

Yellow Brick House supports students who experience dating or sexual violence

Yellow Brick House is a leader in empowering women and children leaving abusive situations at home. Now, thanks to a grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, they are expanding their focus to support students who have experienced ? or are experiencing ? dating and sexual violence.

The Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) recently awarded the shelter with a grant of \$244,800 over three years to support victims of campus violence through their Stepping Up program.

Stepping Up is a peer-facilitated program that aims to support 450 students in ?exploring the best ways to help their peers who may have had a violent experience.?

?Since 1978, we have been providing life-saving services and prevention programs to meet the diverse needs of individuals, families and communities impacted by violence,? says Yellow Brick House Executive Director Lorris Herenda. ?We are strong believers that intervention services are necessary to help abused women and children escape violent homes and rebuild their lives. But we also believe in prevention and we know that working with youth at the post-secondary education level will eventually lead to a decrease in dating violence and domestic violence.

?Our Stepping Up program?is a three-year program. It is evidence-based and it indicates that getting students involved, educating them about healthy relationships and educating them about how to get involved through a peer support program will eventually reduce the incidence of violence on campuses. We're very excited about this because we would like to see, down the road, a reduction of incidents of violence and homicide. We know a woman is killed every six days in Canada and that statistic has been steady for at least the last 20 years.?

Since the start of the Global Pandemic last year, Yellow Brick House has seen a 30 per cent increase in reported domestic violence. They know their work isn't done, says Ms. Herenda, and investments in energy need to be made in both intervention and prevention to ?see an eventual reduction in violence for the next generation.?

The pandemic has greatly impacted the work of Yellow Brick House.

Since the first emergency lockdown last March, the organization made emergency shelters a priority service area. Staff were deployed to ensure that there were enough resources to work with women and children escaping violent situations.

Conversely, during that period of time, they noticed a drop in crisis calls, leading to a re-think on how best to reach out to families. Reaching out through various media and platforms, their key message was they were safe and still operating despite the current health challenges.

From there, the crisis line experienced an influx.

?We are anticipating that once COVID is wrapped up that we're going to see a tremendous increase in women who are fleeing those homes where they have been basically prisoners for the last year,? says Ms. Herenda. ?In this anticipation, York Regional Police and the two Violence Against Women agencies in York Region have created a situation table that is starting to meet? to have those weekly conversations about how to best serve abused women and children if they are escaping violent homes, how to best keep them safe and alive, and how we're going to manage the influx of numbers that we're going to see post-pandemic.?

But the women who have been able to leave these situations during the pandemic have given them feedback that indicates another trend.

?They were told by their abuser there is nowhere to go, nowhere to escape, the shelters are not safe, their children won't be safe.

Women who, before coming out, they had concerns, of course, so that is when we thought it was very important to promote the fact that we follow public health guidelines, our staff are fully equipped with PPE, and we ensure nobody is exposed to any risk in terms of contracting COVID-19.

We have had zero cases of it, so we're very, very proud about our staff's adherence to public health guidelines because they fully understand how important it is to remain safe and clear of virus because we are housing women and children who are escaping very violent homes. When they come to us, they literally tell us that they were told we're not safe and it came down to a matter of life and death. Coming into this shelter, the onboarding that takes place immediately is to show them our protocol, our procedures and how? The families are not mixing in the shelter, they each have their own area, that they remain with their families, so the physical contact is limited and that is how we have been able to stay safe.

There is another added layer of protection. In conjunction with Sandgate Women's Shelter, women and children fleeing their situations have been staying in an isolation centre where they can remain in their family groups until they get a clear negative test result from Public Health. From there, they are brought into the shelters.

We have had amazing support from the Provincial Government during the pandemic with regards to not having to turn any woman or child away, says Ms. Herenda. We are utilizing alternative housing methods and so families are housed not just in shelters but alternative housing options. We are continuing to provide counselling to women who are not in our shelters and who [have either left] their abusive relationship but are staying elsewhere or are in the process of separation or the partner has been arrested so she remains at home while he is in jail [and] we provide some crisis counselling to those families, both children and women. It has definitely been a learning curve for everybody in terms of going all digital this year. It is not the same as in-person, but we're trying to make the best of this situation.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter