

January 22, 2026

The Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy
Minister of Finance
c/oa Communications Services Branch
Frost Building North, 3rd Floor
95 Grosvenor Street
Toronto, Ontario
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Re: 2026 Budget Consultation Proposal

Luke's Place is a centre of excellence dedicated to advancing the safety, security, and legal rights of women and children who have been subjected to Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), particularly within the family law system. Through specialized legal support services, public legal education, professional training, and system-level advocacy, Luke's Place addresses the significant risks survivors face during separation, custody, and access proceedings, often the most dangerous period for women and children leaving abusive relationships.

Family court processes are complex, adversarial, and frequently inaccessible for survivors of IPV, especially those experiencing economic insecurity, trauma, or ongoing safety concerns. Without stable supports and meaningful access to legal representation, survivors are placed at heightened risk of continued violence, coercive control, and unjust outcomes that undermine both safety and child well-being. Demand for specialized family law and court-based supports continues to grow across Ontario, while many critical services remain under-resourced and reliant on unstable, short-term funding.

This pre-budget submission calls on the Government of Ontario to make targeted investments that reflect the realities faced by survivors of intimate partner violence in the family law system. Specifically, Luke's Place urges the government to provide stable core funding for programs and services that prevent and address GBV; prioritize funding for family law support services for survivors, including the Family Court Support Worker Program; and ensure meaningful access to legal representation for survivors of GBV navigating family court. These investments are essential to improving safety outcomes, strengthening access to justice, and supporting a more responsive and equitable family justice system in Ontario.

1. Provide stable core funding for programs and services that prevent and address gender-based violence in Ontario

Gender-based violence is an epidemic impacting countless Canadians¹ (Women and Gender Equality Canada). According to the Canadian Femicide Observatory, 187 women and girls were killed in 2024 alone² (Canadian Femicide Observatory, 2025). On average, one woman or girl is killed every 48 hours in Canada³ (Canadian Femicide Observatory, 2025). Between 2002 and 2017, there were **433** domestic homicide victims in Ontario, of whom 81% were women and 9% were children⁴ (Ontario Office of the Chief Coroner, 2018).

Rates of intimate partner violence (IPV), a prevalent form of GBV, have continued to rise over the last 10 years. In 2022, there were 117,093 victims of police-reported IPV in Canada, with 8 in 10 victims being women and girls (Statistics Canada, 2023). These numbers only scratch the surface of the actual rates of IPV, as it is severely underreported to the police, and much of it remains unidentified. Studies have shown that only 20% to 30% of IPV-related offences are reported, and of those that are reported, women are 3.5 times more likely to be victims than men⁶ (Statistics Canada, 2023).

Rates of IPV and the harm it causes to people, families and communities is so egregious that Nova Scotia⁷, New Brunswick⁸ and over 100 municipalities in Ontario⁹ have formally declared that IPV is an epidemic in their jurisdiction.

GBV organizations that provide support and services to survivors are foundational to Ontario's response to this public health crisis. They deliver critical services that governments rely on every day, including crisis intervention, safety planning, legal system navigation, housing support, counselling, and long-term recovery support for survivors and their children. These organizations are not ancillary to the government system; they are an essential part of the social, legal, and public safety infrastructure.

Despite the critical need for their services, GBV organizations continue to operate under chronic underfunding that undermines their stability and effectiveness. Research from EVA Canada underscores the consequences of persistent inadequate funding and its impact on service delivery.

⁷ Government of Nova Scotia. *Nova Scotia declares intimate partner violence an epidemic.* <https://novascotia.ca/news/release.asp?id=202301>

⁸ Government of New Brunswick. *New Brunswick declares intimate partner violence an epidemic.* https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/news/news_release.2023.html

⁹ Association of Municipalities of Ontario. *Over 100 Ontario municipalities declare intimate partner*

violence an epidemic. <https://www.amo.on.ca/AMO-Content/News-Releases/2023/IPV-Epidemic-Declaration>

Many GBV organizations are forced to work with limited resources, unmanageable workloads, minimal staff compensation, widespread job precarity, and limited or nonexistent health and pension benefits¹⁰ (Canadian Women's Foundation, n.d.).

Addressing GBV is not the work of short-term “projects” where organizations build programs that are effective only to lose funding for them at the end of the project cycle. This is not a sustainable, cost-effective model for funding GBV work. Survivors are ultimately the ones who pay the price. Countless recommendations from inquests, commissions, and reviews have called for GBV services to receive stable, core funding¹¹ (Canadian Women's Foundation, n.d.).

The Mass Casualty Commission's final report recommended “stable core funding for services that have been demonstrably effective in meeting the needs of women survivors of gender-based violence”¹² (Mass Casualty Commission, 2022). The CKW inquest recommendations also found that “IPV services are core programming and should receive annualized funding like other public services.” Just recently, the *Report on Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Violence in the Province of Ontario – Prevention and Response* by the Standing Committee on Justice Policy, released in December 2025 (“Report on Intimate Partner Violence”), recommended that “services related to IPV should be funded through stable funding models as opposed to project-based, time-limited funding”¹³ (Standing Committee on Justice Policy, 2025).

We recommend that the provincial government prioritize implementation of existing recommendations to provide core, stable funding for organizations providing GBV programs and services in the budget. If Ontario is serious about preventing violence, supporting survivors, and reducing downstream costs to taxpayers, funding for GBV organizations must be treated as a long-term investment and a priority, not a one-time discretionary expense. It is only through stable core funding that organizations can plan, innovate, and respond effectively to emerging risks and systemic gaps, thereby strengthening Ontario's response to GBV.

2. Prioritize funding for family law support services for survivors of GBV, including the Family Court Support Worker Program

Separation is a time that can be particularly deadly for women leaving abusive partners. The homicide risk for women increases sixfold after separation. Between 2003 and 2018, the Domestic Violence Death Review Committee in Ontario reviewed 329 cases involving 470 deaths, finding that approximately 67% of the cases involved a couple with an actual or pending separation. This is also the time when women enter the

family court process seeking orders to keep themselves and their children safe and to provide them with some measure of financial security. What many of these women quickly discover is that the family law system often minimizes the severity of violence, re-traumatizes them, and provides new avenues for abusers to engage them and subject them to violence.

Many GBV organizations have designed programs and services to reduce the harm caused by the family law system and help survivors engage more confidently and safely in the process. These programs include independent legal advice and/or representation for survivors, increased access to educational resources for survivors and service providers, and family law support from trained advocates and support workers. Some of these programs also involve the delivery of training and education about the family law system and IPV for service providers. This training and education build sector capacity, create more coordinated service delivery, and ensure survivors receive the support they need from knowledgeable service providers.

Another critical family law-focused program for survivors is the Family Court Support Worker (FCSW) Program. This specific program provides survivors in Ontario with a critical resource while they navigate family court. The FCSW program has been operating since 2011 and was established in part through the hard work of violence against women advocates as a strategy to address the barriers experienced by survivors when navigating family court. There are currently over 40 organizations across Ontario that are funded to deliver this program¹⁵ (Standing Committee on Justice Policy, 2025).

FCSWs bring a perspective and approach to working with survivors that complement the training and expertise of other legal system professionals. It is premised on the notion that a survivor is best served by having a lawyer for legal advice and representation, and a support worker to help provide critical emotional, safety, and informational support. The recently tabled *Report on Intimate Partner Violence*, as well as the dissenting reports from Official Opposition members, share a strong recognition of the critical importance of sustained and strengthened support for this program as a core survivor support mechanism. There is broad, cross-partisan recognition that FCSW services are vital for:

- **Survivor safety and access to justice:** FCSWs provide trauma-informed one-on-one support, safety planning, explanation of the family court process, and connection to legal and community supports, helping survivors navigate one of the most complex and dangerous parts of the justice system.
- **Filling systemic gaps in legal navigation:** without trained support workers, many survivors are unable to meaningfully participate in family law processes, especially given the overwhelming and increasing lack of accessibility and availability of legal representation.

Despite the critical importance of the FCSW program, funding to organizations doing this important work continues to be limited. In the *Report on Intimate Partner Violence*, there is an explicit recommendation to “expand and stabilize the Family Court Support Worker Program”¹⁶ (Standing Committee on Justice Policy, 2025). Additionally, in the Dissenting Report by the Official Opposition, recommendations specifically call for a review and modification of funding formulas for survivor support services, explicitly including the court support worker program, and for increasing base budgets with stable, annualized funding indexed to inflation, in contrast to unstable short-term project funding¹⁷ (Official Opposition, 2025).

While the FCSW program received some additional funding this year, this funding is time-limited and will not address the current demand for service. Many organizations, including Luke’s Place, are grappling with increasing numbers of survivors wanting to access support and services. Many organizations also continue to grapple with staff turnover in this role, with the salary for FCSWs unable to keep pace with inflation over the past decade. For many organizations, the funding level does not adequately cover competitive basic salaries, and, as a result, organizations are left to fundraise to cover the difference and all other associated program delivery costs.

We recommend that the provincial government prioritize family law supports and services, including the FCSW program, through increased and stabilized core funding. This should be done in consultation with organizations currently delivering the program and others who are doing so without the support of this funding, to understand the unique needs regionally and provincially. This consultation should consider the need for program delivery to be expanded to other organizations to increase accessibility. Funding should also be prioritized for organizations creating educational and information resources for survivors and those they turn to for support after separation. Cross-sector training on family law is vitally important to ensure survivors are properly supported after separation, when they are at risk of increased harm.

3. Ensure Access to Legal Representation for Survivors of GBV in Family Court

The family law system in Ontario is complicated, not trauma-informed and prime for manipulation by abusive ex-partners. Exacerbating these challenges is the scarcity of legal representation for survivors. Rates of self-represented litigants continue to rise each year, with many survivors having to directly engage their abusers and navigate complex laws and legal procedures alone without the protective shield of a lawyer.

The Legal Aid System in Ontario is failing many survivors. For a growing number of survivors, restrictive financial eligibility criteria mean they are excluded from accessing LAO services even though they cannot afford a privately retained lawyer. Even the

women who qualify financially for LAO services struggle to find an LAO lawyer to work with.

The consequences of being without a family law lawyer are severe. Survivors are forced to navigate a complex and adversarial family court system alone, while perpetrators can exploit legal processes to prolong control, delay proceedings, and escalate harm. Instead of providing protection, the system too often reinforces power imbalances and exposes survivors to further risk.

Some GBV organizations, including Luke's Place, deliver their own legal services to survivors in an effort to address the critical gap in legal representation across the province. For many of these programs, including those offered by our organization, funding is project-based and time-limited. This means that when the project cycle ends, hundreds of survivors across the province will lose access to critical legal services.

Without urgent reform, including expanded legal aid eligibility and certificate hours for survivors and stable, core funding for GBV organizations delivering legal services, survivors will continue to face impossible choices between their safety, their children, and access to justice. We do not see these changes as optional, but rather urgent and necessary. With rates of femicide and lethal intimate partner violence continuing to rise, access to meaningful legal representation is not simply a matter of fairness; it is a matter of life and death.

We recommend that the government prioritize increased funding for LAO, with accountability measures to ensure this funding is used to prioritize legal representation for survivors of IPV in family court.

We also recommend increased funding to community-based GBV organizations that deliver family law legal services, including independent legal advice and/or representation. Community organizations are best placed to provide legal services given their experience supporting survivors engaged in the legal system.

Summary

Gender-based violence (GBV), including intimate partner violence (IPV), is a pervasive and escalating public health and safety crisis in Ontario. Rates of IPV continue to rise, with women and children facing the greatest risk, particularly during separation and family court proceedings. Despite extensive evidence, inquest findings, and expert recommendations calling for sustained action, the services survivors rely on remain chronically underfunded, fragmented, and unstable.

Community-based GBV organizations are foundational to Ontario's response to violence. They deliver essential services every day, including crisis intervention, safety planning, family law navigation, court support, counselling, and legal services. Yet many of these organizations are forced to operate with short-term, project-based funding models that undermine service continuity, workforce stability, and survivor safety. This approach is neither sustainable nor cost-effective and has been repeatedly criticized by commissions, inquests, and legislative reviews.

Survivors face particularly acute risk and systemic barriers within the family law system. Separation is one of the most dangerous periods for women leaving abusive relationships, yet the family court process is complex, adversarial, and often ill-equipped to respond to IPV.

Family Court Support Workers (FCSWs) and specialized family law supports play a critical role in mitigating risk, improving access to justice, and helping survivors navigate the system safely. Despite broad, cross-partisan recognition of their importance, these programs remain under-resourced and unable to meet growing demand.

At the same time, access to legal representation for survivors of IPV in family court has reached a crisis point. Restrictive legal aid eligibility criteria, shortages of legal aid lawyers, and insufficient certificate hours leave many survivors unrepresented and exposed to further harm. While some GBV organizations provide legal services to fill this gap, these programs are often time-limited and at constant risk of funding loss. This submission urges the Government of Ontario to take decisive action in the upcoming budget by:

1. Providing stable, core funding for programs and services that prevent and address gender-based violence across Ontario;

2. Prioritizing funding for family law support services for survivors of GBV, including expanded and stabilized funding for the Family Court Support Worker Program; and
3. Ensuring meaningful access to legal representation for survivors of IPV in family court through increased Legal Aid Ontario funding and sustained investment in community-based legal services.

Stable, long-term investment in these areas is essential to survivor safety, access to justice, and the prevention of future violence. Treating GBV services as core public infrastructure—rather than discretionary or project-based initiatives is critical to saving lives, supporting families, and reducing long-term social and economic costs to the province.

Best personal regards,



Lily Pourzand
Executive Director



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