

COMMENT

“There is no constitutional requirement to bail out businesses and industries

SEND US YOUR LETTERS

■ **Mail:** Letters to the Editor, Times Colonist, Box 300, Victoria, B.C. V8W 2N4

■ **Fax:** 250-380-5353 ■ **E-mail:** letters@tc.canwest.com

Letters should be no longer than 250 words and may be edited for length. Include your name, address and telephone number. We won't publish anonymous letters. Copyright in letters and other materials accepted for publication remains with the author, but the publisher and its licensees may freely reproduce them in print, electronic and other forms.

Non-profits face serious funding challenges

PEGGY MAHONEY

The editorial on the need for core funding for the non-profit sector in B.C. raised important issues (Dec. 15). While it highlighted the move away from core funding, the editorial only scratched the surface of the challenges facing the non-profit sector today.

Based on the B.C. government's own discussion documents, the province's non-profit sector includes more than 20,000 charities, contracts with government for \$3 billion and contributes another \$6 billion to the economy — 6.9 per cent of provincial GDP.

The sector employs seven per cent of the provincial workforce — more than forestry, fishing, mining and oil and gas combined. In addition, the sector is fuelled by 1.5 million volunteers, the equivalent of 69,000 full-time positions in volunteer time.

Why, then, is it surprising to anyone that a sector this large needs an infrastructure to maintain a high level of co-ordinated service delivery?

Government does not want to contribute to or pay for this. It will in other sectors, but the non-profit sector, the largest, is suffering from chronic neglect and perhaps even exploitation. There is universal agreement that community-based agencies provide a relevant and efficient service delivery model, but at some point this also became a cheaper service delivery model.

There is agreement that co-ordination services, like those provided by the B.C. Schizophrenia Society in Vancouver, are important to identify best practices, bring networks together and create provincial initiatives, rather than each community spending resources to re-create the same wheel.

This is an efficient way of

doing business used in every other sector, including the centralized functions of government ministries. In government, millions of dollars are spent on conferences, meetings and training initiatives to identify practice standards and co-ordinate activities, often in expensive hotels.

However, the people who do the work, and where resources are the most likely to benefit the consumer, do not have the funds to even pay for adequate meeting space.

The B.C. government contracts with most agencies at salary and administration levels that see employees make 25 to 50 per cent less than government workers in similar positions, not to mention the lack of funding for pension and medical benefits.

As most of these workers are women, the literature is beginning to refer to the non-profits as the “pink ghetto,” in that this short-sighted

treatment is forecast to result in women at retirement age leaving the sector with no savings or benefits and with the likelihood that they will be living in poverty, draining the same agencies they spent their careers serving.

In addition, as the editorial noted, amounts for administration are contracted at ridiculously low levels designed to force agencies to make up the difference through fundraising.

Can you imagine the government contracting with another sector, such as construction for the Olympics, at below-cost amounts and amounts too low to attract and retain workers — and then telling it to go and have bake sales to raise the rest of the money? Agencies know that most fundraised revenues are not reliable and, with the downturn in the economy, are scrambling to find ways of covering rent and other costs.

It is quite conceivable that we will be facing the loss of several non-profits with deep roots in our community if these issues are not addressed very soon. Meals on Wheels and the Family Violence Project have both recently folded, while others are on the edge.

There is currently a government non-profit initiative exploring these issues and goodwill on everyone's part to work together to find solutions. However, it would appear that the loss of some agencies is seen as an acceptable outcome, on the assumption there is duplication and redundancies in the sector.

Is this an accurate assumption in the capital region? Is this what the community wants?

The Community Council believes in social planning through informed and collaborative decisions.

First we need to collect up-to-date and accurate informa-

tion regarding the specific challenges of our local agencies and options toward reducing duplication if it exists. The next step is to create community tables for this dialogue.

Looking at the response to the closure of the Laurel House program, it is also important for us to create the space for a larger discussion that includes those who rely on these services. The consumer has been left out of the conversation, and we need to create a vehicle for thoughtful discussion involving all stakeholders as to how to approach these issues before we lose more of the agencies that significantly contribute to our community.

Peggy Mahoney is the executive director of the Community Council, a local non-profit organization working to improve the quality of life for everyone in the capital region, particularly people disadvantaged due to poverty and distress.