

Toronto refuge for abused women infested with violence and prostitution: Residents

'This place ... is a ticking timebomb'

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Abused women living in a YWCA facility in North Toronto say they've been forced to share showers with transsexual tenants and cope with frequent, violent behaviour from others living there.

Residents in the four-storey residence and shelter for victims of domestic abuse told the Sun repeated complaints about physical assault, harassment and verbal abuse have been downplayed, if not outright ignored by the YWCA.

"One woman on the third floor was wielding a knife to other people living on the floor and it took three years to evict her," a tenant told the Sun. "They tell us we have to show compassion."

YWCA staff have refused to call police following complaints of violent altercations, and told residents they have to call authorities themselves, according to women who live in the building.

In one case, they said, support workers told an attacker to flee before the police arrived. The workers waited three hours to contact the victim and accused her of refusing help when she was too upset to talk with them, according to complainants.

Last week, the Sunday Sun revealed complaints arising from a YWCA residence in the east-end, including women getting punched, receiving death threats from other tenants and

men staying in the women-led building -- in some cases for up to 11 years.

Yesterday, the Sunday Sun reported that some women living in the Riverdale YWCA assisted-housing facility are using the taxpayer and United Way-subsidized building as a base for prostitution -- even bringing johns into their apartments.

The North Toronto YWCA facility houses women in a shelter and rent-assisted housing units and serves as the agency's head office.

The building is supposed to be women-only, but tenants say that there are often men who sneak in through a back door and stay overnight.

Tenants also complain women living in the shelters often have to bathe in the communal showers with transsexuals.

It's a situation the women say makes them highly uncomfortable and has led to conflict.

"(A transsexual) threatened one of the women from the 4th floor and when she went and complained to staff, they said she had to be patient with him because he's going through a sex change," a tenant said.

"This person was massaging this Muslim woman's back and then when she found out this person was a man, she was upset. There is no disclosure."

Long-time tenants say the environment in the building has been going downhill for years, and that intimidation, threats and assaults started after the building's second floor was converted into a shelter about five years ago.

"The second floor shelter people -- some of them have mental issues and don't know how to cope with anything, so they get mad, have tantrums and start fighting with each other or staff or tenants," said one tenant who didn't want to be identified.

"Our big issue is we had a woman who was attacked four months ago. It was in the cafeteria but a woman just snapped and started beating on her."

The residents brought up a petition of 38 signatures out of 70 tenants to the YWCA at a meeting, but said nothing was done.

"Everyone who signed that has told me a story of some sort of abuse they've faced," one tenant said. "The YWCA is allowing this abuse to take place and are hiding behind the big Y. They are the enablers and it disgusts me to no means to know that (the YWCA) is for women - - but only if you have mental health issues or are substance abusers or are beaten then they take care of you, because they get funding."

The YWCA rent subsidy and shelter program is funded from a variety of sources, including the City of Toronto, indirectly from the province and through the United Way of Toronto. This year alone, the YWCA is receiving \$1.4 million from the United Way to support programs and administration.

Gail Robinson, a psychiatry professor at the University of Toronto and the ex-president on the YWCA's board of directors, said women who have been abused already generally feel ashamed and guilty. Often, victims believe they might be responsible for what happened to them because they feel worthless.

"Being abused by staff in a shelter would reaffirm all of these beliefs and leave them feeling there is no safe place for them," she said. "Their ability to trust others would be demolished."

The YWCA insists the organization follows a non-discrimination policy outlined in the city's Shelter Standards, but said "this is made clear upon intake to everyone, also as part of a non-discrimination policy," said YWCA acting CEO Sally Palmateer.

The YWCA serves 26,000 women a year and maintains it has a clear process for dealing with complaints which are always taken seriously.

"The examples of tenants and residents who help each other and create a caring community together far out-number the opposite," Palmateer said.

The women's organization said the YWCA offers mediation, but the tenants said that it doesn't work because it's not between two equal parties.

"If someone's punched you or harassed you, how can you mediate between the victim and the aggressor?" a tenant said. "This is not a realistic form of resolving the issue. If you turn down mediation, they say, 'We tried to help you, but you didn't want to listen. Maybe this isn't the place for you.'"

Some tenants plan on moving out in the next few months after staying less than a year.

"This place feels like a prison and is a ticking timebomb," one tenant said.

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