

LOCAL

Strike stalks province's largest women's shelter

By Shamona Harnett

THE staff of Osborne House, the province's largest women's shelter, is on the verge of striking over a wage dispute — a move that would close the shelter indefinitely.

On May 3, the shelter's workers, part of the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the Manitoba Government Employees' Union, unanimously voted to walk out at noon this Friday if wage issues aren't resolved, said Brian Ellis of CUPE.

The salary of an Osborne House worker ranges from \$15,698 for a children's support worker to \$25,662 for a counsellor, wages Ellis said are too low, considering the intense nature of the work required at the shelter.

Neither the union nor Osborne House would reveal wage demands or offers.

Last year at Osborne House, more than 10,000 individual and group counselling sessions were provided to women and children in need, while the crisis line handled over 9,000 calls. There were approximately 11,000 overnight stays at the shelter last year.

"It's not uncommon for a mother and

her three kids to come to us in the middle of the night," said Ellis. "The family may not speak English and they may all need heavy-duty crisis counselling."

He also said it's common for people on the verge of suicide to call the shelter's crisis line looking for immediate help.

"This is why we don't want to end up on the picket line," he said. "We need to be here for women and children in need."

Ellis said Osborne House's approximately 50 workers are anxious to settle on a satisfactory collective agreement and avoid strike action.

Osborne House's executive director Lea Frame said the current labour dispute is a result of underfunding by the provincial government. The province's shelters, including nine others across Manitoba, receive approximately \$5 million a year.

Frame said those who use the shelter's services are being rerouted to the other shelters across the province.

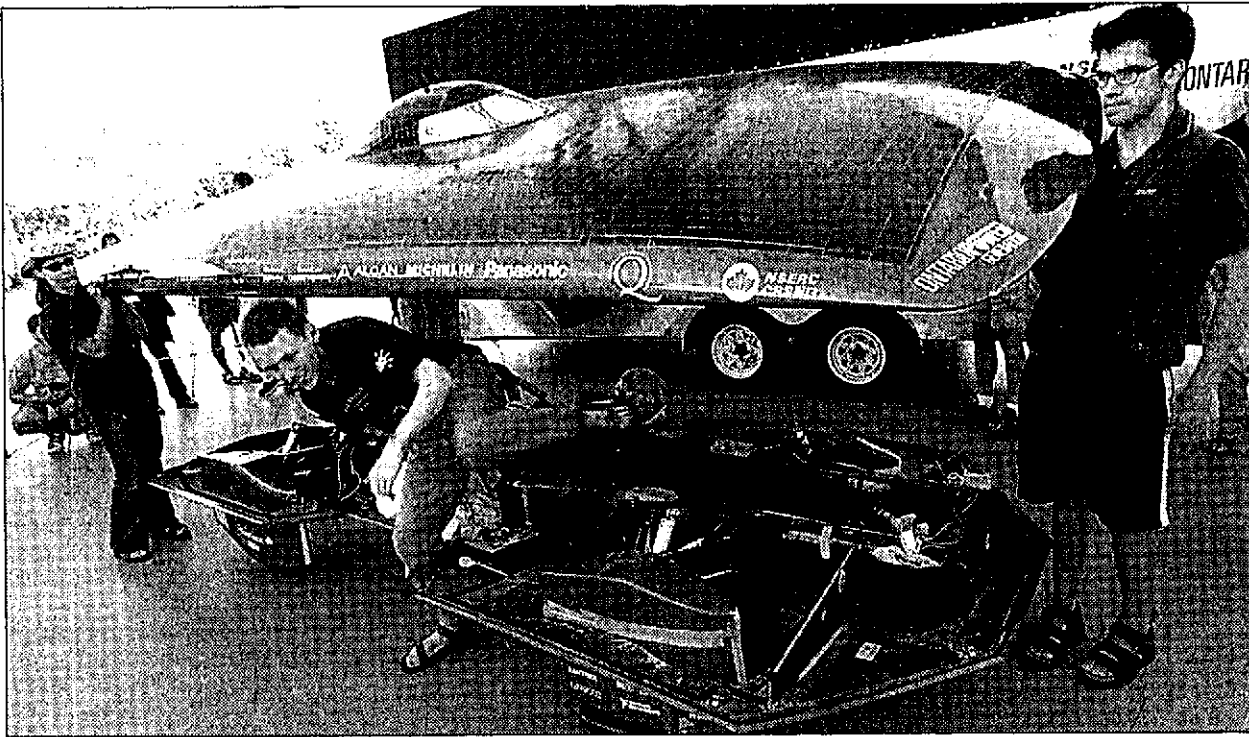
"We have never turned people away from Osborne House," said Frame. "And we hope that we don't have to turn anyone away if there's a work stoppage."

Family Services Minister Tim Sale confirmed during question period at the

legislature yesterday that the province has helped Osborne House develop contingency plans in case its staff goes on strike, adding that as of yesterday, the shelter is not accepting admissions.

Sale would not say if the government is prepared to bring Osborne House under the jurisdiction of the Essential Services Act, which would ensure a working agreement, mandating a minimal staff, is implemented during a strike or walkout.

According to Ellis, Osborne House, which has been in operation since 1973, has never held a strike vote in its history.



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It runs on sun

Queens University engineering student James Keirstead yesterday climbs out of a trail-blazing vehicle that broke the world distance record for a solar-powered car over the weekend. It took Keirstead — shown at The Forks yesterday — and his classmates two years to build the solar car, which broke the 4,058-kilometre world record on Saturday in Ontario. The car reaches a top speed of 125 km/h.

City ready to allow begging after dark, but not in groups

Panhandlers to get new bylaw

By David O'Brien

PANHANDLERS will no longer have to get up during the day to ply their trade: A proposed new bylaw allows them to beg in the dark, but not in a group.

City council is expected to strike down the old Panhandling Bylaw and enact a new one tomorrow as part of a compromise to avoid a lawsuit from the National Anti-Poverty Organization (NAPO).

The old bylaw, passed in 1995, restricted panhandlers to daylight hours and prohibited begging near automatic teller machines, bus shelters and banks, or in a transit bus or elevator.

The new bylaw seeks to regulate conduct, rather than the location or time of their activity.

If adopted, street people won't be allowed to ask for spare change in a way that obstructs pedestrian traffic. They can't verbally threaten or insult passers-by, or approach a pedestrian as part of a

group of three or more persons.

The new bylaw also prohibits panhandlers from continuing to solicit from a pedestrian "after that person has made a negative initial response."

Michael Conner, a lawyer with Legal Aid's public interest law section, which represents NAPO, said the current bylaw discriminates against the poor and violates their constitutional right to free expression.

NAPO was set to challenge the existing bylaw, but has agreed to drop its suit if the new bylaw is approved, civic documents said.

The city has also agreed to drop about 50 outstanding charges under the bylaw.

The new bylaw was developed after talks with civic officials, NAPO and representatives of business groups in the downtown and Osborne Village, where most panhandlers operate.

Spokesmen for business groups said they like the existing bylaw, but they were satisfied the new one would have

enough teeth to regulate the behaviour of panhandlers.

"Rather than risk losing what we had, it made sense to go along with a new bylaw," said Rick Joyal, program manager of the Downtown Business Improvement Zone.

Joyal said a core group of about 20 panhandlers operated along Portage Avenue in past years, but their numbers seem to be down this year.

The Osborne Village area has even fewer career paupers on the street said Asher Webb, executive director of the Osborne Village Business Improvement Zone. Mayor Glen Murray, who helped draft the current bylaw, said he didn't see any need to change it.

If approved at executive policy committee tomorrow morning, the new bylaw will be tabled at council later in the day.

The maximum penalty under the bylaw is a fine of \$1,000 or six months in jail.

Malathion sets stage for show in park

Fogging a go near Rainbow Stage

THE city fogged Kildonan Park for mosquitoes twice last week, lifting a curtain of doubt over Rainbow Stage's production of 42nd Street.

The outdoor theatre had worried that its show, set to begin at the end of July, would be ruined because of an earlier decision not to spray the park with the pesticide Malathion.

The fogging program would have destroyed a breeding site in the park for special beetles that feed on purple loosestrife, a weed that is a menace to wetlands across Manitoba.

But the city decided it could protect the beetles from the pesticide by covering them with a plastic tarp, city entomologist Randy Gadawski said.

The park was sprayed twice last week and will probably be blitzed again as part of the on-going fogging war, Gadawski said.

A spokesman for Rainbow Stage couldn't be reached

yesterday. Meanwhile, cold, windy and wet weather halted fogging operations in the city Sunday night and it was unlikely they would resume last night, Gadawski said.

City traps are still registering more than 100 mosquitoes, down from about 400 last week, but still too high for comfort, he said.

Weather permitting, city crews will resume fogging tonight, starting in the northeast corner of the city and following a clockwise route.

Sections of North Kildonan, Transcona and St. Boniface are first on the list, followed by Windsor Park, St. Vital and St. Germain.

The crews then cross the river to St. Norbert, Fort Richmond, Fort Garry, Wildwood, Waverley Heights, continuing in a northwesterly direction.

Fogging takes place between 9:30 p.m. and 5:30 a.m.

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