

ACWS Position on Supports for Independence (SFI)

ACWS supports increases to SFI as a critical component of a strategic response to family violence and an essential step toward removing the economic barriers to establishing a safe life for abused women and their children. ACWS also supports a position that in cases where protection orders are issued that the orders include perpetrator accountability for reimbursing the abused family member for monetary losses resulting from family violence.

The lack of sufficient financial resources for women leaving abusive situations is a chronic problem. Many must turn to “welfare” or Supports for Independence (SFI) in their hopes of breaking the cycle of violence and re-establishing themselves. However, Alberta SFI allowances are grossly inadequate. Single women on SFI receive as little as 26% of the cost of living and a maximum of 39% of the cost of living. Lone parent families receive SFI allowances between 43% and 58% of the cost of living. Because SFI rates are applied equally across the province, there is no allowance for variations in cost of living among the regions resulting in an even lower standard of living for residents in several regions.¹ Low vacancy rates and increased housing costs compound the problem.

Insufficient SFI rates continue to put women and children at risk. A survey conducted by ACWS from October 2002 to March 2003 showed **that a lack of affordable housing and the lack of money** are high among the reasons why women return to abusive relationships after taking refuge in a shelter.

Consistent with our goal of increasing awareness of issues related to family violence and influencing public policy and systems, ACWS recommended to both the Low Income Review and the Child Welfare Act Review Committees that appropriate and necessary economic resources be put in place to enable and empower women and children.

ACWS supports the full use of the provisions in the Protection Against Family Violence Act that allows for protection orders to require the abusive family member to reimburse the abused family member for monetary losses resulting from family violence. These monetary losses could include act application costs, legal expenses, loss of earnings or support, medical and dental expenses, moving and accommodation expenses (which could be a lump sum of money required for when she leaves the shelter) and out of pocket losses for injuries sustained.

Advantages to providing sufficient financial support for women and children fleeing abusive situations include:

- Protection of women and children from the dangers of having to stay in an abusive relationship and recognition of the impact of exposure to family violence upon children.
- Interruption of intergenerational violence by ensuring that women and children can escape and re-establish themselves in safe environments.

¹ Supports for Independence and the Cost of Living in Alberta: Regional Differences. April 2000, ACWS

- Long-term, significant financial savings to the Alberta government in the area of health, social services, education, criminal justice, and employment related costs associated with family violence.

Failure to adequately increase SFI puts women in abusive relationships at risk!

SFI Related Recommendations

The following are recommendations have been made in various ACWS submissions regarding the need for need for adequate financial support for women and children leaving abusive relationships.

- Increase standard allowances and shelter allowances under the Supports for Independence Program (SFI) to a level equal with the cost of living for all recipients in Alberta.
- Take into account the differences in the cost of living between regions and provide higher SFI allowances in areas of the province with higher living costs.
- Develop Market Basket Measures in partnership with the ACWS to ensure that appropriate measures are used.
- Include a policy in all low-income programs that women and children NOT be required to remain in a violent or abusive environment due to the lack of safe alternatives and financial support.
- Train all SFI workers in family violence issues, risk assessment and screening for domestic violence.
- Assign specialized SFI workers to women's shelters.
- Develop a special benefits plan for women leaving abusive situations.
- Ensure the eligibility of ALL women for emergency accommodation when shelters are full. (There are reports that abused single women without children on SFI are being refused emergency accommodation.)
- Ensure that Human Resources and Employment commit to a policy that all women in financial need staying in a women's shelter be eligible for emergency support (including medical prescriptions, personal needs, discretionary travel and securing a living arrangement in the community) and that financial eligibility be based only on resources safely accessible to the woman during her stay in the shelter.
- Develop a brochure specifically for women leaving abusive relationships, advising them of the benefits available to them under SFI.
- Provide all shelters with the regulations and policy manual for low-income programs and post these resources on the Internet.
- Allow women leaving abusive relationships a minimum of 6 months before having to find employment so they can deal with the effects of the abuse and attend to immediate physical and emotional needs for themselves and their children.
- Ensure that SFI policies are sensitive to the needs of women leaving an abuser by providing for:

Additional Shelter Allowance: Current SFI policy provides for an additional shelter allowance when health is endangered by a move. In the case of violence against women, health is endangered if a move is **not** made. This policy should be changed and funded to help keep women safe.

Telephone Allowance: While the province has made a special dispensation for damage deposits, they need to also provide for a special telephone allowance. Women need to re-establish themselves, arrange counseling for their children and themselves, find employment, and go through various legal proceedings. This is exceedingly difficult without a telephone.

Transportation Allowance: The present emergency transportation allowance should be augmented to recognize the special needs that women face when re-establishing themselves. Finding new accommodation, making the necessary school arrangements, equipping a household, attending court, etc. without any financial assistance for transportation can be overwhelming.

Rate Structure: The rate structure should not discriminate against children. Currently, a traditional family of four (two adults, two children) receives \$15,012 per year on social assistance. A single mom with three children would receive 14,616.

Note: The above are adapted from ACWS recommendations to the Low Income Review Committee, a letter to Hon. Pat Nelson, Minister of Finance, May 2, 2003 re: SFI rates and the ACWS response to proposed regulations for the new Income and Employment Supports Act sent to the Hon. Clint Dunford, Minister, Human Resource and Development, August, 2003

Post Note:

** Income support rates were reduced by approximately 20% in 1993. Inflation during the past ten years has further reduced the support's value by approximately 28%. An increase of \$20 per month per child introduced in the Spring of 2003 does not go very far.

Highlights of ACWS Activity related to Supports For Independence (Economic Equality Issues for Women Leaving Abusive Relationships)

Date	Activity
1993	ACWS Position Paper on changes to Supports for Independence proposed by the province.
1993	Shelters documented problems with SFI Eg. Women returning to abusive relationships because they were denied damage deposits. Media work around the impact of 'welfare reform' on women and children.
1997	Feminization of Poverty", - an update on "Differential Impact and the Alberta Advantage"
2000	ACWS participation in "Healthy Incomes, Healthy Outcomes" - an SFI Coalition which developed a media strategy around the inadequacy of SFI
April 2000	ACWS produces a research report "Supports for Independence and the Cost of Living in Alberta: Regional Differences." This was tabled in the Alberta Legislature
2001	ACWS produces the SFI Survivor Challenge and releases it in June
	ACWS Submission to the Low Income Review Committee
2002	Recommendations related to ensuring adequate financial support for women leaving abusive relationships in order to facilitate their independence were made in various other submissions.
April 2003	News Release "Meager SFI Increase Continues to Put Women and Children at Risk"
April 2003	Letter to Hon. Clint Dunford re: regulations and policy specific to the needs of women and children leaving abusive relationships.
May 2003	Letter to Hon. Pat Nelson with specific recommendations for policy changes and funding to provide support to women leaving abusive situations.
August 2003	Letter and Submission to the Hon. Clint Dunford re: proposed regulations for the Income and Employment Supports Act.
January 2004	Regulation that provides for household set up costs was proposed but has still not been introduced
February 2004	Speech from the Throne contains a commitment to provide for household set up costs for women leaving an abusive relationship.