

ALBERTA COUNCIL of WOMEN'S SHELTERS
NOVEMBER: FAMILY VIOLENCE PREVENTION MONTH

Family violence - Who cares?

Province-wide commission needed to combat fragmentation

Quiz question: Which Alberta department is responsible to champion the fight against family violence?

If the answer doesn't spring to your lips, it's little wonder. Umpteen departments and 18 child and family service authorities share responsibility for aspects of family violence, yet the issue is top priority for none. Officially part of the Children's Services portfolio, family violence prevention all too often remains in the shadows as staff scramble to meet the crises that arise within their mandated responsibility of keeping children safe.

As a result, the limited funding provided to Alberta's 38 women's shelters fails to cover their costs—and falls even further short of helping all who need a safe haven. What's more, because funds are dispensed through 18 regional authorities, funding and services differ markedly across the province. A shelter in one community receives Child and Family Services Authority dollars for a crisis line and second-stage housing while a shelter in another centre must turn elsewhere to fund their crisis line. Shelters in Calgary have found significant corporate and charitable support to fill some gaps. But even they, like peers all across the province, steal time from clients to chase dollars, and still turn away more women and children than they serve.

What's needed, the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters believes, is a single focal point, an independent commission dedicated solely to family violence. Such a body would provide leadership and challenge attitudes regarding family violence just as AADAC does for alcohol abuse. It's an apt analogy in many ways, says Jan Reimer, ACWS Co-ordinator. Both issues are multi-faceted, destructive and costly to society. Both require concerted preventive action, not simply lip service. "Just as AADAC has shaken our nonchalance regarding drinking and driving and built our understanding of the roots feeding alcohol abuse," she says, "so a Family Violence Commission could break the stranglehold abuse has over some families."

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

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BACKGROUND

WHY ALBERTA NEEDS A FAMILY VIOLENCE COMMISSION

- 1. Shared understanding.** Family violence is a complex social problem that crosses department lines, yet demands awareness and concerted action.
 - 2. Consistent unified provincial direction.** Governance through regional authorities further fragments an already complicated service delivery network, resulting in highly inconsistent funding, service and evaluation. For example, some regions fund follow-up, outreach, crisis lines, second-stage shelters, community education and children's programming, while others do not. An external commission with regional delivery arms, based on the AADAC model, would centralize vision and governance.
 - 3. Higher public profile.** While appointed by and reporting to the Minister of Children's Services, the commission would provide an identifiable source of expertise, a champion whose very presence would send a signal that the Province of Alberta is serious about being a leader in this crucial field.
 - 4. Better able to leverage funding.** Funding from Child and Family Services Authorities (CFSAs) covers less than half of the true cost of running shelters, forcing staff to divert energy to seeking donations, running thrift stores or earning fee-for-service income. What's more because many shelters cannot provide a living wage and benefits, they train staff only to lose them to larger, better funded organizations. The shortage of both staff and money means that some licensed beds are not available for use. By raising consciousness about and funds for family violence, the commission would ease the fundraising burden.
 - 5. Clear accountability.** Large segments of need remain unmet by the existing provincial family violence prevention model. For example, seniors' emergency shelters and longer-term accommodation and programming remain outside of CFSA's core funding formula. In addition, cutbacks in other areas have put added stress on the services offered by shelters, particularly those providing clinical counselling. Ideally, the commission would become responsible to Alberta citizens for the entire range of family violence issues.
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