

Domestic violence is an epidemic, says shelter director

By JAMES MATTHEWS

It's time municipalities across Ontario declare intimate partner violence an epidemic.

That's the message Norah Kennedy, the Executive Director at Orangeville's emergency shelter for domestic violence, Family Transition Place, brought to Orangeville Council at their October 30 meeting.

And it had a particular gravity given the murders that had happened in Sault Ste. Marie in late October.

In what police have called a case of intimate partner violence, a 44-year-old man in Sault Ste. Marie, in October, murdered four people, including three children, before he killed himself. Another woman was injured.

"A family and lives were destroyed because of an act of violence by a man with a history of intimate partner violence," she said.

Those deaths brought the list of femicides so far this year to 50.

"Yet again we bore witness to the horror and the devastation that gender-based violence wreaks on individuals, on families, on communities, on all of us, actually," Kennedy said.

When the murders happened, Kennedy said she was in Thunder Bay at a conference of agencies that work against gender-based violence. One of the attendees, a 40-year veteran of the shelter movement, said she believed there would be an outcry when domestic violence is brought to light.

"And it would be done because, when people knew that this is what was going on, there would be an end to it," the veteran colleague said to Kennedy.

But, after 40 years of seeing such abuse, Kennedy said her colleague no longer believes people care to see an end to violence against women.

An inquest into a similar previous intimate partner murders recommended that municipalities declare intimate partner violence an epidemic, she said.

The term is most familiar in a healthcare context.

"So, we might wonder what this issue has to do with health care," Kennedy said. "But violence against women is a health issue. The effects ... on the social determinants of health are uncontested."

Homelessness, poverty, food insecurity, the deterioration of mental health and the misuse of substances, isolation, unemployment, and death are among the outcomes of domestic violence.

"Violence against women has a significant impact on an individual's wellbeing and their health," Kennedy said. "But it's also a social service issue. It is a societal issue. It is a municipal issue. It is a provincial and federal government issue. It's my issue and it needs to be yours as well."

In 2023, Family Transition Place provided shelter to 74 women and 40 children.

"And it would've been higher," she said. "Every year prior to the pandemic, it was higher than that. It's only not higher because

women with their children or women who are there singly have nowhere to go.?

What housing there is that's available is unaffordable. Calls to their crisis line have increased by 23 per cent, which brings that number up to 4,768 calls in a year from people seeking help.

Every 48 hours in Canada, a woman or girl is killed by violence.

?So, is it an epidemic?? Kennedy said.

More than 40 communities have declared intimate partner violence to be an epidemic.

City councillors in Sault Ste. Marie voted unanimously in favour of declaring intimate partner violence an epidemic.

And Kennedy said she'd be extremely proud to see Orangeville Council follow suit.

?Actions like that can be seen for what they mean to be,? she said. ?An avowal that others do still do believe that we can end violence against women and that it's critical that we do that.?

Mayor Lisa Post tabled a notice of motion for the next meeting to declare domestic violence an epidemic.