

**Brief to House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women**

**May 26, 2010**

**Womanspace Resource Centre**

**Lethbridge, Alberta**

**Shannon Phillips, Board Chairperson**

**Tina Shingoose Fancy, Staff Member**

Womanspace Resource Centre is a women's advocacy and service organization. Based in Lethbridge, Alberta, our organization serves women from Lethbridge, Fort Macleod, Taber, and the aboriginal communities on the Kainai and Pikanii First Nations reserves. We are honoured to present this brief to the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women, and look forward to a productive dialogue on the importance of Status of Women grants in building healthy communities across Canada.

Womanspace has been active in Southern Alberta for over 25 years. We have been funded by Status of Women since 1985, and have never had an application denied. We have also been funded by various provincial granting programs, and enjoy a tremendous amount of support and goodwill in the Lethbridge and area community, with a significant membership and small but dedicated donor base. We are governed by the Societies Act and a volunteer Board of Directors. Depending on the size of the projects we were delivering in the past, we employed between 2 and 5 staff. In the wake of our application being denied, we have had to lay off our only long-term employee, and retain only two women on part-time contract while we rebuild the organization.

**Our last Status of Women-funded project: Financial information for low-income women, 2008-2009**

The last project Womanspace delivered with Status of Women funds took place in the context of the 2006 change in the ministry's mandate. Instead of lamenting the change, our organization took on the new challenges with gusto and creativity. Over the course of many years of working with low-income women in Lethbridge, including helping low-income women with filing income tax for a decade, Womanspace staff noticed a severe lack of financial information among low-income women, and specific barriers to full participation in society for these women, who, in our community, were also frequently aboriginal. Given that Status of Women funding was now available for directly serving low-income women, Womanspace designed an 18-month project that would address issues related to financial information, literacy, and referrals. Our project delivered financial information workshops that removed every possible barrier to participation, including providing a meal for the participants, bus tickets and child care. Participants took classes that gave them access to trained financial professionals on subjects such as budgeting, retirement, debt, wills, personal directives, and power of attorney, and understanding various savings and investment vehicles, such as Tax-Free Savings Accounts, RRSPs, RESPs, and so on. In addition, we would provide support for opening bank accounts and help with keeping banking costs down, accessing appropriate identification (many women did not have bank accounts due to not having ID, whether it was lost, stolen, or destroyed, often by an abusive partner) referrals to appropriate professionals to deal with debt issues and problems, legal issues, and the like. We also provided assistance in filing income tax, with a full complement of volunteers trained on the Canada Revenue Agency software.

The financial information for low-income women project was successful beyond anyone's expectations. Financial literacy information sessions, help accessing bank accounts and identification, referrals to

other financial services, help filing income tax, and referrals to accessible and non-intimidating financial professionals turned out to be services that hundreds of women in rural Southern Alberta desperately needed.

In 18 months, Womanspace served 825 women. We began taking referrals from almost every other social agency in Lethbridge and Fort Macleod – provincial income support programs, municipal family support services, aboriginal agencies, employment training agencies, and the various shelters for women leaving situations of domestic violence. There were no other services like ours in Southern Alberta. We served women from Taber to Fort Macleod, and many women who had recently come from the Kainai and Piikani reserves. Because we were serving so many aboriginal women, we also embarked on a formal partnership with Opokaa'sin Early Intervention Society, an agency that works with aboriginal families.

Breakdown of clientele served in 2008-09:

- Processed approximately 295 income tax/child tax credit
- Helped 118 women obtain identification
- Assisted 46 women with opening bank accounts
- Helped 271 other women with additional advocacy services designed to increase employability and independence. These services include, but are not limited to, working with JobLinks, Training Inc., Community Outreach, AISH, and Income Support. In addition, 95 women participated in the Financial Information Seminars. (note that none of these direct client services were funded in Phase one)

### **About the application that was denied: Phase Two – asset building and client services**

The 2008-09 financial information project showed Womanspace how much remained to be done. The first project did not have direct client service as a funded component, but most women needed one-on-one meetings, referrals, and non-judgemental advice on financial matters. Therefore, direct one-on-one client services were part of the Phase Two application. The vast majority of the low-income women with whom we worked wanted to find ways to build their financial lives so that they could make the transition to a more independent life. For many, that meant supplementing their income with work. For others, it meant going back to school or simply building a monthly budget so that they could better control their family's finances. For everyone, direct client contact would mean getting the advice they needed in order to build financial and personal assets. If this part of our Phase Two Status of Women grant had been funded, Womanspace was also going to begin looking for funds for savings matching programs for low-income women and microcredit for women entrepreneurs. Now that our application has been denied, we are no longer expanding our financial independence programs. Our financial workshops are now funded via other community funding sources, and will continue, but all other growth opportunities have been put on hold.

Phase Two also asked for funding to address other aspects of women's economic insecurity and to promote long-term attachment to the workforce. We proposed to help women start their own community kitchens, forming small groups to pool resources for big-batch cooking, as some women from our first financial sessions had expressed an interest in such supports. We also proposed a child-care manual, written in accessible language, for Lethbridge parents, helping our clients, who are often the heads of lone-parent families, access the workforce.

Phase Two also proposed innovative ways to better reach our aboriginal clientele. We had planned to teach self-advocacy workshops, open to everyone but keeping in mind specific aspects of aboriginal culture, recognizing that Southwest Alberta is the traditional lands of the Blackfoot people. During Phase 1, we saw time and again that our clientele had difficulty accessing services, solving problems, and moving into financial independence because of issues related to advocating for themselves. Therefore, Phase 2 proposed self-advocacy workshops and a manual for low-income women, delivered in accessible and culturally appropriate language. We had planned to hire an aboriginal coordinator with our Phase Two funds.

### **Denial of the Womanspace Application for funding from Status of Women**

Given that Womanspace had been funded by Status of Women for 25 years, our staff had developed an ongoing relationship with those who work in the department. Despite the closure of offices and laying off of Status of Women staff, Womanspace still had good contacts within the department. With this Phase Two application, just as with every application in years past, Womanspace consulted with Status of Women employees, mostly via telephone. We made small changes and clarifications to the budget and supporting documentation when requested to do so, and none of the contact with Status of Women led us to believe there was anything out of the ordinary afoot. We were told our application was very sound, that we were an organization with an excellent track record, and that we met the application criteria perfectly.

The application that was denied asked for a longer period of funding – 3 years as opposed to our previous project that was 18 months in duration. There were several reasons we asked for a longer funding period. We thought a 3-year grant for the Phase Two projects would give us the ability to do work that we had identified as desperately necessary in the community, and do it for long enough that we could have time to really make a difference to women's lives with respect to all forms of asset-building. With an 18-month project, one is just beginning to embed one's self in the community with a set of services and it's time to start thinking of a new project. Furthermore, Womanspace was keen to have stability in order to pioneer new asset-building services (not funded by Status of Women) in the community, such as microcredit, support for entrepreneurs, and savings matching programs.

### **Government Reasons for Denying Funding Applications**

There appears to be something of a 'message box' emerging on the part of government members when addressing questions about groups who were denied Status of Women funding. Womanspace Resource Centre in Lethbridge would like to take this opportunity to submit respectful disagreements with how our group has been characterized in this debate.

### **Government Message #1: Funding of “new groups”**

Government members have told the House of Commons and the Senate that long-standing women's groups appear to have a sense of entitlement to Status of Women funding, and those entitlements are selfish and misplaced. Government members have further stated that they prefer to fund “new” groups. While Womanspace has no issue with this explanation on the face of it, we find it puzzling that the fixation on “new” groups should come at the expense of groups who can demonstrate a long history of delivering specific results.

If the goal is tangible results, organizations that are embedded in the community are better able to

deliver specific outcomes and reach target populations. If the goal is accountability, a 25-year track record with responsible use of Status of Women funds should count for something.

Correspondence received by one of our supporters, who contacted the ministry to express her dismay at the denial of Womanspace's funding application, showed that the decision not to fund Womanspace may have been made as a trade-off against funding some new organization giving some form of financial training in Calgary. Here is an excerpt from the letter from Suzanne Clement, Coordinator, Head of Agency, Status of Women Canada:

"...As I am sure you will appreciate, the number of groups seeking financial support from the Women's Program for new projects continues to grow and, as in most funding programs, not all meritorious projects can be funded. You may be interested to learn that the Women's Program is currently funding a number of financial literacy projects in Alberta, including a project with Momentum Community Economic Development Society in Calgary to work with women's groups across the West to assist service deliverers in providing financial literacy information and services to women."

This explanation does not hold water. Calgary is over 2 hours away, and in any event, giving training seminars to people who otherwise have no financial expertise to in turn, deliver workshops to low-income women – with no accountability as to whether this actually happens and what the outcomes are - is not a superior program to the Womanspace financial projects, which has a record of directly delivering specific outcomes for target populations.

### **Government Message #2: Organizations should be “less talk, more action”**

On Wednesday, May 5, Transport Minister John Baird, told the House of Commons that government was interested in funding women's groups that were “less talk, more action,” and this was what led them to deny funding to groups such as Womanspace Resource Centre. This explanation was surprising for members, board, staff, and clients of the Womanspace Resource Centre in Lethbridge. In just 18 months, we served 825 women and their families with financial independence services and information. We were responsible for numerous women entering job training, ceasing the use of food banks, accessing secure affordable housing, accessing appropriate identification and bank accounts, filing income tax, starting savings and investment accounts, and generally establishing economic independence. On the face of it, the goals of our organization are precisely the same as the mandate for Status of Women and the outcomes the government says are important for low-income women in Canada. Womanspace's financial projects are nothing if not action-oriented; if we were only talking, we would not have served over 800 women in only a year and a half.

### **Government Message #3: Organizations should exhibit more accountability**

Minister Baird's comments in the House of Commons on Wednesday, May 5 also indicated that women's groups should be more “accountable” with government funds. The impact of Status of Women funding via the Womanspace Resource Centre in the Lethbridge community is described both above, with specific statistics and outcomes, and below, with testimonial evidence from our clients and partners in the community. In our case, it is possible to draw a direct line of accountability between government funds and positive grassroots results.

Womanspace Resource Centre has always filed Status of Women reports in a timely fashion, demonstrated total financial openness, and has always used funds for the express purpose for which they are intended. None of our staff earns anything close to a comfortable living wage, and staff are

continually clocking overtime hours for fundraising, events, and other voluntary activities.

Status of Women grants are not specifically audited granting programs, but Womanspace Resource Centre would have no problem with demonstrating, with receipts, every penny that leaves the organization should the government choose to require more detailed financial reporting. For an organization such as ours, who put a premium on fastidious accounting and ensuring the bulk of our funds are spent on directly making a difference in the lives of low-income women, the claim that we are not “accountable” is galling and insulting.

### **Impact of the Decision to Deny Womanspace Resource Centre Funding Application**

As a Member of Parliament or Senator, with a good job far away in Ottawa, it is easy to craft a message box and brush off applications from groups who serve low-income women. It is far more difficult to look a young aboriginal woman in the eye and tell her you can't help her with replacing her ID after it was torn up by an abusive partner. That is the reality for the remaining staff at the Womanspace Resource Centre in Lethbridge.

Due to our long track record with Status of Women, and the success of our first financial project, Womanspace created an expectation in the community that we would be able to continue serving women with financial and other issues related to building assets and independence. Our services are not replicated anywhere else in the community, and the impact of our application denial has been far-reaching.

In order to put a human face on the impact of the denial of Status of Women funding, we have included some testimonial evidence from clients and fellow service providers below.

#### **Sharon\*: Client Testimonial, May 2010**

I was in a relationship where I had little control over money, decision making, anything like that. The relationship was abusive, controlling and damaging to my youngest son. When it came time to be on my own with him, I found myself in a world that I didn't know; on a limited income, having to go on Income Support, having to move to a city where I knew nobody and find housing that I could afford. Finding a school and clothing him...all of it was a struggle. I have no family, so there was no one that I could call for help. I had this 5 yr old little boy looking at me to take control, and I had to be the one that did everything.

When my son was in grade 2 a worker at the school told me about a focus group she thought I might be interested in, one that taught financial literacy for low income women. At that point I had no clue what “financial literacy” meant, but I agreed to go. At the beginning of the group one of the presenters asked who in the group did not have identification. I raised my hand and said, “I don't have ID, and you can't help me.” I had been working with the Canadian government for many years on getting my ID; I was born in England, came to Canada in 1971, and as an adult had never had any Canadian identification. After dealing with immigration a number of times about this issue, I was told that in order to get Canadian ID I first needed to go to England and get my birth certificate. The obvious problem with that is without my birth certificate I could not get a passport go to England. After many frustrations, I just gave up and resigned myself to all that it means to not have ID... no photo ID, no driver's license, not even a BlockBuster card. Within 10 days of Womanspace being involved I had my birth certificate; it seems that I had been dealing with the wrong government, and should have been dealing with the British government.

At this same focus group the ladies spoke about an upcoming set of financial literacy sessions. They offered both child care, bus tickets and a light meal, all of which made it very accessible. I decided to attend these groups as I was still severely struggling trying to raise a child on very limited income. Due to issues surrounding

the abusive relationship, I was unable to work full time. I was receiving \$881.00/ month in Income Support and \$257.00/month in child tax. Out of that, \$555.00 is paid for a 1 bedroom basement unit, which works simply because my “bed” is the sofa. With all other monthly bills deducted, it is no small wonder that I was reliant on using the food bank monthly.

One of the first things discussed in the sessions was budgeting skills, and although I thought I was a good budgeter, I learned a lot. One of the biggest influences was the tracking your spending exercise. We were given little books and told to keep track of every dime that we spent, and to keep all receipts. I did this faithfully for a full month, and was surprised to see how much impulse buying I did of sale items. I realized that just because a bag of cookies were on sale doesn’t mean that it’s a good “deal”. In fact, the unexpected result of this exercise is that I now consciously shop ‘healthier’; because I now know how to budget, I can shop once a week (purchasing perishable items) instead of once a month (purchasing packaged items that will last the month). I have not had to use the food bank since learning these new skills. Going to the food bank, or having to ask for any kind of help, made me feel worthless. I no longer feel worthless.

The other information, such as mutual funds, TFSAs, savings vs. investing, wills, power of attorney and personal directives, were always things that I thought were only for the rich. Not only did the financial and legal professionals give us the information in language we could understand, but taught us that it was information that was relevant to us. I am very proud to say that I am getting a mutual fund. I may only be able to set aside \$25.00 a month right now, but in 5 years, that \$25.00 will be \$1500.00!

I am now participating in the sessions as a peer-to-peer presenter. I talk about my experience, how it’s empowered me, and how life just seems easier now. I explain that it will take some work, but that the end result is worth it.

I think that not funding phase two of a project that has such a huge impact in my life would be very short sighted. I wouldn’t be where I am today if it wasn’t for Womanspace. Knowledge is power. I don’t walk around with my head down any more. Before Womanspace I was living day to day, the future was not even thought about. Now I am thinking about the future. I am teaching my child all these things that I have learnt through Womanspace. My son will enter his adult years with this knowledge, as opposed gaining it at the age of 45, like myself.

Please reconsider your decision. I am one of 825 women that Womanspace has helped. Your decisions impact the lives of many women in need in Southern Alberta.

*\*Note: Sharon's last name has been withheld due to issues related to her ex-partner knowing where she lives.*

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Michele Epp, Making Connections Parent Support Program, Lethbridge School District #51

Tuesday, March 30, 2010

To Whom it May Concern:

My name is Michele Epp and I am a Family Liaison Worker for Making Connections. I feel it is a huge detriment to the families I work with and to our community as a whole that the funding was not approved for Womanspace. I have referred families to Womanspace because they provide a great service to single women and their families. They not only inform the families of the proper organizations, services, groups, funding, etc. that are available to them but they help them with the application and follow up process as well. The financial sessions that Womanspace run have been a huge help in teaching many families the budgeting skills they need in order to survive on one income. It is a big mistake to take these financial services away in a time when our economy is suffering and the amount of families we see needing financial help is only increasing.

One of the families (single mom with 5 kids) I referred to Womanspace was on the verge of being homeless.

After meeting with Womanspace, this family was able to access the appropriate funding needed to get a house. This family is now able to budget for housing, food, clothing on their own and is doing very well. I really hope that you reconsider funding Womanspace as they truly do provide an invaluable service to our community.

Michele Epp  
Family Liaison Worker  
Making Connections  
Dr. Probe Elementary School  
Lethbridge, AB

**INTERFAITH FOOD BANK SOCIETY OF LETHBRIDGE**  
**1116 3 AVENUE NORTH**  
**LETHBRIDGE T1H 0H6**  
**TELEPHONE 403 320 8779**  
**FACSIMILE 403 328 0521**  
**www.interfaithfoodbank.ca**



October 8, 2009

To Whom It May Concern:

The Interfaith Food Bank Society of Lethbridge strongly supports Womanspace and the services they provide to the people we serve. We are eager to encourage any program that focuses on providing education, skill development and resources that enable women to gain independence.

Interfaith food Bank Society of Lethbridge is a charitable non-profit organization that has been serving the underprivileged members of our community since 1989. We aim to recognize the human dignity of those in need and to provide food and access to services and resources generated from within our community. Historically, we have referred clients to, and received referrals from Womanspace, which provides complimentary services to the low income families we cater to. Womanspace helps provide our female clients with the ability to obtain identification which is required to access our services as well as other resources within the community. Financial education and assistance with taxes helps in alleviating the some of the financial stain our clients face, which again encouraging them to become more independent.

We, at Interfaith recognize the need to offer programming that educates and provides services that can assist women in working through the tough times together, which is why we are such strong supporters of Womanspace. We appreciate the approach Womanspace uses in connecting clientele to education and resources that may be able to meet some of their needs.

In short, we are grateful for the contribution Womanspace makes to our organization, our clients, and our community as a whole. We are completely comfortable in stating that Womanspace is extremely valuable resource in our community.

If you have any questions or require further information, please feel free to contact me at (403)320-8022 or [kim@interfaithfoodbank.ca](mailto:kim@interfaithfoodbank.ca).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Kim De Groot'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kim De Groot, Client Intake Supervisor  
Interfaith Food Bank Society of Lethbridge

cc: Danielle McIntyre, Executive Director



Opokaa'sin Early Intervention Society  
404, 909-3<sup>rd</sup> Ave N.  
Lethbridge, AB T1H 0H5

March 25, 2010

Re: Womanspace Resource Centre

Opokaa'sin is dedicated to supporting the Womanspace Resource Centre and their work in the community.

Opokaa'sin is a not-for-profit Aboriginal organization in Lethbridge that is dedicated to strengthening and supporting connections for Aboriginal people. We are fully committed to supporting Womanspace's work in the community in educating and empowering women, especially Aboriginal women in the community. Aboriginal women are one of the most dispossessed populations in Canada. Many face a number of personal, economic, social and cultural challenges that make them vulnerable to family violence, delinquency, community violence, suicide and addictions. Womanspace has offered financial management classes for women in the community. Many of which are Aboriginal women. This has brought great capacity building amongst our women and given hope to those who barely survive below the poverty line.

Southwest Alberta is the traditional lands of the Blackfoot People. Within these boundaries are two large First Nation reserves, Kainai and Pikanii. Many Aboriginal women migrate to the city for school or employment and are faced with tremendous barriers that imbed them into a cycle of poverty. This migration has demonstrated that, on average, a disproportionate amount of Aboriginal women within the city live below the poverty line, have limited access to safe and adequate housing, have lower levels of education and employment and thus experience difficulties in all realms of socio-economic and health factors that contribute to lower qualities of life. In addition, many Aboriginal women are disproportionately represented in violence and domestic violence statistics.

Many Aboriginal women move with their children, and about 40% of urban Aboriginal children are in single parent families headed by women. Research also shows more than 50% of all Aboriginal children are from a low income family as compared to 20% for non-Aboriginal children.

Opokaa'sin is committed to continue to support like-minded agencies such as Womanspace in their endeavor to increase the quality of life for women and empower them to achieve equality within the community.

If you require any further discussion on the positive impact Womanspace has made in the community, please feel free to contact me at 403-380-2569.

Sincerely,

Tanya Pace-Crosschild, B.Sc., M.P.A.  
Executive Director, Opokaa'sin Early Intervention Society

## **Conclusion: Recommendations to the Minister of Status of Women**

The impact of denying funding to Womanspace Resource Centre in Lethbridge, Alberta has been significant and far-reaching. It is not an exaggeration to claim that hundreds of women in southwest Alberta will be affected by this decision; if we served 825 women in 18 months, it is reasonable to assume that in 3 years, with a broader array of services, we would have directly affected the lives of two thousand women.

The decision to deny the funding application to Womanspace Resource Centre in Lethbridge is not without cost. The taxpayer is not saving money with this decision. Quite the contrary. An investment of slightly more than \$100,000/year in Womanspace helps to get women off social assistance, get control of their lives, stay healthy and out of abusive relationships, and build a brighter long-term future for families and children. Phase One of our financial information project showed us, time and again, that when women have even a little information about financial matters, they exercise control and begin building independence. There are specific consequences when women build independence, and they come with specific pricetags: reduced income support caseloads, reduced health care costs, reduced education costs for children from families living in low-income, and reduced costs to the criminal justice system.

Womanspace Resource Centre is recommending that the Ministry re-evaluate our application. We would be happy to entertain suggestions for reducing our budget request, time period, or even the types of services we deliver. We look forward to an ongoing relationship with Status of Women, and hope to continue to serve women in our community and accomplish the goals government has set for women's equality; working together to promote the full participation of all women in all aspects of social, political, and economic life in Canada.