

Speaking Notes
Shannon Phillips, Chair
Womanspace Resource Centre, Lethbridge, Alberta
May 26, 2010

Good afternoon honourable members. My name is Shannon Phillips, and I am the volunteer chair of the board of directors of Womanspace Resource Centre in Lethbridge, AB.

First, a little background about Womanspace Resource Centre. Based in Lethbridge, we also serve women from Fort Macleod, Taber, and the aboriginal communities on the Kainai and Pikani First Nations reserves.

Français:

Cela fait plus de vingt-cinq ans que nous desservons le sud de l'Alberta. Depuis 1985 (mille neuf-cent quatre-vingt-cinq) nous recevons le soutien financier de Condition féminine Canada, sans interruption. Nous sommes également soutenus par de divers programmes provinciaux de subventions, et bénéficions énormément de la bonne volonté générale de notre communauté. Par le passé, et selon l'étendue de nos projets, nous avons entre deux et cinq employés. Après le refus de notre demande de subvention en 2009, nous avons été obligés de mettre à pied notre unique employée de longue date, ne gardant que deux employées à temps partiel pendant la reconstruction de notre organisation.

We have been active in Southern Alberta for over 25 years. We've 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 community. 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.

I'd like to first talk briefly about what Womanspace was doing with Status of Women funds, and what we had proposed to do when we were denied funding.

The last project we delivered in 2008-2009 took place in the context of the change in the ministry's mandate. Our organization took on those new challenges with gusto and creativity. We have filed income tax returns for low-income women for over a decade, and noticed a severe lack of financial information among low-income women. That lack of knowledge led to specific barriers to full participation in society for these women, who, in our community, are also frequently aboriginal.

Our 08-09 project delivered financial information workshops that removed every possible barrier to participation, including providing a meal, bus tickets and child care. Women took classes that gave them access to trained financial professionals on subjects such as budgeting, retirement, debt, and understanding savings and investment vehicles, such as Tax-Free Savings Accounts or RRSPs. We also provided help opening bank accounts, keeping banking costs down and accessing appropriate identification (as an aside, many very vulnerable women do not have bank accounts due to not having ID, whether it was lost, stolen, or destroyed, often by an abusive partner).

The financial information for low-income women project was successful beyond anyone's expectations. In 18 months, we served 825 women. Financial literacy sessions, help with bank accounts, ID and income tax, and referrals to accessible and non-intimidating financial professionals turned out to be services that hundreds of women needed.

Il n'existait pas d'autres services semblables aux nôtres dans l'Alberta du sud. Nous desservions de nombreuses femmes récemment arrivées des réserves Kainai et Piikani. Environ deux tiers de nos clients sont des femmes autochtones ; par conséquent nous avons créé un partenariat formel avec Opokaa'sin Early Intervention Society, une agence travaillant avec des familles autochtones.

There were no other services like ours in Southern Alberta. We served many women who had recently come from the Kainai and Piikani reserves. Because about two-thirds of our clients are aboriginal women, we also embarked on a formal partnership with Opokaa'sin Early Intervention Society, an agency that works with aboriginal families.

Now, I'd like to turn to describing a little about the application that was denied.

The 08-09 project provided a great jumping-off point for our next application. The first project did not have direct client service as a funded component, but most women needed one-on-one meetings and non-judgemental advice on financial matters. Therefore, direct services were part of the Phase Two application. Direct services mean women get advice and help following through with the things they need to do in order to build financial and personal assets.

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 moving into financial independence because of issues related to advocating for themselves. We had planned to hire an aboriginal coordinator with our Phase Two funds. We had also planned to help women set up community kitchens in order to address issues related to food security. Finally, we had hoped to develop a child care manual specific to the Lethbridge community. All of these services were with an eye toward long-term attachment to the workforce and financial independence. None of them will now proceed as planned.

Our relationship with Status of Women is long-standing. We received very positive feedback about our application, and were told that it fit the criteria, that the project was sound, innovative, and results-oriented, and that the proposed budget was realistic. We were given no indication our application would be denied.

There are consequences for all decisions in life, and political life is no different. I'd like to share with you the consequences of the decision to deny our application.

First, it is not outrageous 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 at least two thousand women.

The decision to deny our funding application 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 women 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 showed us, time and again, that when women have even a little information about financial matters, they make better choices. Those better choices come with specific pricetags: reduced income support caseloads, reduced health care costs, and reduced costs to the justice system.

Finally, I'd like to briefly turn to the justification for denying Status of Women funds to long-standing women's organizations. I'd like to note with dismay that we in Lethbridge were not alone; the Alberta Immigrant Women's Network, who have been funded by Status of Women since 1986, were also denied, without warning, this spring.

Government has given essentially three justifications. First, government members seem to be putting a premium on funding "new" organizations. While this is not problematic on the face of it, it is clear that there are trade-offs being made – denying old gals like us in favour of quote - new organizations, perhaps organizations that do not come with a history of being strong advocates for women. The government's aversion to groups that have a history of outspoken feminism is really the only explanation for this fixation on wanting to fund only "new" groups. Because if the goal is tangible results, organizations that have several decades of experience in a community are better able to deliver specific outcomes and reach target populations. If the goal is accountability, a 25-year track record of responsible use of Status of Women funds should count for something. The goal is clearly something else.

Other explanations have ranged from the saying that groups should exhibit more "accountability" to claiming that government's emphasis is on groups that are "less talk more action." These two explanations are far removed from our reality in rural Southern Alberta. It is quite confusing for our volunteers, clients, and partner agencies to hear that an organization that delivers programs that are available nowhere else and that served 825 people in 18 months on a budget of \$150,000, is not taking action or acting accountably. And this is what is most important for everyone here to take away today. You can say whatever you like to justify your decisions. But you must know political sloganeering rings hollow to the very vulnerable women we serve. When you are on the verge of homelessness, or leaving an abusive relationship, or digging yourself out of bankruptcy due to addictions or whatever the case may be, you don't need a talking point from a politician. What you need are non-judgemental financial information and other services that help you build a better life. And that's what has been denied to hundreds of women in Southern Alberta as a result of the decision to deny Status of Women funding to Womanspace Resource Centre in Lethbridge. Thank you.