

## **Women's Programming in Addiction Services, DHAs 1, 2 & 3**

Women have been underrepresented in addiction treatment settings. Although substance use impacts on women in a variety of ways, many unique to gender, there has been an emphasis on male substance use patterns. This has resulted in limited exploration of gender-specific treatment approaches.

Several years ago Addiction Services, DHAs 1, 2 & 3, recognized the need to address unique programming and service delivery needs for women with addiction issues. It was acknowledged that the physical health of women is affected more severely and in a shorter period of time by intensive substance use, as compared with men. Furthermore, women are more likely to experience barriers to treatment. Such barriers include lack of reliable and low cost child-care, lack of women centred or gender specific treatment or treatment with clearly defined components for women, and insufficient outreach and publicity strategies. Women are also more likely to experience lack of community support and may not seek services for fear of being perceived as a "bad" mother and of losing a child.

At this time it was acknowledged that Addiction Services had a role to advocate, consult and advise stakeholders on the perspectives of women's addiction services. To this end an Interdistrict Women's Committee comprised of Addiction Services staff and management, other organizations, and women from the community was formed. The purpose of this committee was to identify and recommend strategic directions and opportunities for women's programming. An identified priority was to increase awareness related to gender issues among staff. As a starting point a one-day workshop was organized in 2002 and Addiction Services staff was provided with written materials, including a best practices document on treatment and rehabilitation services for women with substance use problems, published by Health Canada in 2001.

Eventually the work of the Interdistrict Women's Committee was transitioned to a team of Women's Services Coordinators. Through provincially designated funding, in Fall 2002 Addiction Services subsequently hired three Women's Services Coordinators, one per district, to implement an integrated approach to women's programming. This team provides clinical treatment services to female clients within a designated geographical area, and coordinates and delivers a range of awareness, education, training and consultation services and programs focused on the unique addiction-related needs of women. To ensure a comprehensive approach to women's programming, this team is responsible to ensure the continued evolution and improvement of both prevention and treatment programs for women. All programming is to be based on theoretical and empirical research in the field and accumulated staff experience.

The three Women's Services Coordinators work collaboratively with other Addiction Services staff and community stakeholders to implement an integrated approach to women's programming. The Coordinators provide peer consultation to Addiction Services staff and to staff in other programs in relation to both individual clinical cases and to broader programming issues. They establish and maintain collaborative and

mutually supportive partnerships with various intersectoral and community-level partners.

Model program elements being implemented include appropriate client treatment matching (a menu of options and approaches), a harm reduction model, specialized staff training, programming based on strengths not deficits, and an empowerment approach including client driven programming. Programming may also entail advocacy on behalf of clients to address practical issues such as money, housing and employment.

An outcomes monitoring process to examine success factors for women's programs should look beyond reduced drug use to include reduced domestic violence, increased days of employment and positive changes in social values and networks.