

Introduction

Every woman has a story. My personal story includes many experiences of harassment - from catcalling to anonymous notes left on my car window stating I am being watched, a man following me home from a grocery store and tracking me down with his car, and being followed out of concerts and nightclubs right onto public transit.

I believe these stories need to be told so people understand that this behaviour is real and widespread, that it affects girls and women they know and love, and that it is unacceptable. This should start as early as high-school. I have a daughter in high-school and I would really love to see all students – boy and girls – participate in a dialogue circle. This is one example of how we can start these conversations, build understanding and respect, and change the norms that allow perpetrators to think they will get away with harassment and gender-based violence. I think our goal should be a world where both of my daughters do not have to worry about being targeted as they go about their daily lives – and of a world in which the public will call out harassment and gender-based violence, and stop it in its tracks when it does happen.

Below, I have considered and commented on Hollaback!’s specific proposals for making our streets and public spaces safer for girls, women and members of the LGBTQ community in Ottawa.

#1 Fund Public Service Ads to Raise Awareness of Public Harassment on our Streets

Absolutely! I support funding public service ads through grants to raise awareness. A social marketing strategy is required to call out public harassment, and make people understand that it is not “cool” – it is unacceptable. As you know, these behaviours are deeply ingrained in our social fabric. We are long overdue in setting new social norms that oppose gender-based violence, and not only support those who take a stand against it, but actively calls out those who engage in it. We also need to change the norms that blame those affected by gender-based violence for their experiences. No one deserves such treatment, and it is time our society truly internalized that message.

The target audience for public service ads should include not only those affected by gender-based violence and those who perpetrate it, but also by-standers, as it is this last group that has the ability to rally around and support those who are affected while it is actually happening. Any advertising campaign must reach everyone who is affected by, perpetrates and witnesses gender-based violence, in order to be truly effective.

I also think any campaign should be a multi-party strategy. I would love to see the City, Hollaback! and the VAW community reach out to a local PR firm that specializes in social marketing, and seek support for such a worthy campaign. I am confident that women who have these skills would happily work on such a project.

#2 Hire more OC Transpo Special Constables

We definitely need more dedicated special constables to supervise transit stations for safety. We should start by assessing whether resources could be dedicated to this initiative from OC Transpo's existing internal resources. If this requires shifting priorities from monitoring ticket infractions to ensuring safety for OC Transpo users, I would support that. Resources would also be required to provide specialized training to respond to gender-based violence, as well as careful screening of and support for constables dedicated to this task.

#3 Prevent Sexual Assaults at Mass Gatherings

I fully support requiring the organizers of any mass gathering throughout the city to train staff to monitor and respond to sexual violence. This is critical for everyone's safety, and is long overdue! However, to ensure that training is accessible, appropriate and effective, the City should work with organizations like Hollaback! and others in Ottawa's VAW community to identify suitable training programs and resources, and make sure this training is delivered by trained professionals with expertise on these issues.

#4 Promote Comprehensive Sexual Health

I fully support the work that Ottawa Public Health is already doing to promote safer sex in the city, as well as organizations like OCTEVAW and the Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre (ORCC). Adding information and providing opportunities for discussion of issues around consent and healthy relationships in OPH's programs would be a natural extension of the work that is already going on in our community. I think that OPH could and should partner and consult with organizations like OCTEVAW and the ORCC to develop this aspect of their programs. From my time volunteering with the ORCC, I know there are many people working in the VAW sector whose knowledge and expertise would be valuable in this initiative. I would happily champion this, and support Hollaback! in advocating for the inclusion of this element in OPH's programs.

#5 Show commitment to making public transit safer for women and LGBTQ folks.

I am excited at the possibility that I could use my professional experience in public consultation and building partnerships between diverse stakeholders to support the work of Hollaback! and other organizations in the VAW community to making public transit safer for girls, women and the LGBTQ community. I believe strongly that the right social marketing strategy, as described in my response to question 1, combined with collaboration between all stakeholders and a sustained effort towards identifying and supporting the resources necessary to making sure all users of public transit are safe will yield positive results. I am absolutely committed to making this work!