

# Is the COVID-19 pandemic stopping Kawartha Lakes women from seeking help?

*Catherine Whitnall*

Agencies experiencing lower numbers of domestic violence calls are viewing it as the calm before the storm.

Women's Resources executive director Lori Watson said the agency's shelter has limited space, but crisis counsellors remain available 24-7 and services are offered via phone, text and/or video chat.

However, calls are lower than usual, which Watson believes is due to women self-isolating or unable to get time away from abusers during the coronavirus pandemic.

Calls for police assistance are likewise down.

Kawartha Lakes OPP Const. Carrie Lanning said there were about 38 domestic related calls for service made in April this year versus 50 last year.

Kawartha Lakes Police Service experienced a drop in domestic violence related occurrences falling from 212 between Jan. 1 and April 29, 2019 to this year's 174.

But numbers don't tell the whole story.

"Our officers are aware that dynamics in the home are very different for many households these days. Victims of domestic violence may be forced to spend more time with their abusers if they are not able to leave the home to go to work or socialize. Our police service is taking steps to ensure that victims of domestic violence are still being protected, despite the changes brought on by COVID19," said KLPS Sgt. Dave Murtha.

That's because domestic violence could be an underlying factor in something as simple as a noise complaint or a 911 hang-up call.

"It is indeed a powder keg and a time of scary silence," said Watson, pointing out the calls that are coming in seem to indicate increased or more escalated violence. "Home is not a safe place when a woman is being abused and yet due to the pandemic they must remain at home with their abuser. We have no doubt that once the fear of the pandemic is over, we will be inundated with calls."

Unfortunately, federal and provincial funding to shelters is insufficient to cover financial costs of COVID-19. To make matters worse, many spring and summer fundraisers have been cancelled and the closure of Vicky's Values has resulted in a significant financial loss.

The agency estimates lost revenue and increased costs related to the pandemic to the end of April to be about \$90,000. Further losses are expected for May.