

Partnership and the Role of Cities / Municipalities

Elisabeth Arnold

Councillor, City of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Summary

Municipalities' responsibilities have been growing in Canada as a result of downloading from federal and provincial governments. However new responsibilities have not been accompanied by increased budgets, adding to municipalities' reluctance to take on women's safety issues.

Since social change of any kind rarely occurs from within government, any response or change in approach will likely continue to be initiated by community organizations. A change in organizational culture is needed – a new way of thinking about problems, modifying beliefs and behaviour – which is much more difficult than a simple operational or policy change.

We must work to make local government as responsive as possible. This is best done by creating enduring community groups and electing people who share our values and supporting them when in office. We must build partnerships with those in positions to create lasting institutional change such as politicians willing to provide information and access to the municipal decision-making process.

The Women's Access to Municipal Services Project sought to identify and develop recommendations to eliminate barriers to women's access to municipal services in Ottawa. Following intensive consultation with diverse women from across the city, recommendations for changes to many departments (public transit, social services, recreation, corporate communications) were submitted to City Council, who then instructed the City General Manager to report on strategies for the recommendations.

Changing traditional approaches of municipal government to be inclusive of women's concerns in City planning and policy will not happen without a commitment to change and plan for making that change a reality.

Introduction

I have been a City Councillor since 1994 in the City of Ottawa. Previously I worked in various community based organizations, and was a member of community boards, including the Ottawa Women's Action Centre Against Violence, where we did a lot of work on systemic causes of violence against women, and facilitated community involvement in developing solutions through methods like organizing safety audits.

Since being elected I have worked on public participation issues, and have worked to increase women's participation in local government – as community members, employees and in elected office – both in my own municipality and through FCM.

Role of municipalities

Municipalities have a critical role in safety for all residents and for women in particular, in many ways. For example:

- 1) policing;
- 2) urban planning;
- 3) social services;
- 4) funding of community organizations;
- 5) licensing and bylaw enforcement;
- 6) resource allocation.

The responsibilities of municipalities have been growing in Canada as a result of downloading of responsibilities from federal and provincial governments, and from the cuts to programs at senior levels. The results of these cuts are often that municipal government must pick up the pieces. A good example of this is affordable housing – when the federal and provincial governments abandoned their responsibilities to provide affordable housing, it was the municipalities that were required to respond to the problems of homelessness.

Response to women's safety issues

So with these increased responsibilities, how are municipalities responding to women's safety issues? Speaking for my own municipality, I would describe it as skeptical and reluctant. Any response, or change in approach, has been, and will likely continue to be, initiated from community organizations. I think that is because what is needed is a change in organizational culture – a new way of thinking about problems – and that kind of change is much more difficult than a simple operational or single policy change. We are talking about modifying beliefs, behavior, and the analytic approach – a much more difficult thing to implement, and for City Council to articulate.

Women's access to municipal services project

One good example of how women in the Ottawa community have attempted to address this challenge is the Women's Access to Municipal Services project, which was spearheaded by Caroline Andrews and Fran Klodawsky, along with one of my former colleagues Diane Holmes. This project was a partnership between the former regional government, the two universities, and various women's organizations in the community. The goal was to identify barriers to women's access to municipal services in Ottawa, and develop recommendations to reduce or eliminate those barriers. Through a very intensive public consultation process, a report with eleven recommendations was submitted to City Council. The report was received by Council, with instructions to the City general manager to report back on implementation strategies for the recommendations by November of this year.

This process was significant because it involved women from across the city, representing all types of women, in discussing municipal services. For many women, this was the first time anyone had asked their opinion about municipal services, and as a result the recommendations to Council reflected their priorities in a way that had not been previously articulated. Recommendations were made for changes to many City departments including public transit, social services, recreation, and corporate communications.

Next steps

It will be important to follow the next steps in this project, to ensure that:

- 1) the recommendations are implemented and treated seriously;
- 2) the City continues to work in partnership with women's organizations to address issues of access;
- 3) the City adopts the principles of inclusivity into its own consultation processes to ensure that women's concerns are considered and addressed in City planning and policy.

For example, we are embarking on an official plan consultation process, which will have important impacts on women's access and safety concerns. The City needs to ensure that it creates a mechanism for ensuring that women from all walks of life are able, and encouraged, to participate in these consultations.

Key ingredients for success

Changing traditional approaches of municipal government, to be inclusive of women's concerns will not happen without a commitment to change and plan for how to make that change a reality. Some of the key ingredients for success are:

- 1) an active and committed community group(s) that is willing and able to remain involved over time;
- 2) access to funding and resources, either in the municipality or through external sources;
- 3) supportive politicians who are willing to provide information and access to the municipal decision making process;
- 4) champions on staff, who are willing and able to be internal advocates;
- 5) building strong partnerships in the community, and in government – building trusting relationships with people who share values and goals is critical to achieving lasting institutional change.

Conclusion

It is my observation that social change of any kind rarely occurs from within government. What we can do is work to make local government as responsive as possible. We can do this best by creating and sustaining strong community groups, by electing people who share our values and supporting them when in office, and building relationships and partnerships with groups and individuals who are in a position to create change.

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this conference. I am pleased to provide you with some of the Ottawa experience, and am looking forward to learning about your experiences, and building further partnerships.