

History of the Community Health Advocates (CHA) Project

The Vancouver Women's Health Collective (VWHC) has always worked to empower women to better inform themselves about their health care and protect and advocate for themselves within the health care system. In 1992 – 1993 the Collective received grant money from both the Ministry of Social Services and Housing and the Ministry of Health to begin two projects that would help to further this goal.

The Social Services grant was received for two projects. The first project was the Leaping Into Health – Women Taking Action Conference. This Conference addressed issues such as menopause, multicultural/native health, eating disorders, sexuality and disabilities. The second project was to conduct survey and focus groups to determine the need for a community based health advocate and the role the advocate would play within the health care system.

The Ministry of Health grant received in 1992 was also used to conduct survey and focus groups on the usefulness and expectations of a computerized information system. The studies performed under these grants demonstrated the need for accessible information about issue specific health concerns. Thus brought to fruition the Women's Health Information Network (WHIN) project. WHIN was designed to work with a network of community health advocates and promote the availability of these advocates to women in the community through our Information Centre. The Ministry of Health gave us money to do preliminary needs assessment for WHIN and further funding for the project was sought from the Ministry of Women's Equality and BC Centre of Excellence.

In addition to WHIN, the Community Health Advocate (CHA) was developed to train advocates to help women deal with violence and disrespect within the health care system. The project also aimed to make computerized health information available to these advocates. The preliminary findings of the surveys and focus groups conducted during 1992/93 had demonstrated a need for such projects; in the 1997-1998 fiscal year, the VWHC applied to the Vancouver Richmond Health Board (now the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority) Community Health Initiative Fund for funding for these initiatives.

The VWHC received funding in 1998 from the health authority for the CHA project for 1997/98. Although further funding was also sought for WHIN, due to the amount of work required by the project and the lack of women power available, WHIN was discontinued and we directed our efforts towards CHA.

A coordinator and trainer were hired in 1998 for the CHA project. They in turn recruited twelve volunteer advocates to volunteer 5 hours per week in their community. The training took place in the fall of 1998. By April 1999 only six advocates remained. By September 1999 three advocates remained.

The project was not working as anticipated. Through recommendations from the Vancouver/Richmond Health Board's Advisory Board (Women's Population Health Committee) and the remaining CHA advocates, the VWHC Steering Committee decided in September 1999, that the CHA project would provide workshops in the Vancouver/Richmond region about accessing respectful health care. Thus began the CHA project's Patient's Rights workshop.

The Patient's Rights workshops focused on helping women in various communities educate themselves about their rights within the health care system. The workshops were designed to provide information and support for women accessing health care; identify the main issues and problems with the health care system faced by women in specific communities; and have women become the experts on and decision makers around their own health. From September 1999 to May 2002, Patient's Rights workshops were delivered to many women through diverse organizations including:

- Mount Pleasant Community Centre
- North Shore Women's Centre
- MOSAIC
- Strathcona Mental Health Team
- The Centre
- AIDS Vancouver
- Gathering Place Education Centre
- Prostitution Alternative Counseling and Education (PACE)
- Vancouver & Lower Mainland Multicultural Family Support Services
- Inform"Elles Reseau-Femmes Colombie-Britannique.

Unfortunately, the VWHC received notice in May of 2002 that the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority would be discontinuing funding for the project. Although the VWHC no longer offers the workshops, all materials developed during the project are available at our Information Centre.