

Christie's media talk raises concerns

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by Monica MacKinnon

Some representatives of programs for women are concerned that community services minister Peter Christie isn't carrying out the plan he agreed to in an April 17 meeting.

"We feel duped," Lucille Harper of Antigonish said in an interview.

Harper, executive director of the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre, said that at last Wednesday's meeting in Halifax all parties agreed to four key points, but Christie backtracked when talking to media afterwards.

"We went to that meeting in good faith," Harper said. "We were very clear as to what we were agreeing to."

After the meeting the minister went to the press and outlined a plan contrary to the one agreed upon, she says.

As many as 40 representatives from the province's transition houses, women's centres and men's treatment programs and the minister agreed that no timelines would be put in place for redesigning services and that a moratorium would be placed on funding cuts, Harper notes.

Talking to the press after the meeting, the minister talked about a six month timeline and funding cuts, Harper says.

Steve Bone is a spokesperson with the department of community services.

He says when media personnel asked the minister about a timeframe for the redesign, the minister said it is reasonable to suggest that by this fall, the parties will have decided on a plan of redesign.

"By saying we'd like to arrive at decisions this fall is not necessarily putting a timeline" in place, Bone said in an interview.

But the mention of a timeframe, after the minister agreed to an open ended process, does not instill confidence.

"This is incredibly discouraging," Harper says. "We feel we are back at square one."

Initially, when Peter Christie announced funding cuts of \$890,000 for programs that serve women and children, he said the province would redesign services by Sept. 1, with some changes as early as June.

Following a public outcry, the minister issued a press release reminding Nova Scotians his proposal was a

"draft" and therefore still subject to negotiations.

Bone says the budget cuts and redesign of services are meant to achieve "more efficiencies in administration."

The provincial government's "commitment to protecting women and children has not changed" and "levels of services to alleviate family violence will remain constant," he says.

We feel duped...and that there was and is no commitment on the part of government to the women and children in the province.

- Lucille Harper

However, the almost \$1 million cut in a service sector that many see as already under funded has left many communities deeply concerned about how women and children living in violent situations will get help.

The province's eight women's centres, which are also threatened by the cuts, play a role in helping women build more self-reliant lives.

Nova Scotia's women's centres, although offering a variety of services from job retraining to self-esteem building, receive funding through the "family violence" portion of community services funding.

Bone says this is because a portion of the work done at women's centres does deal with family violence prevention.

He also says that if his department cannot achieve its projected savings through a redesign of programs, "we'll find [the saving] elsewhere" in the department's budget.

It was also agreed to at the April 17 meeting that meetings be held provincially not regionally with the goal to create a provincial model to any changes to family violence programs, Harper says. And that identification of core services would be a consultative process with department of community services, transition houses, women's centres and men's treatment programs.

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