

Social distancing proving a challenge to Yellow Brick House

Social isolation and physical distancing are necessary to address COVID-19 but, at the same time, can be 'absolutely detrimental' to the health and wellbeing of women and children trying to flee domestic violence.

This, according to Lorris Herenda, Executive Director of Yellow Brick House, the Aurora-based shelter for women and children.

But the organization is rising to the occasion, deploying some out-of-the-box thinking to continue providing shelter services while, at the same time, reassuring the public of their commitment to lend a hand to those looking to get to safety.

'For women who find themselves in this situation, and I know they are listening to the news and feeling like they have nowhere to go even more, but we are encouraging women to reach out to our crisis line,' she says. 'That might be more challenging if their partner is always home with them, but, if possible, if they have a moment to make a call or text our crisis line, we can get them out and into a hotel.'

'We are making contingency plans for these women, but we have already had a 25 per cent increase in our crisis calls because women are experiencing the negative effects of self-isolation.'

Being in a situation like this is always stressful, she says, but Yellow Brick House staff have been spearheading 'new and innovative ways' to help ease the stress by keeping women in shelters busy. It is about providing a routine, she says, and this can be as simple as getting dressed, setting goals, and accessing online resources for physical and creative activities.

'Our staff are available to speak to them, which is a very crucial part of the daily checking on, counselling sessions that are ongoing, both with women and children, and the message that we're all in this together. Because women and children in shelters are surrounded by such strong support from our staff, I think they are actually feeling very good. It is kind of getting through this as a team.'

Yellow Brick House operates two shelters in York Region, the first of which is in Aurora.

The Aurora shelter is not a purpose-built facility and this has led to some challenges that Yellow Brick House is looking to solve. The building has only seven bedrooms yet, at press time, nine women and twelve children were sheltering in place.

'You can't assign a bedroom per family and they have to share it, which is a challenge,' says Ms. Herenda. 'All of our common living

areas such as the kitchen and the living room give structure to a home, but they're small, so we do try to instruct women to be one family at a time in the kitchen preparing the meal, so to speak, but there is always overlap, especially when you have, out of twelve children, six under the age of four. It is very difficult to contain little ones in a tiny room.?

To help address this problem, Yellow Brick House is moving a ?sufficient number? of women and children to hotel rooms so some can remain at the shelter as they are now, maintaining social and physical distancing, while others will be practicing the same in their hotel rooms.

?Looking at the logistics of that, there is an additional cost to a not-for-profit in implementing that,? says Ms. Herenda. ?That is why we are looking at a very detailed plan on how that is going to be possible. All intakes in the last three weeks have already been placed in hotels. We have not brought new intakes into our shelters. The plan was they remain in hotel for 14 days and then they can be [re-located] to the shelter once the self-isolation period is over.

?As we are moving families into hotels?we are reaching out to local restaurants to see if they are willing in the short term to donate a hot meal, or even a cold meal, for the women and children who are in the shelters or in hotels. We're managing now with grocery deliveries and all of that, so getting help from local businesses in terms of food preparation will be fantastic. We're also looking for some supplies and donations that some people might have extra of at home, such as toilet paper, which has disappeared, paper towels, hand sanitizer, cleaning products, milk, sanitary pads, diapers and everything physical because shelters are in a high mode of continuous assurance that all surfaces are cleaned at least four times a day. We are extremely grateful for everything that our community can do for us and for the women and children who find themselves in this unfortunate situation.?

To get in touch with Yellow Brick House for non-emergencies such as fundraising and general inquiries, call 1-800-263-2231 or visit yellowbrickhouse.org. If you're in crisis, the 24-Hour Crisis Line can be reached at 1-800-236-3247.

By Brock Weir