

Holidays financially hard for women escaping abuse

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By *LYNDA MUIR*

The woman stands with her two-year-old son in her arms and her five-year-old daughter by her side and speaks into the intercom. Late afternoon on a December day is dark and cold, and the children are uncomfortable and understandably cranky. The woman's belongings are in four plastic bags by her feet.

After a short conversation with the person at the other end of the intercom the door is unlocked and the woman, her children and her four bags disappear inside the building. She and her children wait in the downstairs foyer until a counsellor comes to greet them.

This is a strange situation for the children and they look for reassurance from their mother. She is tired, confused and frightened, so it's hard to comfort the children when she's not sure what's going to happen or what she's going to do.

Every day, the staff at the Women and Children's Shelter in Barrie meets with women in similar situations as they bear witness to the women's stories and do what they can to provide comfort and support.

Most women elect to remain in the shelter once they get to this point. They may feel threatened by their abusive partner and fear for their safety and the safety of their children. They may have been brought here by police or told by children's services that they need to get out of the house and the shelter is their best choice. Often, it's their only choice. They may have made the decision before coming to the shelter that they must leave and they don't want to return to their abusive partners.

Once the woman has made the decision to stay, she and her children are shown to their room and, depending on the time of their arrival, the process of gathering information begins.

Staff makes sure that the family is not hungry or thirsty and does what they can to make them feel comfortable.

This is a bigger job than you would think.

Women who leave abusive and violent situations are traumatized and need time before they feel any semblance of safety. The surroundings are new, the people are strange, and the future is uncertain.

The staff takes the time to work with each woman and child whose individual needs may vary. They may need social assistance and have to secure affordable housing. They may require day care for their children and want to seek employment.

More than likely they have legal issues that are ongoing and complex. But with the support and expertise of the staff they can begin the process of healing and trusting themselves and their ability to take care of their families.

The holiday season is a particularly difficult time of the year financially for many of the women using our services.

Although we do what we can to support the women, we would not be effective without the generosity of our community partners.

If you would like to make a donation to the Women and Children's Shelter, call 728-6300, ext. 225 for financial donations, or 728-6300, ext. 224 for donations of new items. If you would like to sponsor a family this holiday season, call 728-6300, ext 247 for information about our winter sponsorship Program. If you have donated in the past, we thank you very much for your support.

Lynda Muir is executive director the Women & Children's Shelter in Barrie