



Tracy Porteous: Cuts to B.C.'s violence against women programs going in wrong direction

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By Tracy Porteous

International agencies such as the United Nations, World Health Organization, and Amnesty International have all identified violence against women as one of the most widespread and socially tolerated global human-rights violations facing women today.

To contextualize the alarming extent to which women are at risk from violence, Brian Valle's book *The War on Women* documents that between 2000 and 2006, 101 Canadian soldiers and police officers lost their lives in the line of duty, yet in that same time frame, over 500 Canadian women were shot, stabbed, strangled, or beaten to death due to intimate partner violence.

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According to the police services division of the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, in B.C. alone, between 1997 and 2006 there were 124 women murdered as a result of domestic violence. These numbers of course do not also tally the murdered and missing women from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, from B.C.'s Highway 16, or countless other communities coping with the epidemic of violence against women.

The September provincial budget dealt a striking blow to services that respond to violence against women and children across British Columbia.

A sector-wide funding cut of \$1.2 million has left organizations and individuals across B.C. that work to respond to B.C.'s most vulnerable populations stunned.

On budget day, Finance Minister **Colin Hansen** said: "Simply put, there are public services people cannot do without — and, no matter how difficult our fiscal situation, those crucial services must be protected. When a forest fire threatens a community, we fight it. When someone needs care in an emergency, it's there. When people fall on hard times, we provide support for them."

What constitutes more of an emergency than domestic-violence deaths of women and children? What is a greater tragedy than women being stabbed in public and beaten and sexually assaulted in private? Of course fighting forest fires is important, but so too is having a secure and stable response for the more than 50,000 women and children who come forward in B.C. each year for help, trying to cope with ever-escalating violence. The message government is sending to B.C. citizens is that vulnerable women and children, those who are fleeing violence, are not as important to society. Our leaders need to get their priorities clear and ensure that vulnerable women and children are protected.

In these economic hard times one might ask, "Don't we all need to tighten the budget?" This is a fair question. However, there is a large body of research out there that tells us that when societies face economic downturns, violence against women increases. When communities are hit with forest fires and floods, violence against women increases. And where there are areas with high gang activity, gang members are not just hurting and killing other gang members, but killing, abusing, and sexually assaulting their girlfriends and spouses as well.

The counselling and outreach programs impacted by these cuts work alongside of the police, child protection services, Crown counsel, settlement programs, and others to ensure there is an accessible, intelligent, and timely response to sexual and domestic violence. These programs already work from a deficit position. These life-saving community services receive funding that falls far short of what is needed. While they and the thousands of women and families they serve each year appreciate the province immeasurably for the funds they do receive, most of these programs have to raise funds to subsidize the services they provide. From bake sales to social enterprise to telemarketing to community events, these services reach out to individual donors to redress their programs' funding shortfalls. Many programs already have wait lists and struggle to cope with the all-too-real demand for services. With cuts to funding, the queue will only get longer and, perhaps, the death toll larger.

B.C. needs more counselling and outreach services responding to violence against women, not less. B.C. needs police and Crown and community services with enough resources so that they can adequately respond. With informed practice and adequate support, together, we can break the multi-generational cycle and epidemic called violence against women. It's time to take the death toll seriously. It's time to move forward and prioritize women and children.

Tracy Porteous is the executive director of the [Ending Violence Association of British Columbia](#), a nonprofit organization that supports over 200 of B.C.'s community-based programs that respond to sexual and domestic violence and child abuse.

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