



Violence Against Women Services: What Can COVID-19 Teach Us, and Are We Willing to Learn?

Why this Project is Necessary

As the current pandemic evolves, we see increasing evidence of, as the Secretary General of the United Nations called it on April 6, 2020, a “*horrifying global surge in domestic violence*”, and violence against women and girls generally (UN, 2020). As Wathen (PI) recently wrote in the Western News: “*[b]eing safe at home isn’t possible for everyone...women and children living in violence are especially at risk under ‘shelter-in-place’ or #StayHome directives. As stresses mount, and with no place for anyone to go, violence can escalate*” (Wathen, 2020). This is exactly what’s happening. The World Health Organization summarized the additional risks to women and their children due to COVID-19 as follows:

- Disruption to services, including sexual and reproductive health services for sexual assault survivors, and access to formal and informal support networks.
- Safe shelter increasingly unavailable due to service restrictions and ongoing housing crises.
- Increased proximity to the abuser, with no ability for respite or escape.
- Sharp increases in financial and other material stresses through job loss and underemployment.
- Increased burden of child-care and other household tasks borne disproportionately by women.
- More ways for abusers to exert control, including threats of turning victims out of the home, exposing them to illness, denying access to supplies and spreading misinformation about victims.

What We Plan to Do

Services for women experiencing violence are tightly squeezed; on the one hand, they are an essential service, often making the difference between safety and severe injury or death. On the other, they must now account for coronavirus-related health risks to women, their children, staff and volunteers. They are having to actively implement new protocols for physical distancing, knowing the toll this will take on women, children and staff in the context of their compassion-centric, high-touch work. We need data to understand the nature and scope of these changes, and their impact, on the violence against women (VAW) service ecosystem, both to feed data back into services in real-time, and also to support future planning for a stronger, more resilient sector.

In partnership with Anova, London’s women’s shelter and sexual assault service (co-applicant), and VAW services in St. Thomas (Violence Against Women Services Elgin County) and Sarnia (Women’s Interval Home of Sarnia-Lambton) (partners) we propose a multi-component, mixed method study to examine:

- 1) The direct impact on women using these services, and their children, and on staff, of physical distancing and other new technology-mediated service protocols.
- 2) Existing and emerging physical space planning, service design and other structural factors that enable or impede new covid-19 (and future crises) required protocols.
- 3) The evolving impact of rapid change and decision-making on service mandates, mission and consideration of these in light of the traditional values of women-serving organizations.

