

WIT 2000

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

for
The Nova Scotia Department of Community Services
June 2000

The following recommendations have been developed to illustrate how the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services can change policies, programs and supports to enable women's economic well-being.

Poverty is a complex social issue, and women's poverty is made even more complex, firstly by gender, and secondly by a range of other factors - geography and access to services; ability; language, religion and culture; race; socio-economic status and education. Although the well-being of our citizens and our communities is determined by a range of factors, two issues are of significance to this discussion:

- Recent research has demonstrated that income distribution is a primary determinant of health. In countries where income distribution is highly polarized, every member of society is at risk for diminished health status, not only the poor. Poverty is, therefore, everyone's concern.
- Access to basic needs is another fundamental determinant of health - physical, mental, social, and economic. Without access to basic needs, women cannot take advantage of the opportunities that may be available to them - without basic needs, they cannot escape from poverty.

A strategic investment in women's well-being now, will have significant positive, long-term savings to the tax payers and citizens of Nova Scotia in terms of reduced usage of a variety of Government services and increased well-being and vitality of our communities. The recommendations fall into five categories: basic necessities; support services and programs; access to information; the clawback of the National Child Tax Benefit; and the development of a mechanism for on-going input from communities into the policy and program development process.

We recognize that the Department of Community Services does not, and cannot, work in isolation from other government departments, both provincial and federal, or from the community and business sectors. Recommendations specific to the Community Services mandate are outlined by category below, as are suggestions for collaboration with other departments or sectors.

1. BASIC NECESSITIES

- ▶ Assistance rates must be redeveloped to reflect the real cost of living. This should be done in consultation with recipients and anti-poverty advocacy groups.
- ▶ Needs not presently classified as necessities must be reclassified. The following must be recognized as basic necessities:
 - telephone
 - prescription drugs and health equipment such as eyeglasses, hearing aids, wheelchairs etc.
 - school supplies and special fees for school trips and projects etc.
 - winter clothing and boots
 - special health and nutrition needs, vitamins and alternative health care
 - dental care - both preventive and emergency
 - ambulances
 - legal costs if no access to Legal Aid
 - travel and accommodations for out-of-town medical care
 - special allowances for such items as fridges, stoves, oil tanks etc.
 - allowances for a car and upkeep in places where there is no public transportation

- insurance for house and belongings
- ▶ Establish an income supplement for families with terminally or chronically ill children/family members.
- ▶ Raise the amount a recipient is allowed to earn to \$300 per month.
- ▶ Make assistance more accessible to single working parents.
- ▶ Change the current policy that disqualifies women entering Transition Houses from receiving benefits.
- ▶ Increase rates as children grow older to reflect the increased costs for clothing and other needs of older children and teenagers.
- ▶ Allow children over the age of 18 to remain at home and receive benefits.
- ▶ Increase support for low and modest income parents for child and infant care.
- ▶ Assistance recipients who are re-entering the workforce should be allowed to receive their full benefits in addition to wages, without penalty, for one full year before no longer qualifying for benefits.
- ▶ Assistance checks should be issued bi-weekly.
- ▶ Shorten the appeal process.
- ▶ Appoint citizens who have experience as recipients to appeal boards.
- ▶ Ensure that workers are available to recipients at least once a week. Women reported that they were often unable to reach workers, and did not have their calls returned (made more difficult without a telephone).
- ▶ The Department is urged to work with anti-poverty and women's groups, and the private sector to ensure that basic utilities and services are available to social assistance recipients. For example, in Saskatchewan, the Department of Family Services has worked with SaskTel to establish a program that provides all recipients, regardless of their geographic location, with basic telephone services. More details of this program will be available in early August and we would be pleased to share these with you.
- ▶ With women's groups and anti-poverty advocates, develop and deliver a sensitivity training program to government workers and community-based agencies that eliminates the stereotypes associated with social assistance recipients, and which assists participants in gaining an understanding of the variety and complexity of issues that impact on women to put them and keep them in poverty.

2. SUPPORT SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

- ▶ Work with community women's and anti-poverty groups to establish a "Provincial Assistance Advocacy System" to ensure that standardized, quality services are available across the province.
- ▶ Establish a 1-800- telephone line to provide support and information to women on assistance.
- ▶ Support community-based non profit organizations that provide services to low-income women.
- ▶ With community-based agencies, provide information to women on how to budget and how to cook to make groceries last longer.
- ▶ Ensure women's access to education and retraining - whether it is academic up-grading, college or university. Women must be eligible for assistance while attending school, and should have a special allowance for tuition and books.
- ▶ With the Department of Education and Recreation and Culture, and the private sector, ensure that all children living in low-income homes have access to all recreation programs, either by way of a sliding scale or by designating free registration for low-income families.
- ▶ With the Department of Housing, or as a newly structured Department of Human Services, protect and expand affordable and safe public housing.
- ▶ With the Department of Transportation, establish a public transportation system for rural Nova Scotia. Expand shuttle and access-a-bus service to rural areas. Facilitate and encourage the establishment of transportation co-operatives in rural areas.
- ▶ With the Provincial and Federal departments of Justice:
 - ensure that legal aid services are available for matters related to social assistance, Canada Pension, EI appeals, wills and estate, divorce, separation and maintenance, as well as summary offences and residential tenancy.

- track down 'dead beat dads' and ensure maintenance and support payments are made. Revoke drivers licences if not making payments.
- ▶ With the Department of Health, ensure that women survivors of emotional, physical and sexual aggression have access to the range of private and public services and programs that will assist them.

3. ACCESS TO INFORMATION

- ▶ Clarify policies, regulations and procedures. Make information available in plain language to recipients and community-based organizations.
- ▶ Develop an information distribution system that is standardized across the province to ensure that all recipients are aware of programs and services to which they are entitled. This information should also highlight the programs and services of other Departments, if recipients are eligible.
- ▶ Establish a monthly community/government newsletter to outline program and policy changes and keep recipients up-to-date on a calendar programs and services.

4. CLAWBACK OF THE NATIONAL CHILD TAX BENEFIT

- ▶ End the clawback.

5. A MECHANISM FOR ON-GOING INPUT FROM COMMUNITY

- ▶ Establish a mechanism by which women and anti-poverty advocacy organizations can meet regularly with Government to evaluate the impact of policies and programs and make suggestions for effective change. This could be done by arranging regular meetings with women's and anti-poverty advocacy groups, and by providing the relevant information to be discussed in a manner that allows these groups to consult their constituents and gather input.

Women's Centres in Nova Scotia *and the Women in Transition Project*

Women's Centres are located across Nova Scotia, primarily in rural areas and in industrial Cape Breton. The Centres all provide a range of services to the women of their communities, including: information, advocacy, referral, crisis intervention, support counseling, programming, public education and community development. The issues addressed by each Centre cover the range of concerns faced by women everywhere, however the key issues facing women in Nova Scotia are poverty, sexual violence, health and employment. Centres all provide services and programming to address issues identified by their communities, in ways that are appropriate to each community.

The Women in Transition (WIT) project is a collective initiative involving six of the Centres in Nova Scotia. In the late fall of 1999, Centres began community development work with groups of women living on low incomes to identify problems around, and develop solutions to, women's economic independence. The WIT project is funded by the Women's Program of Status of Women Canada and will continue until late 2000, at which time, Centres will absorb the on-going community development work into their core activities.

WIT Contact Information:

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Every Woman's Centre, Sydney
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Lea Place, Sheet Harbour
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Second Story Women's Centre, Bridgewater
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