

Women's Centre of York Region faces challenges in New Year



By Brock Weir

The Women's Centre of York Region ended 2018 with a new location and a new Executive Director and now, at the start of a New Year, they are going into 2019 prepared to tackle new challenges in an ever-changing community.

The community is growing, but funding is not, says Executive Director Liora Sobel. Funding is largely in a holding pattern, but shelters are operating well above capacity.

'We're trying to show to funders, especially large funders, how big our catchment area is, and also the need in our area,' says Ms. Sobel. 'They say a minimum of 25 per cent of women are experiencing violence; we have a population of over one million in York Region and over 250,000 women who are suffering right now and living in abusive situations within our Region. Some statistics go up to as much as 50 per cent of women experiencing violence' and we have just 30 shelter beds in the Region.'

The Women's Centre of York Region (WCYR) has just three counsellors on site, focused on getting women leaving abusive situations, to the resources they need. Their aim is to increase rather than decrease services they provide, but that is an ongoing challenge given resources.

'Toronto has over 20 different organizations providing services; we have five violence against women (VAW) organizations in York Region, which is not nearly enough for what the demand is on services,' she says, noting this and many other York Region organizations took a hit when the United Way merged throughout the GTA.

Prior to the merger, the United Way was the main funder for shelters in York Region. Now that funding goes to women's shelters administered by the YWCA, all of which are within the City of Toronto.

Last year, the Women's Centre of York Region served over 900 women and nearly 560 children.

Ms. Sobel took the helm of the organization in the second half of 2018, following Catherine Madden who left for another opportunity at Ronald McDonald House. Ms. Sobel says she was attracted to the job not only for the leadership opportunity but also the feminist philosophy at WCYR.

Coming into the job with 15 years working in the VAW field, she was also interested in the economic development potential that WCYR had, particularly when it comes to social enterprise for young women who have experienced violence.

Ms. Sobel was inspired to get involved in the field from the own challenges she has had to overcome. She experienced these challenges, she says, from something of a 'privileged position' having the education to overcome her oppressors; other women, she said, are 'dealing with these same oppressors, but don't have the same advantages I had.'

'I think that is what really drew me to the VAW sector and field was my own personal experiences and wanting to give back to the community,' she says. 'Knowing what it felt like to be oppressed and to be in abusive situations, knowing we can make that change, and that women often get stuck in these situations. A woman who doesn't have any background with any financial knowledge or empowerment of their own and isn't able to work or hasn't ever worked feel dependent upon that abusive situation and that is one thing we work to do here: empower them, to give them those skills and abilities so that they are able to leave those situations, and guiding them through that process.'

'Not all women are so lucky as to be given those opportunities. A lot of them don't even know that that exists, especially if you're

not going through a shelter system. That's what makes us unique as well: you can get all these transitional supports through a shelter system, but a woman has to intake into a shelter. Our shelters are over capacity at this point and not all women want to be in a shelter or need to be in a shelter, but still need to access the services. We can help you work through the system of leaving that abusive situation and into a safer situation, but we can help you do it without having to utilize the shelter system. We offer the same supports and services without the bed.?

But those beds are very important in addressing community needs ? and this isn't the only shortfall. While the WCYR served over 500 children last year, they do not currently have children's programs, nor do they have parenting programs. These are two areas Ms. Sobel hopes to develop while leading the organization, helping women through motherhood.

They currently offer counselling and group services for women focused on their own social and economic empowerment but parenting, she says, is a huge part of that.

?It's about what a woman brings back to her children, especially when leaving abusive or violent situations,? she says. ?How do you parent after abuse? How do you work with that child through what they have been through when you yourself is traumatized? If half our clientele has children, why aren't we offering those programs that support children with these services as well? I am hoping to empower women on that parenting journey.

?York Region is an affluent community, but we often don't see the suffering or the poverty of what exists in these communities because we see the affluence and we want the people in the community to know this does exist.?

For more information on the Women's Centre of York Region, visit www.wcyr.ca.