

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE LOW INCOME REVIEW COMMITTEE

Recommendation 1: Based on the report, “*Supports for Independence and the Cost of Living in Alberta, Regional Differences*”, we urge the Government of Alberta to:

- (a) 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;
- (b) 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;
- (c) Develop Market Basket Measures in partnership with the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters to ensure that appropriate measures are used.

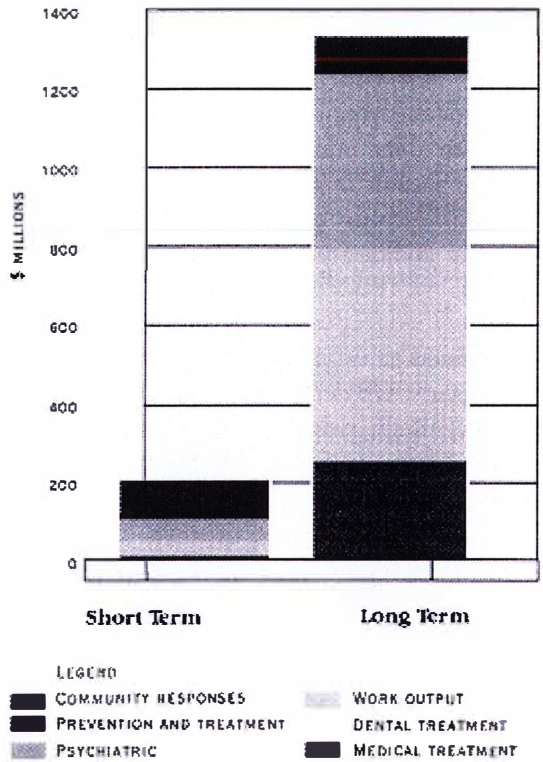
Rationale: Women return to abusive situations due to inadequate financial support. To interrupt the cycle of violence, the barriers to establishing a safe life for abused women and their children must be removed. Current SFI rates are grossly inadequate to do this.

The long-term costs of family violence are significant: The **Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children** examined both the health-related and total costs associated with violence against women. On the health issue alone, researchers have estimated that **violence against women costs more than \$1.5 billion annually**. This estimate includes **\$255 million** in medical consultations through the long term and **\$506 million** in short- and long-term psychiatric care (Day, 1995).

Figure 6 depicts these costs. It is apparent from this representation that long-term costs far exceed short-term costs, even though short-term costs are serious.

Figure 6

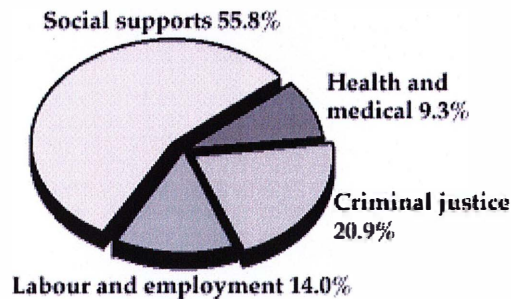
The Health-Related Costs of Family Violence (Total=\$1.5B)



Other researchers with the Centre have examined a broader, though still not complete range of costs resulting from criminal violence against women. They calculated that this crime carries an annual price tag of **\$4.2 billion**. This includes Social services and education costs - **\$2.4 billion**; Criminal justice costs - **\$872 million**; Labour and employment losses - **\$577 million**; Health and medical costs - **\$408 million**. These calculations are represented in **Figure 7**.

Figure 7

Annual Cost of Violence Against Women (Total \$4.2B)



These figures reflect the costs for Canada as a whole. This report can be viewed at http://www.crime-prevention.org/english/publications/economic/invest/cost_e.html).

While costs of family violence have not been estimated in Alberta, a B.C. government report identified costs in the order of \$385 million. This study did not include emergency medical care costs other than to say they were unknown but large. (This report is available at <http://www.weq.gov.bc.ca/paying-for-violence/payingforviolence.stm# Summary>)

The Alberta government could realize significant long-term financial savings on its portion of these costs by further investing in family violence prevention programs. Children exposed to violence in the home tend to perpetuate the cycle of violence. An important first step in preventing this cycle of violence is to ensure that women and children can escape – by ensuring adequate financial support.

The Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters, as an Alberta government community stakeholder, would be pleased to provide expertise to establish appropriate Market Basket Measures, particularly relating to the needs of women leaving abusive situations.

Recommendation 2: That all low-income programs include a policy 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.

Rationale: No one should have to choose between abuse and financial survival. There is a correlation between lack of financial resources and abuse. Women remain in abusive situations because of a lack of financial resources. Low-income support programs need to recognize and address the results of that correlation.

Recommendation 3: That all SFI workers be trained in family violence issues. Special emphasis should be given to the importance of screening for domestic violence.

“I never have sent a women over there (to an SFI office) who hasn’t come back crying,” - Shelter Director

“Why don’t you go back to your husband and save the taxpayer’s money?” - SFI worker to abused women.

Rationale: Some staff provide excellent support to women leaving abusive situations. Unfortunately, this is not consistent across Alberta. We believe that once workers understand the dynamics of spousal abuse, they will be in a better position to assist. Women who have already gone through terrifying situations should not be demeaned and victimized through a lack of understanding about family violence. ACWS would be pleased to work with Human Resources and Development to provide appropriate training.

Recommendation 4: That specialized SFI workers be assigned to women's shelters. This will provide continuity of contact and an in-depth understanding of family violence issues.

Rationale: The Minister's July 10th letter to the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters states "Regional SFI staff and shelter staff collaborate to ensure the needs of abused women and children are met in an expedient, caring manner". We think this can best be achieved by assigning specialized staff to shelters. The province of Manitoba successfully uses this model. We believe it provides a more appropriate, expedient and cost-effective way of meeting the needs of abused women and children. In some Alberta centers, SFI applications are only taken two times per week.

Recommendation 5: That a special benefits plan be developed for women leaving abusive situations.

Rationale: Not all women leaving an abusive relationship go to women's shelters. This plan would provide assistance with telephone, damage deposit, utility hook-ups, household effects and other re-establishment costs. There appear to be inconsistencies throughout the province in providing these necessities. A plan that specifically addresses the needs of women leaving abusive situations would ensure women are aware of available resources and help reduce these inconsistencies.

Recommendation 6: That **all** women be eligible for emergency accommodation when shelters are full.

Rationale: Discrimination based on marital status is prohibited by legislation. Single women without children who are abused also require assistance. We find it unacceptable that there are reports of abused women on SFI being refused emergency accommodation. Women on SFI are entitled to be safe..

Recommendation 7: 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.

Rationale: Financial eligibility should be assessed only on the resources **safely** accessible to the women during their stay in the shelter. This includes cash in hand, bank accounts in her own name, employment income and joint accounts that do not require the signature of both spouses. **These resources should only be included if they can be accessed without jeopardizing her legal position or physical safety.** Emergency support should include all medical prescriptions, personal needs, discretionary travel, and securing a living arrangement in the community.

Women come to shelters with very little. They have often left their abuser with only the clothes on their back. All women in financial need have personal needs. They require transportation, housing, medical attention, legal help, counselling and other necessities. Shelters report that they often have to pay for prescription drugs, transportation and other items for clients. They must fund raise to do this. This is even more problematic in rural areas. HR offices are not always nearby and it makes little financial sense to drive a woman to another community to fill in the forms to cover necessary prescription costs. If adequate financial support was provided to women within the shelter and women were helped to secure a living arrangement in the community, the length of shelter stay could be reduced. The shelter could then serve more women and children in need. The HR Department's hotel budget could be reduced.

Such support could also greatly contribute to the woman's sense of self-esteem. They are leaving a situation where they have been abused and controlled. Women lack the resources to take a child on an outing to cope with stress or make a long distance telephone call to family and friends for support. Having to rely upon (and ask) the shelter for everything from a sanitary napkin to a bus ticket continues their dependency rather than encouraging self-sufficiency and self-reliance.

Recommendation 8: That shelters be fully funded for licensed spaces to reduce the number of women and children turned away.

Rationale: This could reduce the number of women being accommodated in hotels. According to the most recent statistics (only 1999 stats are available as of the writing of this report), **8,688 abused women** and **9,463 children** were turned away.

Very few shelters in Alberta are fully funded for the number of licensed spaces. We believe that Human Resources could reduce their hotel budget for emergency accommodation if all shelter spaces were fully funded. As well, it is a more compassionate and safe situation for the women involved.

Recommendation 9: That all shelters receive the regulations and policy manual for low-income programs and they be posted on the Internet. We further recommend that a brochure be developed specifically for women leaving abusive relationships, advising them of the benefits available to them under SFI.

The Minister's letter of July 10th revealed a number of policy provisions that shelter directors and field staff are not aware of. By posting up-to date regulations on the Internet and providing each woman's shelter with the policies and regulations, shelter staff can better assist women and children needing help. Interpretations vary greatly. For example, one SFI worker might give a woman leaving an abusive situation six months to find employment, while another requires 20 job applications before being allowed to go on SFI. In addition, women need to know what is available to them. The perceived tendency in some local offices is to not tell anyone what they are entitled to, as they might request it. Shelter Directors have requested copies of policies and have been told there is not written policy pertaining to abused women, but rather protocols for audit purposes. In Edmonton, there is only one copy of the SFI regulations available – and it's at the main branch of the public library!! We would like to thank the Communications Officer from Human Resources and Employment for his assisting in providing copies of the SFI Policy Manual regarding abusive situations.

Recommendation 10: That AISH be retroactive to the date of the application; and mental illness be recognized as a debilitating illness.

Too often, women with schizophrenia are turned down for AISH benefits, although it is virtually impossible for them to hold down a job. In addition, the application process is very long and drawn out. It is our view that the benefits need to be retroactive so that delay is not seen as cost saving measure on the backs of those in need.

Recommendation 11:

Women leaving abusive relationships be allowed a minimum 6 month period before having to find employment, to deal with the effects of the abuse and attend to immediate physical **and** emotional needs for themselves and their children.

Women coming to shelters are told to find employment if their children are over 6 months of age. It does not matter if they have never worked, have no job skills or have 3-5 children. Women deemed capable of working are told they need to do a job search before being eligible to apply for SFI.

The only recourse for these women "in crisis" is for a doctor to write a letter stating they cannot work for a period of time due to stress/depression. What woman would not be dealing with stress and symptoms of depression after leaving an abusive relationship and being told by SFI to:

- find a place to live,
- have a rent report signed by a landlord,
- arrange childcare,
- find furniture,
- file for interim custody, and
- of course find a job!!

This re-victimizes these women and increases traumatization!! Women and their children need to adjust to a new life free from violence. Children do not need the added stress of a new home, loss of friends, loss of Dad, plus a strange person looking after them and mom working and not being home to nurture them!!

Respectfully submitted:

ALBERTA COUNCIL of WOMEN'S SHELTERS

Poor logic

MLA hard at work to tackle the root causes of poverty

Calgary Currie MLA Jon Lord is a successful businessman who wants to stamp out poverty in our province.

Lord, always energetic, always full of ideas, thinks we can do it, too, if only people would listen.

So I tell the 46-year-old former Calgary older-man that I'll listen.

Right now, he's working a multi-pronged attack on poverty that involves opening up tens of thousands of low-rent homes for people, giving tax credits to people on welfare who find low-paying or part-time jobs, and tackling drug abuse, which he believes is the leading cause of both crime and poverty in our society.

Now, you just can't knock a guy like this, a guy who actually takes his job as an elected representative of the people as a serious challenge to get things done.

Lord has a private member's motion on the Legislative agenda for an "earned income tax credit" that would encourage, rather than penalize Albertans on social assistance to get jobs. Right now if you get a job, your social assistance allowance is clawed back.

"What's the point of trying to get ahead if you are going to be penalized for it? We should be encouraging people to get jobs rather than discouraging them. In the U.S. the earned income tax credit concept has lifted millions of people out of poverty."

Under the program, people who work, but are still under the poverty line would come under a "reverse tax" program in which the government would top up their paycheques provided their total earnings until they are over the poverty line.



Paul Jackson

Increasing the minimum wage doesn't work, he says, because this often actually increases poverty. Employers figure if they have to pay more, they get the job done with fewer workers.

Lord is also co-chairman of the Legislature Secondary Suite Building Regulations Review Committee, currently touring the province. It's not an exciting title, but it's got an exciting purpose.

"Right now, almost all basement suites being rented out in the province are basically illegal. To be legal they have to conform to so many regulations, the average homeowner can't afford upgrading costs."

He says by changing the rules — while making sure basements suites are still safe

— thousands of new homes could be opened up for the poor.

"Right now, we have people sleeping in the streets and in homeless shelters, when by rewriting a few rules they could be living in warm, clean and safe basement

suites."

He points to one more advantage of legalizing basement suites: Older people who own the homes containing suites would get extra income to supplement their often meagre pensions. They would also have more security by having people living downstairs.

Perhaps the basement renters would do odd jobs for them, or at least see they hadn't fallen ill with no one to take care of them.

On to his drug fighting plan: "One third of homeless people have substance abuse problems. The biggest cause of crime is due to drug use. Drug addiction costs Albertans \$1.5 billion a year. In the U.S., it is a \$180 billion a year problem. Surely that should be an incentive to aggressively work to eradicate drug use and cure people of it."

Lord has started to investigate the possibility of two somewhat controversial treatments, involving the drugs Ibogaine and 18-Methoxycarbonyl, which in itself is a derivative of Ibogaine.

"The drugs have been around for years, but are almost unheard of in Alberta. They have been reputed to have cured drug addiction with as little as a single dose. Due to some temporary side effects, they were banned in the U.S. in the 1970s, but these side effects can be controlled."

Now, in Vancouver, a clinic has opened up to start experimenting with the two drugs, and Lord says offers have been made to him from the promoters to come to Calgary and treat a group of addicts for free.

"I think this is surely worth trying. So many other methods have been tried, and failed. That's why the drug scourge continues to destroy more and more lives. What can we lose by this free experiment?"

Well, there you have it — oh, Lord had more ideas he to talk about, as he always has — but maybe these three will get the ball rolling — or the province and the city moving — to tackle problems that can end both homelessness and hopelessness.

Paul.Jackson@calgarysun.com

PRAIRIE MEDIA
MONITORING

CALGARY SUN

DATE: DEC 30 2003
FRONT PAGE:

INSIDE PAGE: 15

9