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## This Change in Legislation Should Help Domestic Violence Survivors Flee Faster

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The Residential Tenancies Act has been changed to help achieve this goal.

BY RHIANNON RUSSELL



Photo by [Lori Whelan](#) from the [Torontoist Flickr Pool](#).

At its 12 locations across the city, the [YWCA Toronto](#) helps about 12,000 women each year.

**Much of the work it does** centres on housing—it offers nine different types, from homeless shelters to transitional housing to emergency shelter from violence.

Women who use its services tell staff about the challenges they're facing, and, until recently, one big problem was trying to flee domestic violence when they were tied to a lease with their partner.

Under the [Ontario Residential Tenancies Act](#), they, like everyone else, were required to give 60 days' notice when they wanted to break their lease. If they decided to leave sooner, they'd be financially responsible for rent.

"When you leave violence, in addition to everything else, to have to worry about paying rent that might be owing, that's an issue," says Maureen Adams, YWCA Toronto's director of advocacy and communications.

That changed earlier this month, when the provincial government amended the act to allow people experiencing domestic and sexual violence to end their tenancy within 28 days.

To use this special provision, a tenant must provide her landlord with either a copy of a peace bond or restraining order from the courts or **a signed and dated statement** that says she or a child living in the unit have experienced sexual or domestic violence.

If victims opt to write a statement, it's important to note this does not have to be filed with police. It does not have to include detailed allegations, either. It must only say that violence has occurred in the home and that they believe they will be at risk if they continue living there.

"While still allowing survivors to use court orders as evidence if those documents are more readily available to them, including the option of using a statement ensures the special notice provision is accessible and does not act as an additional hurdle for those seeking to flee domestic or sexual violence," Conrad Spezowka, spokesperson for the Ministry of Housing, wrote in an email.

Once they receive the notice, landlords must keep it confidential. During the 28-day period, they aren't allowed to advertise the unit or tell anyone else who lives in the unit that notice has been given.

The move to amend the act is part of [It's Never Okay: An Action Plan to Stop Sexual Violence and Harassment](#), launched by the Province last year.

"Survivors of sexual and domestic violence need to have the ability to leave an unsafe living environment quickly," said Spezowka. "Financial concerns related to ending a rental agreement may act as a barrier to survivors seeking to flee an unsafe environment."

The government held consultations months ago with women's organizations and landlord and tenant associations to discuss reducing the period of notice for people fleeing domestic violence.

Before, there was no mention of victims in this situation in the act. The required notice period was 60 days for all tenants. (But if there was a fixed-term or yearly tenancy, the tenant's termination date could not be earlier than the end of the lease.)

The government decided upon 28 days.

"This was felt to be reasonable for both sides," Adams says—for victims of violence and for landlords.

According to Spezowka, 28 days is in line with other Canadian jurisdictions that have a shorter notice period for victims of violence. In these other regions, it's between 14 and 30 days.

Adams says the YWCA is pleased with this change. But there's more work to be done to improve housing options for people fleeing domestic violence.

"This is a very good move forward, but the issue is there's not enough affordable housing for women and their families."

On Monday, the organization launched [#ActOnHousing](#), its campaign for a national housing strategy—one that the YWCA Toronto feels must take into account the unique needs of women.



The YWCA Toronto launched its campaign for a national housing strategy on Monday. Photo courtesy of YWCA Toronto.

"It can't be a gender-neutral discussion," Adams says. "There has to be a discussion on the impact of women, who disproportionately experience violence."

Twenty years ago, women fleeing violence might stay in a shelter for six to eight weeks. Now, they sometimes stay for years.

"A shelter is no place to live for years," Adams says. "They weren't designed that way. They were designed for short-term and then you'd move on to affordable housing."

But with a lack of affordable housing, where are they supposed to go?

The federal government has begun consultations on a national strategy with its **Let's Talk Housing** campaign.

And this month, **the Province announced** it will dole out \$22 million to 20 communities for its new portable housing benefit program for survivors of domestic violence.

The benefit is intended to assist victims in finding housing sooner, rather than wait for a social housing unit to become available.

Toronto City Council will discuss its share—\$3.4 million—during the Council meeting beginning October 5.

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