



Women's Centres Connect Annual Report 2011 – 2012

This report outlines the activities of Women's Centres Connect for the period April 1, 2011 to March 31, 2012. It also includes key initiatives and successes back to October, 2009, when the current co-ordinator began her tenure. Beginning with funding and government relations, in which Connect continued to lobby for and received an increase in core funding, the report then summarizes the work done to complete service level agreements with the provincial government. Next, it outlines progress on two initiatives identified in Connect's 2008 planning document: expanding sexual assault services and increasing the public profile of Connect. Connect's advocacy on social issues and its leadership in the organizing of the Women's Action Alliance for Change (WACNS) is then reviewed. The report concludes with a section on Connect's role in the voluntary, non-profit sector work being done in Nova Scotia.

Core Funding and Government Relations

Core Funding In 2006, after more than four years of lobbying and working with the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services (DCS), Connect secured a core funding increase for women's centres. More intense lobbying with existing MLAs and the opposition parties (NDP and Liberal) led to a promise by the NDP that, if elected, it would increase funding for women's centres and transition houses by an overall total of \$500,000. The NDP was elected in June, 2009, but it would another year before the Minister of Community Services announced the funding increase. In Connect's press release responding to the minister's announcement, Myrene Keating-Owen, chairperson said, in part

...we are encouraged by this addition to our budgets. It has been 10 years since the last increase even though we have lobbied every year for additional funds to bring programs and services to women and adolescent girls in rural Nova Scotia...Women's centres advocate for the human rights of women in all that we do. This recognition of our work gives us reason to be optimistic about this government's commitment to social justice.

Connect's optimism was short-lived, however. Our case for adequate funding was rebuffed by government officials during 2010 through to April 2011, when the NDP government's second budget was delivered. In particular, we met with the Deputy Minister of the Office of Policy and Priorities and made our case for increased core funding: we are seeing more women with more complex situations as our rural economies continue to stagnate or worsen, as the social safety net withers. Women's centers need another 6% added to the core budget, at a bare minimum, to keep up with existing services and programs.

Government Relations Connect also met with both opposition parties (Liberals in March and the Progressive Conservatives in August, 2011) making presentations about women's centres, including core funding. We were well-received at both tables with Liberal MLA, Kathy Regan, taking a particular interest. Connect presented to the Standing Committee on Community Services in February 2011 to inform, update, and make the case for core funding increases. The topics in the

presentation included: what is a women's centre?; locations; history and roots; multidimensional approach and core services; who uses women's centres; community capacity-building and development; evaluation and planning; increased demand and key challenges.

Service Agreements and Standards Women's Centres Connect began meeting with DCS officials in December, 2009 to develop service agreements between the department and women's centres as well as standards for centre operations. After an initial skirmish about how many Connect members could attend the meetings, we met during 2010 to work on these documents with DCS officials. Final versions of the agreements, appendices and standards were circulated by DCS in May, 2011.

Building Connections Working Group In February 2010, the new Minister of Community Services called together organizations that deliver services on behalf of DCS to join what has become the Building Connections Working Group which has a mandate

... for service providers and DCS to ... discuss how we provide services and supports for our shared clients ... and to ensure that participants' priorities are known and represented. The goal is to offer service providers and the department meaningful and timely feedback so both are able to make the most effective decisions based on the best possible information.

There are fifteen (15) provincial organizations representing service providers and ten (10) representatives from DCS at this table, including the Minister and Deputy Minister.

It took a year and a half for this group to work out terms of reference for itself, which were adopted in August 2011. The slow pace can be attributed to factors such as leadership issues within DCS, and disparate groups struggling to find common ground and develop a shared vision. The group has been building connections among the organizations around the table, particularly by using a networking process where each organization takes a few minutes to report on what's been happening and what challenges have been faced. The group has also learned about organization and policy development within DCS through presentations on the budget process, the regional organization, and ESIA policy. The group is now working on one of its key priorities—the development of a specific strategy for communication with the Minister and specific recommendations for enhancing the relationship between DCS and service its providers.

Business Case for Expanding Sexual Assault Services

In the mid-1990s four first voice research reports from rural areas of Nova Scotia (including three women's centres) identified key components of sexual assault services as specialized, survivor-centred therapy, community and school-based prevention education, expert medical responders, and professional education. In 2006, the NS Advisory Council on the Status of Women funded the Avalon Sexual Assault Centre to conduct a province-wide needs assessment of sexual assault services. The Advisory Group included existing sexual assault services, transition houses and women's centres. The resulting report, *Suffering In Silence: An Assessment of the Need for a Comprehensive Response to Sexual Assault in Nova Scotia (2008)*, calls for community-based services, prevention programs, expanded core services and an elimination of barriers to access.

Because women's centres are the services to which many women and adolescent girls turn after they have experienced sexual violence, Connect has long been concerned about the lack of financial support for providing these services. Follow-up to *Suffering in Silence* was slow to unfold. By 2011 when little of significance had happened to further this work, Women's Centres Connect decided to put together a business case calling for the expansion of sexual violence services within the existing structure and mandate of women's centres by adding one full-time position to each of the eight women's centres. This position would be dedicated to providing sexual violence support services and would enable women's centres to meet the need for specialized supports by women in rural communities to overcome the wide-ranging and intensely harmful effects of sexual violence.

When the business case was completed in September, 2011, Connect requested a meeting with the Deputy Minister of Health, and was referred to a Senior Working Group of three departments—Health and Wellness, Community Services, Justice, and the Advisory Council on the Status of Women—that is reviewing the recommendations of *Suffering in Silence* toward the development of a sexual assault service strategy for Nova Scotia. Connect met with this group at the end of October, 2011 and presented the business case. Since then we have met with Minister of Justice and corresponded with the chair of the working group and the Minister of Health and Wellness.

Connect's Public Profile

Connect's operational plan for 2009-10 includes a goal to promote and facilitate feminist discourse on women's equality through a mainstream media strategy. The strategy to date has two prongs: publicizing Connect and the activities of women's centres on International Women's Day (IWD) and other significant dates during the year, and having a presence at government and community events focusing on women's issues.

International Women's Day (IWD) For IWD 2010, Connect was successful in placing free ads promoting women's centres and women's equality in daily and weekly newspapers across Nova Scotia. IWD 2011 happened just before the last federal election was called. Connect used the opportunity to undertake a Women Use Your Vote campaign on April 26, the day in 1917 that NS (white) women won the right to vote. The campaign encouraged women to become informed about the political parties' platforms on women's issues, and to vote for women's equality. A flyer connecting the struggle of suffragists to win the vote for women to voting in the current election was produced by Connect and circulated to all women's centres and ally organizations, daily and weekly newspapers. Connect did a comparative study of the platforms of the four political parties (Conservatives, The Green Party, Liberals, and the NDP) regarding issues of concern to women and other equality-seeking groups. This was also circulated widely. Women's centres used this campaign material in different ways, from handing it out to all women using a centre, to circulating it widely at the local level, to a press conference, to a "flash" demonstration that visited places where women were at work, including the three campaign headquarters of the town.

For IWD 2012 Connect publicized widely the specific events held by each women's centre. The media advisory highlighted rural women: "their challenges, resiliency and talents", a focus adopted this

year by the Government of Canada. Women's centres celebrated with events that showcased women artists, artisans, performers, storytellers; with discussions about opportunities for young women, women's activist history, and the experience of immigrant women; with concerts, open houses, luncheons, teas, cocktails and fashion. The media advisory, together with a What is Feminism? flyer and a Famous Nova Scotia Women in History flyer and quiz, was circulated widely, including being posted on the NS Advisory Council on the Status of Women website. Connect was also invited to Government House to commemorate IWD 2012 with Her Honour, Mayann Francis, Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia.

Events focusing on Women's issues: Connect had representation at several events which raised our profile among government officials, other non-profit agencies and media outlets:

- October 6, 2011 *Rally in support of Jordan's Principle* organized by the Native Women's Association of Nova Scotia and the Pictou Landing First Nation's Women's Committee. The struggle is over jurisdictional disputes between federal and provincial governments that deny equal treatment and resources for First Nation's children with special needs.
- October 17, 2011 *International Day for the Eradication of Poverty (IDEP)*. Connect released its report entitled Women's Poverty To-Do-Lists.
- October 20, 2012 *Women's Action Alliance for Change (WACNS)* lobby of provincial politicians and press conference.
- December 6 (2010 and 2011) *Day of Remembrance and Commemoration* in the Red Room at Province House. In 2011, this included a display table at the NS Art Gallery along with 30 or so other agencies and organizations addressing violence against women and girls.
- December 10, 2011 *WACNS Human Rights Day Press Conference*.
- December 17 (2011) *Day of Remembrance of murdered women sex workers: Public Vigil* organized by Stepping Stone.
- March 9, 2012 *Health Equity Forum* organized by the Diversity Committee of the Department of Health and Wellness.
- March 14, 2012 *Community Responses to Sexualized Violence Workshop* organized by Avalon Centre for Sexual Assault.
- March 28, 2012 *Crime Prevention Symposium*. Connect was represented on the organizing committee for this event. Connect hosted one of the workshops on community responses to violence against women and had a display table.
- March 31, 2012 *Taking Action: Engaging Women and Girls in Physical Activity, Sport and Recreation* organized by the Department of Health and Wellness and various community partners. Connect was a table host over lunch with a short presentation on gender-based analysis.

Advocay on Social Issues

Women's poverty continued to be an advocacy focus of Connect for the past year and for many years before. In 2010 Connect's co-ordinator was co-chair of a government/non-profit groups/business and unions steering committee that met for a year to organize a provincial conference on poverty. The initiative was sponsored by the Health Promotions Clearinghouse, a provincial non-profit

organization that connects health groups. The steering committee met for eight months prior to the October 28-30, 2010 *Taking Action on Poverty Conference* in Truro. Building relations among the three sectors around the table was a key piece of the work on this conference.

From 2002-2006, women's centres conducted research documenting women's experience with the Nova Scotia government's Employment Support and Income Assistance (ESIA) program. During the same time period, two research studies were done by women's centres in the western part of Nova Scotia on public pensions and women. All of these reports make specific and extensive recommendations for change, based on the research findings. In 2011, Connect completed a review and synopsis of the findings and recommendations made in these reports. The resulting document, entitled *Women and Poverty: Canada and Nova Scotia's To-Do Lists*, provides a focus on the recommendations, together with pertinent information about how Canada and Nova Scotia are doing in addressing the poverty of women. The report was released simultaneously in Sydney and Halifax, receiving media coverage and public support. When the provincial government tabled its first budget which included some measures to address women's poverty, Connect was able to take credit for repeatedly making these recommendations over the years, and most recently in the *To-Do Lists*.

Connect continued its representation on the Community Committee (now Coalition) to End Poverty (CCEP), which included meetings with senior bureaucrats and the Minister of Community Services and the Finance Minister regarding poverty, particularly among those on income assistance.

Transportation in Rural Communities The lack of transportation in rural Nova Scotia always appears as a finding in studies of women's poverty by women's centres. Connect and CCEP were invited to participate in a Provincial Transit Strategy Task Force under the auspices of Community Transport Nova Scotia, a non-profit organization of rural transportation services. The task was to develop a strategy for the expansion of community transit for the provincial government by the end of March, 2012. This proved to be a good opportunity to inform the various groups and government representatives around the table about the link between women's poverty and rural transportation and to have some of Connect's and CCEP's material appended to the final document.

Women's Action Alliance for Change Nova Scotia (WACNS)

Women's Action Alliance for Change Nova Scotia (WACNS), formerly the Women's Action Coalition-Nova Scotia, was re-constituted on May 14, 2011 with its first annual assembly at St. Mary's University. A year's worth of work by several women's centres and other women's organizations led up to the assembly. Women's poverty, housing and homelessness, and violence against women were chosen by the assembly as primary issues for a fall lobby of the provincial government and opposition parties. Work on the brief for the lobby began almost at once, as did the organization of working groups on these and other issues of concern to women. WACNS undertook a postcard campaign called *Women are Watching* reminding the provincial government that women vote and women's issues matter. 2000 postcards were delivered to the government at the fall lobby press conference on October 20, 2011 (to commemorate Person's Day) and at least 2000 more

were circulated widely across the province. As part of this campaign women representing WACNS were in the gallery watching almost every day the house sat between October 20 and December 9, 2011 the last day of the session. WACNS work for 2012 thus far has focused on structure, process and membership development. Three women's centres and Connect's co-ordinator sit on the steering committee.

Voluntary Non-Profit Sector

Connect has been involved in voluntary non-profit sector work in two ways. Firstly, the Pictou County Women's Centre received funding through the Voluntary Sector Capacity Trust to build capacity among women's centres across the province in two specific areas: human resources and financial resources. The project looked at human resource development through a cultural diversity and inclusion lens while financial resource development was examined through the possibility and opportunity of social enterprise. The project brought the staff and board members of all women's centres together for a weekend retreat at the Pictou Lodge resort in October 2011, followed by site visits at each centre throughout the winter, finishing in March, 2012 with a follow up gathering of executive directors and board members in Baddeck.

Secondly, Connect representatives have been participants in the consultations about organizing the non-profit sector in Nova Scotia. Research on the sector released in 2010-- *Nova Scotia's Non-Profit/Voluntary Sector Labour Force*—sponsored by Phoenix Youth Services and the Federation of Community Organizations (FOCO), provides statistical confirmation of key labour force issues, including the fact that 87% of the labour force are women, less than 40% have pensions, and more than 40% are in short-term project positions. This research was followed in 2011 and early 2012 by a series of consultations with sector groups about whether and how to organize the non-profit sector to represent and address its interests, particularly in the area of human resources.

Conclusion and Thank You

Women's Centres Connect was organized in 1988 as the collective voice of the eight community-based women's centres to articulate women's centres' activities, needs and concerns, and co-ordinate social advocacy work to change public policy affecting women and adolescent girls. In 2011 a new women's centre opened its doors in Port Hawkesbury, expanding and strengthening this work. Connect welcomes and supports this initiative and any other where women are empowered and women's equality is advanced.

Thank you to the eight women who represent women's centres around the Connect table. Your commitment, passion and skills are what makes Connect a vital organization and what inspires me and many, many other women to keep up the struggle for women's rights.

All of which is respectfully submitted
Jeanne Fay, Co-ordinator
May 24, 201