

Shelters become more accessible

Options for families with disabilities

Helen Henderson, The Toronto Star

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Sharlene Tygesen sees pictures of families fleeing violence in Lebanon through a particularly sharp lens.

The women and children she helps resettle as community and staff relations director at Ernestine's Women's Shelter come from Toronto.

The war zone they inhabit is rarely mapped out in the public consciousness but it is no less explosive.

Escape routes are littered with barriers under the best of circumstances. If you are a woman who is deaf or the mother of a child who uses a wheelchair, these barriers make the road to freedom even more daunting.

And anyone who cannot move or communicate or process information according to society's prescribed norms is especially vulnerable to abuse.

"There aren't enough safe accessible spaces out there, says Verlia Stephens, program director of the Assaulted Women's Help Line, a 24-hour telephone crisis service that includes a TTY teletype line for anyone who is deaf. "We just do the best we can."

"I think violence against women is a type of war," says Tygesen. "It just falls off the map, particularly for women with disabilities."

Come this fall, however, Tygesen will be a big part of a movement to change. Ernestine's is one of two Toronto-area shelters undergoing extensive renovations to make families with disabilities more welcome.

That means a lot more than a wheelchair ramp to the front door. It means access to attendant care and sign language interpretation, visual fire alarms, roll-in showers, acceptance of service dogs, and staff sensitive to women with special needs.

It does not mean this city will suddenly have enough space for every disabled woman at risk. It does not mean the province will magically expand disability support services to meet all the needs that are out there.

But it does mean more shelters that understand how to tap into the limited resources available to families with special needs and a lot more than lip service for disabled women.

The change started a couple of years ago when Education Wife Assault, a not-for-profit group working to decrease physical and psychological violence started an accessibility audit of shelters.

“It was really just a way to support efforts to improve things with very little money and to say “here are some things you could do,” says project coordinator Fran Odette.

“The audit was great,” says Charlene Catchpole, director of Yorktown Shelter for Women. “We thought we were accessible just because we had a room on the first floor. Turns out we were only pseudo-accessible.”

Yorktown, in the middle of extensive renovations, hopes to reopen soon with one fully accessible bedroom, including two beds and a washroom with a roll-in shower. It is also widening doors, adjusting the grade of its outdoor ramp and getting rid of as many barriers as possible.

Accessibility helps everyone, including those who are elderly or may be temporarily disabled owing to injuries, Catchpole says.

When Ernestine’s gets its new building up and running this fall, it will have a whole new take on accessibility, says Tygesen. That includes everything from having small sinks that kids can reach easily to accommodating personal service workers, service dogs, sign language interpretation and, for the first time, TTY service. “We’ll do whatever it takes,” she says.

Already, Tygesen says, everyone at the shelter has learned a lot.

As a rule, no one who phones Ernestine’s is ever put on hold. But if there were an emergency in the office and a choice had to be made, “one of the things we know now is never to put a woman using a TTY line on hold,” she says.

Why?

A woman who is deaf can’t hear her abuser coming up behind her while she’s typing a request for help on a TTY machine. Nor can the person she’s communicating with at the shelter hear any noise. So both parties might think there was no immediate danger – until the woman was attacked and suddenly stopped typing.

If no one is watching the TTY, the delay in sending help could cost a life.

The new Ernestine’s won’t open until fall but Tygesen hopes that, in addition to raising the bar on accessibility, it will go a long way to lowering society’s penchant for stigmatizing shelters and the people who need them.

“We need to say: ‘It’s okay to seek help.’ We’re here to take the pressure off,” she says.

Both Ernestine’s and Yorktown’s websites have valuable information for women at risk of violence, including how to make an escape plan and cover your Internet tracks so your computer won’t leave a trail of evidence if you surf websites looking for help.