

Your Voice for Choice



Abortion Rights
Coalition of Canada

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Canada's only national political pro-choice advocacy group

POB 2663, Station Main, Vancouver, BC, V6B 3W3 • info@arcc-cdac.ca • www.arcc-cdac.ca

September 12, 2015

Mayor Walt Cobb, and City Council
450 Mart St.
Williams Lake, BC, V2G 1N3

Dear Mayor Cobb and City Council,

We understand that the City of Williams Lake will be looking at an application on Tuesday Sept 15 to approve a proclamation for "Celebrate Life Week" from Sept 27 to Oct 4. The proclamation application was submitted by the group Choice for Life Society of Williams Lake. We understand this same proclamation has been approved by the City for the past few years; however, there was considerable controversy and media attention last year.

We are writing to ask the Williams Lake City Council to please reject this particular proclamation application, and refrain from approving it in the future. We believe there are strong grounds on which you can take these actions: The Choice for Life Society is an explicitly religious, anti-abortion group according to their website, and the proclamation represents a cloaked attempt to get the City to approve an anti-choice viewpoint that would deny women their Charter rights. As such, the proclamation would represent the City's tacit support of discrimination against women and of attacks on women's human rights and democratically-decided laws (both provincial and federal). It is inappropriate for any City to do this. Please allow me to explain these points further.

Both the title of the week and the wording of the Proclamation appear quite benevolent, but evaluating the group behind the request is perhaps even more critical than vetting the message itself. Groups with an unpopular agenda will not state their views upfront in these situations, and instead will whitewash their language to gain more public support.

To illustrate, a real-life example of this dynamic occurred in Regina in 2013 (as well as six other cities and towns previously). The mayor of Regina approved a proclamation for the benign-sounding "European Heritage Week." However, when the mayor learned that a white supremacist group was behind the request, he immediately rescinded the proclamation.

In the case of anti-abortion groups in particular, the decision to approve or reject a proclamation must also include an understanding of why an anti-abortion viewpoint rises to the level of discrimination on the basis of sex when it is officially supported by a city. Canada's anti-abortion

movement often uses progressive-sounding language around the protection of human rights, and in this case the Choice for Life Society of Williams Lake appears to want to “celebrate life” in general. However, the group’s website is explicitly Christian (it quotes many Bible verses) and is almost entirely concerned with abortion. So in fact, its proclamation is really about “celebrating” the lives of embryos and fetuses, and nothing else.

A primary goal of the anti-abortion movement – likely shared by the Choice for Life Society – is to recriminalize abortion and impose forced motherhood onto women, even at risk of their lives or health. According to our courts, women cannot exercise full rights or achieve equality under our Charter without control over their fertility, which must include access to safe and legal abortion. The 1988 Supreme Court Morgentaler decision that threw out our abortion laws ruled that the restrictions violated women’s right to bodily security by increasing risks to their life and health. One judge also found that the restrictions interfered with women’s right to liberty, privacy, and conscience as well.

Women are also protected against discrimination under BC’s *Human Rights Code* as well as the *Canadian Human Rights Code*, both of which include “sex” as a prohibited ground for discrimination. Because only women get pregnant (and some transgender people), the proclamation targets people on the basis of gender. The City’s approval of the proclamation would endorse this discriminatory stance and would make women and transgender citizens of Williams Lake feel unwelcome and harassed in their own city. (People who have heard of this anti-abortion group would likely be well-aware of their real agenda.)

Although I was unable to find a Proclamation Policy on your City’s website, I presume you follow some policy or guidance that would preclude approving proclamations that are discriminatory in their meaning or effect. Perhaps your policy also has criteria limiting the approval of proclamations on controversial or political issues, or those from religious groups.

You may be aware that the City of Kelowna had been approving a similar proclamation each year for “Protect Human Life Week” from a local anti-abortion group. After heavy pressure from the public, local activists, our group, and the Westcoast Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF), the City ended this particular approval in 2013 by rewriting their Proclamation Policy to ensure that Charter values including women’s equality would be honoured. I have attached [LEAF’s August 2012 letter](#) to the City of Kelowna and invite you to read it, as it provides legal reasoning for why cities should not approve these proclamations.

Finally, although many see this as a free speech issue, Section 1 of the Charter allows rights to be balanced and sometimes limited to accommodate other fundamental rights. Rejecting the “Celebrate Life Week” proclamation request in no way prevents the local anti-abortion group from celebrating their week, carrying out their planned events, or speaking out in any way they wish. There is just no need or obligation for the City to help spread their message. Disallowing the proclamation request would therefore be a very narrow and justified speech restriction that rightly prioritizes the rights, health, and dignity of the women of Williams Lake. Can we please ask you to not approve this particular proclamation?

Thank you very much for your kind consideration.



Joyce Arthur
Executive Director
Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada
604-351-0867 • joyce@arcc-cdac.ca