

Notes from the Northern Women's Forum: A decade of observations on poverty in Prince George

The Northern Women's Forum (NWF) is a Prince George social activist group started in 2002 as a sub-committee of the Active Voice Coalition. From the very beginning, the NWF was rooted in protesting the newly elected provincial government's cuts to the social safety net that were causing increased poverty and precariousness, especially for women. Members of the NWF came from various sectors of the Prince George community, often with connections to labour and public sector unions: for example, higher education, social services, and health.

From 2003-2015, the NWF organized an event called the Chili Blanket: members distributed donations of warm clothing and blankets, served hot chocolate and bowls of chili, and led anti-poverty speeches and songs. It was initially intended as a one-time rally to raise awareness of the social fallout of government cuts to the social safety net, and it was never intended to be an ongoing annual event--simply because the hope was that the government would recognize the error of its ways and begin to rebuild rather than continue cutting. However, for the next twelve years, the cuts increased and the Chili Blanket continued, year after year.

In 2014, NWF organizer Jan Mastromatteo was interviewed about the origins of the Chili Blanket: "This event started as a reaction to what was then the incoming Liberal government in 2002 [and] has always been focused on poverty reduction and regressive social policies...We thought this would be temporary, but it's not. The news, it's still not good--so we're still here" (Arthur Williams, "Chili Blanket Event Calls for Social Change," *The Prince George Citizen*, Dec. 7, 2014). In 2015, NWF organizer Dawn Hemingway spoke at the final Chili Blanket event about the ongoing need for what the group had hoped would be a temporary protest rally: "This is the 13th time that the Northern Women's Forum and all of you have come together to try and address the question of poverty and also violence against women in our community. It's much like the food banks that started when I was in university, that was only supposed to be an emergency service for one year and here we are, it's become a part of our whole structure for providing support to people in our community."

Each year, we saw an increase in the number of people who came to get warm clothing

and food. Many different groups accessed the event: young people, families, children, and the elderly. Every year, we asked agencies for volunteer speakers, and we asked them to attend the rally with their clients. This is a partial list of agencies who were invited/attended:

- Active Support Against Poverty
- Association Advocating for Women and Children (AWAC)
- Central Interior Native Health
- Elizabeth Fry Society
- John Howard Society
- Phoenix Transition House
- Positive Living North
- Prince George Native Friendship Centre
- Prince George New Hope Society

However, many agencies told us privately they were afraid of losing their funding if they spoke up.

Some of the issues contributing to poverty in Prince George and region are job losses in the retail sector, cuts to supports (or lack of supports in the first place), and intense cold, which exacerbates many of the effects of homelessness. In December 2009, right before the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver, the NWF sent out a press release giving the BC government a "gold medal" in beating out Alberta in its use of food banks; being Canada's top province in terms of child poverty; and having a monthly welfare rate for a single employable person that was \$62 less than the average rent in BC.

Once social services are cut, it is very difficult to rebuild them. The Northern Women's Forum has seen the devastating results of 17 years of regressive policies and deep cuts, and we urge the current government to restore these services and help repair some of the damage done to our social safety net. The health of our communities depends on it.