

SAFETY. POWER. SISTERHOOD.

nyws

# COVID-19

## Impact

## Report



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# INTRODUCTION

Since opening its doors in 1984, North York Women's Shelter has provided a place of safety and support for women and children impacted by violence. In the 38 years since NYWS's inception, over 11,000 residents have stayed at the shelter – determined to build lives free of violence and abuse.

When we talk about the pandemic and its relation to increased rates of gender-based violence, we wanted to be specific and illustrate exactly what it's been like to operate a VAW (Violence Against Women) shelter during a global crisis such as the pandemic.

In the first two months of the onset of COVID-19 pandemic, 1.5 million women lost their jobs in Canada. Women's participation in the labour force reached its lowest level in three decades. Domestic violence across the country started surging at the same time. The pandemic has been disproportionately affecting Black, Indigenous, women and children of colour, LGBTQ+, and the gender-diverse. The result of COVID's devastating gendered effects on women and female-identifying people has become so severe across the world, the U.N. had to officially declare the effects as a "shadow

pandemic". To put it simply, women and the gender-diverse are continuing to face the brunt of two global pandemics with little to no support.

According to Canada's Women's Foundation, the rates of gender-based violence were high in Canada, even before the pandemic: on average, every 6 days, a woman is killed by her intimate partner. Thousands of women, girls, trans, and non-binary people faced a heightened risk of violence at home with COVID-19 isolation measures. 1 in 10 women was very or extremely concerned about the possibility of violence in the home, suggests a Statistics Canada survey about COVID-19. And those living with abusers must hurdle new obstacles to escape violence and to reach out for help.

As we're writing this, we are now in our 7th wave here in the GTA. We're in year 3 of the pandemic and while restrictions have loosened, mask mandates have been lifted, travel has increased, we have to remember that this pandemic is still real, still affecting gender-based violence, and still an urgent issue that we have to make a priority as a community.

**1 in 10**

Canadian Women reported they were very or extremely concerned about the possibility of violence at home after COVID-19

There has been a global increase in calls on domestic violence helplines; Ontario saw **a 400% increase**

## Shadow Pandemic of Gender-Based Violence

In Canada, there was **a 12% increase** to the police about domestic disturbances

In January 2022 it was reported that a woman is killed by her intimate partner **every 2.5 days**. The number was at every 6 days in 2018.

Canada saw **a 47% increase** between 2019 and 2021 in women and girls who were killed by violence.

The early days of the COVID-19 pandemic were an extremely difficult time for survivors of gender-based violence. In an instant, survivors were suddenly ordered by the government to stay at home with their abusive partner with no relief. Despite a general trend of increase in calls about GBV, there were fewer reports, especially in Toronto. This means there were cases that are still undetected. This is an even bigger issue than we think.

# The shift in community needs and responses

During various lockdowns and the multiple waves of increased COVID-19 cases, movement had to be guided by protocols in place to keep everyone safe. Before the pandemic, residents at NYWS could move freely within and out of the shelter space. As NYWS is a congregate-living setting and considered high risk for COVID, it was imperative to implement policies of reduced movement and strict quarantines in order to protect the safety of staff and residents alike. This affected our ability to provide various services within the shelter and restricted daily activities and movement.

Community services and resources which residents were often referred to pre-pandemic were over capacity due to unprecedented demand- this has continued to this day. Community programs and resources shifted to virtual and this only produced more barriers in accessing services like immigration support, legal support, health services, etc. Lack of technology and access to internet is and continues to be a barrier for community members.

In times where there isn't a global pandemic and subsequent lockdown measures, survivors of gender-based violence are already often subject to extreme



isolation and loneliness as a control measure from their abuse. They're often cut off from their friends, families, and are alienated from their community. Survivors' relationships with their loved ones are often strained, if existent, and the pandemic only exacerbated survivors' loneliness.

It became more difficult than ever to transition out of shelters. With the lack of affordable housing, especially for families, the rate of inflation in Canada at a record 39 year high of 8.1%, and with community services and organizations under undue pressure to support the increasing amount of services needed, it's placed immense strain on community organizations like North York Women's Shelter to fill in the gaps.



# Endeavoring

After an intensive 3 year construction period to build our brand-new 24,000 sq foot therapeutic designed 17-bedroom emergency shelter and anti-violence collective, we opened our doors two weeks before the first city lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While navigating opening a new shelter after having been on hiatus for 3 years, the added stressor of the pandemic caused immense stress, anxiety, and fear for all of us, staff and residents alike.

The lack of information around COVID-19 and the risks around it made it harder to manage housing multiple households and providing services to everyone. We had to enforce a strict quarantine, make sure the residents' meals were delivered to their rooms, and it was very difficult, near impossible to connect to service referrals outside the shelter. Initially, in the first city mandated lockdowns, we had to stagger room occupancy as we were unsure whether the virus was transmissible through the air vents.



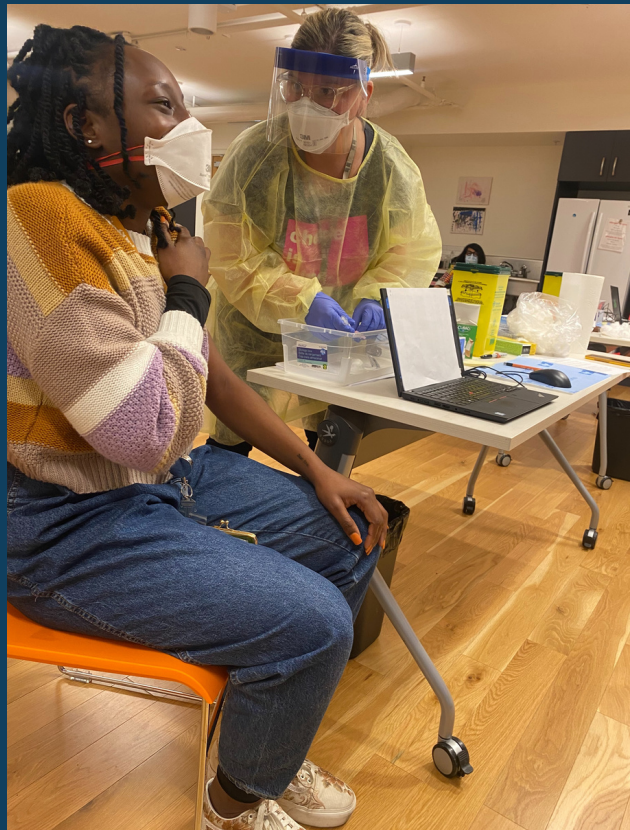


# How do we build trust in an epidemic of mistrust in institutions?

COVID-19, had no playbook. In March 2020 especially, so much was unknown about the virus, about how we could protect ourselves and our loved ones, or who to trust. There was a palpable mistrust of institutions including shelters like NYWS. To make things worse, recommended health and safety protocols from the pandemic and lockdowns required us to exercise institutional control impose restrictions to staff and residents. As a VAW shelter and with the knowledge that our clientele are survivors escaping violence, escaping controlling abusers, this was a decision, first of many, that felt so contrary to our organizational values of honouring survivors' autonomy.

There was so much mistrust from clientele about the pandemic and a deeper mistrust of institutions such as governments, media, and of course, shelters. Much of our work was trying to disseminate credible information about the pandemic to staff and clients alike. We had to focus on educating people on COVID, explain that the restrictions were for health and safety.

*"We had to prioritize cultivating trust with our staff, our residents, and most importantly, each other."*



*Here is Margaret, our Development Administrative Coordinator, receiving her booster in NYWS's second vaccine clinic in partnership with Planned Parenthood Toronto.*

NYWS is located in the middle of Downsview Roding-CFD, York University Heights, and Glenfield-Jane Heights which had reported the highest number of COVID-19 cases in the city of Toronto.

In the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, staff had to screen themselves and residents up three times a day. As a VAW shelter and congregate setting, it required us to continue to re-evaluate our operations, programs, and services to ensure that we could protect staff and clients.

Our plans in place for programs and operations had to be re-evaluated and restructured according to the new and ever-evolving evolving safety measures. Every day, we had to make critical decisions about policies and procedures to protect the safety of staff and residents had to be made ad hoc and communicate these changes in real-time.

Some of the obstacles we've faced and continue to face are:

- Isolation and the mental effects on everyone including staff and residents.
- Staff were concerned to come into work, health and safety regulations were all over the place.
- Transitioning out of the shelter became more difficult for residents
- The perpetual oscillation between online and in-person school
- We had to digitalize our workforce abruptly and implement work-from-home policies
- Staff burnout and the toll of extra stressors of health concerns, family responsibilities, and providing trauma-informed care in a pandemic





*How do you tell someone who just left an abusive situation that we need to implement control and restrictions for their own health and safety?*

As a trauma-informed organization, we never found the perfect answer.

What we had to remind ourselves, and continue to remind ourselves, is that the first tenet of trauma-informed care is health and safety. When these values seem at odds or in conflict, we must return to our organizational values and centering survivors' safety is a prerequisite to centering their autonomy.

To reflect this value, we worked with our IPAC (Infection Prevention and Control) Champion for the Violence Against Women sector to focus on disseminating credible information about COVID-19 to survivors. They created a website for both VAW service providers such as NYWS, as well as one for clientele to build trust with our community that shelters were safe to enter.

If the COVID-19 pandemic taught us anything, it taught us that we had work to do as an institution to gain the trust of our community. And we were committed to cultivating trust with survivors during the harrowing time that was the early years of the pandemic.



Working with the Violence Against Women (VAW) IPAC champion, we helped shape the communications strategy to build trust in VAW shelters and institutions and ensure that survivors who needed our services felt comfortable to do so. One of the fantastic outcomes of this collaboration was the [InfectiousDiseaseandMe.ca](https://infectiousdiseaseandme.ca) website.

The IPAC Champion designed website includes information about all infectious diseases, how they spread, how to prevent them, as well as information about vaccines. The site also includes interactive resources called "Kids Zone" that were specifically designed for children and youth to educate them on health and safety measures. The website is available in English, Spanish, Arabic, Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, Portugese, Mandarin, Swahili, and Vietnamese. Click on the picture below to take a look!



# Adapting... as staff

## 1

### Safety!

The pandemic compelled all of us to shift focus to infection prevention and control. In doing so, we had to invest in PPE as well as invest in intensive PPE training for frontline staff to ensure proper wear. We started performing daily testing, masking, temperature-taking for everyone who entered the shelter space. We had to invest in extensive cleaning and sanitizing services to reduce risk of contamination.

## 3

### Personal Health

Many elderly staff and or immunocompromised staff or staff who had elderly or immunocompromised family members had to make the impossible choice of coming into work or protecting themselves and their families and choosing loss of income.

## 2

### Staffing Needs

We hired a Physical Distancing Coordinator who ensured that all PPE and health and safety policies were adhered to. We hired a full-time teacher to support children and youth with education- essential as over 60% of our residents are children. The existing staff also had increased labour added to make sure that all health and safety protocols were followed.

## 4

### Mental Health

As a service provider, the VAW sector was hard hit by mental health, isolation, trauma, lack of emotional support. Our staff required time off to recover from contracting COVID, because they were exposed to COVID or because they were exposed to someone who had contracted it. The toll of this affected all staff organization-wide.



# Re-orienting Ourselves

## Food, Inflation, and our commitment to food security and food justice



We created the Food Security and Food Justice program to provide residents autonomy over their food and support some healing around trauma about food. The FJFS program's primary objective is supporting residents towards accessing their right to nutritious and culturally competent foods.

Our FJFS program was founded on the understanding that food carries incredibly important cultural beliefs, memories, and meanings. For many of our residents, food, meals, and money to obtain food/groceries, is oftentimes used as an effective means of violence and control by the abuser. We recognize that low income is often linked to intimate partner violence and is a key predictor of food insecurity and it's why we created this program to support survivors.

In the COVID context, the rise in demand for services meant that we increased our occupancy from 30 to 40 residents to meet the growing demands for VAW (Violence Against Women) services in Toronto. However, inflation, economy, supply chain issues, even global politics, has all contributed to the exponential increase in food costs for basic kitchen staples such as: fresh produce, whole grains, and meat.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have shifted from residents cooking for themselves for two meals a day to NYWS serving residents three meals a day with COVID safe dishware. In the pandemic. While this was a necessary shift in protocol to reduce risk of infection, it increased our food budget by over 50%.



However, providing nutritious meals that honour residents' cultural belonging and connection is an imperative we will not compromise on. We will always ensure that all meals served at NYWS are comprised of whole grains, Halal meat (for religious accommodations), plenty of fresh produce and fresh ingredients, to support residents' immune systems, nutrition, and overall physical and mental well-being.

We weren't able to make full use of our beautiful newly built dining room for residents to eat together. Instead we had to offer meals in COVID-safe disposable containers and utensils to ensure we were protecting the safety of our staff.

We understood how cooking, shopping for groceries, and being able to have independence and autonomy over the nourishment they make for themselves and their families is healing. But we had to enforce strict measures- specifically around cooking and dining together to ensure health and safety of everyone at NYWS.

The financial cost of shifting from providing one meal a day to three to ensure safety to reduce risk of transmission, the imposition of rules and regulations preventing residents from cooking and/or dining together, and enacting these organizational policies with the knowledge of how harmful this can be to mental health to survivors was an incredibly difficult decision to make as an organization. But unfortunately, a necessary one.

Food is meant to be happy, healing, to build community and closing the residents' kitchen was one of the many necessary sacrifices requisite to prioritize the health and safety of everyone at NYWS. As restrictions begin to relax, we have begun to host celebratory meals on special occasions to cultivate connection and belonging and we are grateful to be out of the most restrictive period of the pandemic. However, the unforeseen rise of food costs, the shift from one meal to three, the staffing, all of these are outcomes that placed an immense financial burden to NYWS. It's one outcome of the pandemic that we continue to wrestle with.



# School and Education

Children who have witnessed violence have been found to be likely not doing as well as their counterparts in school. With the pandemic, the disparity between children's current school grade and their level of academic performance became more pronounced. As school oscillated from virtual to in-person, many barriers- from technology, access to technology, to engagement started to emerge and only exacerbated this discrepancy.

To reduce risk of transmission when there were numerous COVID-19 cases transmitted in schools, we made the decision to hire a full-time teacher to provide schooling on-site. Having a teacher hired by NYWS to support children during the pandemic not only reduced risk of infection, it also supported children and youth's mental health to have a supportive figure dedicated to their education and well-being.

Between the multiple lockdowns and changes with restrictions over the course of the pandemic, we noticed students were experiencing a lot of hardship. These stressors compounded



with adjusting to shelter living and other intersectional factors made it tougher for the children to succeed academically. Many children at the shelter experienced lower reading levels than their grade and found it difficult to stay on top of material at the classroom pace.

To address the challenges faced by children, we introduced the Children's Education Facilitation Program: a program in which we work to first identify any and all barriers to a child's academic success and devise development strategies to address them. The Children's Education Facilitator works closely with Therapists and Expressive Arts Counsellors to ensure they are setting up each child for long term success.





# In-Kind Donations

During the pandemic we shifted our in-kind donations policy as well. In the first days of the pandemic, we immediately stopped accepting used in-kind donations to reduce risk of transmission. We implemented this policy for the health and safety of all.

Secondly, as we shifted to a needs-based model, we want to make sure the items we accept are things that the clients in residence currently need. This helps us minimize how much storage we amass while allowing clients to have autonomy over what they require.

Our new model promotes choice and autonomy for all residents and so we are currently asking for gift cards that will allow survivors to buy what they need and want.

## Technology

As Canada pivoted towards virtual school for children, we here at the shelter pivoted towards online programming to reduce contact between residents which required a huge investment in technology.

Research shows that during the pandemic most people found internet and technology essential for their daily lives. We provided residents with laptops,



tablets, and smart phones to facilitate access to education and trauma-informed care. We also put TVs in each bedroom. It was yet another unforeseen cost that the shelter had to front to support residents mental health during an incredibly turbulent time as a shelter and as a community.



# The Unforeseen Costs of Covid-19

During Covid-19, we had to incur additional costs on various existing and additional services, as mentioned in this report. From sanitizers, to tablets, to hiring staff to test anyone who enters the shelter, we had to pivot the way we provide services and bear the expense of that for everyone's safety.



Extra cleaning over the last 30 months:

**\$107,582**

10 additional beds over the last 30 months:

**\$1,164,300**

Equipment (tablets, laptops, tvs, home office setups, desk shields)

**\$36,505**

COVID Supplies (Hand sanitizer, dispensers, disinfectant)

**\$2,840**

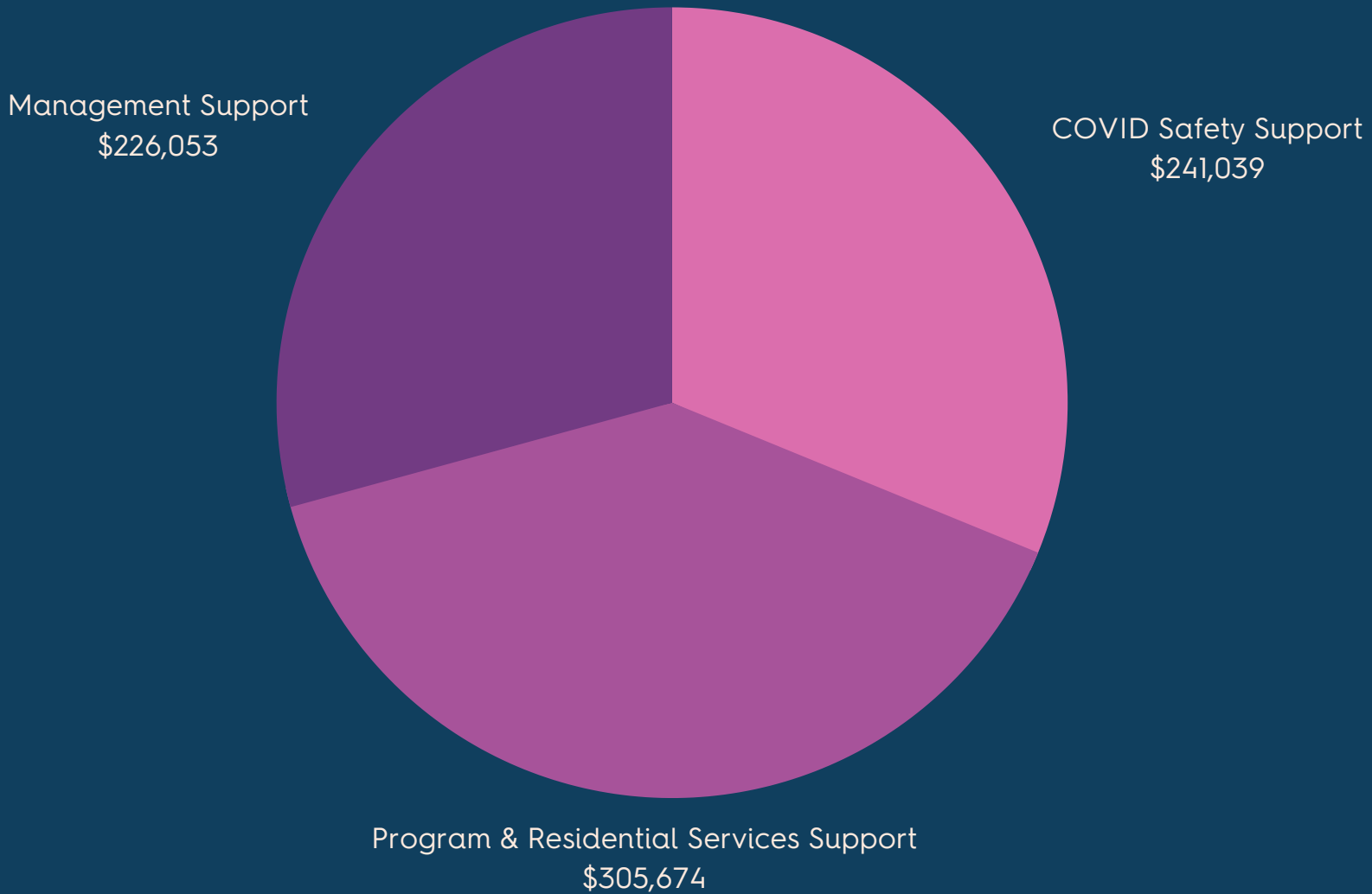
Hardship Allowance Provided to Staff to offset emotional, mental, and physical toll of working in VAW shelter in global pandemic:

**\$335,000**

Travel support (Taxi Cost for Residents as they were discouraged from taking public transit due to health risk):

**\$17,746**

## Additional Staffing Costs during the Pandemic (2020-2022)\*



Over the course of the pandemic, we have had to hire additional staff to fulfill the gap created in services. We hired a Physical Distancing Coordinator, two additional Women's Advocates, a Rapid Antigen Tester, a Teacher, Kitchen Support, and an Operations and Client Services Manager.

\*From Audited Financial Statements for Fiscal Year 2020-2021 and 2021-2022

# Covid-19...and moving forward in IPAC

No doubt, the pandemic has greatly transformed the Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC) program at NYWS, catapulting it from basic implementation to a higher version of its kind.

We have emerged from days of carrying out our duties to our clients with smiling faces into the era of hiding our emotions behind the mask. Till date, both the staff and the residents are required to mask to prevent the transmission of this virus. Just like our faces, our hands have likewise been caught up in this transformation by going through cycles of sanitizing with alcohol-based hand rub, washing with soap and water, and gloving when necessary... all to keep the virus at bay.

As at the time of this writing, even as Covid-19 protection diminish in Ontario, cases are on the rise and the risk of exposure to the virus persists. However, the diminishing of protection is not as pronounced in our shelter compared with the public as NYWS is deemed a 'Congregate Living Settings' (CLS). For CLS, IPAC measures have always been stricter because of the vulnerability of our resident population.

How has all these measures further impacted on day-to-day activities at NYWS? As rigorous and tiring as the strict IPAC measures have been, one cannot hide the fact that they have helped us to build resilience as well as readiness for future pandemics. They have helped to strengthen and facilitate prevention, detection, and response to Covid-19 management. This

comes handy, as Covid-19 infections, along with other seasonal respiratory illnesses are expected to make a strong comeback this Fall and the coming winter. Way forward? At NYWS, we shall not rest on our laurels in curbing the spread of the Covid-19 virus. We shall continue to equip ourselves with IPAC best practices such as:

- Hand hygiene
- Use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as face masks, gloves, gowns etc.
- Cleaning and disinfecting of surfaces and equipment
- Respiratory etiquette
- Adequate ventilation and filtration

To buffer the IPAC measures, staff are expected to stay away from the shelter if they are experiencing Covid-19 symptoms until the symptoms are resolved.

Staff and residents are also advised to stay up to date with their Covid-19 vaccine doses, (primary series, booster doses), as these offer protection against the original Covid-19 virus and its subvariants.

Together at NYWS, we can win the war against the Covid-19 virus!

By Bolanle Oludairo (IPAC  
Champion, VAWII)



# Looking onwards...

The pandemic has revealed inequalities across systems. For us at NYWS, it has really become clear the areas that we must focus on to fight gender-based violence on all levels. We are dedicated to supporting survivors by meeting them where they are in their journey by providing holistic care to residents and the local community.

Looking forward, we are going to be working on making our Food Justice and Food Security program more robust. We will also be working on opening up the Anne Marie D'Amico Community Collective up to the local North York community. The area NYWS is located in is a service-poor area and it is important to improve access to services like health clinic, counselling, etc.

We are also committed to building stronger partnerships with other organizations and hosting workshops, events, etc. with them to build the concept of community into our anti-violence center. As we have all experienced isolation and its harrowing effects, it is important to work to create that community that we have missed or perhaps have lacked for a while even before the pandemic.

Finally, we are more adamant than ever in our advocacy efforts. We understand how urgent it is to speak up and lead conversations around gender-based violence, affordable housing, food insecurity, and how our sector is overburdened by this demand for support by survivors.

Since re-opening into our new shelter space in March of 2020, we have served over 191 survivors. It's only through community support and mobilization, that we've been able to do so.

Although the pandemic showed us the level of inequity present in our world, it also showed us that we need each other to survive.

As adrienne maree brown said, "things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered. we must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil."

Through the darkness of it all, we are with you.

We will continue to provide emergency shelter to survivors.

We will be relentless in our fight against gender-based violence.

We will always be a part of your community.

Thank you for being a part of ours.

In solidarity,

nyws





**nyws**

**I find my power in my community.**

**When you give to NYWS, you're funding a holistic and intersectional feminist approach to anti-violence and pushing back against gender-based violence in your community. When you invest in NYWS, you are helping to create space for survivors to reclaim their power and autonomy- right now. Will you invest?**