

More emergency shelter spaces needed for women, Vancouver council hears

City council signaled their support this week for increasing emergency shelter spaces for women in Vancouver.

During a discussion on a motion introduced by COPE councillor **Ellen Woodsworth** and amended by other councillors, city council voted to make it a “continued high priority” to expand the number of 24-hour women-only shelters and beds.

Council also directed staff to ensure optional women-only areas in Vancouver’s co-ed shelters and to increase training for shelter employees.

Shawn Bayes, the executive director of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver, told council Thursday (March 17) there are very few provincial standards to ensure women’s safety in co-ed shelters, such as separate sleeping areas or separate washrooms.

She added there are currently no standards for «training and gender responsiveness» at emergency shelters.

“I think we need to push further to actively encourage the development and consideration of those standards,” she told council.

Bayes said these kinds of standards have successfully been adopted in other jurisdictions such as Toronto.

Woodsworth’s motion follows concerns [raised](#) by a coalition of women’s groups last month about reports of sexual assaults in a Downtown Eastside women’s shelter.

According to Vancouver police, there have been six reported sexual assaults at the First United Church

shelter since October 2010, three of which have resulted in charges.

Alice Kendall of the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre told council that while there are some emergency shelters for women in the city, there aren’t enough spaces to meet the need.

“When we walk down the streets in the Downtown Eastside, we see many, many spaces for men, and we don’t see the equivalent for women, and it needs to be there,” said Kendall.

“Women are an invisible population in the community that are grossly under-serviced,” she added. “The consequence of being under-serviced is that women are in an even more vulnerable position.”

The Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre provides drop-in shelter space for women between 11 p.m. and 8 a.m.

The St. James Community Service Society operates two of the city’s emergency shelters for women, including a 52-bed temporary location on Powell Street, and a 33-bed facility in Mount Pleasant for women and children.

Jonathan Oldman, the executive director of the organization, said the emergency housing spaces are generally always full.

However, he said it’s difficult to determine the size of the unmet demand for emergency shelter.

“Women’s homelessness is complicated by the fact that I think people recognize there are a lot of women who are not on the street,” he told the *Straight*. “If they’re homeless, they end up staying in unsafe relationships or couch surfing. So I think a lot of

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women who are homeless don't necessarily get recorded in the homeless count."

Oldman said that while the number of turnaways at their facilities have decreased in the last two years, they are still turning away on average 8 to 10 a day between their two shelters.

He noted that the turnaways are treated as a guide and may not reflect a precise picture of how many people are unable to access accommodation.

Woodsworth said she wants to see the city pursue standards for women-only shelter spaces, as well as expansion of shelter beds, with the province. She noted that the wording of her original motion called for council to make the creation of additional shelter spaces for women "its highest priority".

"We've I think worked really hard to set up the shelters and to work with the province on the 14 sites, but it has not been a priority to get separated space for women in those shelters," she told the *Straight*.

"I think we have to look at both getting funding to open more spaces, but also see if there's some space within existing shelters where we could create safe space for women."