

Local emergency shelter adapting services through COVID-19

By Sam Odrowski Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

To prevent the spread of COVID-19, government and healthcare officials are asking the public to stay home, but for certain women and children in New Tecumseth, that's where their health is most at risk.

While most people have the advantage of being able to self-isolate in a safe home environment, victims of domestic abuse are left with almost nowhere to turn.

"The home is absolutely one of the areas that the women that we serve don't feel safe in," explained Deborah Herrington, Executive Director of My Sister's Place, a 12-bed emergency shelter in Alliston.

"It's a real double-edged sword for the women and children we serve," she added.

The shelter is usually at maximum capacity, but the number of women staying there has been reduced to enable adequate social distancing, due to its communal living environment.

"Our challenges have been how to offer the same level of service in a remote way," Herrington said. "We're having to look at different ways to support women both in and outside of the shelter."

Traditionally, services were provided face to face, but in the era of COVID-19, much of the shelter's operations have shifted to over-the-phone, remote and video chat.

During this time, My Sister's Place is working closely with its sister shelters in Simcoe County to ensure they are providing the best level of support to those in need.

"We're the Violence Against Women shelter that serves South Simcoe, but we are in close connection with the other shelters," Herrington noted. "We know where women can move to if they're not able to come into our shelter here."

Herrington said shelters are leaning on one another during this time to see what processes are working effectively through COVID-19 and to adopt best practices.

"It certainly does look differently in different shelters and different physical areas, but things are changing rapidly and we're trying to keep up with the changes," she said.

Meanwhile, My Sister's Place allows women and their children to stay in the shelter for a maximum of eight weeks, depending on their needs. Those staying at shelter have access to one on one crisis counselling and ongoing safety planning.

A children's services worker also provides counselling to children at the shelter because they're in crisis as well, Herrington noted.

Staff connects people staying at My Sister's Place with other services they may need, in addition to connecting them to safe affordable housing in the community with an onsite transitional housing worker.

"We'll help them meet with landlords and help move them forward," Herrington said.

"Our organization also offers transitional housing and we have five one-bedroom units," she added. "Women are able to stay there for up to a period of just short of a year."

During an individual's stay in transitional housing, My Sister's Place staff meet with them monthly to provide support and help move their lives forward when they leave.

Due to a lack of low-cost housing locally, the shelter also has two three-bedroom apartments that are classified as long-term affordable housing.

My Sister's Place receives approximately 80 percent of its funding from the government and has to fundraise the remainder, which typically ranges from \$160,000 to \$200,000 each year.

"That's what we're consistently fundraising for? basic service, so we absolutely at this time are still looking for support from the community in order for us to keep our services going and to support the women and children in our community, in need," Herrington stressed.

"We do realize that there will be some funding coming down from the federal and provincial governments of which we are very pleased about."

A 24/7 crisis line is offered by My Sister's Place as well, that provides immediate support to individuals and connects them with its services.

Herrington said the crisis line is well utilized, which demonstrates the importance of local emergency shelter services.

"We see usually 150 to 200 calls? a month and our shelter services are always full, so I think that alone speaks to the need of our service in the community," she noted.

"Violence against women is a topic people typically don't like to speak about or acknowledge, it's not something that's easy to talk about but it's absolutely necessary in every community to have support for women that are trying to flee domestic violence situations."

The crisis hotline is (705) 435-3835 and anyone who is a victim of domestic violence or is looking for more information is encouraged to call or visit www.mysistersplace.ca to access help.