



**Report: Roundtable on Safe Workplaces for Political Staff
Hosted on Zoom
Monday, March 8th, 4 PM - 5:30 PM**

Participants

- Stephanie Dobbs
- Victoria Laaber
- Nancy O'Brien
- Eziona O. Nnorom - ED, Sexual Assault Support Centre (SASC) of Ottawa
- Amina Doreh - Public Education Coordinator, SASC
- Emilie Taman - human rights and employment lawyer
- Amy Kishek - Legal staff, Public Service Alliance of Canada
- Carly McMaster - Chrysalis House
- Erin Leigh - ED, Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women
- MPP Stephen Blais (Orleans)
- MPP Joel Harden (Ottawa Centre)

Summary

Our roundtable began by acknowledging that we were meeting on the unceded and unsundered territories of the Algonquin / Anishinabek peoples.

With this acknowledgement, we noted that reconnecting to the origins of the land and the relationships between those living here is an essential part of reconciliation to which Ontario is committed. For this commitment to move beyond words, action is needed. We noted that discussion about addressing gender-based violence is part of reconciliation's healing journey, and we must treat it with utmost seriousness.

Everyone has a right to feel safe at work, and anyone who abuses their power -- including elected representatives -- must be held accountable. This community roundtable with local leaders and experts highlighted the issue of safe workplaces for political staff, and how we can address this at all levels of government.

We noted that Ministers Jill Dunlop and Steve Clark had announced an intention to review Ontario's *Municipal Act* on March 5, 2021 in light of requests made by Ottawa City Council. They signalled an interest to consult on further accountability measures to ensure appropriate consequences for elected municipal officials proven by independent investigation to have engaged in serious acts of misconduct, including sexual misconduct.

This report aims to encourage this kind of meaningful policy change in Ontario.

Survivors of Rick Chiarelli speak out

With that in mind, we began by noting that [two investigations by Ottawa's Integrity Commissioner into the conduct of Councillor Rick Chiarelli](#) has elicited outrage in Ottawa. The Commissioner found Chiarelli had engaged in acts of ["incomprehensible incidents of harassment"](#) against staff.

The [latest report](#) noted that Chiarelli demeaned women in his office, belittled them, and requested they engage in activities that made little sense beyond satisfying his own warped desires. Chiarelli objectified his staff, threatened them, and used his power as a City Councillor to dictate their behaviour. These are shocking examples of misconduct that happened to at least 5 women.

Throughout, Chiarelli has refused to cooperate with the Integrity Commissioner's investigations, and challenged the efficacy of the process. He is serving a 450 day salary suspension, the maximum consequence under existing rules. On May 25, 2021, [he argued his case in court](#), a judgement for which is forthcoming.

Survivors of Chiarelli's office have spoken out, and our roundtable afforded space to three women to do so on the record. What we heard in each case added context to the Integrity Commissioner's two reports.

Victoria Laaber

Victoria Laaber worked with Chiarelli, and learned in August 2019 that a former co-worker would be coming forward to file an anonymous complaint with the Integrity Commissioner. Her initial reaction was to warn Chiarelli. After reading media reports about this complaint, she struggled with a sense of disbelief in the allegations.

"What you need to understand", Ms. Laaber told us, "is I was so traumatized by my time in that office and loyal to Rick, that my brain blocked out all of the pieces of memories that I now know for certain was sexual harassment and abusive predatory behaviour. This is survival mode."

She continued:

To reiterate: when I first caught wind of this article about my abuser, I went to warn my abuser. I started to discuss my experiences in Rick's office with my fiancée and my therapist. This is when everything unravelled. Those pieces of memories came flooding back. I spiralled, my world was forever changed.

Resettling in this new world, where I had been abused for years, came with a wave of shame for not realizing what happened while I was working there. For not being able to protect myself. And even worse, for knowing that he kept up this behaviour long after I was gone, and created more victims.

Soon after this unraveling, I made the decision to come forward to not just the Integrity Commissioner, but to the broader public [by telling my story to Joanne Chianello at the CBC](#). Why would I want to do that? To willingly live with the consequences of publicly acknowledging that I was a victim?

I saw the conversations happening on Twitter, casting out on an anonymous account that was speaking truth to power. I knew it was true, but the public had its doubts. Are you if I stayed anonymous that things wouldn't change.

I was angry and I felt like I had to do something. Being out in BC for almost 3 years, I felt comfortable putting my name out there. He has no influence here. I felt safe. Unlike others who still live in the region or are still in his ward. Was it scary and overwhelming to come up against someone who held a position of power and who I was loyal to?

Absolutely. However, I have a keen sense of justice. Considering my context at the time, it was a no-brainer to humanize the story by attaching my face to it. Remaining silent was not an option. You can't ignore me or the situation. I worked for Rick for five years. I built strong relationships with your community associations and constituents. I am somebody.

Something that is crucial to understand is that this whole experience has a huge cost on my mental health. I already had a fragile mental health coming into this. This process destroyed what little I had left. To offer complete transparency, I was in a space of limbo. My story was out, but nothing was being done.

I had taken the risk of putting myself out there, but it wasn't paying off and I started having suicidal ideations as a result. I wanted to stop. It was so overwhelming that I was routinely disassociating and I was romanticizing death for a few weeks. I connected with a psychiatrist which added another prescription to help with my mental health. I was absolutely terrified that my now very public harassment case was all in vain, that no one would help or care enough to change the situation.

This is a systemic issue.

Since coming out I had people from other municipalities, provincial and federal levels enter my private messages on various social media platforms to tell me that this was an issue in their office as well.

My therapist was able to take me out of this limbo. She helped me understand that I have a decision to make. I can either drop it and focus on the betterment of my mental health, or I can turn and fight.

As you know, I decided to fight. I don't blame anyone who wouldn't make the same decision as me. I understand, I support you and I see you.

I took part in multiple interviews with the Integrity Commissioner's investigations which would routinely make me dissociate. I participated in radio interviews and gave statements for written interviews to put momentum behind this cause.

I started tweeting about the abuse that myself and countless other women injured during her time in Rick's office. Here I was met with astounding abuse from anonymous trolls. This highlights even more why survivors of this kind of abuse, or quite frankly any type of abuse, are so hesitant to come forward.

To say that my mental health suffered would be an understatement. I am lucky to have a great support system and privileged enough that I can afford my own therapy bills. I am one of the lucky ones in that respect, others have not been as lucky.

I am still healing from what has happened to me. I didn't ask for consent to any of this. My day-to-day life is still affected by this. I have issues trusting people and I am exhaustingly, constantly hypervigilant. This is to mention just a few ongoing repercussions from this experience.

Seeing Rick continue to hold a position of power in a system that isn't designed to appropriately punish this behaviour is so crushing; everyone who is a survivor of his, as well as the survivors in other jurisdictions. He gets an administrative slap on the rest, we get our whole lives upended.

Stephanie Dobbs

Stephanie Dobbs also worked for Chiarelli, and [has been public in her advocacy](#). In our roundtable, she offered a reply to "Cassie", an online troll who had heaped abuse on Dobbs for speaking out. Her reply to "Cassie" read as follows:

Dear Cassie,

I do not know you personally, but I want to thank you for being such a strong example of what I do not want to be. When you decided to attack me on Twitter last year, I read it and cannot fathom why you felt the need to attack me, nor could I understand the inaccuracies in your attack. I did not care to respond at the time because I know you are, at least at this current point in your life, not someone who was worth my time.

However, as time has passed, I believe it is important that I address a few things from your tweets. Not for you, or for anyone like you, but for others out there who might've been subjected to your tirade.

When I went public it was not because I was milking this for all it's worth, as you so graciously put it. I did it for many reasons, one of which you and the others like you demanded, that I not remain anonymous while exposing Mr. Chiarelli's past behavior. This was literally my first tweet where I clearly identified myself to the public and already you accuse me of milking it. Got it.

Next you chose to tactlessly bring up my sexual assault. I have little faith in your ability to do proper research or gather information since you misquoted me and stated that my assault was by a previous employer, which it was not. You would know that if you had been paying attention to the facts and details, but I am keenly aware that neither of these are of concern to you. I would like to make it very clear that the sexual assault that I have referenced in my testimony and interviews was not by a previous employer. I do not want this meant information spread, so I will repeat, the sexual assault reference was not from a former employer.

After you misquoted me, you deflected from the issue at hand by questioning whether I went on to charge this person. Let me make a few things very clear to you. Firstly, whether I did or did not charge has zero bearing on Mr. Chiarelli's egregious behaviour. If I told you that I had, would that satisfy you? Based on what I can gather of your character I already know it would not.

Secondly, you say that it is my responsibility to identify and charge my abuser so I can protect other women. He also claimed that this is my own message. You are wrong. I would never tell a victim that it is their responsibility to ensure that their abuser is punished, especially when people such as yourself are prepared to be retraumatized by them.

I would gladly support them in pursuing this option, should they believe they are capable, but I would never put the burden on them. Should I happen to witness something like this I do believe it is my responsibility to speak out, but I do not believe it is the victim's job to re-victimize themselves through what could be a lengthy and traumatic experience bringing your abuser to justice. I do not presume to know what they have been through and I am learning firsthand just how trying the path towards justice can be.

Canada's federal Department of Justice has stated that over 83% of sexual assault cases are not reported. The most frequently reported reasons for not reporting child sexual abuse and or adult sexual abuse were: the participants thought that they would not be believed, they felt ashamed or embarrassed, they did not know they could report the abuse, and they had no family support. They also found less than half of the sexual assault reporting result in a guilty verdict. For many people, this kind of outcome is expected and therefore they risk being ostracized, of losing their job, or becoming targets of victim blaming. All of this leads to fear of reporting sexual assault.

This brings me to my last point, and it is a big one: I owe you nothing.

Speculating about whether my assault took place does not change the fact that it happened. You also go on to say that if I was a previous victim of assault there is no way in hell I would've taken the job with Chiarelli. First, I'd like to applaud you for acknowledging the fact that no victim of abuse should work for Mr. Chiarelli. I agree, given his past manipulative practices this is a dangerous environment. However, you are once again wrong. Many men and women who are trauma survivors are at risk of future abusive relationships in their lives. I've included a couple of reference articles on the subject so that maybe you can broaden your knowledge, but for now I will leave you with some insight that no two trauma victims are the same. Sometimes in order to cope a victim might refuse to acknowledge what happened to them in order to avoid addressing unwanted feelings like guilt and shame.

In one of your last messages, you chastise me for what I am doing to Mr. Chiarelli, his wife, and his three daughters. If speaking publicly about my time in Mr. Chiarelli's office is so damaging to him then you are certainly upset at the wrong person. I would also like to request that you, Mr. Chiarelli, his lawyer, and other members of the public refrain from bringing his family into this.

It is unfortunate that his family has been negatively impacted. My previous co-workers and I have done our best not to discuss them or involve them. Despite this they have been used as metaphorical shields to imply that a man who is a husband and father of three could not be a man guilty of these horrendous and numerous claims.

This is deplorable, not only because being the former does not prevent you from also being the latter, but also because he is once again using the women in his life to suit his purpose and protect his image.

So again, I would like to thank you dear twitter troll. Not because I believe you had anything worth contributing, but because you have reinforced that I am doing the right thing, and that it is worth doing.

A discussion then ensued between Ms. Laaber, Ms. Dobbs and Ms. O'Brien. They were asked if their experience changed the way they look at politics.

Ms. Laaber said Chiarelli preyed on people with limited political experience. Despite the disaster of that office, she said, "I am now in politics".

Ms. Dobbs agreed. I knew nothing, she said, and didn't know better. She had been involved in my community in the past, and active in community work, but not electoral politics per se. Her current focus is seeking change. "I am a Carleton University student now", she said, "and I want to ensure this will not happen to anyone else."

Ms. O'Brien said her experience makes her sick to my stomach when politicians are present in any event; online is different, but being in the same room as a local leader is tough. The thought of going to an event where there are many politicians makes her nervous.

We took a moment to think about the impact of those statements. We asked if there is a poisoning impact on politics when misconduct happens from elected officials without consequences.

Emilie Taman

Emilie Taman, a local lawyer, continued by asking what the obligations are for employers to create safe workplaces. The impacts of a toxic and unsafe work environment are clear, she said, but we must not begrudge those who have yet to step forward. It is tough to speak freely in political offices, which is an issue in itself.

But in the law, there is no basis to make a distinction between political staffers and any other workers. There are many deep layers of legal protection. All workers have a right to be free from sexual discrimination and harassment in the workplace. The City of Ottawa is the employer, and has the obligation to protect employees in the Chiarelli Office. Sometimes a Councillor can seem like an employer, but the City is the actual employer for employment purposes.

Ms. Taman continued: we will often hear the suggestion that the Chiarelli office culture was an open secret, but who chose to intervene to help? No one, said Taman. That is troubling. Ottawa's Integrity Commissioner's reports signalled a willingness to do the most with the tools he had. But beyond pay sanctions, what was the city able to do to protect workers in this case?

Of course, Taman explained, this matter needs thoughtful reform --there is a constitutional right to seek and hold office, so the grounds for depriving someone of that right must be clear. Some worry that any new powers to compel the removal of city councillors could be abused. That said, what exists in law now to remove city councillors during their term are infractions around electoral issues, or fiscal impropriety issues. We certainly need to expand the scope to address serious and egregious acts of misconduct that are proven by independent investigation.

Ms. O'Brien then asked Ms. Taman: "The only office removal provisions I know of are under [Sect 90\(3\) of the *Municipal Elections Act*](#), and [Section 91\(1\) of the *Municipal Elections Act*](#). A City Councillor can be removed from office in cases where they are convicted of criminal charges, or for financial improprieties related to the outcome of an election. Is this a correct reading of the law here?"

Ms. Taman replied: "You have read the law correctly. If Chiarelli hasn't abused his powers to win an election, or been convicted of a criminal offence, he can still hold his seat. We need new legal tools. Just because something is hard to manage doesn't mean it shouldn't be done."

Amy Kishek

Amy Kishek, another legal expert in this area, began her contribution to our discussion. She has been very involved in changing federal legislation around workplace violence. There were many incidents on Parliament Hill that created a push for change.

For some time, no health and safety laws applied to workers on Parliament Hill, which was a major problem. Change came from a moment of political crisis, not fulsome legislation. To begin, she emphasized, our conception as a society of how to correct for this kind of harm by political office holders is very weak, and very ineffective. As such, it is almost impossible to remedy, so few step forward.

We need multiple different recourse avenues. Grievances under unionized collective agreements are an option. Civil suits may be involved. But these options are onerous, and unlikely to deter serial abusers. What is more, employers are often reluctant to deal with these situations, which allows these things to fester. This is really about a lack of accountability.

Some will say unionization offers workers protection from misconduct by political office holders. In reality, while this is a positive option, it is not a panacea. The culture of political workplaces demands unquestioning political loyalty, and one is judged on your ability to toe the line. The NDP staff on Parliament Hill are unionized and it didn't make them safe, abuse did happen; so unions are important, but not sufficient. A union is only as strong as its members, but it does empower your speech.

Ms. Kishek noted It was a struggle to raise the issue of violence on Parliament Hill. She recounted an example of sexual assault, and that folks were inclined to look the other way. Some women believed that this was part of "paying their dues", putting up with sexual harassment. That notion on its own was chilling.

MPP Stephen Blais

MPP Stephen Blais then offered his reflections. He said It was sobering to know that he was so close to the Chiarelli's office, and had no idea this was going on. Because of this, MPP Blais will be devoting his Private Members slot this parliamentary session to taking action for legislative change.

MPP Blais has proposed [Bill 260](#), that would require city councillors and members of local boards are no longer exempt municipal workplace harassment and conduct policies. They must comply with those policies or face consequences for misconduct. Bill 260 also establishes a process in the event of an Integrity Commissioner investigation that finds severe actions of workplace violence and harassment, Council can direct the Integrity Commissioner to make an application to the court to vacate the seat. This is how the municipal process works with conflict

of interest cases. This is set up with a limited scope, egregious actions, but with judicial oversight. That is the goal, the consultations are now ongoing from the province.

Ezioma Nnorom

Our roundtable continued with remarks from Ezioma Nnorom, Executive Director for the [Sexual Assault Centre of Ottawa](#) (SASC). Ms. Nnorom began by saluting the courage of those who came forward to hold Chiarelli accountable. But the issue, Nnorom emphasized., is the difficulty and the hesitancy of speaking out. When survivors come out they challenge the culture of allowing misconduct. We need a change in culture as a first step in getting the requisite accountability to ensure we can live and work safely.

Legislation, Nnorom noted, is not enough. She explained that a legalistic perspective is about rules, but the objectives of these rules are not straightforward. The realities of disclosing is that it is a fraught process. So much is missed, and so much is still needed.

Ms. Nnorom noted from Ontario's *Health and Safety Act* that the victim is required to re-traumatize themselves in the course of seeking accountability. They are compelled to explain in great detail the pattern of violent events knowing that appropriate consequences are unlikely to follow. This, she noted, is the harassment that takes place after the harassment. Survivors get re-harassed and re-victimized. And it diminishes the ability to ensure accountability. This is why most people don't report incidents of harassment.

Ms. Nnorom noted a description of sexual harassment and misconduct first expressed by the documentary filmmaker [Maggie Hadleigh-West](#): "To hurt, in a public space by treating someone badly. Unintentional degradation through ignorance. To imply a physical, sexual or emotional threat through gestures, verbalization and postures, or grasping of body parts. Coarse, deceptive and salty language, or manipulative language that is seemingly complimentary or judgemental. Unsolicited physical contact, or following another for the purposes of inflicting physical, psychological or emotional harm. Unequal access to public space because of cultural, hierarchical imbalances or physical disparities between predator and prey."

Throughout, Nnorom explained, these activities are carried out between those who tend to have power over others, and any steps to accountability must acknowledge and address that power imbalance. Women and other marginalized people are in a precarious position, and therefore need proactive and supportive options to seek accountability.

Amina Doreh

Our roundtable continued with remarks from Amina Doreh, Public Education Coordinator for SASC. She noted that SASC has offered support and services for 37 years. SASC is a feminist-based and peer support organization that helps people who have faced gender-based and sexual violence.

SASC, Ms. Doreh explained, aims to meet the survivor anywhere in their healing journey, we meet them where they are at. She agreed that this is about power and control, so we counteract that by empowering the survivor, allowing them a chance to talk about the complexities of their experience, and holding space for them.

SASC offers a 24/7 crisis line, an evening tech support line, but also has individual support for up to 20 weeks for survivors of gender-based violence. SASC helps survivors navigate various resources in the community, often doing so with off-site accompaniment.

SASC have two unique programs: a Young Women at Risk program, for women 24 years of age and younger who have experienced gender-based or sexual violence, and there are options for short and longer term support. SASC also has a unique program called the Women and War program for new immigrant women, refugee women and non-status women who have experienced gender-based and sexual violence in Canada or their country of origin.

SASC also offers an important community role in public education: we talk about gender-based and sexual violence when invited to do so, and we consider that to be important preventative work. It is important to de-stigmatize this conversation, and to realize that incidents of of gender-based and sexual violence are beyond the people directly concerned; they are indicative of a culture that reinforces and permits violence, so we try to support people from all angles as a grassroots community organization. COVID19 has made this challenging, but our work is more important than ever. The community needs to know about the important work we do.

Carly McMaster

Our roundtable continued with Carly McMaster, a case manager from [Chrysalis House](#). Chrysalis House is a 25 bed shelter in Ottawa that specializes in helping women and children who have left abusive relationships, and looking to safely rebuild their lives. Our main work involves counseling, service navigation and advocacy for women and families that stay at Chrysalis House. We offer housing supports, and a peer support program.

Our goal at Chrysalis House is to help. We believe in safe shelter for women and children trying to leave violent partners. Sadly, the COVID19 pandemic has made the incidences of such violence higher. There have been more femicides in Canada because of the isolation that women are facing. It is difficult to leave abusive relationships now, and we see decreased capacity in Ottawa for this.

So this means less women are leaving violent homes. We are here to offer that support, for women to be believed. to help women and children get their lives back on track. There has been a lot of talk today about the culture of violence in our society, and the need to address violence at a structural and systemic level. This is where our conversations need to go in order to address violence against women, and gender-based violence in the community.

At this point, given the extent of gender-based and sexual violence in Canada, we asked if much progress had been made in recent years and decades. In response, many said the situation is dire, but that ebbs and flows in progress are evident. High-profile cases — like the Chiarelli reports — allow opportunities for public discussion, and to push for reform. If we are aware of the need for constant vigilance, and the need to push for significant action, progress remains possible.

Erin Leigh

Our roundtable discussion continued with Erin Leigh, Executive Director of the [Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women](#). She began by saluting survivors for speaking out; survivors, she said, “do it best”, but a community must be built to support those who do come forward.

It is also worth noting that there are unique circumstances to the Chiarelli investigations. First, it is not common to have such a paper trail of evidence to validate what survivors claim; it is more typical to have a verbal, private moment of harassment or assault from a single person. In this case, Chiarelli was implicated in repeated acts of misconduct against several people, and several survivors came forward to Ottawa’s Integrity’s Commissioner to validate these claims. We must remember that won’t always be the case; we must ensure a similar degree of accountability for others who come forward on their own.

Also, Ms. Leigh noted, MPP Blais’s focus on “egregious” misconduct presents many potential problems. There is the issue of interpretation: what is egregious to some may not be for others; LGTB2QS+ survivors, for example, may talk about violence at the workplace that may seem less serious to others without their lived experience. In the anti-violence community that is what why we talk about a spectrum of sexual violence, without saying “this is worse than that”.

Ottawa’s City Hall needs a revamp in how it handles issues of gender-based and sexual violence. The Clerk’s report focused on the hiring process for Councillor’s assistants, but this is much broader than that. While there is a tension between ensuring misconduct proceedings aren’t used for disingenuous purposes, it is also worth noting that sexual predators remaining in office hurts democracy. It is an abuse of office to be an abuser in office.

Proposal for action: Nancy O’Brien

We ended with Ms. O’Brien, who has created a petition calling for changes to Ontario’s *Municipal Act* to allow for the removal of city councillors who engage in occupational health and safety violations related to emotional or physical violence and harassment.

It is promising, O’Brien said, to see Ministers Clark and Dunlop open to taking action, because this is not a partisan issue. This is an accountability issue, it is an ethics issue, it is a women’s issue, it is an equity issue.

While Ministers Dunlop and Clark have opened a consultation, they have not established a timeline for reform. O'Brien believes the public will not accept a continued lack of accountability on misconduct in political office, and she expects Ontario to stop egregious behaviour by elected municipal officials.

It's time for change.