

# The Edmonton Journal

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Kill 500 ducks in an Alberta tailings pond and you hear outrage from around the world.

Yet, turn away 27,000 women and children from Alberta emergency shelters and you hear barely a whisper. Close six group homes for troubled children and there isn't a peep. Shut down 12 foster homes and there's only silence.

Non-profit agencies across Alberta are facing a crisis and odds are you had no idea -- not unless you were an abused woman, a troubled teen or a neglected child.

In that case you'd know first-hand that even though Alberta's economy might be booming its non-profit social infrastructure is facing a bust. The problem, like most political problems, is a lack of money.

The non-profit groups that rely on government funding simply cannot pay a decent wage to attract and keep workers. These are the community agencies that run women's shelters, provide services for the disabled and represent social workers. Their workers deal every day with the flotsam and jetsam of society -- the alcoholic parent, the abused child, the brain injured adult -- and in some cases they do it for pay not much higher than minimum wage.

Consequently, the agencies are seeing a large chunk of their workforce leave for better paying jobs in the private sector or with the government.

The Alberta Association of Services for Children and Families (AASCF), for example, has a turnover rate of almost 40 per cent, almost 70 per cent of its vacancies can't be filled because it can't find qualified workers, and almost 30 per cent of its staff are working two or more jobs to make ends meet.

That has meant women's shelters turned away a record 27,000 people the past year and various other groups have been forced to shut down group

homes and reduce services.

"This crisis is unprecedented, never before have we fallen so far behind in our ability to pay a competitive wage," said Patty Kilgallon, president of the AASCF. "Our backs are against the wall today and Alberta's most vulnerable children are suffering."

Kilgallon made the plea at a news conference in the drab and airless meeting room of an inner city school on Wednesday morning which managed to make a cheerless topic even more depressing. A couple of television cameras turned up as well as half a dozen reporters.

It was a far cry from the circus of 30 reporters and camera operators who showed up complete with live satellite trucks for a Greenpeace news conference a few days ago.

Dead ducks are a big draw, especially when they are poisoned in the hundreds by multinational oil companies.

Overworked and underpaid shelter workers aren't nearly as dramatic or interesting. Nobody is dangling from the ceiling at premier's dinners with banners that say "Support social workers!"

But social workers need our support. More specifically, they need more government financial support.

The government realizes there's a problem. The non-profit agencies have been complaining for months. Last August they held a news conference which was pretty much the same as yesterday's news conference where Jan Reimer, the former Edmonton mayor who is now with the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, said that while the province's mayor are angry about roads and infrastructure, "I'm angry, too. I'm angry about family violence in our province and the compromised safety of Alberta's women and children. This sector is reeling."

The non-profit social service sector is

still reeling despite \$41 million more from the government in the provincial budget to help boost wages. That's simply too little money, perhaps enough to increase wages by 30 cents an hour when they need 10 times that much to attract and retain workers.

This crisis has its genesis in government policy, not simply an overheated economy. In the 1980s, the government actively promoted a shift from institutional care for needy Albertans to more community-based services run by non-profit community agencies.

The system actually worked well. But the agencies felt the axe fall in the early 1990s when the Klein government cut services and money. The non-profit groups managed to barely stay afloat until they got swamped the past few years by Alberta's economic tsunami. They are now in danger of going under.

Janis Tarchuk, Minister of Children and Youth Services, says she's well aware of the problem and is promising help: "I have committed to working with them and in fact on May 27th I have asked all of our contracted agencies and our CEOs who contract with them to meet with me for a day and go through the issues and come up with an action plan that will address both short term and long term issues."

Promising words. But the government has been making similar sounding comments the past year and the problem is getting worse, not better.

The government continues to download its social responsibility onto the backs of overworked and underpaid staff in the non-profit sector.

The workers, of course, have an option: they can quit and find better paying jobs elsewhere. Options are much more limited for battered wives and neglected children who are turned away at the door of understaffed women's shelters.