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20 years of helping women heal; B.C.'s landmark Bridges program gets abuse victims back on track, but funding cuts are starting to hurt

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Page: C1 / FRONT

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Illustrations: Colour Photo: Debra Brash, Times Colonist / Jan Bate, left, executive director of Bridges for Women, and board chairwoman JoAnn Reid, right, lend a supportive arm to Jodi Williams on the stone bridge at Beacon Hill Park. Bridges is helping Williams reclaim her life and independence after years of partner abuse.

On July 31, 2006, Jodi Williams walked away from her dream job, hustled her two little kids into the car and drove from the Fraser Valley to Victoria Transition House.

For the previous two years, she says she had been in counselling trying to deal with the physical abuse by her partner that was seeping into her daughter's life and working full-time to support the family.

"We minimize things to survive," she says. Within six days of arriving here, Williams had "a home, a job and everything."

So why is she sitting in the Bridges for Women Society office on Cook Street -- an organization dedicated to helping women get back on their feet?

Laid off from the Victoria job, at 42 she's on social assistance and identified as "a person with persistent multiple barriers" to employment. "All this is the result of being in an abusive relationship. It's called post-traumatic stress disorder," she says.

Helping women break the cycle of abuse, with skills and employment training, support and confidence-building, is what Bridges is famous for.

Just over 20 years ago, Bridges became the first such organization in B.C. The Bridges manual is distributed throughout Canada; in 2005, the Czech Republic invited Bridges representatives to give the keynote address on International Day for Elimination of Violence Against Women in Prague.

More than 800 women have graduated from the program with a view to financial independence for themselves and their children. Graduates have gone on to careers in law, government and business.

Most people are "absolutely unaware" of the uphill climb that abuse creates, says JoAnn Reid, co-chairwoman of the Bridges board, who has a background in social services and employment counselling. In the workplace, the after-effects can include anxiety, hyper-vigilance, hyper-sensitivity and tuning out tasks.

"You don't really know how overwhelmed you are until you remove yourself from an overwhelming situation," says Williams, who is looking for work, doing professional development and volunteering. In her case, six months of Bridges wasn't enough.

At one point, Bridges offered 12 months of full-time

training, then it went down to nine and then to six.

Earlier this year, the province chose to expand bridging programs for women throughout B.C. but did not increase funding.

It's good that the province wants broader services, says Bridges program manager Viki Prescott. "I just wish that they had upped the budget for everybody."

A Ministry of Housing and Social Development news release states that \$5 million in funding for bridging employment programs has been in place since 2003. The funds will now be divided among 18 service providers over 30 locations, up from 13 providers.

Proposed changes include increasing the number of women served to 880 from 562.

The ministry said it revised the program by "applying lessons learned and best practices research, including valuable stakeholder feedback."

Unfortunately, the upshot is that "the mother of all bridging programs in British Columbia" is shrinking rather than expanding in Victoria, Reid says, undercutting "enough time for a woman to heal, be able to focus on where she's going in life and put it into action."

Moreover, the Bridges for Women online program is "in hibernation" despite 50 women on the waiting list, says executive director Jan Bate says. Gone, too, is the simulated workplace for pre-work experience.

The current funding from the province is \$275,000; 10 years ago, it was \$450,000, Bate says.

Bridges still has a six-month program but with a continuous intake of clients. The ministry says that means "flexible and individualized services." But it's tougher for Bridges to deliver the group sessions it finds most effective. There are only three months for peer-supported education, therapy and learning how to trust others again.

The completion rate is about 50 per cent -- considerably lower than when a longer and more intensive structure allowed women to take breaks to look after their kids or deal with medical or legal issues that often arise from abuse.

"Our experience over the years is that healing doesn't come in a six-month package," Prescott says. "When women have the ability to access services over the

period of a year, or even years, then healing does go along."

The new contract expects Bridges to refer clients to community resources such as the Women's Sexual Assault Centre. But when Prescott called at one point to make a referral, its waiting list was 11 months.

Bridges has opted to redirect some donations to subsidize in-house counselling. (Bridges receives \$100,000 from local foundations and corporations and earns a further \$100,000 by community outreach).

Board member Marie-Christine White, now a Sidney legal advocate, received nine months of Bridges support about 10 years ago.

For the first three months, "you're kind of in a daze," she recalls. The peer-group sessions were important because she had been "hiding for years." When she began at Bridges, she was raising seven children without any child support -- four of her own, two of her dead sister's and a grandchild. She had a Grade 9 education.

"I learned to find out who I was and what my talents were," she recalls. And there is no way she'd be where she is today without Bridges. The program even hired a tutor to allow her to study for the law school admission exam.

While funding is a concern, Reid wants to make clear that Bridges' mission, innovative programming and online potential still resonate. Which is why its tagline for its first 20 years is: Proud History. Gutsy Future.

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