

Lesbians struggle at Nellie's women's hostel

Nellie's is a short-term hostel in Toronto for women in crisis: battered and runaway wives, transient women, women without money or a place to stay. The staff and residents at Nellie's have organized an emergency occupation to win long-term stable funding. Since they opened in 1974, they've had to cope with short-staffing, lack of funds, and the consequent need to turn more and more women away.

Now the Government cutbacks are creating more of a demand for emergency shelter, and other services, because more and more women are being thrown into poverty. *The money and services that go to women have been the hardest hit.* The cutbacks have come from every level of government: the Family Allowance freeze, wage controls, and Unemployment Insurance (federal); daycare, welfare, and health care (provincial); daycare, housing, etc. (municipal).

In Toronto, there are only 77 emergency beds available to women, compared to 1,200 for men! Nellie's, one of six women's hostels, had a minimal budget for 1976 of \$168,000, and a ceiling of \$85,000 from Metro Social Services. The search for private funds has yielded little, which means that Nellie's will be at least \$35,000 in debt by the end of the year. Under these circumstances, the staff is often forced to work 30 extra hours per week without pay; lack of security precautions have meant assaults on the staff and residents; there are bad sanitary conditions, a lack of space, facilities, and counselling for the women who come to Nellie's doors.

Growing support for their fight is making it possible for the women at Nellie's to say they'll continue the occupation until they win. The crisis there is the same crisis facing many community services run by and for women. Most of these services were set up to meet basic needs: employment centres, immigrant services, hostels, rape crisis centres, etc. Because they have never been recognized as a social necessity deserving adequate funding, too many are now being forced to close or to operate on a steady diet of low-paid and unpaid (volunteer) work. Workers must endure long hours, bad working conditions, and face curtailment of services. These services are seen as mere 'women's work' and are run largely on a pool of cheap female labor - the same one that works for 'love' in the home.

Nellie's supporters are demanding permanent adequate funding for Nellie's,

a long-term residence for women, and new government policies toward long-term adequate funding for community-based services.

Lesbian women are among the strongest supporters of the occupation. One of the possibilities that's becoming less and less open to women because of the economic crisis is lesbianism. Those of us who have been able to avoid or leave marriages have to subsist on low 'women's' wages, welfare or unemployment insurance, all of which have been systematically cut back. Most lesbians are trapped in dependent relationships with men or our families by the lack of our own money.

All of us are more vulnerable than ever to the constant pressure to hide our lesbianism - at home, on the job, in the streets, and in the courts. How many more women might 'come out' of unendurable home situations if we could afford food, clothing, medical care and decent housing for ourselves and our children?

Lesbian women among the staff, residents, and supporters of Nellie's have helped build the occupation by writing letters to the newspapers and carrying our own placards in a large delegation to Queen's Park. We have spoken as lesbians on behalf of the struggle at Nellie's about how fed up we are with the cutbacks. The government has counted too long on women's 'natural' capacity for self-sacrifice.

Wages Due Lesbians was planning to go to the 4th Annual Gay Rights Conference and to give a workshop on the Wages for Housework Campaign. We cancelled because Nellie's took precedence. In the leaflet we wrote to explain our choice we said "... the struggles of lesbian women and gay men will be connected on our terms."

The fact that the Gay Conference endorsed the aims of the struggle at Nellie's is a real confirmation of the importance of lesbian women setting up our own priorities and having the men support us. When we are subsumed in the men's organizations we have nothing to offer but our weakness as women - we just 'serve time' while others define our goals. As we build, with struggles like the occupation at Nellie's, the power of a movement of women - lesbian and straight - which is based on our need for time and money of our own, we will end our subordination within the gay movement and have some power to offer the men.

by Wages Due Lesbians

Letters to the editor

Women's hostels

All of Toronto's women's hostels face drastic budget deficits this year.

At Interval House, a hostel for battered women and children, we have had to lay off half of our staff of 10 in order to keep the doors open, but the service has been crippled in the process and we still face a \$8,000 deficit.

The staff of Women in Transition, another hostel for women and children in crisis situations, have decided to take a cut in already low salaries to maintain their service.

Nellie's Emergency Hostel is full to overflowing with women badly in need of the service and the underpaid and overworked staff are barely able to offer food to the residents because of budget deficiencies.

Stop 158, a planning house for young women, and Anduhyaun, a residence for native women, are both overcrowded and unable to expand their services to keep pace with community need.

When Ontario Community and Social Services Minister James Taylor recommended budget restraints in social services spending, he promised that no one in need would suffer. This doesn't seem to be the case.

At Interval House the cutbacks are a physical reality. With only five staff left, counselling and child care have gone by the boards. Money management is simply a question of paying rent, utilities and food bills. If there's enough left that week we pay the staff and give some carfare to the residents.

We now have to refuse admission to working women because we do not receive a full subsidy for women who work. This comes at a time when the Ministry of Community and Social Services has decided to put pressure on sole-support mothers to work instead of receiving family benefits.

We don't know what to do about the huge hole in our living-room ceiling, and Metro Toronto housing inspectors have told us we will lose our lodging house licence if we

don't install an air vent in our third-floor bathroom and rebuild the back porch.

We try to keep the cockroaches and mice at bay with sprays and mousetraps because we can't afford the cost of fumigation. There is no money to replace our supply of linens and blankets before winter and new mattresses will have to wait another year. The stuffing is coming out of the new living room furniture we recently purchased from the Salvation Army Thrift Store.

Mr. Taylor has suggested that agencies affected by the provincial restraints should canvass the community for money to meet budgets, but United Way member agencies, such as Interval House, are prohibited from door-to-door, corporate, and mail canvassing. This leaves us with government as the remaining source for money. Unless the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services and Metro Toronto Social Services co-operate to increase the per diem subsidies for all women's hostels in Metro To-

ronto, residential crisis services for women will grind to a halt.

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other women's services all the more necessary.

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The acute shortage of emergency and long-term housing for women in Toronto is an especially urgent problem for lesbian women, old or young, married or single. Many of us have to subsist on low "women's" wages, or welfare or unemployment insurance, all of which are being systematically cut back. Most lesbians are trapped in dependent relationships with men or our families by our lack of money of our own.

All of us, because of our poverty and lack of time, have become more vulnerable than ever to the constant pressure to hide our lesbianism—at home, on the job, in the streets and in the courts. How many more women might leave unendurable home situations if we could afford food, clothing, medical care and decent housing for ourselves and our children?

This is our economic crisis. It makes the continuation and expansion of Nellie's and