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Abused women, children among first to feel brunt

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As the economy darkens, those caught in the cycle of domestic violence face heightened risks and a worrisome climate in which to tackle the issues, experts in the field say.

The economic meltdown, marked by layoffs and job worries, together with post-holiday stresses and tough fundraising for help agencies, means pressure on vulnerable women and kids will grow.

"This is the most difficult and potentially dangerous time ever for women and children experiencing violence," said Barb McQuarrie, community director of the University of Western Ontario's Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children.

"We know these women and children are vulnerable in multiple ways. And when our social network is overtaxed and potentially under-resourced, it's the vulnerable who are going to feel that first."

Besides the annual onslaught of holiday credit card bills, McQuarrie said today's economic turmoil adds stress that aggravates relationships already resorting to violence to resolve conflict.

"It's not just bills coming in. It's job loss and potential job loss and these are things that trap women in controlling relationships where they can't earn a decent living independently and provide for their children."

McQuarrie said women facing workplace harassment are also at greater risk, because they're less inclined to leave such dangers for fear they won't find another job.

Kate Wiggins, executive director of Women's Community House, is seeing the economic fallout firsthand.

All 67 of the shelter's beds are full, as are its 25 second stage housing apartment units. While no one is ever turned away, Wiggins worries women may feel compelled to stay in "untenable" situations.

She's encouraged that Ontario's Liberal government has supported efforts to combat violence and poverty, but notes private fundraising is crucial to her organization and those dollars are down.

"We generally raise between \$600,000 and \$700,000 a year that supports things like children's programs and transportation programs, but we're about \$40,000 short right now," she said.

Wiggins said second stage housing -- once offering safety and counselling for abused women and kids for up to a year -- now, out of necessity, tends to stretch beyond that.

"We seem to be in the midst of a housing crisis, where accommodation is pretty hard to come by," Wiggins said.

Louise Stevens, London's director of municipal housing, says victims of domestic violence automatically jump to the top of the the city's social housing waiting list -- but that poses problems of its own.

As of Dec. 31, 2008, there was a waiting list of 3,852 for the city's 8,085 affordable housing units -- a list comprised of seniors, individuals and households with children. That's an increase of 484 households -- a whopping 14 per cent hike over the same period in 2007. In 2007, 283 went to the top of the list due to domestic violence issues.

And while domestic violence victims get top priority, increased housing demand and fewer vacancies create two problems, said Stevens.

Firstly, the units earmarked for domestic violence victims are not geared-to-income, but rather, offer rents reduced to 80 per cent of the average market rent. Stevens said victims of domestic violence often can't afford even that reduced rate, and therefore "hold out" for rent-geared-to-income units in which it's guaranteed they pay no more than 30 per cent of their income for rent.

And when openings do come available in public housing with rent-geared-to-income, Stevens said the upshot is entire neighbourhoods full of victims of domestic violence. "With very little funding for housing support workers, we end up with whole pockets of people with the same social problem," said Stevens.

McQuarrie said the result is unhealthy for all concerned.

"You produce a kind of ghettoization that isn't workable. And it's the safety of the women and children that hangs in the balance here."

Stevens said her staff was meeting this month with the Ministries of Housing and Community and Social Services -- which established the domestic violence first policy -- to explain it won't work unless top-up dollars are provided for rent-geared-to-income.

Ontario Attorney General Chris Bentley, also London West MPP, has said the safety of women and children at risk must be a top priority.

"We all want to make sure victims of domestic violence have a place of safety and can move into the community," said Bentley.

"I'm pleased they're going to sit down and talk about the challenge and hopefully they will come up with a resolution that achieves the goal we all want, which is the safety and good community transition of those who are victims of domestic violence."

GROUPS THAT CAN HELP OUT

Women's Community House. Provides a hotline for abused women, emergency shelter and 24-hour counselling: 642-3000 or 1-800-265-1576

London Abused Women's Centre. Offers advocacy, support and counselling: 432-2204

Zhaawanong Shelter. Offers support for women in abusive relationships: 432-2270 or 1-800-605-7477

Sexual Assault Centre London. Provides counselling, support and 24-hour crisis line: 438-2272

Changing Ways. Counselling for abusive men: 438-9869