

# Osborne House facing a crisis

## Battered women's shelter dreary and overcrowded, says director

By Bonnie Bridge

**W**innipeg's only emergency shelter for battered women is itself facing a crisis, says its director.

Osborne House is overcrowded, dreary and underfunded, says Marlene Bertrand. "The physical condition of this building is so depressing that it seems the message we're giving to these women is they don't deserve any better."

The sprawling, turn-of-the-century house on Balmoral Street isn't worth the money it would take to fix it up properly, says a recent study.

Bedrooms are furnished with nothing but the plainest of bunk beds, a baby's crib, curtains at the window and perhaps a dresser. Pregnant or elderly women sometimes have to sleep in a narrow, uncomfortable upper bunk.

At times, families who are strangers have to share a bedroom. There are only two toilets in the entire house. The main bathroom on the second floor is small and consists of two shower stalls, a toilet and sink. The third floor has only a sink in the hall.

**'It's literally take a number for the counselling room'**

"You can't shower during mealtime because it drips onto the dining room table," Bertrand said. "There's no way the physically handicapped can come into the shelter because the house isn't wheelchair accessible."

More space, better facilities and more secure funding are badly needed, Bertrand said. "We're talking about a family not having to share a bedroom when they're in a time of crisis."

"We're talking in the summer a building where the temperature doesn't get to 104 Fahrenheit and they have to bring pillows and blankets down to the main floor and sleep there."

There isn't much privacy. Police, lawyers, relatives, social workers and counsellors come to the house for interviews because it's a place of safety for the



Rooms at Osborne House are crowded, bleak and depressing, says director Marlene Bertrand.

women. But Osborne House has only one tiny room for these meetings.

People are lined up waiting to use it, Bertrand said. "It's literally take a number for the counselling room." People are often forced to discuss intimate details in front of others.

Osborne House considers its

support groups, counselling, follow-up and preventive work among its most important services. But this work is hampered by lack of space. "We're the only shelter in the province of Manitoba, and I would say in western Canada, that's doing it in the stairwells and bathrooms."

Bertrand has a file full of letters from lawyers, police officials and community groups who have written their concerns to the provincial government. Some lawyers say they're reluctant to send clients to Osborne House because of the lack of privacy and cramped, dismal quarters.

"In a time of personal crisis

these women do not want to share accommodations, share bathing facilities, and be interviewed by staff and legal counsel in hallways or open rooms," said one lawyer.

Bertrand says the shelter provides other services that include educating teenagers about violence in relationships, answering questions from the public, and speaking out on behalf of clients.

Osborne House is a department of the downtown branch of the YM-YWCA, but the house is owned by the Manitoba Housing and Renewal Corporation which provides an annual operating grant that pays for heat and electricity. The shelter's operating revenue comes from \$35 per person per day payments through the provincial welfare system. This income, which fluctuates, goes for salaries, food and programs.

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The shelter gets \$20,000 a year from the province for services such as public education, workshops, volunteer recruitment and training, support groups and drop-in counselling.

Bertrand said some people have suggested that instead of fixing up Osborne House, it should be replaced with several small shelters across the city. This would be costly in duplicating administration costs and providing 24-hour staff, she said. Smaller shelters likely wouldn't have enough money or resources to provide counselling and support groups that are essential for getting a woman back on her feet and able to break out of her lifestyle, Bertrand added.

"Our support groups are full because people have a bond with us."

"We'd like to see the provision of an adequate building, with enough space so we can continue to deliver the kinds of programs we're already providing, but in appropriate space."

"We want a building where women can go and be treated with the respect and dignity they deserve."

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