

COVID-19 is exacerbating domestic abuse locally, as demand for shelter services outweighs supply

Domestic violence is a public health issue of pandemic proportions and its victims need the government's help now more than ever.

Imani's Place in Alliston offers a safe haven to victims of human trafficking or domestic violence, and its founder, Lisa Jaden, said the COVID-19 crisis has only empowered perpetrators of abuse as they spend far more time inside with their partner.

"Normally when women are at home with their abusers, the men find a place to go? but now everyone is to stay home because of COVID,? she explained. "The abusers get more aggressive because they're now at home with the women 24/7 ? she's stuck there.

"They just tend to beat the women more and become more aggressive because now they don't have an outlet for their own stress, so what happens is they take it out on the women.?"

Consultations conducted by the Federal government in late April show there's been a 20-30 per cent increase in domestic violence because of the pandemic and one shelter in Toronto saw a 400 per cent increase in its calls for help.

New Tecumseth is no exception to the trend of a growing demand for shelter and support services. In fact, Imani's Place has turned away over 20 women in the past two months as its stayed full.

Before the pandemic, Imani's Place had six beds, but to allow for physical distancing, that's number's been reduced to four.

Other shelters in Simcoe County and across Canada have had to reduce their capacity as well due to COVID-19, creating a two-fold blow where there's less of a supply of beds for domestic abuse victims as the demand continues to grow.

"There's not enough space, but the big struggle is getting funding to put the women in hotels,? said Jaden. "As a smaller shelter, we don't have that kind of funding, we don't get that kind of money, so we've had to turn a lot of women away and it's so painful because we know that these women really need our services.?"

Imani's Place requested emergency funding from the County of Simcoe to assist them with the increased demand through the pandemic, but they were denied.

While domestic violence has been exacerbated by COVID-19, human trafficking is still an issue impacting women and girls locally.

"It's so sad that kids as young as 12-years-old are being trafficked right under our nose, in Canada, in Alliston, in Simcoe County,? Jaden said. "That's an issue where not a lot has been said about it.?"

The shelter provides a lot more than just a roof over the head of domestic violence and human trafficking victims, they also provide counselling services and the resources needed to get them back on their feet.

They address emotional, behavioural and mental health difficulties as well as provide free clothing, food, and transportation.

"Even just listening to what they have to say is a powerful tool to help them in their journey of healing,? noted Jaden.

Imani's Place also guides its clients on a pathway towards employment.

"If they want to go back to school, we help them make that possible and we do have programs on job readiness that will prepare them for the workplace,? said Jaden.

"We also give them clothing that is good for them to go to work because when these women leave home [to escape the abuse], they leave with nothing at all, so we have to provide all of this for them."

Cooking and financial management classes are provided to clients as well, which helps in developing their independence.

"We help them in reaching their goals and we always do progress checks with them just to ensure we are meeting their goals," Jaden told The Times.

If clients need help with legal services for court battles, Imani's Place also assists with those types of referrals.

Jaden told the Times she made it her mission to create a safe haven for victims of domestic violence after escaping an abusive relationship of eight years in 2005.

"I promised myself that if I ever came out of it, I was going to help other women who are in similar situations," she said.

In 2019, Imani's Place opened its doors and it's been rapidly growing ever since.

The shelter is a Black-led organization and recently partnered with UPlift Black, a social service agency looking to uplift the wellbeing of Black people living in Simcoe Muskoka.

"Black organizations, especially small ones, they struggle a lot at the beginning because they don't have the support or the funding that they need, so UPlift Black is trying to fill that gap by helping the organization," Jaden explained.

"With UPlift Black, we are partners, but they've helped us in so many ways; they've given us care packages, and if there's any funding available for us they will call us and let us know about it. They're just helping to uplift us."

Going forward, Imani's Place hopes to gain more support from the community and lobby the government, so it can expand to Innisfil and other areas.

Half of all women in Canada have experienced one or more incidents of physical or sexual violence since age 16, according to Statistics Canada.

With the issue impacting so many women, Jaden said it's critical that victims reach out for help.

"Speak up, because a lot of women have not made it. In Canada, a woman dies every six days of domestic violence, so I would encourage every woman that is going through any form of domestic abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse ? you have to speak up, talk to somebody," Jaden told the Times.

By Sam OdrowskiLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter