordable and supportive housing options. Shelter design, including the necessity of self-contained suites in emergency shelter settings, must be rethought in order to protect the most vulnerable populations in our communities. We continue to support a right-based approach to housing.

Physical distancing has been a key component in preventing the spread of the virus and has forced shelters to limit the number of residents. Though necessary, the restriction of new intakes contributes to the ongoing challenge for women fleeing violence: there simply is not enough shelter space. Prior to COVID-19, VAW shelters were at capacity with fairly slow discharge rates due to the lack of affordable housing options. Now, due to the pandemic, women will likely have to endure violent relationships longer, especially when many people are still working from home and the opportunity to safely and confidentially access support is limited.

### **II. Procuring Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)**

Procuring PPE has been an ongoing challenge, compromising our ability to keep our staff and residents safe. Until recently, it was difficult for our Association to obtain PPE from our provincial/municipal partners. In recent weeks, we have received a steadier supply, albeit for a cost, which has helped alleviate concerns from staff and residents. Currently we are not experiencing a PPE shortage, but this could change at any time as our supply is not guaranteed, and staff members are required two masks per shift. It is important for the government to ensure a secure, adequate, and affordable supply chain for PPE and other supplies needed to keep non-profit workplaces such as ours safe.

### **III. Human resource issues**

Ensuring the appropriate level of staff supports for our frontline programs has been another area of concern. Thankfully, we have avoided community transmission at our sites and have only had a few positive cases of COVID-19 among residents and staff. We attribute this success, in part, to the diligent and fastidious work of our frontline housing workers and cleaners who have gone into work, day in and day out, despite uncertainty, fear and enforced enhanced cleaning protocols. To deal with staff shortages and/or a potential outbreak, we have introduced, first a volunteer, and now a mandatory, redeployment policy which we are in the process of implementing. Should the need arise, we are ready to redeploy staff as suits the needs of the organization and takes into consideration pre-existing health conditions of individual staff members.

At the beginning of the pandemic, we promptly instituted 10 paid pandemic days so that staff having to isolate would not suffer lost wages. We have also instituted a 10% top-up to frontline staff in recognition of their hazardous working conditions. Through support from the provincial government, we are also able to provide a temporary \$4 hour top up to frontline staff, which has been an incredible

boost to staff morale. Our frontline workers assume a great deal of risk and responsibility and our work is simply not possible without them – we are very grateful for their continued commitment and perseverance.

This pandemic is calling into question who is considered an essential service worker and how such workers are treated and paid. Since many frontline workers are racialized women who tend to be underpaid and overworked, we do hope the government's response to this pandemic will go beyond instituting the 10 paid sick days for workers. While this is a great step in the right direction, broader labour market reforms to protect workers and improve working conditions in particularly feminized industries are needed. This pandemic is highlighting the importance of cleaners, personal support workers, and cashiers in keeping our society functional. Precarious work should rise to the top of employment issues.

### **Financial Matters**

The support from the federal and provincial government has been instrumental in assuring the continuation of our operations. Of the \$350 million of additional funding the federal government announced on April 21, we are currently applying for \$75k in a first round, and possibly \$35k at a later time. In terms of the May 16, WAGE announcement of \$40 million additional funds to the VAW sector, we received \$64k, to be split between our two shelters. In terms of the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) program, we have applied and successfully received \$820k thus far, and we are hopeful we can access more funds in the future. Additionally, from the provincial government we received \$65K pandemic pay and \$18k COVID-19 Residential Relief Fund from MCCSS so we can provide our frontline staff the aforementioned \$4 top up. On the municipal level, we have received some additional monies for our two, non-VAW shelters.

These financial relief measures have been critical in ensuring we maintain our levels of staffing and service. Despite the generous support from federal and provincial governments, we are very likely facing a significant deficit for the year, possibly \$1 million or more, which is due in part to the cancellation of revenue-generating activities such as our camp, venue rentals program, and our annual Women of Distinction fundraising event.

As an organization, the majority of our staff identify as women, and approximately 70% of our staff are racialized. We support and employ people from many of the communities we serve – as a whole, our sector is primarily a woman's sector and we have engaged all levels of government to advocate for decent work within feminized industries. We echo the concerns expressed by others in our sector, including the Ontario Nonprofit Network and Imagine Canada, that the non-profit sector requires permanent and sustained government funding to remain afloat. Non-profits serve – and employ – communities that experience higher levels of poverty, violence and other forms of oppression. Ensuring the doors of non-profits remain open will fundamentally require further government investment and support for the foreseeable future.

### **COVID-19's gendered and racial impacts**

As an Association that works with women, girls and non-binary people in marginalized communities, we are concerned about the social and economic impacts of this pandemic. We recently conducted an analysis of COVID's intersectional gender impacts, *An Intersectional Approach to COVID-19 She-Covery*

which can be accessed [here](#). It is clear that there are gendered and racial dimensions to this public health outbreak. Newcomer women, racialized women, senior women, Indigenous women, trans communities, women with precarious status, and women with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 transmission – and the harmful economic impacts of the pandemic. Many of the financial relief measures for residents are temporary. We have also heard from partner agencies that some of these relief measures are inaccessible for a multitude of reasons. For example, women with precarious immigration status cannot easily access the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). The pandemic has also highlighted the fact that highly feminized industries have suboptimal working conditions. Many women on the frontlines of this pandemic are Black and racialized, underpaid and precariously employed.

As economists have rightly pointed out, child care will be central to Canada's recovery efforts. Reductions in public health restrictions will mean that many people will go back to work, but this will not be the case for women if child care is not available. Given that women take on a disproportionate amount of unpaid care work compared to men, and are more likely to have lost their jobs during the pandemic, recovery or recovery for women will be much slower unless federal responses include additional investments in Canada's child care system. YWCA Toronto operates an Early Learning Centre that we are in the process of re-opening. However, with so many multi-service non-profits facing increased deficits and economic uncertainty, many of these non-profit child care spots are at risk as well. The child care system was already unaffordable for many families, the move towards a publicly funded system will be integral to supporting women's economic empowerment.

In terms of the government's response to COVID-19, without having clear data to inform policy choices, vulnerable populations within our society – particularly people who face intersecting forms of marginalization – are at greater risk of being excluded from relief measures and other support provisions. As the situations with the long-term care homes and meat packing plants reveal, many advancements are still needed to improve the working conditions of frontline and migrant workers who are particularly vulnerable when a public health outbreak occurs. Understanding the differential impacts of pandemics on vulnerable and historically marginalized communities are necessary to inform adequate government responses that actually protect the populations in need of support. The collection of federal, race-based health data and other forms of disaggregated socio-demographic data on measures such as poverty, gender-based violence, gun violence, and so forth, would be helpful in informing a GBV+ analysis of budgetary considerations.

## **Recommendations**

Our brief has highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on YWCA Toronto in some detail as an example of how the non-profit sector is navigating these unprecedented times. The pandemic relief measures the federal government has introduced have been immensely helpful. We hope that some of the positive gains made during this pandemic can provide a guide to making systemic changes in our country. These are our suggestions going forward:

1. **Dignity Dividend:** A continuation of CERB or a CERB-like program – similar to the GST credit – that can remunerate unpaid care work and set a national foundation below which poverty cannot fall. When we look at the population who is disproportionately impacted by poverty in Canada, women and women-led families in Indigenous and racialized communities are hardest

hit. A guaranteed income tool has the potential to support gender and racial equality. We also suggest a non-punitive process for CERB-related eligibility issues is introduced such that low-income CERB recipients are not penalized or criminalized for accessing additional income supports at a time of crisis and heightened need. Social assistance rates across Canada should be equivalent to a CERB-level payout.

2. **Universal Child Care:** Access to affordable child care is a precursor to women's labour market participation. Since women are disproportionately impacted by job loss related to COVID-19, supporting women's labour force re-entry should be of paramount federal concern. We recommend federal legislation that enshrines Canada's commitment to a universal child care system, setting out conditions for federal transfer payments similar to the Canada Health Act.
3. **National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence:** Shelter in place measures and increased restrictions on shelter usage are creating unsafe conditions for women. For several years we have advocated for a national plan on gender-based violence and a coordinated federal response to combat violence against women. We call for a substantial increase in federal dollars for women's organizations and emergency shelters to keep up with growing demand, and a comprehensive strategy to allow for a meaningful response to this pressing social issue.
4. **Sector Funding:** Charities are facing billions of dollars in lost revenue. Drastic service disruption to essential community services and massive layoffs disproportionately impact women — enhanced funding for the non-profit and charitable sectors is urgently needed, as outlined by [Imagine Canada](#).
5. **Labour Market Reform:** Precarious working conditions for feminized industries continue to persist and undermine the livelihoods of many families, particularly women-led families. Systemic racism, gender and racial wage disparities, and a lack of supports for women who take on the responsibility of paid and unpaid employment continue to leave women economically disadvantaged. The time is right for robust federal legislation that promotes decent working conditions, closes the gender wage gap, promotes integration of newcomer skills, and ensures safe and healthy workplaces across Canada.

## Conclusion

In a time of crisis and rebuilding, COVID-19 has presented many challenges but has also offered an unprecedented opportunity to address certain inequities that have stubbornly persisted in our country. Federal leadership continues to be crucial in ensuring the wellbeing of Canadian residents and advancing a recovery plan that serves the interests of women. We welcome the opportunity to appear before the Committee and present on the matters we have raised in this brief.

Sincerely,



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