

Over 25 Organizations Advancing Women's Equality Call on City Council to Make Ottawa a Sanctuary City

Ottawa, March 8 2017 - To mark International Women's Day, a group of over 25 prominent organizations on the front lines of ending violence against women and advancing gender equality have written an open letter to Mayor Watson and City Council to show their support for making Ottawa a sanctuary city.

In recent weeks, there has been discussion among city Councillors and residents about the possibility of declaring Ottawa a city where all residents, regardless of immigration status, are able to safely access city services. As organizations working toward gender equality and providing frontline support to women facing violence and exclusion, we know first hand that women with precarious immigration status will often decide not to access the services they need for fear that information about their status will be shared with immigration enforcement. When women do not access essential services like shelters, counseling, food banks, public health, or emergency services, the consequences for their safety and well-being can be dire.

As Leighann Burns, Executive Director of Harmony House shelter for women, explains, "In our day to day work, we do our best to support women without status and their families. But we need the city to help us do that. A robust sanctuary policy would provide our whole sector with the mandate and tools we need to ensure that no woman is denied the support she needs to be safe."

"Fear of being reported to immigration authorities increases the likelihood of reproductive coercion", says Catherine Macnab, Executive Director of Planned Parenthood Ottawa (PPO), "That fear lets abusive partners control their partner's bodies and reproductive choices."

According to Suzanne Doerge, Executive Director of City for all Women Initiative (CAWI), "Women face many barriers to full equality in our city, and precarious immigration status only makes this situation worse. At CAWI, we believe that the City has a key role to play in removing barriers to social inclusion and this is no exception. We hope Council will seize this opportunity to take concrete action and effect real change."

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