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Province cuts all funding for women's centres

by *Katrine Campbell*

The Nelson & District Women's Centre, which offers a wide range of services to women in need, may have to close its doors by April 1.

Along with every other women's centre in the province, its core funding of \$47,000 annually has been completely eliminated by the government. Pleas for a meeting with the Minister of State for Women's Services, Ida Chong, have gone unanswered.

NDWC co-ordinator Penny Ruvinsky says the funding cut amounts to more than 50 per cent of the centre's yearly budget. It comes on top of a loss of funding from the BC Gaming Commission, down this year from \$25,000 to \$15,000. There was no explanation given for that cut, which has reduced the centre's drop-in hours.

The government says the money cut from women's centres

will go to counselling and shelter programs. The BC Coalition of Women's Centres calls the decision "unacceptable, short-sighted and irresponsible. Women's centres are often a woman's first contact for referral to other services."

"Counselling programs are very different for men and for women," Ruvinsky says. "Much of that money isn't going to women's counselling. They're going after women, that's what happening here."

"[Former minister] Lynn Stephens said women are equal so there's no need for women's centres any more. That's not true. We see 40 women a day looking for a place to stay, food, boots for their kids, information on divorce or abuse. If we were 'equal' we would be more than pleased to sit back."

"Do they need this money that badly for the Olympics that it has to come on our backs?"

Ruvinsky says the government

claims it's giving \$33 million to transition houses and counselling programs, but women's centres only get \$.17 million a year. This equals just over \$5 per woman helped, or 91 cents for every woman in the province, according to the BC Government and Service Employees' Union.

The NDWC sees about 3,000 to 4,000 people every year. Women and their children come in to get free food or clothing, to use "the biggest feminist library outside of the lower Mainland," to get help and information on parenting and employment issues, or to access support services, not only through staff but also through other women at the centre. There is no needs assessment done; anyone who comes in and asks for help gets it.

"We're often the first contact for women coming out of abusive or crisis situations. The transition house is in a secret location. Often

women come here first as it's a quick way for contact."

The Centre is looking for other funding to keep the drop-in open. It's also operating without an administration co-ordinator, as that position was paid by the grant from the Ministry of Children's, Aboriginal and Women's Services.

"My feeling is we need to be asking not only for a reinstatement but for more funding," Ruvinsky says. "We need money to do this job, to keep communities safe for women and children and families. The community needs to be up in arms about this. There was a lot of pressure put on government about welfare cuts and that's been turned around. If communities back women's centres, it will turn around."

The coalition urges people to log on to www.bcwomen.cjb.net or www.SaveWomensCentres.ca to help convince the government to reinstate the funding.