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Yellowknife, N.W.T.

NGO's getting short end of the stick

Yellowknife (Feb. 10/06) – Non-governmental organizations like the YWCA of Yellowknife are facing an urgent problem because they can't pay staff wages that are on par with government and other employers. "Unless the YWCA can improve its ability to hire and retain staff, we may have trouble delivering all the programs we've been contracted to provide," said executive director Lyda Fuller. "We're calling on the health minister to boost funding agreements for NGO's by at least the same amount as civil servants received in their last contract," she said.

The Health and Social Service portion of the budget is being debated for a second day in the Legislative Assembly. It's this portion of the budget which ultimately funds the work of NGO's, such as the YWCA. But in the last three years, the government hasn't increased funding agreements for NGO's at all. The result is that the YWCA has fallen far behind in what it can pay its staff. The organization is now having trouble attracting staff to front-line positions. "As an agency that delivers many services 24 hours a day, an inability to fill front-line shifts can soon become a crisis," said Fuller.

A salary survey to test the YWCA's current wage scale against other service providers completed in October 2004 showed that for front-line positions, the YWCA is at least \$10,000 a year or \$5 an hour less than market. Staff who move over to Yellowknife Health and Social Services are paid at least \$20,000 more a year than the YWCA can pay them.

It's not only more difficult to recruit new staff; it's difficult to retain them. More than half of the 120 staff who work for the YWCA have been with the organization for less than a year. This turnover may pose serious problems for continuity in the service the YWCA provides.

"The answer is for the minister of health to add cost-of-living increases to services we contract," said Fuller. The YWCA is urging the minister make the change before the next year's agreements are signed for April 1.

The YWCA is the largest NGO in Yellowknife, operating a shelter for women and children who experience violence, running a 39 unit emergency and transitional housing program, offering in-home support to adults with development disabilities, operating a home for clients with mental illness, offering after school programs in every school in Yellowknife, and running the women's shelter in Fort Smith.

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