

Gender-based and intimate partner violence poised to be declared 'epidemic' by Council

Gender-based and intimate partner violence is an epidemic, Council is poised to declare this month.

On September 26, Council will consider a motion put forward by Mayor Tom Mrakas to declare these forms of violence an 'epidemic' across Ontario and, in turn, to request the Federal government add the word 'Femicide' as a term in the Canadian Criminal Code.

More than 40 Ontario municipalities have declared similar epidemics and by Aurora following suit, 'Aurora can join the growing number of municipalities and regions in demanding action from all levels of government to address this growing epidemic,' says Mayor Mrakas in his motion.

'The incidences of gender-based violence and intimate partner violence increased exponentially throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and has not decreased, while funding to provide [for] the growing demand of services and support for victims and survivors of intimate partner and gender-based violence has not kept pace.'

Should the motion pass, Aurora will request the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) and all municipalities and regions in Ontario to declare an epidemic; request the Provincial and Federal government to enact 85 recommendations from the inquest into the 2015 murders of Carol Culleton, Anastasia Kuzyk, and Nathalie Warmerdam in Renfrew County' which provide a roadmap to preventing intimate partner violence from escalating to femicide; and request both upper levels of government to provide 'the necessary support to municipalities, regions, and their emergency and social services to meaningfully address' the epidemic.

'I always think it is vitally important that in important issues we join in and lend our support, our name, and say 'Our community is behind this,' so that way the Federal and Provincial government knows [and] the more municipalities you have on board the more those higher levels of government listen,' Mayor Mrakas tells The Auroran. 'I think it is vitally important and for an issue like this; to me it is something that needs to be dealt with immediately.'

That Aurora was set to join these Ontario-wide calls was received warmly by Lorris Herenda, Executive Director of Yellow Brick House, which operates a shelter in Aurora for women and children escaping violence.

While she says it is 'essential' for municipal leaders and elected officials 'to keep intimate partner violence a standing agenda item' as well as in larger conversations between all levels of government, support needs to come with the declaration.

'The recommendations that were released last year following the inquest of the murders of the three women in Renfrew County, there were 86 recommendations and number one was to declare domestic violence an epidemic,' says Herenda. 'Our Provincial Government refused to do so earlier this year because they said that was related to an illness, but we have been advocating with municipal government in proclaiming Domestic Violence and Intimate Partner Violence an epidemic.'

'What this does is it really increases awareness of intimate partner violence. Intimate Partner violence is preventable yet it remains a major public health problem. One third of women in Canada have experienced violence in their lifetime and for many women it becomes a death sentence. We know that during the pandemic domestic violence increased by 30 per cent nationally. We also know that before the pandemic a woman was killed every six days in Canada and during the pandemic the Femicide increased to a woman or child being killed every two-and-a-half days. This is a real issue in our country and the sooner municipal, provincial, federal government declare it, invest it, invest resources into prevention and support of survivors of violence, the sooner we're going to hopefully see a decrease in the percentage of incidents.'

Herenda says she would like to see Ontario's Mayors and Regional Chairs to keep pushing the Province and Feds to provide

additional sustainable funding to support organizations that support violence against women organizations which are all struggling.

?We are all under-funded,? she says. ?Many of us are forced to fundraise to sustain our existing level of services as the demand keeps increasing. It has to be a multi-layered approach addressing intimate partner violence. It is not only supporting sustaining existing levels of services but investing into providing even more services to women and children who have experienced violence and while doing that also investing in the educational component with judges and with lawyers who are dealing with these cases. We needed to get them to understand the impact, of course, and control perpetrators have on the women going through the family court system and the impact it has on the children.

?I would be interested in finding out in terms of Town of Aurora investment in supporting the Violence Against Women agency, be Yellow Brick House or Sandgate Women's Shelter. Currently our only funding is from Provincial government and some from Federal government. We would like to see a change in that. We would like to see each municipality invest in our sustainability and I have asked all the mayors for support in advocacy with the Provincial government and they have certainly supported?

?It is amazing to see the Town of Aurora put the motion forward to declare gender-based violence and intimate partner violence an epidemic. With that declaration there has to be an investment in our services.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter