

City for All Women Initiative (CAWI)
Initiative; une ville pour toutes les femmes (IVTF)

A partnership between the City of Ottawa and Ottawa's women's organizations promoting a women-friendly city that respects diversity.

Inclusion of Aboriginal people in Municipal Decision Making

Submitted to HRSS Committee, Nov 4, 2004

By: Suzanne Doerge, Project Coordinator, City for All Women Initiative

My name is Suzanne Doerge. I am the project coordinator for the City for All Women Initiative, a partnership between the City of Ottawa and Ottawa's women's organizations that is working to promote gender inclusive practices in the City of Ottawa.

I am here today to urge you to call on staff to reconsider the response to the recommendations put forth by the Health and Social Services Advisory Committee on behalf of the Aboriginal community.

At the beginning of our project, in February and March of last year, we conducted a survey of women's organizations to determine the extent to which they perceived they had input into decisions made by City Hall. In that survey, we were struck by the fact that most women, and especially women living in poverty, Aboriginal, visible minority and immigrant women felt they did not see themselves among the leadership of the City, did not feel their issues were understood and did not feel they could influence the system.

To address this, we are in the midst of a women's lobby training programme to strengthen women's capacity to make their issues known. Four Aboriginal women are participating in the programme.

In the survey, we were particularly struck by the extent to which Aboriginal women felt their issues were not heard by the City. They were the first to say, "Why bother". They gave stories of promises made by candidates to champion their issues followed by unreturned phone calls and cancelled meetings. They spoke of the unique situation that Aboriginal women find themselves in when they leave their reserves and come to the urban areas – stuck between two systems unable to access the services they and their families need. This can be especially difficult for single mothers or women fleeing situations of violence.

They are the first people of our City. And they are an urban reality as so many Aboriginal people migrate to the cities to find themselves in poverty and, often, on the streets.

I understand that you are looking at a budget with limited dollars, however working with Aboriginal peoples to ensure their specific needs are addressed will be more cost-effective. The problems facing Aboriginal people have become major issues in other cities of our country, Ottawa has the opportunity to be proactive and find ways to address and prevent growing difficulties faced by Aboriginal peoples.

In this project, we are urging the city to use a gender lens in planning in order to be sure to address women's specific needs and identify differences between women and men. But we also know that women of diverse races and communities have unique needs and unless the city uses tools to take into account the needs of specific racial and cultural groups, the planning cannot be effective either.

In the staff comments, the department noted that they are currently developing a strategic prioritization framework to identify key departmental priorities over the next three years. We know from our research on gender inclusive planning that no strategic planning process is neutral. Unless specific analysis is incorporated from the beginning, the planning will not promote greater equity but instead can reinforce the status quo. This is true in terms of race, culture and other aspects of diversity, as well as gender.

Aboriginal people have skills and insights into addressing the problems faced by people in their community. The women leaders who have approached the City have important ideas to share. The City for All Women Initiative is currently working with city staff to develop a guidebook for city staff on ways of ensuring diverse women are included in city consultations. We have ensured that Aboriginal women participate in the reference group developing the guide and will strive to include the experience of Aboriginal women. We urge the City to find ways to be intentional about including Aboriginal people in other planning tools and processes.

A clear message we received from women who feel disenfranchised was that it is very hard to come forward to the City. If they are met with a negative response, they may never come forward again. It should be no surprise that there are 3 white women here speaking today to a room of mostly white people, while the three Aboriginal leaders, all women, have decided "why bother". These women Aboriginal leaders have reached out, on behalf of their community, I urge you to hear their concerns.

I urge you to request that staff reconsider these recommendations.