

Legislative
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STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

(Section 3.10, 2013 Annual Report of the Auditor General of Ontario)

1st Session, 41st Parliament
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The Honourable Dave Levac, MPP
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly

Sir,

Your Standing Committee on Public Accounts has the honour to present its Report and commends it to the House.

Ernie Hardeman, MPP
Chair of the Committee

Queen's Park
March 2015

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

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1st Session, 41st Parliament

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PREAMBLE

On November 19, 2014, the Standing Committee on Public Accounts held public hearings on a value-for-money audit (Section 3.10 of the Auditor General's *2013 Annual Report – Violence Against Women*) of the violence against women (VAW) programs and services administered by the Ministry of Community and Social Services and the Ontario Women's Directorate of the Ministry of Citizenship, Immigration and International Trade. (For a transcript of the Committee proceedings, please see Committee *Hansard*, November 19, 2014.)

The Committee endorses the Auditor's findings and recommendations, and presents its findings, views, and recommendations in this report. The Committee requests that the Ministry provide the Clerk of the Committee with written responses to the recommendations within 120 calendar days of the tabling of the report with the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, unless otherwise specified.

Acknowledgements

The Committee extends its appreciation to officials from the Ministry of Community and Social Services, the Ontario Women's Directorate, and the Ministry of Citizenship, Immigration and International Trade who appeared before the Committee on November 19, 2014. The Committee also acknowledges the assistance provided during the hearings and report writing deliberations by the Office of the Auditor General, the Clerk of the Committee, and staff in the Legislative Research Service.

BACKGROUND¹

In Ontario, a range of ministries, sectors, professionals, and community members are involved in providing services and supports to women and their children who are fleeing violence. In the 2010-11 fiscal year (the latest year for which data was available at the time the Auditor General's *2013 Annual Report* was published) the province estimated that it spent a total of \$220 million across all ministries dealing with the issue of violence against women. Two-thirds of these costs were for VAW programs and services that were administered by the Ministry of Community and Social Services (Ministry).

The objectives of the Ministry's VAW programs and services are to

- increase the safety of women (and their children) who are experiencing violence by providing safe shelter, safety plan development, and crisis counselling;
- assist women (and their children) experiencing violence by enhancing self-esteem and supporting them to access resources to live independently; and
- enhance the coordination of VAW services at the community level.

¹ The wording of this section is taken largely verbatim from the Auditor's Report.

Transfer Payment Agencies

The Ministry provides transfer payments to more than 200 not-for-profit community-based agencies to deliver supports and services to abused women and their children. These agencies are governed by volunteer boards of directors. The Ministry is responsible for prioritizing and coordinating local service delivery, as well as for allocating public funds in response to priorities identified by VAW agencies and the local community. The Ministry's head office establishes program policies and procedures, and its five regional offices oversee funding and program delivery for the agencies in their respective jurisdictions.

In the 2012-13 fiscal year, the Ministry spent \$142 million in transfer payments. Of that amount, approximately \$82 million went toward the operation of 95 shelters. The remaining \$60 million was for other supportive services, including community-based counselling, crisis help lines, and connecting women with supports to help them secure more permanent housing.

Action Plans

In the last decade, the province released two multi-ministry action plans and a report by the Domestic Violence Advisory Council (created by the Minister Responsible for Women's Issues) dealing with the issue of VAW:

- Domestic Violence Action Plan (2004)
- Domestic Violence Advisory Council Report (2009)
- Sexual Violence Action Plan (2011)

The Ontario Women's Directorate (Directorate), a government office under the Ministry of Citizenship, Immigration and Trade,² but reporting to the Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, is responsible for coordinating the implementation of the two action plans as well as the recommendations in the Council Report.

AUDIT OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

The objective of the audit was to assess whether the Ministry and the Directorate had adequate mechanisms in place to

- meet the needs of abused women and their children cost-effectively; and
- measure and report on the effectiveness of services and initiatives aimed at curtailing VAW and at helping victims of this type of abuse.

The audit focused on VAW programs and services administered by the Ministry, and on the coordination efforts of the Directorate.

² The Directorate falls under the Ministry of Citizenship, Immigration and Trade but has a distinct mandate and therefore its own Minister. (Telephone interview with staff, Ontario Women's Directorate, Toronto, January 23, 2015.)

ISSUES RAISED IN THE AUDIT AND BEFORE THE COMMITTEE

Significant issues were raised in the audit and before the Committee. The Committee considers the issues below to be of particular importance.

TRACKING AND REPORTING PROGRESS ON PROVINCIAL INITIATIVES

The Auditor recommended that the Directorate should ensure that there are measurable goals and targets attached to commitments made in the action plans, and that progress be regularly assessed and reported. The Directorate explained that a number of steps have been taken to improve tracking and reporting progress on provincial initiatives. For example, the ministries involved in dealing with issues of violence against women have been asked to report to the Directorate on their progress in meeting their commitments under the Sexual Violence Action Plan.

The Directorate is currently analyzing data from the Statistics Canada 2009 General Social Survey (GSS) on Victimization to assess impacts of the province's VAW prevention initiatives. The Directorate is consulting with Statistics Canada to improve the usefulness of GSS data now being collected regarding sexual violence and population groups at higher risk of gender violence. The Directorate acknowledged the need to integrate the broader data from population surveys with studies of violence against women in specific contexts such as postsecondary education, and in the workplace.

Public education and awareness campaigns are key strategies for helping to change social attitudes about violence against women. The Directorate supports a number of community organizations that deliver public education about violence against women at the local level to diverse populations, including aboriginal communities, newcomers and immigrants, workplace initiatives, and postsecondary education students. One such program, the "Neighbours, Friends and Families" public education campaign, undertaken in more than 200 hundred communities across the province, has been cited by the coroner's Domestic Violence Death Review Committee as an important initiative for the prevention of domestic violence. The Directorate uses surveys and agency reports to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs.

Committee Members note that statistics showing a change in the prevalence of violence against women are not alone sufficient evidence to prove or disprove the effectiveness of provincial violence prevention initiatives. It is important to conduct focused surveys that will enable the Directorate and ministries to assess the effectiveness of provincial VAW initiatives, and the reach and impact of provincial VAW awareness and education programs.

The Committee encourages the Ministry and Directorate to move towards a culture of continuous improvement so that evaluation is always an integral part of program implementation.

Possible Committee Recommendations

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommends that:

1. The Directorate work with relevant ministries to ensure that
 - a. there are measurable goals or targets attached to the commitments made within the province's Domestic Violence Action Plan and Sexual Violence Action Plan; and that
 - b. progress on meeting these commitments is assessed and publicly reported every two years.
2. The Directorate evaluate the reach and impact of provincial violence against women public awareness and education programs in diverse communities including, but not limited to, aboriginal communities, newcomers, and immigrants; as well as programs addressing violence against women in the workplace and in postsecondary education.

MONITORING SERVICE QUALITY, DELIVERY, AND EXPENDITURES

The Auditor recommended that the data gathered from transfer-payment agencies by the Ministry should allow for effective analysis of service costs and gaps in services, and that the Ministry should periodically spot check agency-provided data to ensure that it is accurate, consistent, and reasonable. The Auditor also recommended that the Ministry use relevant results from Statistics Canada's biannual Transition Home survey to assess its programs' effectiveness, and request more detailed survey results in order to identify where improvements are needed and how Ontario compares to other jurisdictions.

The Ministry is currently gathering more detailed data from the Survey and other relevant sources to improve their understanding of VAW services in Ontario and compare results with other jurisdictions.

Work is also underway to review data elements and performance measures in VAW programs and make changes to ensure that the data being collected is of value and that applicable performance measures are in place. Consultations with the VAW sector on implementation of any new data elements will be held in spring 2015.

Shelters and Other Services

The 96 emergency shelters for women in crisis and their children are a key component of Ministry of Community and Social Services (Ministry) funded programs and services. In 2013-14, these shelters supported approximately 10,700 women and 7,400 children. Other vital services include:

- 177 counselling agencies that helped 45,300 women and 7,400 children;
- 64 agencies delivering the Child Witness Program that provided support to 2,700 women and 4,900 children;
- 127 community agencies delivering the Transitional and Housing Support Program that helped 20,300 women connect with housing, counselling, job training, and other supports; and

- provincial crisis lines that received 53,900 calls in 2013.

The Ministry is developing a quality standards manual for shelters, including standards on Canadian Police Information Checks. Instructions are being developed to guide regional office staff in regularly monitoring shelters to assess compliance with quality standards. Staff explained that the goal is to implement the quality standards in the 2015/16 fiscal year.

Possible Committee Recommendations

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommends that:

3. The Ministry
 - a. conduct ongoing analysis of service costs and gaps in services; and
 - b. ensure that the appropriate data is collected to enable assessment of the level and quality of service provided by agencies, including any regional disparities.
4. The Ministry develop a process to ensure shelters' compliance with quality standards to initiate once the standards are implemented.

Meeting Demand for Services

The Auditor reported that nearly 15,000 women—approximately 56 percent of those who sought help—were turned away from emergency shelters in 2011-12. Ministry staff acknowledged that in 2012-13 more than 11,700 people were referred to more appropriate services, while 14,000 women were referred elsewhere due to a lack of capacity.

The Ministry noted that agencies are now tracking and reporting on whether a woman is referred elsewhere because the shelter does not have capacity to accommodate her (and any children she has in her care), or because she is referred to a more appropriate service. However, agencies are not tracking whether women referred elsewhere actually received services. The main reason cited by the Ministry is the need to maintain confidentiality.

The Ministry's VAW Data Analysis Working Group is exploring how to collect data on whether women who are eligible for VAW services but must be referred elsewhere by an agency, because of capacity issues, actually receive the needed services. The Ministry plans to consult with the VAW sector on the feasibility and appropriateness of collecting this data.

Committee Members emphasized that in order for the Ministry to accurately assess the effectiveness of VAW services and the extent of unmet needs, it is vital to track whether women who are turned away receive help elsewhere.

Possible Committee Recommendations

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommends that:

5. The Ministry work with agencies to develop a process for tracking
 - a. the reasons that individual women are not admitted to emergency shelters;
 - b. whether women experiencing violence who are referred elsewhere do receive the services and support to which they have been referred; and
 - c. how long women who are referred elsewhere wait to receive appropriate services.

Client Satisfaction Survey

The VAW client satisfaction survey is an important tool for monitoring the quality of service delivery, and the Auditor's report noted low participation rates in the survey. Ministry staff noted that the rate of participation in the client satisfaction survey rose from 3,200 in fiscal 2011-12 to 4,200 in fiscal 2013-14. The survey was revised in consultation with the VAW sector and implemented in May 2014. VAW agencies can now offer incentives to clients who complete the surveys. The Ministry will monitor whether this succeeds in encouraging more women to complete the survey.

Possible Committee Recommendations

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommends that:

6. The Ministry explore new approaches to examining whether programs have increased women's safety, well-being, and sense of empowerment, as well as assessing whether there have been improvements in the accessibility and responsiveness of violence against women services.

Funding for Transfer-Payment Agencies

Although women's shelters receive government funding, they still also rely on fundraising and donations. As a result, some shelters are better financially positioned than others. The Auditor recommended that the Ministry periodically compare and analyze agency costs for similar services across the province, investigate significant variances, and ensure that funding is commensurate with actual services provided.

In 2012-13, the Ministry made changes to the type of data that transfer payment agencies are required to submit for monitoring purposes. The Ministry will monitor whether the new data requirements enable the analysis of service costs and gaps, and make changes as necessary. Following the 2013 audit, the Ministry strengthened accountability in the transfer payment budget package by including standardized expenditure categories and additional information on staffing costs that allow staff to review and analyze service costs.

New validation rules have been implemented to enhance and improve data integrity. Revisions to the Legal Text template make contract amendments less onerous. Transfer payment budget package online training modules were added

to the in-person training sessions for MCSS staff and VAW program staff. Further enhancements will be made to the budget package to make it easier to use and enhance data accuracy.

The Ministry will assess the feasibility of implementing spot checks at VAW agencies to ensure that data reported is accurate.

Individual agencies receive funding from the government as well as through donations, and the Committee heard that volunteerism and fundraising are key to agencies' success. The Committee notes that it is important for the Ministry to gain a better understanding of how agencies raise—and use—donated funds in order to have an accurate grasp of the full cost of providing VAW services.

Possible Committee Recommendations

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommends that:

7. The Ministry should
 - a. use audited financial statements submitted by agencies to review information on total revenue including revenue from donations and fundraising, in order to assess the impact of non-government revenue on the operation of shelters; and
 - b. work collaboratively with agencies to help them share best practices in fundraising.

Building Condition and Assessment

The Auditor recommended that the Ministry implement a plan for correcting significant safety and security deficiencies identified in the Ministry's 2009 Building Condition Assessment.

The Ministry acknowledged that the capital budget for women's shelters is not large. These shelters have received just over \$32 million in infrastructure funding over the last five years, and supplement this funding through fundraising.

The Ministry has now received Treasury Board/Management Board of Cabinet Approval to complete Building Condition Assessments and update the VAW Security Checklist. Funding of \$9.4 million has been provided to complete Building Condition Assessments for all Ministry programs, including updating the VAW Security Checklist.

A Request for Proposals (RFP) for procuring services to conduct Building Condition Assessments will be released in the 2014-15 fiscal year. The VAW site assessment schedule will be developed once the RFP process is completed.

The Committee is concerned that the Ministry has yet to address deficiencies identified in 2009 and would like to see these tackled with some urgency.

Possible Committee Recommendations

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommends that:

8. The Ministry implement a plan for ensuring that safety and security deficiencies, as identified in the Ministry's 2009 Building Condition Assessment and its upcoming assessment update, are addressed in order of priority.

COORDINATION OF SERVICE DELIVERY

The Ministry provides support for coordinating bodies such as the Domestic Violence Community Coordinating Committees, the Children's Aid Society/VAW collaboration committees, and service system planning between regional offices and VAW agencies. There are 48 Domestic Violence Community Coordinating Committees across the province, tasked with improving the community response to domestic violence, increasing awareness and prevention, and identifying gaps in VAW services. Committee members include domestic violence survivors, as well as representatives from the VAW, justice, health, and education sectors. The Ministry noted that in response to the Auditor General's recommendations, the Ministry is being more specific about what type of reporting is needed from these coordinating committees in order to collect both regional and province-wide data.

The Auditor recommended that the Ministry establish performance measures for its objective of enhancing the coordination of services, targets for these and existing performance measures, and regularly report results against all performance measures for VAW programs and services. Ministry staff explained that their initial focus for 2015 is on better using VAW transfer payment data, after which they will review VAW program objectives, performance measures, and possible targets and benchmarks.

Possible Committee Recommendations

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommends that:

9. The Ministry make progress on developing performance measures for the coordination of services, as well as targets for both new *and* existing performance measures, and establish timelines for regularly reporting results against all performance measures for violence against women programs and services.

ABORIGINAL WOMEN

The Committee is concerned about the high rates of violence experienced by aboriginal women, and was encouraged to hear that the government has formed a joint working group with five aboriginal partner organizations and ministries, co-chaired by the Directorate and the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs. The working group is charged with developing a long-term strategy to address violence against aboriginal women. The Committee members consider this focus on a long-term strategy to be a very positive development. The Directorate is also

working with aboriginal partner organizations on a number of other public education and community-based initiatives, such as

- the First Nations Draw-the-Line project which provides public education and raises awareness in First Nations communities about violence against women;
- the Building Aboriginal Women's Leadership program;
- the Talk4Healing helpline for aboriginal women in northern communities; and
- providing funding to train frontline workers and improve their skills in providing culturally appropriate services to victims of violence against women.

WOMEN IN NORTHERN AND REMOTE COMMUNITIES

The Committee noted that shelters in the north, and particularly in the northwest of Ontario, are often unable to accommodate women either because they are over-capacity, or because of the high cost of airfare to bring in women from communities in the far north. The Ministry explained that in many cases women prefer to get the services they need in their home communities. In these instances, the crisis line or counsellors will look for alternatives to relocating the women.

The Ministry noted that due to their smaller size and scale, northern region agencies may not have the capacity to collect data to the same extent as other agencies. For this reason, and because of the unique characteristics of northern communities, the Ministry will be emphasizing the importance of the collection of data from these agencies over the next two years.

CONSOLIDATED LIST OF COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Directorate work with relevant ministries to ensure that
 - a. there are measurable goals or targets attached to the commitments made within the province's Domestic Violence Action Plan and Sexual Violence Action Plan; and that
 - b. progress on meeting these commitments is assessed and publicly reported every two years.
2. The Directorate evaluate the reach and impact of provincial violence against women public awareness and education programs in diverse populations including, but not limited to, aboriginal communities, newcomers, and immigrants; as well as programs addressing violence against women in the workplace and in postsecondary education.
3. The Ministry
 - a. conduct ongoing analysis of service costs and gaps in services; and
 - b. ensure that the appropriate data is collected to enable assessment of the level and quality of service provided by agencies, including any regional disparities.
4. The Ministry develop a process to ensure shelters' compliance with quality standards to initiate once the standards are implemented.
5. The Ministry work with agencies to develop a process for tracking
 - a. the reasons that individual women are not admitted to emergency shelters;
 - b. whether women experiencing violence who are referred elsewhere do receive the services and support to which they have been referred; and
 - c. how long women who are referred elsewhere wait to receive appropriate services.
6. The Ministry explore new approaches to examining whether programs have increased women's safety, well-being, and sense of empowerment, as well as assessing whether there have been improvements in the accessibility and responsiveness of violence against women services.

7. The Ministry should
 - a. use audited financial statements submitted by agencies to review information on total revenue including revenue from donations and fundraising, in order to assess the impact of non-government revenue on the operation of shelters; and
 - b. work collaboratively with agencies to help them share best practices in fundraising.
8. The Ministry implement a plan for ensuring that safety and security deficiencies, as identified in the Ministry's 2009 Building Condition Assessment and its upcoming assessment update, are addressed in order of priority.
9. The Ministry make progress on developing performance measures for the coordination of services, as well as targets for both new *and* existing performance measures, and establish timelines for regularly reporting results against all performance measures for violence against women programs and services.