



AUTUMN HOUSE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY PLAN

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the social responsibility of Autumn House with respect to providing service to all members of the community, to explore the issues facing African-Canadian women in abusive relationships, and to provide recommendations on how Autumn House can increase the use of its services and the diversity of their workforce to meet the needs of these groups. Because of the large number of cultural groups and the complexity of the issues affecting each, this paper will focus on African-Canadians only.

The authors recognize that the issue of African-Canadian women in abusive relationships accessing services is an issue that has implications reaching far beyond Autumn House. The Nova Scotia Status of Women and the Women's Institute of the African United Baptist Association of Nova Scotia have done significant work in this area to address the inequities and will be implementing many initiatives in the coming years to assist African-Canadian women living in violence. This paper will refer to provincial initiatives, however will focus on proactive measures that Autumn House can undertake in order to reach out to the residents of Cumberland County in addition to these provincial programs.

Background on Autumn House

The following information was gathered from the Autumn House website¹, the Transition House Association of Nova Scotia website² and through correspondence with the Executive Director, Agnes Douglass. Autumn House is a transition house located in Amherst, Nova Scotia and first opened its doors in 1989. It provides shelter and counselling services to women of Cumberland County who have been abused by an intimate partner. Autumn House also provides counselling services to men who abuse, and to children who are witnesses to abuse. Cumberland County encompasses Amherst,

¹ <http://www.thans.ca/autumn.html>

² <http://www.thans.ca>

Parrsboro, Oxford, Springhill and surrounding rural areas for a total population of approximately 32,600 residents³.

Autumn House receives 75% of its approximate \$500,000 budget from the provincial government. The other 25% is obtained through fund-raising initiatives. Autumn House is currently facing a slight deficit that is expected to be eliminated over the next two to three years. They are hoping to increase their fund-raising revenues to offset this deficit.

Autumn House is one of the 14 shelters that are members of the Transition House Association of Nova Scotia. Although each transition house is run autonomously, the Executive Directors of each transition house in Nova Scotia meet each quarter and are in regular communication to ensure consistency in service delivery across the province. Autumn House's Executive Director reports to a Board of Directors comprised of various community members with an interest in women's issues and/or domestic violence awareness and prevention.

The Issue

Third Place Transition House in Truro, Nova Scotia was recently the subject of a negative media report that included allegations that the shelter, and other women's shelters in Nova Scotia, does not provide proper services or employment opportunities to African-Canadian women⁴. The article was about a video titled "No More Secrets" that explores the silence around women in abusive relationships and explores what needs to be done to eliminate the challenges African-Canadian women in abusive relationships have in finding support. The article pointed out that there are currently only five African-Canadian women working in shelters and no affirmative action policies to correct the inequity.

³ Statistics Canada- <http://www.statcan.ca/>

⁴ The Daily News (Truro), "No More Secrets digs deep into spousal abuse", February 14, 2005

The article and its implications were recently discussed at a meeting of all executive directors. Each Executive Director was tasked with examining the issue as it relates to their transition house, and developing an action plan to address it. Autumn House's Executive Director enlisted the authors' help with this initiative.

Autumn House's statistics indicate that of approximately the 1,800 women who have used their services, less than five women were from the African-Canadian community or any other racially visible group⁵. There is currently one racially visible person working for Autumn House, however no African-Canadian employees or volunteers. Autumn House currently does not have a policy on affirmative action hiring, and does not offer any training or development to employees or volunteers in the area of cultural diversity.

Social Responsibility

As a non-profit organization receiving their funding from the provincial government and charitable donations, Autumn House has a responsibility to ensure that they are providing an adequate service to the public. Autumn House's mission statement⁶ underlines their responsibility to the public and consists of four goals, as follows:

Goal 1- To provide shelter for abused women and their children.

Goal 2- To ensure a full range of services and supports for existing services and programs for abused women and children.

Goal 3- To carry out community education, social action and advocacy related to abused women.

Goal 4- To maintain a strong Association to deliver the programs of the Association.

An American organization, Independent Sector, has developed a Statement of Values and Code of Ethics for Non-profit and Philanthropic Organizations that explores

⁵ Information provided by Executive Director

the ethical standards and public expectations of these organizations. This statement summarizes the ethical obligations of a non-profit organization as follows⁷:

“As a matter of principle, the non-profit and philanthropic community should adhere to the highest ethical standards because it is the right thing to do. As a matter of pragmatic self-interest, the community should do so because public trust in our performance is the bedrock of our legitimacy. Donors and volunteers support charitable organizations because they trust them to carry out their missions, to be good stewards of their resources, and to uphold rigorous standards of conduct.”

Cumberland County has a very small percentage of African-Canadian residents (1.09%)⁸. Therefore, it would be easy to dismiss the issue entirely under the Utilitarian theory that encourages decisions based on the greatest good for the greatest number⁹. The size of the African-Canadian population is very insignificant overall and therefore the vast majority of the population is unaffected by this issue. However, in considering the social responsibility of a non-profit organization described above, the mission statement of Autumn House, and the universal concept of “do what is right”, it would be extremely unethical for Autumn House to discount the concerns raised by the African-Canadian community simply because they are not in the majority.

Autumn House is now aware of a segment of the population that is not accessing their services, therefore they are not entirely meeting public expectations or the goals of their mission statement. They have a social responsibility to perform outreach and education to the African-Canadian community in Cumberland County to encourage use of Autumn House where services are required. They also have a social responsibility to ensure that their workforce is representative of the community they serve.

⁶ Autumn House Mission Statement- provided by Executive Director

⁷ National Alliance for Choice in Giving website- <http://www.choiceingiving.org/membership/ethics.asp>

⁸ Statistics Canada- www.statcan.ca

⁹ Definition- <http://www.disabilitymuseum.org/glossary.php#U>

Autumn House is facing two distinct problems. One is that African-Canadians are not accessing their services. The second is that there are no African-Canadian employees or volunteers working for Autumn House. While this second problem may be a large part of the reason that African-Canadians are not accessing Autumn House's services, there are other cultural factors involved that will not be resolved by simply hiring African-Canadians to work at Autumn House.

Domestic Violence in the African-Canadian Community

In 1993, the African United Baptist Association Women's Institute undertook a needs assessment regarding domestic violence in the African-Canadian community¹⁰. A study was conducted in Pictou, Nova Scotia, which determined that family violence was a significant problem within that community. Over 80% of the women interviewed believed abuse to be a problem in their community, and 32% of the women interviewed consider themselves to be abused women. That particular study was conducted on a limited scale and cannot be considered conclusive for all African-Canadian communities, however, it did raise awareness of issues faced by African-Canadian communities that affect their willingness to seek help when involved in an abusive intimate partner relationship.

The study concluded that the major issue faced by African-Canadian women in an abusive relationship is the lack of trust in the criminal justice and social service systems due to historical issues of oppression and discrimination. This lack of trust causes reluctance for African-Canadian women to turn for help as they feel they will not be treated properly or understood. Also, many African-Canadian women feel that if they report their abusive partner, their partner may face racial discrimination by the criminal justice system and that reporting their partner will further the stereotype that African-Canadian men are violent.

¹⁰ Government of Nova Scotia- <http://www.gov.ns.ca/coms/files/facts12.asp>

Another issue raised in the needs assessment was the importance of access to support from women in their own community. Currently there are no transition houses specifically for members of the African-Canadian community. Therefore, a woman from that community who finds herself in an abusive relationship relies on their support system of family, friends, community leaders, and in many cases, their church. While it is beneficial that there is a support system to turn to, there is a feeling by African-Canadian women that they will be betraying their extended families and close-knit communities by seeking help or reporting their abusive partner. There is a fear that their community may ostracize them, which for many African-Canadian women could be more devastating than being in an abusive relationship. Family and community are of extreme importance to African-Canadians and many African-Canadian women do not want to jeopardize their relationships by reporting domestic violence or seeking help. These reasons all contribute to African-Canadian women keeping silent about domestic violence they experience or witness.

Importance of Support Workers

The Nova Scotia Department of Justice has developed a “Framework for Action Against Family Violence” which contains an analysis of the current response to domestic violence by the justice system and many recommendations for improvements¹¹. It also outlines the critical success factors for working with women in domestic violence situations. The authors utilized this framework to assess the importance of support workers to women in the African-Canadian community. For any woman in an abusive relationship to seek help, it is very important for her to feel she can trust the support worker. Moving from home and into a shelter or transition house is a very important first step for women and their children who have been victims of domestic violence. This can be a critical step, as a transition house is a place where a woman can start planning her future and become accustomed to not being at home anymore.

¹¹ Framework for Action Against Family Violence- <http://www.gov.ns.ca/just/framework.html>

In some cases it takes a woman more than one attempt to leave an abusive situation. A successful transition to a shelter can make it much easier for a woman to avoid returning to these situations. This is why it is so important for workers at the Autumn House to establish a relationship with their clients where there is honesty, trust, and where the woman feels comfortable enough to be completely open with the staff member. If a woman feels uncomfortable in any way with the worker, the chances of her returning home to an abusive situation can greatly increase.

When women make the move to shelters, a great deal of confusion about where their life is going can occur. In many cases, women have to make vital decisions regarding their future, and again, women can deal with this pressure with more confidence and assuredness that they are making the right choices when they feel safe and supported by staff at the shelter. If a staff member helps a woman to feel these things, they end up being key supporters in the woman's fight to be free from the situation that led them to seek help in the first place. It is also important for the shelter worker to strike the right balance between providing a controlled, but comfortable environment where women can feel entitled to living a life free from abuse, so that they can begin to focus on their future while letting go of the past.

Therefore it is important that there are support workers within the African-Canadian community that victims of abuse can turn to for help. If there were African-Canadian women working in Autumn House, women from their community may feel more trust in the system and more inclined to seek help.

Limitations

Autumn House is currently operating at a deficit¹². They are also operating with a limited number of staff. This situation is typical of a non-profit organization such as Autumn House and not expected to improve any time in the near future. Therefore, the recommendations will be limited to those that are operationally feasible given Autumn

¹² Amherst Daily News, "Transition house hopes to improve fundraising in new year", December 2004

House's current resources and will not include any recommendations that will require any additional staffing or funding.

Recommendations

Autumn House has a social responsibility to address the concerns regarding the level of service and employment opportunities provided to African-Canadian women despite the fact that there are a small number of African-Canadian women in Cumberland County. Autumn House needs to build up the level of trust and awareness that African-Canadian women within the community have in transition houses. They also need to educate their current workers and volunteers on cultural issues affecting African-Canadian women and make changes to any policies or procedures that may have created systemic barriers to this community group. The authors recommend the implementation of the following four recommendations in order to meet these goals.

Recommendation 1- Adoption of a Diversity Commitment Policy

Three transition houses in Nova Scotia have adopted Affirmative Action policies to address inequities in recruitment and hiring. Autumn House provided the authors with a copy of Byrony House's Affirmative Action policy and asked that this be tailored to meet the needs of Autumn House. While adopting an Affirmative Action policy would be a positive step forward, it would not fully address the concern of African-Canadian women not accessing the services of the transition house. Therefore, the authors recommend that Autumn House combine their affirmative action goals with their goals of increasing the use of services by African-Canadian women into one policy. Autumn House was supportive of this recommendation. Therefore, the authors have developed this new policy, entitled the Autumn House Diversity Commitment Policy, and it is attached in Appendix "A."

The ultimate long-range goals of Autumn House as reflected in the Diversity

Commitment Policy are as follows:

1. To develop a workplace that represents the composition of the labour market population with respect to persons with disabilities, racially visible persons, and First Nations/Aboriginal persons, through a combination of recruitment, hiring and training practices; and
2. To ensure that every woman in Cumberland County, regardless of age, race, colour, religion, creed, sex, sexual orientation, physical or mental disability; an irrational fear of contracting an illness or disease, ethnic, national or aboriginal origin, family status, marital status, source of income, political belief; affiliation, or activity, or that person's association with another individual(s) having characteristics referred to in the previous grounds, is aware of the services provided by Autumn House and makes use of these services if they find themselves in an abusive intimate partner relationship.

A summary of the policy is as follows:

- The policy includes the accountability and responsibility of the Executive Director and the Board of Directors to support and enforce the policy, as well as to lead by example by demonstrating behaviour consistent with the policy. The Byrony House policy simply stated that the Executive Director and Board of Directors were responsible for implementing the policy but did not outline their specific accountability with respect to enforcing it. It is important that the accountability is clearly stated to ensure that the policy does not become a piece of paper that has no meaning or is not followed.
- The policy includes the development of an Equity Committee to actively monitor the objectives set out in the policy. The Equity Committee will be responsible to meet with members of various cultural groups within the community to identify the relevant issues and then develop a detailed plan of the goals, objectives and timelines of how Autumn House will address these issues.

- The Equity Committee will also be responsible for identifying and removing systemic barriers to equal opportunity employment. This includes a detailed review of current job descriptions, job postings, and recruiting standards.
- All staff and volunteers will receive a written copy of the policy along with a letter supporting the policy from the Board of Directors and Executive Director. The policy will also be discussed at regular staff meetings and as part of the orientation and training of new employees and volunteers.
- Autumn House will conduct diversity awareness programs for all employees and volunteers in co-operation with the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission.
- Autumn House employees will attend and/or participate in any events within the community regarding diversity or cultural issues. Autumn House has already started this and also actively supports events such as International Women’s Day and the Internal Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Continuing to reach out to the community in this manner will help to build up trust in the public eye that Autumn House is supportive and accepting of all persons, which in turn should help to increase awareness of the service and eventually the use of the service by African-Canadian women in need.

Recommendation 2- Amend the collective agreement

Collective agreement language can create barriers to employment equity hiring, promotion, transfer, etc. Tearmann House (New Glasgow) has adopted language in their collective agreement, and it is recommended that management attempt to negotiate similar language into the Autumn House worker's collective agreement during the next round of collective bargaining. This will help to reduce barriers to employment equity hiring and assist Autumn House with the implementation of the Diversity Commitment Policy. The Tearmann House collective agreement language is as follows¹³:

4.03

a) Pursuant to the *Nova Scotia Human Rights Act*, the Employer and the Union agree that there will be no discrimination with respect to Employees covered by

¹³ Tearmann House Collective Agreement- provided by Executive Director Karen O’Hara

this Agreement, by reason of age (up to age 65,) race, religion, creed, colour, ethnic or national origin, sexual orientation, marital status, physical or mental disability (unless there is a bona fide occupational requirement,) nor by reason of membership or activity in the Union. The parties expressly acknowledge the discretionary authority of the Employer to require that gender be a specification of employment.

b) Both the Employer and the Union agree to cooperate fully in the advancement of affirmative action/employment equity policies and procedures adopted by the Employer from time to time, and agree that any Articles in this agreement shall be construed and applied in a manner consistent with the effective implementation of such policies and procedures. Provided, however, that any overriding of a provision of this Agreement to implement such an initiative shall require the written agreement of the Union.

Recommendation 3- Hold a designated volunteer recruitment from the African-Canadian community

Autumn House uses volunteer workers in a variety of ways and they are an integral part of the service. Volunteer workers receive detailed training on domestic violence and are able to answer crisis calls and work with women and children experiencing abuse. In addition to the affirmative action goals outlined in the Diversity Commitment policy, it is recommended that Autumn House hold a designated recruitment to seek volunteer workers from the African-Canadian community. This would be a positive step towards educating members of the community who can act as support for friends and relatives they are aware of who are experiencing domestic violence. They could also provide education to the women in their community and encourage these women to use the services of Autumn House. African-Canadian women may be more inclined to seek help with the support of these volunteer workers, and even if they choose not to use Autumn House, they are still receiving proper counselling and support from the volunteer workers. The added advantage is that the volunteer workers could also then be in a position to apply for and obtain paid employment opportunities should they arise.

To target the African-Canadian community when seeking volunteers, Autumn House should design an appropriate information package and distribute to organizations

such as the Cumberland African United Baptist Association as well as advertise the recruitment through normal channels such as Human Resources Development Canada and local newspapers. The Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission can likely provide assistance with this initiative.

Recommendation 4- Develop a partnership with the Women’s Institute of the African United Baptist Association of Nova Scotia

In May of 2004, the Women’s Institute of the African United Baptist Association of Nova Scotia received an \$81,500 grant from the Nova Scotia government¹⁴. The grant is to fund an 18-month initiative to ensure access to services for African-Canadian women living in violence. In addition to this project, the Association has also conducted research and worked in conjunction with the Nova Scotia Status of Women and many other agencies in Nova Scotia to examine the issue and can likely provide Autumn House valuable information and support with their initiatives. If possible, it would be extremely beneficial to invite a representative from the Association to a staff meeting as part of staff development to discuss the issues affecting African-Canadian women.

¹⁴ Nova Scotia Status of Women, news release, May 19, 2004

Appendix A: Autumn House Diversity Commitment Policy

Introduction

The Diversity Commitment Policy is a positive, results-oriented policy designed to ensure meaningful opportunities to all segments of society. The Diversity Commitment Policy is the written document through which management commits to ensure that all persons have access to the services of Autumn House, as well as equal opportunities in all aspects of employment and volunteer work with Autumn House. This includes equity in recruitment, selection, appointment, benefits, compensation, and related managerial areas. The Diversity Commitment Policy represents a solid commitment to equal opportunity and practice at all levels of Autumn House. These objectives have been set with the intention of achieving and maintaining them.

The Diversity Commitment Policy is designed to change and/or remedy any practices that have or may have had the effect of producing inequities in service delivery and employment and volunteer work opportunities. These inequities impact significantly on four groups of people: Women, Persons with Disabilities, Racially Visible Persons and First Nations/Aboriginal people. The provisions of the Diversity Commitment Policy will form an integral part of the Personnel Policy and Procedures Manual. To ensure the continued success of this policy, Autumn House will continue to identify and eliminate those barriers that may deny equal opportunities to traditionally under-represented groups.

Goals

The ultimate long-range goals of Autumn House are as follows:

- (1) To develop a workplace that represents the composition of the labour market population with respect to persons with disabilities, racially visible persons, and First Nations/Aboriginal persons, through a combination of recruitment, hiring and training practices; and
- (2) To ensure that every woman in Cumberland County, regardless of age, race, colour, religion, creed, sex, sexual orientation, physical or mental disability; an irrational fear of contracting an illness or disease, ethnic, national or aboriginal origin, family status, marital status, source of income, political belief; affiliation, or activity, or that person's association with another individual(s) having characteristics referred to in the previous grounds, is aware of the services provided by Autumn House and makes use of these services if they find themselves in an abusive intimate partner relationship.

Authority and Responsibility

Autumn House reaffirms its commitment to diversity by the adoption of this policy and the implementation of an Equity Committee to continue to actively monitor the objectives

set out in this policy. The Equity Committee will comprise of at least one employee(s), one Board of Directors representative(s), and any other interested volunteers. The Equity Committee will update the Board of Directors on diversity issues and initiatives by submitting written progress reports every six months.

The Equity Committee will meet with stakeholders and women's groups from within the community in order to identify the relevant issues affecting the various cultural groups within Cumberland County. The Equity Committee will then assume responsibility for preparing a detailed plan outlining the goals, objectives and time lines which Autumn House will strive to meet as part of their commitment to diversity. This detailed plan will be submitted to the Board of Directors for approval within six months of the signing of the Diversity Commitment Policy. The plan along with the progress reports will be submitted to the Race Relations and Affirmative Action Division of the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission.

In addition, the Equity Committee will be responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Diversity Commitment Policy, identifying systemic barriers to equal opportunity employment (including a detailed review of job descriptions, job postings, and recruiting standards), developing methods for eliminating potential barriers, prioritizing tasks, maintaining records (minutes), and liaising with other Committees in areas and projects related to Equity/Affirmative Action and other cultural or diversity issues.

Staff Development

Autumn House will conduct diversity awareness programs for all employees and volunteers in co-operation with the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission. Autumn House will also dedicate a portion of orientation and training of new employees and volunteers to diversity awareness issues.

Autumn House employees and members of the Board of Directors will also actively participate in events within Cumberland County relating to diversity and women's issues, and will continuously seek to form and maintain relationships with various community groups.

Executive Director, Board, Personnel & Equity Committees

The Executive Director, Board of Directors, Personnel and Policy Committee, and the members of the Equity Committee will be required to implement and support the Diversity Commitment Policy and to ensure that it is a practiced policy within Autumn House. They will also lead by example by ensuring that their own behaviour is consistent with the policy and by addressing and correcting inconsistent behaviour demonstrated by anyone associated with Autumn House.

Internal Publication of the Diversity Commitment Policy

All employees shall be informed of the Diversity Commitment Policy by the following

methods:

- (1) Each current employee and volunteer receiving a copy of the Diversity Commitment Policy along with written communication endorsing the policy from the Board of Directors and the Executive Director;
- (2) Each new employee and volunteer receiving a copy of the Diversity Commitment Policy during their training and orientation;
- (3) Placing “Equal Employment Opportunity” policy statements and human rights posters on staff bulletin boards and in strategic work areas;
- (4) Reference to the Diversity Commitment Policy in the Personnel Policy & Procedures Manual;
- (5) Ongoing discussion of the Diversity Commitment Policy in regular staff meetings; and
- (6) Human Rights awareness sessions coordinated in cooperation with the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission, which will sensitize employees to the kinds of barriers and attitudinal stereotypes experienced by women of various cultural backgrounds.

External Publication of the Diversity Commitment Policy

Autumn House shall announce their commitment to diversity and major diversity initiatives undertaken by way of local newspapers and any other publications within the community.

Legal Issues

It is expressly understood that the Diversity Commitment Policy is subject to all legal obligations of Autumn House regarding employee seniority rights and otherwise under collective agreements, the Trade Union Act, and other relevant legislation which supersede this plan.

Renewal

The Autumn House Diversity Commitment Policy will be updated and submitted to the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission for renewal five (5) years from the date of signing.

DATED AT Amherst, Nova Scotia, this _____th day of _____, 2005 SIGNED: Executive Director: _____ Board of Directors Representative: _____
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