

ROCKY MOUNTAIN OUTLOOK

LAKE LOUISE BANFF CANMORE MD OF BIGHORN KANANASKIS STONEY NAKODA

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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2023

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HI HO SILVER

Bella Da Costa rides with a Canadian flag and tows a snowboarder as part of the skijoring event during the SnowDays Winter Festival on Banff Avenue on Saturday (Jan. 28).

JUNGMIN HAM RMO PHOTO

Sexual violence in Alberta reaches crisis point

CATHY ELLIS

BANFF – The Banff YWCA says current provincial funding is not enough to provide the services necessary to deal with a sexual violence crisis throughout Alberta.

Across the province, the number of people seeking specialized sexual assault services is at an all-time high, spiking in 2017 with a massive culture shift linked to the global #MeToo movement and Alberta's own #IBelieveYou campaign, and increased yet again due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The growing number of people in need of help has resulted in lengthy wait times for trauma counselling, sometimes up to 15 months, while Banff's YWCA continues to lobby for more provincial dollars to be able to even offer therapeutic counselling.

YWCA Banff officials say the local organization continues to hear that sexual violence in the community has increased dramatically, as it has across the province, and wants to be able to offer the full range of services to

survivors, including therapeutic counselling.

"There's a crisis of sexual violence across the province," said Reave MacLeod, director of advocacy and community programs at YWCA Banff.

"People are coming to us and saying this is an issue in our community. The Banff RCMP has come to us and said, 'look, we're seeing this increase higher than we've seen in five years, and then we don't even have the full spectrum of services to respond.'"

YWCA Banff is a member of the Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services (AASAS). The organization has 15 sexual assault centres in the province, and the local Y is one of only two that do not offer therapeutic counselling. Last May, AASAS presented the provincial government with a comprehensive business case for increased funding in order to increase specialized support and prevention services across Alberta, asking for an additional \$14.2 million to bring the total provincial investment to \$31.2 million.

The ask included dollars to increase immediate, spe-

cialized counselling to survivors to substantially reduce wait times, expand prevention education, ongoing specialized police and court support services, development of an online 24/7 third-party reporting software platform, and pilot a new core service designed to support wait-listed counselling clients.

The government's response was to provide an additional \$3.67 million for one-time funding for counselling services, but no dollars for access to justice or prevention.

Hunter Baril, the press secretary for the office of the minister of seniors, community and social services, said the proposal from AASAS will be reviewed over the coming months.

He said budgets for sexual assault centres were increased over three years in 2020, bringing the ministry's sexual violence prevention investment to \$13.8 million. Overall, the government provides more than \$17 million across four ministries.

CRISIS

CONTINUED ON A4

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