

Women's shelters report spike after holidays

BY NAOMI CARNIOL

Shelters in the Greater Toronto Area for women fleeing abuse are almost always full. But in the days after Christmas and New Year's Eve, staff at some shelters say there's a spike in the number of requests for placement.

At Women's Habitat in Etobicoke, the calls start right after Christmas. At Toronto's Yorktown Shelter for Women, the increase comes just after New Year's Day.

"I think women are trying to get through the holiday season," said Sandra McCormack, executive director of Denise House in Oshawa, where calls peak on Boxing Day.

Women with children often don't want to remove them from their homes during the holidays, said Rhonda Roffey, executive director of Women's Habitat. "But usually they end up having a crappy Christmas and end up regretting not leaving. One woman in particular told me ... her husband ended up getting drunk and ruining Christmas anyways."

More requests for placement may come later in the month, as bills from December shopping arrive, she said. "Money issues put pressure on already dysfunctional relationships."

But not all the women fleeing violence and call or go through Toronto's central family intake service will find a spot at a shelter.

In the past year alone, Nellie's in downtown Toronto was forced to refuse more than 700 requests, while Women's Habitat could not accommodate more than 600.

While some women may find spaces at other shelters, many other wind up in homeless shelters run by the City of Toronto. A total of 325 families — 970 people, including children — fleeing abuse are sheltered in the city's hostel system, said Maura Lawless, manager of hostel operations for Toronto.

"Those numbers don't include single women who are fleeing

abuse and living in hostels," she said. Staff at shelters for women fleeing domestic abuse say it's important the city gives women a place to stay.

"We'd rather have the women in the homeless shelter than on the street or with their abuser because the safety concern is the primary concern," said Heather McGregor, executive director of the YWCA Toronto, which runs two shelters for women fleeing domestic violence.

But homeless shelters don't offer the support those women need, Ms. McGregor said. For example, the YWCA's shelters for such women offer counselling and workshops on conflict resolution and understanding the cycle of violence. "The city shelters just aren't equipped to deal with that," she said.

Cindy Cowan, Nellie's executive director, also has mixed feelings about the setup. "A homeless shelter is at least safety away from the house, but it's not a place where they have the specialized counselling and supports for women who are fleeing violence."

Ms. Lawless agrees. "Clearly the focus in the hostel system is getting people into housing.

Providing shelter specifically geared toward women fleeing abuse would cost the city an additional \$3.3-million a year, Ms. Lawless estimated.

Last November, the Ontario government introduced the Transitional and Housing Support Program. Under the program, the government is investing an additional \$3.5-million a year in programs for women leaving domestic violence. But that money is for the entire province — not just Toronto.

The money given to Toronto agencies was earmarked for those that provide second-stage housing — available when the stay at a women's shelter ends, said Anne Machowski, a spokeswoman for the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services.