

Money too tight to pay a living wage

**Underfunding shrinks shelters' ability to be a
haven in need**

*"We are dealing with people's lives, yet many shelter workers are required to work a second job to financially sustain ourselves."
"With the high turnover rate, we are in a constant state of training new staff. This directly impacts how much time we can give to the clients."*

It's ironic, but all too true: the very shelters that seek to give women a place of refuge from abuse are forced by lack of funding in many cases to pay their workers what some might term abusive wages. A report by Banister Research & Consulting Inc., released today by the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters to mark Family Violence Month, finds that salaries in Alberta's women's shelters place undue stress on workers, shelters—and ultimately the women seeking refuge.

Turnover rates as high as 59 per cent over the past two years speak volumes of the burnout and disempowerment felt among shelter staff, says Jan Reimer, ACWS Co-ordinator. "Our shelters meet a pressing need in Alberta, but they cannot continue to operate with the uncertainty and stress created when fundraising and staff recruitment usurp time that could better be spent with the women and children who arrive on our doorsteps with deep needs of their own."

Salary levels set by the provincial funding model have fallen far behind the rate of inflation. Differential funding models coupled with the ability of some shelters to top up those wages, creates discrepancies across the province while reducing the funds available for the women and children using the shelters—or increasing the pressure for dollars from other sources. Yet women's shelter workers make, on average, 20% less than comparable staff in the government and not-for-profit sector, devaluing the work done in shelters.

Indeed, funding uncertainties and limitations add up to the most urgent issues facing women's shelters in the Province of Alberta, Banister found. "Additional, secure funding sources should increase the stability of staff at women's shelters and ultimately improve the services provided to women and children in need."

Results of the study (see backgrounder for details) have been provided to the Minister of Children's Services as evidence of the need to restructure shelter funding.

"We believe in a world free from violence and abuse."

ALBERTA COUNCIL of WOMEN'S SHELTERS

BACKGROUND

ALBERTA'S SHELTERS: WHAT GOES UNFUNDED

- Provincial funding through the Child and Family Services Authorities covers just 64% of emergency shelter budgets on average across Alberta. Shelters attempt to cover other expenses through fundraising and by soliciting donations, but still fall short of serving all the women and children who seek shelter.
- Shelters do not have provincially funded 24-hour crisis line coverage.
- The provincial model does not fund shelters that focus on emergency accommodation for senior clients.
- The provincial staffing model does not include public education, outreach and follow-up services, nor second stage housing.
- With regionalization, there is significant inconsistency in funding levels and rules, as each authority uses its dollars differently. For example, some regions do not even fund for a toll-free crisis line, while others provide funding for early intervention, follow-up, outreach, client programming and community education.
- Due to lack of funds, some shelters cannot open up enough beds to meet the need.
- Many shelters cannot pay enough to attract qualified staff, or lose staff they have trained to government agencies, other not for profit organizations and private companies offering competitive salary levels and benefit packages.
- Depending on expertise and energy, shelters are offering such services as in-house support groups, court and housing support/advocacy, volunteer coordination and specialized programming for Aboriginal clients and other cultures even if they lack provincial funding for those ventures.
- Cutbacks generally have put added stress on shelter services, particularly in shelters offering clinical counselling. One shelter that provides clinical treatment services has room for 82 children and a wait list of 140, due in part to a lack of alternatives.

"Working in a women's shelter is a very challenging job and unless one has worked front line jobs, it is hard to fully conceptualize the energy and commitment it takes to provide services to the families of Domestic Violence. It is about time that wages and benefit are taken into consideration. Hopefully there is action!"

"We work in an organization that attempts to empower women, yet we do not practice what we preach."

*Shelter staff members quoted in
Compensation Review and Evaluation
Banister Research & Consulting Inc., 2002*