

## Crisis in funding for BC women's centres

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**he BC Coalition of Womens Centres** provides a critical voice for women at a time when the provincial government is turning its back on all communities. For women, these changes have been particularly harsh. Womens centres are needed now, more than ever.

What can you do to help?

-  Contact the womens centre in your area.
-  Contact your MLA to demand that core funding for these centres be continued.
-  Involve the civic government. Contact your municipal council to make a presentation and let them know the impact these cuts will have on your community.
-  Encourage your colleagues to support the centres and get involved.
-  Plan an activity around International Womens Day, March 8.

Womens centres were founded by women in many towns and cities across BC and around the world as early as the 1970s. Their two key purposes are: to provide direct services to women locally, and to improve the status of women at the local, regional, provincial and national levels. Today, 37 non-profit womens centres exist in 33 rural and urban communities in BC, serving women from all backgrounds.

Services provided by womens centres differ from community to community. Womens centres respond directly to the needs of women at a grassroots level, tailoring services and programs around the specific, current and real demand for help within our communities. According to the BC governments own website, womens centres are -the first place to go in your community when you need help in times of crisis." Womens centres provide a variety of services, including information and referrals, support groups, crisis counselling, job entry programs, childcare services and housing.

Unfortunately, the provincial government has unveiled plans to stop funding womens centres. Provincial funding will be completely cut on March 2004. This will devastate BCs womens centres, which in some cases may be providing the only services available to women in some of BCs rural and northern communities. Some centres depend entirely on the \$47,174 they receive annually from the BC Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Womens Services (MCAWS), an amount which barely covers such basic expenses as a single staff person, rent, and a telephone.

At the same time, womens centres in this province are seeing a large increase in demand for services. Massive provincial cutbacks are disproportionately hurting British Columbias women, as indicated by the United

Nations. As more and more women in BC are adversely affected, demand increases for Womens Centres to provide services which fill the gaps created by the cuts.

### **Multiple impacts: provincial government cuts**

#### Womens centres

Half of BCs 37 womens centres will be forced to close their doors in 2004 when they lose their provincial funding, increasing service demands on the remaining centres.

Along with all other womens centres in the province, the Vancouver Womens Health Collective is losing 100 per cent of its core \$47,000 annual provincial grant.

#### MSP and Pharmacare increases

Medical Services Plan (MSP) premiums increased 50 per cent on May 1, 2002. A woman who makes \$24,000 or more a year saw her MSP premiums climb to \$54 a month from \$36, for a total of \$648 per year.

The so-called "Fair" Pharmacare plan announced by the government in February 2003 will result in a \$90 million cut in the Pharmacare budget.

A \$90 million budget cut means individual British Columbians will be spending \$90 million more a year to meet their medication needs; drug costs are being shifted from the Pharmacare plan to the individual. The plan now combines seniors with the majority of people and links how much a person pays for her drugs to her income.

#### Residential care vs. assisted living

More than 25,000 BC seniors live in residential care facilities ... also referred to as long-term care facilities or nursing homes. The vast majority of those in residential care are women.

In April 2002, the provincial government announced it was closing 3,000 residential care beds. To date, the government has closed Cooper Place in Vancouver's downtown eastside and Olive Devaud in Powell River, as well as many other facilities in the interior.

The provincial government is pushing assisted living ... built through public-private partnerships ... by redirecting government money to build assisted living units instead of low-income housing.

#### Home care and support

At the same time that the provincial government is pushing assisted living, the regional government is reducing home support services. The majority of seniors relying on home care and support are women.

Reducing home care not only puts many seniors at risk, it also forces women ... who are societies traditional care-givers ... to take on even more care of elderly family members and friends in need.

The result is greater stress in womens day-to-day lives, more family stress and strain, and for women who choose between paid and unpaid work, less hours of paid work. Down the road, this means lower pensions for women and when they retire.

#### Cuts to hospital and health services

More than a dozen hospitals have been closed or had their services downgraded, including hospitals in Kimberley, Delta, Sparwood, Enderby, Lillooet, Summerland, Vancouver, Richmond, Kootenay Lake, Castlegar, Ladysmith, Comox, Burnaby, Shuswap Lake, Victoria and Cumberland.

Downgrading hospital services and closing hospitals altogether means that community-based hospitals are not able to offer residents a full range of required services; women must travel further to have their babies and emergency health needs may not be met.

#### Attack on health care workers

The provincial governments Bill 29 shredded legally bargained health care contracts clearing the way for hospital closures, healthcare privatization and job cuts. More than 87 per cent of these healthcare workers are

women.

More than 5,000 unionized health care workers will be gone by June 2003.

When jobs are privatized, wages will drop from \$19 to \$9.50 per hour with no benefits.

#### Elimination of womens rights

The provincial government has eliminated the Ministry of Womens Equality. The government cancelled universal child care in June 2002, and scrapped \$15.6 million in child care funding. Before and after school care programs have also been eliminated.

#### Welfare cuts

Single mothers on welfare with children over the age of three are now required to search for paid work, enroll in a training program or return to work. Coupled with the cuts to universal child care, this puts women in a double bind of finding work without access to affordable child care.

In addition, cuts to the child care subsidy for low-income parents will put child care out of reach for thousands of BC families. The subsidy cuts amount to \$26 million on a \$126 million budget. This is being accomplished by lowering the income threshold for the program by \$285, so that fewer women qualify. 

*Source: BC Federation of Labour*

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