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'A step 30 years backwards'

Facing staggering funding cuts, the Nelson Women's Centre makes plea to city council for support

BY DARREN DAVIDSON
DAILY NEWS STAFF

Desperate times for abused women and those in need of social support are only going to get worse according to Nelson's embattled Women's Centre.

That's the message the Centre

took to Nelson city council last Monday night.

West Kootenay Women's Association spokesperson Penny Ruvinsky made a statistic-laden argument to council outlining the drastic funding cuts the local organization is facing, just as need for its services is on a steep increase.

Ruvinsky told council that in the past six months the centre, which will lose 90 per cent of its provincial and federal government funding by next spring, has seen a 67 per cent increase in the number of women in search of food donations, a 45 per cent jump in those looking for clothing, a 25 per cent increase in women needing infor-

mation on housing, and most notably, a 65 per cent jump in those facing violence issues in homes.

"Do you attribute that to increasing poverty and stress on families?" asked Mayor Dave Elliott.

"We absolutely do," Ruvinsky confirmed.

"One of the things about poverty is that somebody ends up kicking the dog."

In a recent Nelson questionnaire on women in poverty, Ruvinsky says respondents reported that they were struggling with a lack of economic activity and skills train-

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Situations will not go away

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ing, a child-care crunch and increased difficulty to access services outside the area due to health care and transportation cuts.

"These situations are going to get worse as the funding is cut," she told council.

Ruvinsky asked council to pass a resolution encouraging the provincial government to re-instate funding to women's centres all across the province, in addition to forwarding letters of support to local MLA Blair Suffredine, provincial ministers, Premier Gordon Campbell and even the Prime Minister.

"These situations are going to get worse as the funding is cut."

Fifty per cent of the Centre's operating budget will disappear in March, when the province axes all of the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services (MCAWS) funding of B.C.'s women's centres.

Ironically, Ruvinsky made her pitch following a presentation by the group lobbying to build a new multi-purpose arena and aquatic centre upgrade in Nelson. The project will require a loan of over \$10 million.

"It's interesting hearing about the recreational facilities and \$10 million dollars that would be spent in the city," she observed.

"The budget for women's centre funding through MCAWS is a whopping \$2 million for all 37 women's centres in the province."

At the start of the month the local Women's Centre cut its hours by 50 per cent.

Ruvinsky offered councillors a tour of the facility, located in a small house at 420 Mill Street.

"I know many of you haven't been there," she said. She also offered council a crash course on policy making, as seen through what's known as a "gender lens," or the point of view of a sex and race other than that of the demographic that Ruvinsky suggests makes most of society's rules.

"Many of our policies are based on the good will of white men. And they don't represent us all," she says.

"A gender lens is very important to all of us. It creates an equitable community for all of us."

Ruvinsky pointed out that the Women's Centre

does more than the public realizes. It has the largest feminist library outside the Lower Mainland with 2,500 titles, office equipment for use and Internet access. A donated food service is available Tuesdays.

The centre also runs the Nelson Women's Drop-In and provides a Women's Economic Equality Project. The organization recently ran a Women's Co-operative Venture Project, which helped 12 local women learn how to develop co-operative businesses. The centre also distributes free clothing. It is currently in search of women's and children's winter clothes.

The possible closure of the centre — which at 31-years-old is the second oldest in all of Canada aside from Montreal's Women's Centre — would be a blow for the entire city, she suggested.

"It would be a move 30 years backwards," Ruvinsky charged.

"For the women of this community, the children of this community, for the families of this community."

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