

Opinion

Job training strangled

Something is seriously wrong when non-profit agencies in Toronto that provide vital job-skills training to disadvantaged youth and new immigrants are closing down.

The closures are the result of a new, and clearly flawed, process now being used by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada to issue grants to community agencies providing the training.

Toronto Liberal MPs Maria Minna and Alan Tonks went public this week, apologizing and expressing concern over bungling by the federal government that has led to the cancellation of programs that helped hundreds of people in this region.

Two months ago, a House of Commons standing committee similarly condemned the process adopted by the ministry in February 2004.

The trouble began when human resources decided that job-training contracts worth more, than \$500,000 should be subject to formal requests for proposals, a process that for-profit and larger agencies have the expertise and funding nec-

essary to navigate effectively.

But the same isn't true for smaller groups providing equally valuable services. Stricter rules have resulted in groups with vast experience losing funding and being forced to close.

Among those directly affected by the closures are immigrant and refugee women served by the Working Skills Centre and hard-to-employ young people who access the Gateway Cafe and who will see already enormous barriers to jobs become insurmountable.

Before entering politics, Minna was a long-time board member with an immigrant settlement agency.

She says no government could afford to pay the tab for all the volunteer hours, community connections to other services such as language and life skills and just plain experience these groups bring to the table.

Human Resources Minister Belinda Stronach was not in the job when the changes were made, but she should make it a priority to acknowledge the problem, rectify it, and put front-line agencies back to work.