

Editorials & Opinion

All for the sake of bookkeeping

The first rumble of trouble came from the Working Skills Centre, a non-profit agency that helps immigrant women find jobs. The second distress signal came from the West Scarborough Neighbourhood Community Centre, which runs one of the country's best programs for unemployed youth. The third cry for help came from Link Up, a charitable organization that assists job seekers with disabilities. The list of local voluntary organizations facing extinction is growing weekly. And there is a common thread: They're all losing long-standing federal contracts to deliver employment services.

Mayor David Miller is concerned. He fired off a letter to Prime Minister Paul Martin recently, urging him to review the funding practices of the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development. "The City of Toronto is committed to a strong and vibrant community-based non-profit sector," Miller wrote. "The complexity and confusion with respect to the approval process puts current service providers at risk both financially and in terms of compromising service delivery." The source of all this upheaval is a new contracting procedure put in place by federal mandarins last winter. It is so laden with rules, safeguards and administrative requirements that agencies whose first priority is serving their clients — not doing government paperwork — can't cope. Seven have already lost their federal funding. (They include the Working Skills Centre, West Scarborough Neighbourhood Community Centre, Link Up, Goodwill Industries, JVS Toronto, the YMCA and the YWCA of Greater Toronto). Dozens of other agencies are working on month-to-month contract extensions because the department can't approve applications fast enough to meet its own deadlines. Experienced com-



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munity workers are drifting away. Non-profit agencies that have always worked together are competing fiercely against one another and private bidders.

"I don't think there is a conscious effort to undermine the voluntary sector, but that is the unfortunate consequence," said United Way president Frances Lankin. "Organizations are being destabilized and clients are getting bounced around."

This is what happens when overzealous bureaucrats try to flesh out the concept of accountability. They issue directives, set up committees and strangle their community partners in red tape.

Few taxpayers would question the need for accountability at Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). It was the government department that gave away \$1 billion in job grants in 2000 with virtually no guidelines and no oversight. The scandal blighted the political career of then-minister Jane Stewart.

But adding layers of administrative complexity won't fix the problem. It will only punish deeply rooted community agencies.

Take Link Up. It has helped thousands of people with disabilities find work in its 13-year history. It has convinced many Toronto businesses that disabled individuals are skilled and dedicated employees. It has developed partnerships with social agencies offering everything from adult education to immigrant services. Most of its

workers were let go before Christmas.

Take the West Scarborough Neighbourhood Community Centre. It runs a project called Gateway Cafe, which provides job training for disadvantaged youth. It has established connections with more than 500 employers. It is integrated into a network of youth service agencies that ensures that its clients have access to housing and other social supports. It draws on a large pool of volunteers. Barring a last-minute reprieve, the Gateway Cafe will close at the end of March.

Take the Working Skills Centre. It has been serving immigrant women since 1978. It has three full-time training programs and three non-profit businesses to provide clients with work experience. More than 21,000 clients have gone through its doors. It faces closure within 10 weeks.

"These organizations are the backbone of our community," Lankin said. "They give us the capacity to care for citizens."

That evidently counts for less, in the eyes of the micromanagers at HRSDC, than their ability to fill out forms and follow strict accounting rules.

Miller has asked the Prime Minister to consider a moratorium on the department's new directives. Lankin is seeking a meeting with senior ministry officials. Community activists are appealing to newly appointed Human Resources Minister Lucienne Robillard to work with them to design a funding system that balances accountability with compassion.

Toronto can't afford to lose the vitality of its voluntary sector.

If dismantling the city's network of community agencies is how federal bureaucrats define good government, they need a refresher course in public service.

Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.