

August 21, 2020

Niagara Regional Council Member

Re: Anti-Human Trafficking Community Support Fund Application, Province of Ontario

Dear Regional Councillors,

On behalf of the YWCA, I am respectfully requesting Regional Council's formal support in our provincial application to secure funding to help combat human trafficking in Niagara. As you know, the effects of human trafficking are felt throughout our region as it fuels organized crime, imposes enormous economic costs and consumes countless resources in many Regionally funded programs such as Community Services, Public Health, EMS and the Niagara Regional Police.

With Niagara being a US border community, easily accessible from the QEW and a tourism mecca, we experience a troubling amount of human trafficking in our community. The vast majority of the victims of human trafficking are young women, with one in four being under the age of 18. In 2018, our organization led an initiative to bring together over a dozen community partners to sign Niagara's first Anti-Human Trafficking Emergency Response Protocol. This protocol, signed by 14 community partners takes a human rights approach to coordinate a range of wrap-around services for victims of human trafficking. Signing partners include the NRPS, EMS, the regional fire departments and groups representing indigenous women and victims of sexual assault and domestic violence.

As many councillors will be aware, the YWCA continues to lead these important efforts across Niagara. The project for which we are seeking Regional Council's support is a natural extension of the YWCA's leadership on this file and continued efforts to combat human trafficking in Niagara. The 6-bed project will provide emergency crisis housing to youth who are female and gender minority identifying, ages 16-24, who are fleeing a human trafficking situation. The program will support survivors to develop relationships and address underlying concerns that keep them vulnerable to returning to a trafficking situation or being re-exploited. The program will assist youth in stabilizing after trauma, as well as connecting them with additional community services to continue recovery after exiting.

Recognizing that emergency shelter is not sufficient on its own to tackle the complex issue of human traffic, the program was designed with a harm-reduction foundation, understanding that each attempt to exit trafficking builds on future successful attempts. The program uses a strength-based approach to leverage survivors own resilience to achieve long-term exit.

The program is unique as actual survivors of human trafficking both developed, and continue to manage, its delivery. During the development phase, an advisory board of community partners and survivors of trafficking oversaw the creation of policies and procedures that will continue to provide insight as the program moves forward. By designing this project with those who have a lived experience, the supports are more likely to make a long-lasting and meaningful difference in the lives of victims.

Funding from this project would provide the opportunity to fill a large gap in services in the Niagara region by being able to provide a safe location with 24-hour supports, including a spectrum of person-centred, intensive supports that provide options for transitional housing and address activation of trauma related symptoms and behaviours related to safety concerns. Through this model, survivors will not need to access other supports as often or for as long of a time in order to heal and rebuild their lives.

It is my hope that Regional Council will recognize that this project closely aligns with their strategic objective to build a healthy and vibrant community. Specifically, support for our application will help to foster a safer and more inclusive neighbourhood, ultimately supporting the Region's larger Community Safety and Wellbeing strategy. Formal support from Regional Council will be instrumental in helping to secure the funding necessary to provide this critical service for years to come.

As always, I am grateful for the productive and longstanding partnership that the YWCA has formed with the Niagara Region. I would view this endorsement as a natural extension of that enduring relationship, and our shared commitment to fight human trafficking in Niagara.

Respectfully,



Elisabeth Zimmermann
Executive Director
YWCA Niagara Region