

Women's centre, important part of healthy community

by Monica MacKinnon

"The mark of mankind is how you treat vulnerable people," town councillor Patty Smith says.

When funding is cut from programs that serve people who cannot speak for themselves, "it's the responsibility of the rest of us to speak up," Smith told a gathering of more than 130 people outside town hall last Wednesday.

Smith was speaking at an April 17 noontime rally outside town hall in support of the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre.

"Antigonish prides itself on being a community that looks after its own people," she said, adding that supporting families in the community means continuing to offer the services and programs at the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre and Naomi Society.

With the provincial government's recent budget, Nova Scotia's eight women's centres are uncertain of their future.

Following public outcry about a \$890,000 budget cut to the province's transition houses, women's centres and programs for men who abuse, community services minister Peter Christie retracted his plan to close programs dealing with family violence.

Smith says, while politicians need to be commended for the change of plan, a failure to fund women's centres and men's treatments centres makes no practical sense.

"We need to stand up and say we need the preventative programs as well as the crisis programs," Smith says.

Because women's centres address more issues than family violence, it is uncertain how they will fare in what Christie calls a "slower pace" in the "redesign of the province's family violence and outreach programs."

The Antigonish Women's Resource Centre offers a range of services to women in the community, from emotional support to help finding affordable housing and programs that develop life skills and job skills.

At the AWRC, women find advocates who assist them with health and legal issues, as well as crisis intervention for both themselves and their children.

Dr. Minoli Amit says poverty and family violence are among the severest threats to children's health.

A paediatrician at St. Martha's Regional Hospital, Dr. Amit also spoke at the rally.

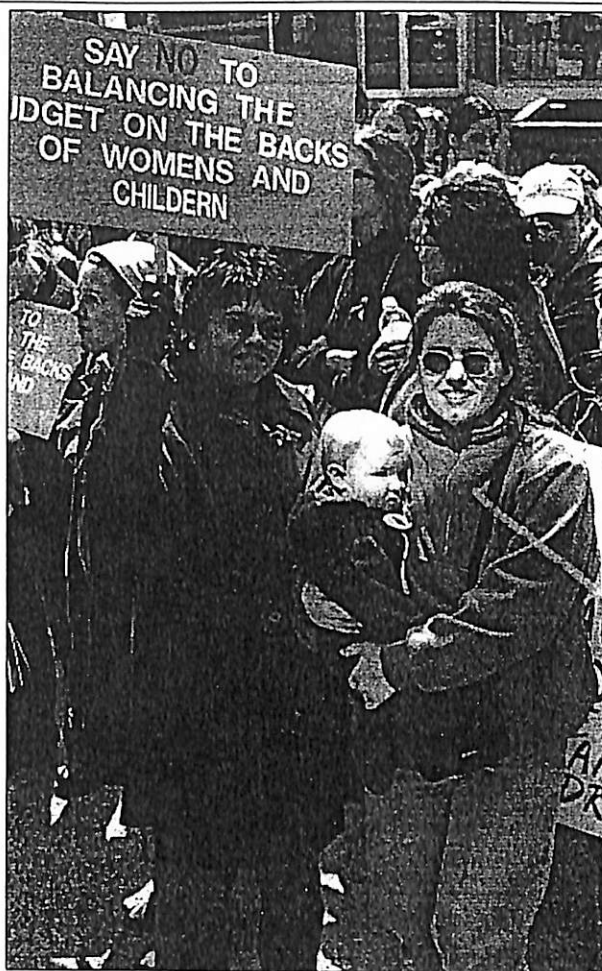
She says when family life is violent or in crisis, children often act out with aggressive, destructive behaviours.

These young people often experience nutritional and emotional problems, including depression, as well as health problems and school failure, she adds.

Dr. Amit says the children's problems are solved through education and support for the adults in the family.

The services, advocacy, support and direction offered at women's resource centres are necessary to help parents, she says.

"I hope the minister will listen to the people and not reduce the budget, but



DR. MINOLI AMIT (left) says services provided by the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre are an important part of creating healthy Antigonish families. Charlie ten Brinke and her 10-month-old son Jesse were among the approximately 130 people who rallied last Wednesday in support of the centre.

double and triple it."

Sr. Anne MacLellan says the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Martha adds its voice to support for the local women's centre and its role in serving women and children in the community.

"We are deeply concerned about cuts in the recent budget which affect the vulnerable in our community," she told the group.

The local health authority has also come out strongly against any cuts to funding for women's centres.

Guysborough Antigonish Strait Health Authority is "outraged by the cuts" and has written to government urging reversal of the cuts, chair Colleen Cameron said at the rally.

Cameron points out that health is determined in part by income, housing

and social support.

Resources offered by the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre are a vital part of a healthy Antigonish community and address the determinants of health put forward by Health Canada, she says.

Also addressing the group were Antigonish County Warden Herb Delorey, Kim Hodgkinson of Naomi Society, Maurice Smith of Nova Scotia Legal Aid, AWRC projects coordinator Katherine Reed, AWRC board member and Nancy Forestall of St. F.X. University.