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'Disappearing act' a tragedy for mom, kid

Ottawa program less than it was designed to be

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Candace and her 14-year-old daughter, Amelia, started out as victims of a violent abuser but wound up victimized by a federal process that took away their family, friends and past forever.

They are two of at least 100 Canadians who in the 1990s were pressed by law enforcers and government officials to submit to a complete identity change, aimed at safeguarding victims from life-threatening relationships.

The New Identities for Victims of Abuse had been in place for about six years when Revenue Canada's then-director of benefits programs recruited the single mom in 1998.

Candace and her child had been running from her ex, a former military man, for years. Not only had he threatened them repeatedly, he was also known to hate police, who often had to be deployed to her Ontario home to chase him away.

Candace, 40 at the time, said she was told she'd better get with the program or she and her daughter would continually be at risk, so she relented, not realizing the life-altering results of the irreversible renunciation of her and her child's former lives.

Revenue Canada bureaucrats working in partnership with colleagues in what was then Human Resources Development Canada no doubt meant well as they struggled to steer enrollees through NIVA's poorly planned and badly organized relocation process, particularly the massive federal-provincial paper chase-and-erase.

But they were running on empty. Managers had no funding or resources, no designated office and, worse yet, no co-operation from the provinces, which had to be relied upon to delete all records related to a person's life or prepare a fresh paper trail for a new arrival.

Everything from Candace's social insurance number to birth certificate, family connections, medical records, driver's licence, passport, provincial health benefits, marriage/divorce papers and custody order had to be exorcised and begun anew.

Nine years later, and mom and daughter are still on the move and still missing important pieces of their lives.

Try getting hired, opening a bank account or applying for credit without a paper trail of your past.

A 2000 HRDC poll of a third of NIVA participants indicates Candace is not alone: 57 per cent found their financial status was either the same or worse than before joining the program.

Travel, document fees and moving ate up much of their income, but by far the toughest blow was having to cut all ties with family and friends and start fresh, to learn to trust again and forge new relationships. Many, while admittedly feeling safer and freer, had a hard time with the isolation and pressure of having to guard such a secret.

Respondents urged the authorities to establish a central agency for each document service and more importantly bring the provinces on side with identical policies and procedures.

But their concerns were ignored until last spring, when the Tories announced plans for a new identity service aimed at "a single service-delivery network to secure all the necessary federal documentation to complete an identity change."

Susanne Dehlin, director of victim services for the Solicitor-General of B.C., which houses many of the eastern enrollees, agreed the feds' ad hoc process lacked uniform procedures, was poorly thought out and failed to groom participants for the journey.

"The people running the program didn't have the awareness of what these women had to go through, the dynamics of their isolation," she said.

Dehlin said she and her provincial counterparts have met with Ottawa officials to discuss the new initiative. She said if the program is to be effective Ottawa must first develop consistent training and assessment tools across the board and help the provinces fund the costs.

"But the best solution is to find alternatives so that victims aren't forced to give up their family, friends, contacts, jobs and homes."

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