

Victims and Survivors of Crime Week 2021

Supporting Women and Children Escaping Intimate Partner Violence and Abuse

VICTORIA WOMEN'S
Transition
 *House*
SOCIETY

Our Mission

Victoria Women's Transition House Society (VWTH) collaborates, advocates and educates to address and prevent intimate partner violence and abuse of women and children through supportive shelter, housing, counselling and other community-based services.

Older Women's Outreach

Victoria Women's Transition House's **Older Women's Program (OWP)** offers services for survivors aged 45–65. The Program provides specialized supports and resources tailored to the experiences and needs of its participants.

In some cases, OWP clients have experienced intimate partner violence and abuse for many years. The psychological and emotional impact of being exposed to abuse over a long period and the subsequent coping tools and healing process itself can look different when compared to survivors who have may have been in an abusive relationship of a shorter duration.

In addition to providing trauma-informed counselling, OWP counsellors can share resources and explore pertinent issue topics brought forward by the lived experiences of OWP participants. Sessions explore topics such as relationships with adult children, financial self-sufficiency and breaking down generational stereotypes.

OWP hosts health and wellness and arts-based groups such as *Healing Through the Arts* and *Turning the Tide*, providing women with the opportunity to explore their experiences and strengths through art and storytelling. The groups offer older women a safe space to meet and build meaningful connections with other survivors.



Pictured: Portrait painting by an Older Women's Program participant

Healing Through the Arts

Like many folks during the pandemic, it has been difficult for Victoria Women's Transition House clients to stay connected.

One VWTH client, Leslie*, who is a participant in the Older Women's Program, recently attended the *Healing Through the Arts* community art group for the first time. She felt she had lost her connections with friends and family and even felt disconnected from herself.

As Leslie started to come to the Group sessions, she found her creative side emerge through working with the different art mediums. She said it allowed her to decompress and to feel more in touch with her true self. She attended counselling sessions regularly, and through artistic expression, Leslie gained the confidence to engage more freely with others and develop lasting relationships.

During difficult and isolating times, Leslie said that the Group sessions were the highlight of her week and allowed her to be herself.

Since the end of *Healing Through the Arts*, Leslie has continued to use her creativity as a form of self-expression and self-care, sharing that it helps her to process difficult life experiences through a different lens.

**Name has been changed for confidentiality*

What My Mother Didn't Tell Me: Helping to Break the Intergenerational Cycle of Violence

As a teenager, Annie* once witnessed her uncle slap her aunt. She remembers feeling powerless and scared. No one told Annie that abuse was unacceptable. Violence and abuse, whether verbal, emotional or physical, was something all of her aunts and mother were surviving. As a female, Annie often wondered if she would have to endure abuse too.

Before age 15, one in ten Canadians will witness violence in the home. Children who witness abuse have a higher risk of emulating abuse later in life—either as victims or abusers. *Source: Statistics Canada, 2015*

So what can be done to help break the cycle of intergenerational violence? And how can we empower generations to raise awareness and stand against the abuse we may experience, hear about or witness as children, youth and adults?

"For years, my mother endured abuse in her relationships. Recently, with continued support and encouragement from trusted loved ones, she decided to reach out to local community supports," shared Annie. "With the help of a safety plan, she was able to leave her abusive partner, overcome her trauma, heal and move forward. In so many ways, this has helped me and my siblings, too."

Talking about violence and abuse in a judgement-free way can help to erode the stigma that often surrounds these topics. Although it may be difficult, normalizing discussion about abuse can also help reduce the isolation people in abusive relationships may experience. Not talking about abuse fuels the shame survivors may feel. Abuse is never the survivors' fault.

Sharing stories of surviving and escaping abuse can also help people recognize signs of abusive



behaviour and encourage children and more women to speak to loved ones and ask for help. This can also help survivors learn about resources and access community-based services. Organizations like VWTH offer trauma-informed counselling services that help survivors process their experiences and emotions and understand personal rights to safety.

"Growing up, the women in my life didn't tell me that abuse was unacceptable. Perhaps because they weren't told that either. But now we know," reflected Annie. As mothers and mother-like figures, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, friends, mentors, role models and supportive groups of people, we need to have these difficult conversations and support and empower each other. This will help us address and break the cycle of intergenerational violence and abuse—for ourselves and future generations.

** Name of the interviewee has been changed for confidentiality*

Family Law Advocacy



Women who have experienced abuse in their relationships can often find legal processes stressful, overwhelming and intimidating. **The Family Law Advocacy Program** at Victoria Women's Transition House (VWTH) offers clients information, referrals and support for legal issues related to abuse and intimate partner violence (also known as family violence). We connected with the Program's family law advocate to learn more.

Why is the Family Law Advocacy Program needed? *Women who seek assistance often have a multitude of legal issues involving different areas of law, including family law, child protection, immigration and criminal law. Many VWTH clients do not know their rights or the steps they need to take to resolve their legal issues. Through the Program, I can support survivors by outlining important legal steps and explaining information clearly and concisely.*

What is your role as the family law advocate (FLA)? *Survivors of intimate partner violence regularly face ongoing trauma that affects their physical, emotional and spiritual well-being—and they often blame themselves for the abuse. These factors, among*

others, can cause survivors to feel that people in the legal system may not believe them or help them make legal decisions. As an FLA, I practice using a trauma-informed approach and connect with clients to provide services that bring awareness to their rights and support them to work through their legal matters in a timely manner.

How do you support survivors of abuse?

As a retired Métis lawyer with over 25 years of family, criminal and Aboriginal law experience, I use my knowledge of the law, including court procedures in both provincial and federal law, to assist women through the legal system. As an FLA, I do not give legal advice but support Transition House clients by:

- Providing legal information and education on relevant legal issues
- Offering Family Law support, which includes specialized client assistance to prioritize and address legal matters
- Advocating for supports and services

Using plain language, I explain court documents, orders or agreements such as no-contact orders and how these may impact the client's rights and obligations. When preparing clients for legal meetings or appearances in court, I assist them to identify, clarify and prioritize their legal issues. I also assist to fill out court forms and other legal documents.

In terms of advocacy, I refer clients to pro bono legal supports and other public legal services such as Legal Aid or the Victoria Justice Access Centre and, when needed, organize additional support such as translation services.

Since 2019, VWTH's family law advocate has supported over 150 women impacted by intimate partner violence and abuse. To learn more about the Family Law Advocacy Program, visit [transitionhouse.net](https://www.transitionhouse.net)

How to Reach Us

Crisis and Information Line 250.385.6611

Community Office 250.592.2927

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Charitable No. 10817 3501 RR0001

Victoria Women's Transition House is a registered charity and donations are gratefully appreciated. Give online at [transitionhouse.net](https://www.transitionhouse.net) or call **250.592.2927**, Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm. *Thank you.*

✉ info@vwth.bc.ca

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24-Hour Crisis & Information Line: 250.385.6611