

Executive Summary

A two-day conference of the Ontario Association of Women's Centres (OAWC) was held on February 5 and 6, 2007, as part of the Association's Revitalization Initiative. This conference was the first OAWC conference in eight years, the previous one occurring in 1999. The conference was a follow-up to the Fall and Winter regional meetings of 2006 and addressed the regions' desire for a space in which to network and determine the Conference's course of action.

The theme of the conference was "The Future of Women's Services in Ontario", and this is reflected in the conference sessions and guest panel. Strengthening community partnerships and increasing the profile and capacity of the OAWC was a central focus of the conference. Speakers from national and provincial organizations spoke on a panel entitled, "Successful Models". Each speaker stressed the need for community partnerships to be a central concern for the OAWC, in order to ensure that the network is able to provide an effective vehicle for women's centres in Ontario to be heard. Conference participants then had the chance to share their visions for the OAWC in small focus groups. The main themes arising out of the focus groups were: engaging young women, community action, and quick and easy information sharing.

It was recognized that the OAWC needed to build a strong infrastructure in order to be the powerful voice for Women's Centres that the conference participants desired. An action plan was drafted that identified a list of priorities for the Steering Committee to begin to clarify and develop. To this end, a new Steering Committee was elected, which included an alternate for each region. An effort was made to place young women in the roles of alternates. There was also a desire to initiate a commitment to a model of membership development that would strengthen the individual members within the OAWC, as well as the relationships between centres. The issues flagged for further review were: membership structure; definitions; fee structures; the role of the trustee; and membership categories.

An evaluation was handed out at the end of the conference to all participants. Overwhelmingly, participants expressed satisfaction at the opportunity to reconnect and network with women doing similar work across the province. The speakers were noted as a highlight of the conference, and virtually all participants were eager to support the Association's restructuring and growth, and participate in the next OAWC conference.