
Women's Centres Connect Annual Report 2013-2014

This report outlines the activities of Women's Centres Connect for the period April 1, 2013 to March 31, 2014. It begins with funding and government relations, in which Connect continued to lobby for and received an increase in core funding, as well as core funding to Nova Scotia's newest women's centre—the Strait Area Women's Place. The report then highlights progress on expanding sexual assault services in rural Nova Scotia and Connect's participation in Sexual Assault Awareness Month.

Core Funding and Government Relations

Core Funding: A primary function of Connect is lobbying the Department of Community Services for increases to women's centres' core funding. One of the key issues over the years has been the disparity between transition houses and women's centres: transition houses get an annual cost of living increase on the salary portion of their budgets, women's centres do not. Community Services has steadfastly refused to rectify this, citing a difference in the status of transition houses as essential services. Connect continued to lobby the Department throughout this fiscal year, making the case for increased funding to all nine centres. The key issues raised in our dialogue with Government were:

- Women's centres continue to face the challenges associated with inadequate funding. While the number of women seeking services at Centres has increased, core funding has not. Centres continue to lose competent, trained staff as a result of inadequate core funding. For small agencies a staff change can have a major impact. It alters not only how services and programs are provided, but also which ones can be offered or continued. Staff changes also mean additional training, realignment of duties, staff relations and working conditions.
- With the increase in public awareness around sexual violence, Women's Centres have experienced a significant increase in requests for services that support survivors of sexual assault and historical sexual abuse. Both the NDP and the Liberal Governments of Nova Scotia have made commitments to address sexual violence. While we applaud the intention to develop a sexual assault strategy for the province, but while this is being developed, survivors need direct services now.
- Women's Centres are often the only place women can turn for support. The increase in demands for service have pushed centres to the limit. They are working beyond capacity to meet current demands.
- Women's centres are the backbone of programs and services for women in rural communities across Nova Scotia. With restrictions and cut-backs on social services, women's centres are the final resource many women have. We are leaders in community engagement and development. We are an important voice for women's equality. Women are the mainstay of the non-profit, voluntary sector. Our work must be adequately compensated.

As a result of Connect's persistence in getting a meeting with the NDP caucus in February, 2013, we were successful in getting salary increases of 2% for the fiscal year 2013-14. This was not made retroactive to April, 2012, however, which was a disappointment.

Connect also asked that Nova Scotia's newest women's centre receive core funding. The Strait Area Women's Place in Port Hawkesbury opened in May, 2011, initially as a partnership between Leaside Society, which operates the Leaside Transition House, and the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre. It operated for the first year with a grant from the IWK. Since then the doors have been kept open on a part-time basis with Leaside Society and the Antigonish Centre providing staff, and Leaside paying for rent and utilities. After much pressure to provide core funding, the Provincial Government agreed to provide \$70,000 per year, which allowed SAWP to hire a full-time facilitator. The centre 'officially' opened on June 5, and then Premier Dexter was on hand for the official ceremony. In the fall, SAWP signed a

Service Level Agreement (as do the other centres) and officially joined Connect as the ninth Women's Centre in Nova Scotia.

The government did not act on Connect's request to have its budget covered by Community Services in the same manner as the Transition House Association of NS (THANS). Women's centres fund Connect out of their own budgets. Having government funding would take some financial pressure off each centre. This issue will continue to be a priority going forward.

Government Relations: Connect met with the Deputy Minister and key staff of the Department of Community Services to advance our case for increased core funding. Our key messages were:

- The need for expanded sexual violence services in rural communities, ideally through women's centres;
- Support for the inclusion of Healthy Relationships for Youth programming—a made in Nova Scotia model—in all schools in Nova Scotia and the delivery and funding of these programs through women's centres and other community-based organizations;

Connect also met with the Advisory Council on the Status of Women, asked for their support in securing adequate core funding and gave a presentation focusing on:

- the community development leadership women's centres provide in our communities on issues relating to poverty and economic security, housing, health, violence and youth
- the expertise women's centres have in many areas
- the innovative initiatives we do

Sexual Violence

Business Case for Expanding Sexual Violence Services through Women's Centres

In light of increased demands for services and the need to evaluate services, the original Business Case was revised to include a coordinator. This new Business Case was strengthened by a Logic Model and Evaluation Framework, which would allow Centres to evaluate and monitor the impact of their services.

In the interim, for Centres (and two other organizations) received funding for two-year demonstration projects to address sexual violence. These projects will inform the development of the strategy, and will provide short-term relief to survivors in the communities. Centres are concerned that short-term funding for sexual assault services can be damaging. It is a significant step for women to come forward and ask for help. If services suddenly disappear, this will be traumatic for survivors. Centres that remain un-funded for sexual assault services will continue to respond in any way possible, but are at a significant disadvantage without core funding.

Our dialogue with government around sexual assault services expanded this year to include the co-chairs of the Provincial Sexual Assault Strategy development process. Initial discussions highlighted the importance of evaluation information in informing the strategy, and the gaps in service across the province. In response, Centres developed a map of services, and presented a vision women's centre for sexual assault services that would reach un- and underserved areas and populations. We were encouraged to hear that the government is intending that the Strategy will be more of an Action Plan that will be implemented by the next fiscal year. We look forward to developing a positive working relationship with government and community stakeholders to improve the lives of women and girls in this province.

A HUB Model for Sexual Assault Services: Centres and other stakeholders participated in a two-day conference sponsored by Avalon Sexual Assault Centre to develop a HUB model of sexual assault services. This model articulated how services could be expanded across the province.

Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM): Connect's co-ordinator was a member of the provincial planning committee for SAAM (May in Nova Scotia) for the second year. The committee, called together by the Advisory Council on the

Status of Women (ACSW), includes Avalon Sexual Assault Centre, the Transition House Association of Nova Scotia, Stepping Stone, the Halifax Police, the RCMP, Department of Justice and Health and Wellness officials, as well as ACSW and government communications staff. In response to a request from CONNECT, and with agreement from the other agencies involved, the ACSW officially moved SAAM from May to April. Because sexual violence is of particular concern on university campuses, and universities are not in session during May, it was agreed that events in April would have more impact. The ACSW sponsored a presentation by Jackson Katz on March 31, and on April 1, the Minister of the ACSW proclaimed April as Sexual Assault Awareness Month.

In-school Violence Prevention

Women's centres consider prevention to be an integral part of our response to all kinds of violence against women. Our work across Nova Scotia includes offering healthy relationship education to Jr. and Sr. high school students. The Healthy Relationships for Youth (HRY) program, for example, has been offered in the Strait Regional School board for several years by the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre and Sexual Assault Services Association. It is also offered at Duncan MacMillan School in the Halifax Region by LEA Place Women's Centre in Sheet Harbour. Other in-school programs offered by women's centres have expanded this year, and Connect continues to lobby government to support the expansion of this program to all schools in the province.

Social Policy Advocacy

The Dissolution of the Labour Market Agreements and the advent of the Canada Job Grant Program: Labour Market Agreements provided Federal funding to Women's Centres and other community-based literacy organizations. These LMA programs provided essential employability, skills and literacy programs to the most vulnerable in our communities. The Federal Government discontinued these programs in favour of the Canada Job Grant program, which provides funds to employers for job-related training. The arrangement excludes those who need extra help to become employed, and disadvantages many in rural communities who have no access to employment or training. Connect supported efforts by the Atlantic Provincial Premiers to maintain LMA funding. Although the provincial government did provide some short-term relief to some literacy agencies, it is doubtful that community-based programming will continue to help women in rural communities gain access to the workforce.

The Council of Atlantic Premiers Study on the Impact of Changes to Employment Insurance: Connect conducted a short survey of centres to identify the impacts of recent changes to EI, and submitted it to the Council. Access to EI, especially for seasonal, temporary and part-time workers has reduced drastically, leaving many rural women in poverty. New requirements to travel up to 100 km for work makes it impossible for many women to accept work: some are juggling two or three part-time/casual jobs in different communities and are simply not able to schedule shifts due to travel times and distances (especially when there is no public transportation); opportunities for skills training are less accessible to EI recipients; women are often required to care for family members – both young and old – and find it impossible to build up the required number of hours to be eligible for EI. The changes have excluded a significant proportion of rural women from eligibility, making them more vulnerable to poverty and its consequences.

WACNS—Women's Action Alliance for Change NS: Women's Centres Connect continued to be active in WACNS, lending its co-ordinator to the steering committee, as well as individual women's centres taking executive roles.

Support for the Voluntary Non-Profit Sector Council

Voluntary Sector Council: Connect's representative on this council continued to take an active role in its development and management. She is chair of the board. The Council is being well-funded by the provincial government, with salary levels well above those of women's centres executive directors. The issue of remuneration for women—who make up 87% of the not-for-profit sector staff—is of primary importance to women's centres and will be a focus going forward.

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.

It has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with the the ten women who represent women's centres around the Connect table. Your leadership in the struggle for women's rights ensures that the voices of women are heard and the issues affecting us are kept on the public agenda.

All of which is respectfully submitted
Georgia Barnwell, Co-ordinator
May 20, 2014