

## Women's shelters no longer off-limits to immigration officers

By **BRYN WEESE**, PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU

Last Updated: February 11, 2011 2:46am

OTTAWA — Women's shelters are no longer off-limits to immigration officers looking to round up and deport people hiding out in Canada illegally, QMI Agency has learned.

But don't worry, SWAT teams won't be kicking doors down any time soon.

Effective Friday, a new policy allows Canada Border Services Agency immigration officers to enter shelters, if warranted and approved by the agency's top brass, to pick up illegal immigrants avoiding deportation.

The directive outlines in detail under what circumstances and how CBSA officers are to enter a shelter, and how to seek appropriate approvals before hand.

"Where a foreign national is subject to an enforceable removal order and fails to leave Canada, the CBSA is statutorily obligated to remove the individual as soon as reasonably practicable," the directive reads. "While cases where a foreign national enters a women's shelter require heightened sensitivity, the obligation to investigate and remove the individual does not cease to exist in those circumstances."

CBSA officials will be meeting with shelter administrators in Toronto Friday to discuss the new policy.

A year ago, CBSA officers entered a Toronto shelter looking for a Ghanaian woman in hiding, which resulted in significant push back from migrant and women's advocacy groups.

The agency agreed last fall to stay away from shelters — at least temporarily — until a specific policy could be drawn up to deal with the sensitive issue.

According to a government source, the CBSA will still use "extreme" discretion when dealing with women's shelters, and will not interfere with women legitimately seeking refuge from abusive situations.

"In those cases, the officers will let the person remain in the shelter, get the help they need and worry about the deportation notice later," the source said.

If CBSA decides to enter a women's shelter, the regional director general and the agency's vice-president of operations must sign off on the action, and a female lead officer must be assigned to the case.

Also, women's shelter staff are not required to tell CBSA officers whether the woman in question is in the shelter, and the new policy stresses women and children who flee or experience violence "have a right" to protection and confidentiality.

Government officials said illegal immigrants hide out in shelters "very rarely," but CBSA wanted a policy in place for when the situation does occur in the future.

The new directive does not apply to churches, which CBSA officers have never entered while executing a deportation order.

But while churches are often seen as legitimate sanctuaries for people avoiding the authorities, there is no rule precluding immigration officers from entering churches to carry out deportation warrants.