

UNDERMINING YOUR PROGRAM'S "ARMS LENGTH" RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GOVERNMENT

Your receipt of provincial support for a SE program for Social Assistance recipients has resulted in your participants' perception of your program staff in a policing role, and has blurred your organization's distinction from government.

Through our travels to numerous (mostly Ontario) organizations, we know there are a number of things that you can do to respond to this challenge:

1. Ensure that your training staff are not directly involved in monitoring and reporting.
2. Minimize what you have to report - do your best to protect the anonymity of people in your program so that they can participate freely. Be firm with your funder about what information you are willing to collect and report on.
3. Work to build a strong working relationship with your government partners. Try to build their understanding about the importance of your working relationship with clients and how reporting requirements can undermine those relationships.
4. Try to institute a designated caseworker relationship so that you don't constantly have to intervene with different caseworkers on behalf of your clients.
5. Negotiate roles and responsibilities so that the caseworker does most of her work directly with clients. Minimize your role in monitoring the government's official business.
6. It might make sense to take a stand at the policy level pushing the bureaucracy to adapt its policies to support the development of women's businesses.
7. Some agencies with good relationships have caseworkers come to the training site to do this work, and as a result have a greater understanding of the program and of the needs of women's businesses.
8. Continue to build your credibility with your participants. In this case actions speak louder than words. They need to see that your program is actively protecting their interests and confidentiality. The confidentiality agreement that you sign with your participants should work both ways – by signing it your organization and staff are agreeing to limit what is said about participants. This can be dangerous these days, we've heard reports of some provincial governments subpoenaing people to obtain client information.
9. In our experience, a relationship of trust and openness is critical to the success of a SE program. If you can't maintain an arms length relationship with government, you will undermine your program's trust and credibility. At some point it is almost better not to take the money at all, than to completely undermine the ability of your program to function effectively.

They are strictly our ideas and we know that not everyone will agree. We think we need to know more about your situation in order to give any advice. If the policy situation is anything like that of Ontario, it does not surprise me that people are being careful and are leaving the program.

There are some programs that have managed to do good work in the face of tremendous regressive bureaucratic and policy challenges. It seems that these organizations have found more progressive and risk taking administrators who are willing to interpret the rules in a way that provides a positive context for economic development with women on Social Assistance.

Janet Murray and Mary Ferguson
Eko Nomos Program Development Consultants
70 Bertmount Ave., Toronto, Canada M4M 2X9
Tel: (416) 461-7711 Fax: (416) 461-7723

Eko Nomos promotes innovation and excellence in community-based economic development programs.