

Emergency shelters in Kawartha Lakes still a safe haven during COVID-19 crisis

Catherine Whitnall

Dealing with the current COVID-19 pandemic is difficult enough without having the added stress of being homeless or living with abuse.

While many businesses and services are closing their doors, those running area shelters are doing their very best to ensure theirs stay open.

A Place Called Home's executive director Lorrie Polito said the agency's 19-bed shelter in Lindsay is currently on Level 1 of its protocols. Staff who are able to work from home are doing so and advanced cleaning regimens have been undertaken. Everyone is also following recommendations laid out by public health.

Unfortunately, this has also meant vital outreach services have had to be cancelled.

"Those programs are very important to the clients that we've helped. It's an opportunity for them to touch base with staff if they have a concern or problem, do their laundry, have a meal and just know there is someone there to help," said Polito. "The goal is, and always has been, to not only help people get permanent housing, but to keep it."

In the event someone experiences symptoms and has to self-isolate, the agency has a quarantine room already in place. The room can accommodate up to three people and has both a separate bathroom and entrance.

"We're not there yet, and we may never be, but it's important to be prepared ... Our clients fall into that vulnerable category. They don't always eat the healthiest and some come to us with compromised immune systems and health problems," said Polito, who is proud of the commitment and dedication of staff during this unprecedented and challenging time. "We're one of the few shelters in the region that already prepared for this (COVID-19 outbreak). We're sharing what we're doing with others. And if anything does happen, we will rise to the challenge."

Polito said volunteers continue to pick up and deliver groceries weekly as usual — they just don't come into the shelter — and donations are still being made, albeit, people are asked to call in advance.

"The community's been great. Everyone has really rallied. And I encourage people to do what they can to help out the food banks because, as this goes on, the demand is going to increase," said Polito. "These are very scary times and no one knows for how long."

Recent announcements by the federal and provincial governments regarding funding to assist social service agencies through the economic impact were welcomed by Polito and Women's Resources executive director Lori Watson.

Although it's unknown how much will filter down to agencies like theirs, Watson is optimistic specifics will be revealed soon.

In the meantime, every effort is being taken to ensure the women and their children — as well as the staff — at Victoria's Shelter are safe.

In addition to following the Ministry of Health's COVID-19 recommendations, Watson said the agency is now conducting outreach counselling by phone and videoconference instead of face-to-face and group sessions.

“We also have the capacity that, if someone did present with the virus, we can isolate them and work with public health and other health-care providers to ensure their needs are being met — while keeping others safe as well.”

Unfortunately, said Watson, COVID-19 doesn't just pose health risks.

“This is unusual. No one's ever had to go through this and, because of that, the potential for increased violence in the home is there,” said Watson. “There are so many unknowns. People are out of work, the financial implications could be severe and it's compounding the stress that is already there.”

Watson encourages any women who need help to call the agency's 24-hour crisis line at [705-878-3662](tel:705-878-3662) or [1-800-565-5350](tel:1-800-565-5350) for support and safe options.