



A SAFE PATH HOME

Solving homelessness and domestic violence in Alberta



Acknowledgements

Traditional Lands

ACWS acknowledges the traditional lands upon which we live, work and play. We recognize that all Albertans are Treaty people and have a responsibility to understand our history so that we can honour the past, be aware of the present and create a just and caring future. ACWS celebrates and values the resiliency, successes and teachings that Alberta's Indigenous people have shown us, as well as the unique contributions of every Albertan.

The ACWS office is located on Treaty 6 land, which is the traditional territory of the Plains Cree and an ancient gathering place of many Indigenous peoples for thousands of years. These lands have also been home to and a central trading place of the Blackfoot, Nakota, Assiniboine, Dene, and the Métis people of western Canada.

We honour the courage and strength of Indigenous women. We honour them as life givers and caregivers as we honour and learn from their continuing achievements, their consistent strength and their remarkable endurance.

Our members - and the participating shelters in this project - serve all nations and all peoples; they are located on Treaty 6, 7 and 8 lands across this province, which includes the six Métis regions of Alberta.

Contributors to this report

ACWS would like to express our gratitude to the women who stayed in Alberta's second-stage shelters, who gifted us with their time, personal experiences and perspectives on shelter services and supports, including the barriers they faced as well as their suggestions for service improvement.

Thank you to the members who participated in this research.

Thank you to all second-stage shelter staff for connecting with women for follow-up and research interviews, helping us test the Acuity Scale, diligently entering data, and most of all for the outstanding work you do in creating safe healing spaces for women and children

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Recommendations

Recommendations for all Service Providers:

1. Recognize in policies, procedures and definitions that domestic violence, in and of itself, is a form of homelessness requiring urgent attention, which includes:
 - a. Identifying second-stage housing as a critical component in an integrated framework to address domestic violence, women's poverty and associated homelessness;
 - b. Planning for and prioritizing women and children in domestic violence situations, and acknowledging their unique safety challenges;
 - c. Providing adequate resources so they may stay in their family home if it is safe to do so and provide safe alternative options where it is not;
 - d. Working closely with ACWS to incorporate women's safety into all housing and Housing First Initiatives, including:
 - i. The addition of a new category of homelessness - "Threat of Violence" – which gives automatic priority to women facing domestic violence. This category should be added to "gatekeeping" assessment tools used for housing and support services, when these are used to ration services.
 - ii. A training component on understanding and responding to domestic violence.
 - e. Prioritizing strategies that allow mothers and children fleeing abuse to remain together as they transition to stable housing and violence free lives.
2. To achieve gender equitable resource allocations, undertake a gendered analysis of all budgets, including analysis of intersectional data and policy responses to identify the needs of women.

Recommendations for Provincial & Municipal Governments:

1. Ensure emergency, senior and second-stage women's shelters have sufficient and sustainable funding.
2. Utilize the specialized expertise of women's and seniors' shelter staff to provide the Provincial Affordable Housing Strategy's recently announced tenant supports for women and seniors escaping violence.
3. Implement tailored housing and income support policies to protect women facing domestic violence from further victimization.
4. Working with women's shelters, encourage second-stage development in areas of need.
5. Include second-stage services in definitions used for affordable housing, recognizing that second-stage provides integrated supports.
6. Partner with emergency and second-stage shelters in providing supports to mothers to keep children safe; policies should support women's choice to access shelter services, without threatening to apprehend children if women choose not to access shelter.
7. Link the capital planning process with the operational budget planning process so that when new second-stage shelters are constructed they have the ability to operate effectively by providing or linking with needed services and facilities. Provide greater certainty by earmarking funds to allow women's shelters to plan strategically.

Recommendations for Federal Government:

1. The Federal Advisory Committee on Homelessness requires a mandate that addresses both the experiences of homeless women as well as women who are homeless due to the actions of their abuser.
2. Update the Federal Strategy to include concrete actions and funding commitments for housing for women fleeing domestic violence.
3. Ensure Canada's National Housing Strategy incorporates the needs of abused women, recognizing that women's homelessness does not manifest itself in the same way as men's homelessness.

A Safe Path Home

"My life was hell before. I would cry all day. Being here has been amazing. I feel like I can finally breathe. I feel safe here. I am flourishing."

For more than 40 years, the domestic violence sheltering movement in Alberta has been serving women who find themselves homeless due to violent partners. Second-stage shelters are a core part of this work, providing long-term shelter to women and children who are in need of safe housing and supports. Responding to the unique circumstances of women and children fleeing domestic abusers, second-stage shelters have developed a range of wrap-around services that prioritize security, trauma and violence informed service and the provision of long-term housing and outreach supports.

The ACWS report, "Building Informed Service Delivery in Second-Stage Shelters" illustrates the beneficial effects second-stage shelter services have on the lives of women, highlights how collaborative research led to enhanced services for women and children, and demonstrates the need for ongoing, sustainable funding towards programs that protect and improve the lives of women and children facing abuse.

The purpose of "A Safe Path Home" is to provide a high level overview of the full second-stage report and to offer supported recommendations on how to improve the safety and accessibility of housing services for women fleeing domestic violence.

The full Second-Stage Report can be accessed at the link below:

<https://www.acws.ca/collaborate-document/2853/view>

Positive Outcomes

At the end of their stay:

87% of women were able to achieve progress on at least one of their goals.

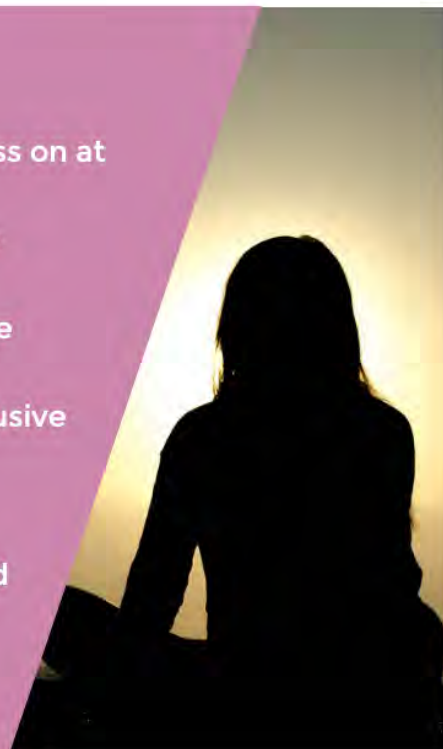
Over 80% of women were satisfied with the services they received.

Over half of women were moving into stable housing when they left shelter.

Only 6% were planning to return to their abusive partners.

At follow-up:

79% were living on their own (this compared to 67% who were homeless when entering shelter).



What is a second-stage shelter?

Most people are familiar with the concept of emergency shelters: places of refuge where women can go, year-round, to escape a situation of violence or abuse. The typical duration of a stay in emergency shelter is 15 days.¹ Second-stage shelters serve women and children who are fleeing domestic violence whose safety and other needs resulting from abuse are not met within the short-term stay in a women's emergency shelter. Women stay in second-stage shelters between six months up to two years, with the average length of stay in 2016-2017 being 214 days.²

Women may be referred to second-stage by an emergency shelter, but may also come through a referral by a health worker, police officer, social worker or from their own research.

Second stage shelters are safe, longer-term apartment style residences which are part of the spectrum of domestic violence and housing support services. They are part of the women's shelter movement but also play a central role in tackling women's homelessness.

The first second-stage shelter opened in Alberta in 1973 and, remarkably, second-stage shelters survived as "pilots" without a government funded program until 2015. Alberta has fourteen second-stage shelters: five in Edmonton and Calgary, seven in smaller towns, and two on-reserve.³

Five urban locations



Seven rural locations



Two on-reserve locations



[1] ACWS Annual Statistics 2016-2017

[2] ACWS Annual Statistics 2016-2017

[3] Alberta on-reserve shelters are funded by the federal government and did not participate in this research. The data contained in this report pertains only to provincially funded shelters.

"There is such a big difference for my children. They do so many activities because we live here...the older children have improved their grades...they get to do normal things that other kids get to do."



Who uses second-stage shelters?

The women accessing second-stage shelters were, on average, 35 years old. More than one-third identified as Aboriginal and a quarter are immigrants to Canada. Indigenous women are more likely sheltered in rural areas and immigrant women in urban areas. Almost all women bring at least one child with them (children were, on average, seven years old).



The average age of women in shelter is 35 years old.



87% of women were accompanied by children.

60% had two or more children.

49% of children were preschool age.



35% had current or previous involvement with Children's Services.

24% of women in second stage shelters immigrated to Canada.



35% of women in second stage shelters were Aboriginal.



67% were homeless or living in short-term accommodations.



Second-stage shelters: Expert, wrap-around services

"Living here has turned my life around ... Before moving here my life was not very good. I am much more independent now. I have more confidence. I would never have been able to start my own business if I hadn't come to the shelter."



Second-stage housing models support and empower women seeking stability during and after abuse. When domestic violence is combined with other factors – such as poverty or addiction – the trauma of abuse makes the healing process all the more difficult.

Second-stage service providers have years of expertise, which allows them to understand the confluence of factors affecting domestic violence survivors and respond appropriately. Women face a difficult and often insurmountable task in finding affordable housing that keeps them safe from abusers and accommodates children. Shelters offer family-friendly, safe and nurturing environments that support women and their children with specialized programs to fit their unique needs. Programs include addictions counselling, outreach services, system advocacy, group support and childcare, among others. Due to the extreme need for housing, women's shelters have also started offering housing through the acquisition of homes and apartments.

Dangers and health factors women face

Women leaving violent relationships typically have a range of needs. When faced with violence that threatens a person's life or well-being, normal reactions include: a loss of power or control over one's physical health and environment, loss of stability, fear for one's safety and the safety of one's children. The severity, frequency and/or duration of abuse deplete personal resources and social supports. Abuse often culminates in devastating impacts on health, social and family functioning, as well as access to economic resources and community supports. Many women in second-stage are dealing with physical and/or mental health concerns as a result of their abuse.

Developmental delays and disabilities are key issues for children entering Alberta shelters and are also a significant challenge for mothers. Common examples include speech delays and learning disabilities (sometimes complicated by poor school attendance due to chaos at home).



Upon entering shelter, 65% of women had one or more health concerns



40% report physical health concerns



33% faced addiction issues



22% suffered severe injuries from their perpetrator



54% faced trauma & mental health issues

Injuries included:

- broken bones
- bruises
- cuts/abrasions
- stab wounds
- neck injuries from strangulation
- head injuries/concussions
- miscarriages
- internal organ injury
- chronic mobility impairment
- eye trauma
- hearing loss



11% were seriously considering suicide



27% of children had a disability, mental or physical health concern

Understanding and Responding to the dangers faced by women



"It was eye opening. I have spent a lot of time trying to minimize my experiences so I could be normal."

"It was shocking to realize that you are in a terrible situation and you don't even realize it."⁴

Danger Assessments

To assess the risk of a woman being killed, or almost killed, by a current or former intimate partner, shelter staff use the Danger Assessment (DA). This instrument was developed by Dr. J. Campbell of Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing. The DA is a validated tool that empowers women, supported by shelter staff, to assess the severity of the threat posed by their abuser and the level of risk they face. Using a standardized tool like the DA helps shelter staff provide appropriate safety supports for women and gives women information they can use to better understand their risks.

ACWS and Alberta shelters have identified that women in second-stage shelters are at a higher risk of femicide; on average, 73% of women in second-stage shelters faced extreme or severe danger from their abuser. For these women, the tool tends to raise consciousness and reduce denial or minimization of the abuse in their lives.⁵ Identifying incidents of abuse also aids the safety planning process. Women can often identify patterns indicating when the abuser is most likely to become violent and develop safety plans specific to their situation.

The risk is even more elevated for Indigenous women. A 2009 study of the Danger Assessment in Alberta Shelters, Keeping Women Alive – Assessing the Danger identified the existence of important differences between experiences of Indigenous women and non-Indigenous women, reasoning that Indigenous women may benefit from a culturally tailored approach.⁶ Recognizing the importance of making the tool culturally relevant to Indigenous women, ACWS and its members from on-reserve shelters worked with Dr. Campbell to develop the Danger Assessment Circle.⁷

Safety Plans

In addition to security measures within the shelter, staff work with women to ensure their personal safety goes beyond the shelter walls: 79% of women in second-stage shelters received support to create and implement personalized safety plans. An ongoing process, safety plans include individualized strategies and tips related to the survivor's specific risks. Safety supports provided by staff can include safety planning for children, accompanying women to court, assisting women with transportation, contacting the police, and – most frequently – doing ongoing safety checks with women.

[4] Campbell, 1995; Ferraro et al. 1983

[5] ACWS 2009 Report: Keeping women alive – Assessing the danger. Available: https://acws.ca/sites/default/files/documents/DangerAssessment-FullReport_FINAL.pdf

[6] ACWS 2009 Report: Keeping women alive – Assessing the danger. Available: https://acws.ca/sites/default/files/documents/DangerAssessment-FullReport_FINAL.pdf

[7] ACWS 2014 Report: Walking the Path Together: Danger Assessment Phase II. Available: <https://acws.ca/collaborate-document/2516/view>

Risk of femicide: Abuser violence escalates when women leave

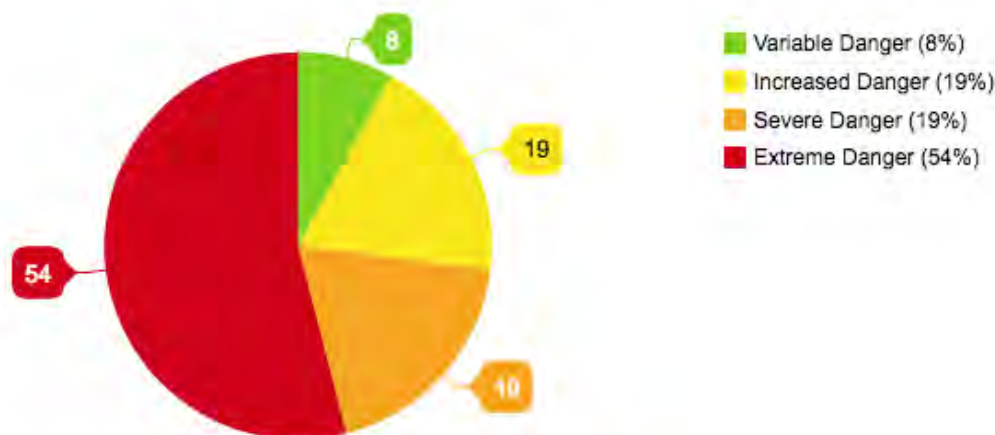
The most serious of all threats faced by women is the likelihood of being murdered by an abusive ex-partner.⁸ Research indicates that “the most dangerous time for an abused woman is when she attempts to leave.”⁹ Women are six times more likely to be killed by an ex-partner than by a current partner.¹⁰

Given the dynamics of power and control, once an abuser believes he has lost control of the relationship, he is more likely to engage in increasingly dangerous behaviour.

Women accessing the longer-term services of second-stage shelters have left their relationships, so they are at greater risk. The high scores on the Danger Assessment (DA) and the fact that 22% of women in second-stage shelters were severely injured by their abusers bears this out. Unfortunately, DA scores are on the rise: In 2016/17 ACWS second-stage member shelters recorded a three percent increase in the proportion of women using their services who were at extreme levels of risk of being killed by an abusive partner.

The scale of the threat to women’s lives and safety makes second-stage services quite unusual in the context of homelessness: not only are shelters providing accommodation to house women (and their children) who have nowhere else to go, they are also working to keep women alive and their children safe. Shelters also offer wrap-around supports to assist women heal from abuse, and build safe and independent lives. For survivors of violence, these are critical components not offered by other housing/homelessness options.

Danger Assessment Scores for Women in Second-Stage Shelters



[8] In 2015, 69 women were murdered by intimate partners according to Statistics Canada. Available: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2017001/article/14698/tbl/tbl3.8-eng.htm>

[9] Measuring Violence Against Women: Statistical Trends 2006. Available: http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/gender/vaw/surveys/Canada/2006_Publication_VAW.pdf

[10] Statistic from the Canadian Women’s Foundation. Available: <http://www.canadianwomen.org/facts-about-violence>

"Living here has turned my life around ... Before moving here my life was not very good. I am much more independent now. I have more confidence. I would never have been able to start my own business if I hadn't come to the shelter."

Each year second-stage shelters in Alberta support over 1,000 women and children fleeing domestic violence.



Second-stage shelters are almost always full and many more women are in need of services.

"I struggled with depression for a long time, using anti-depressants because living with my partner wore me down. I feel safe now and am not on meds. I think my depression was situational."



The Acuity Scale: Understanding complex needs

"It is a safe place. I like the rules because it is about my safety. My anxiety has decreased. The counselors made sure I keep on track. I have struggled with addictions so my counselor suggested AADAC. I am going to a group now."

ACWS is developing an evidence-based Acuity Scale that identifies 28 factors that may shape the experiences and risks faced by women fleeing abuse. Factors incorporate information already collected by shelter staff, such as indicators of violence risk levels, parenting stress levels, poverty-related issues, housing, financial, legal and social support issues, and the presence or absence of: addictions, mental health problems, and/or physical health problems.

The tool will support shelters to use their existing data collection practices to:

- inform service practices,
- develop and test promising practices,
- support caseload management and referral decisions, and
- advocate for appropriate resources, reflecting the full complexity of women's experience.

The tool is used to inform the services and resources required to best support and empower women as they transition to independence. Unlike the assessment tools used in the housing sector, the acuity scale is not a gatekeeping tool, but one that assists service providers in providing holistic, personalized support for every woman who enters shelter. This tool is now being tested in second-stage shelters.

Acuity Scale

ACWS developed an acuity scale, which identifies 28 factors that shape the experiences and risks faced by women.

SAFETY

1. Risk of femicide
2. Level of Violence
3. Engaged in staying safe

POVERTY

4. Financial Situation
5. Education
6. English and Literacy
7. Transportation

SUPPORTS IN PLACE

8. Personal / Informal supports
9. Professional supports
10. Length of time in Canada or off-reserve

HOUSING STABILITY

11. Type of housing (immediately prior to shelter)
12. Number of times moved residence (in the year prior to shelter)

TRAUMA/ WELLNESS/ MENTAL HEALTH

13. Abused as a child
14. Number of prior abusive relationships
15. Mental health concerns
16. Suicide risk
17. Addiction

PHYSICAL HEALTH

18. Physical health
19. Injury resulting from abuse
20. Pregnancy

ADMITTED CHILDREN

21. Number of children in shelter
22. Age of children in shelter
23. Child mental, behavioural or physical health concerns
24. Child Protection Involvement
25. Parenting Stress Index

SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT

26. Immigration Status
27. Legal Issues
28. Overall System Involvement

Second-stage shelters help women transform their lives

Upon Entering:



17% had been living in stable housing.



67% had been homeless or living in short-term housing.



46% had been living with their abuser before emergency shelter.

When Leaving:

55% were moving into stable housing.

9% were moving into short-term housing or became homeless.

6% planned to move back in with their abusive partner.

Second-stage shelters measure success in a variety of areas including assisting women to attain safety, access stable housing, navigate systems and heal from the trauma of domestic violence. They also measure how many women were able to meet personal goals, support their children's development, and live independently.

Data shows second-stage shelters have a dramatic impact on the lives of women. Although 67% were homeless when entering second-stage, more than half of women exiting shelter were moving into independent, stable housing. 79% of the women in follow-up interviews were living independently. The longer women stay in shelter the more likely they were to achieve their goals, a further testament to value of the services provided. Upon leaving shelter, 87% of women had made progress towards at least one of their goals developed during their stay.

Goals, outreach and wrap-around supports



Women were most successful in achieving goals set in the areas of safety, basic needs, child safety, access to community resources, self-care and living skills. Major barriers still exist in women achieving goals related to legal issues, housing and employment/education. Although follow-up surveys showed that 26% of women were attending an educational institution and 28% were employed, 14% of women were unable to work due to severe injuries they sustained as a result of abuse.

Second-stage services extend beyond shelter walls. When women leave shelter (or if they are unable to enter due to shelter capacity or personal circumstances), they can still receive outreach support services to assist them in achieving safety and stability. Outreach services include individual support, group support, supports for children, and basic needs assistance. Shelter workers also help women to connect with community services, like income support, legal aid, addictions/medical assistance, or counselling.

For many years, all but two second-stage shelters operated without government funding. During the course of this project, provincial funding allowed all operating second-stage shelters to significantly strengthen their overall service offerings. Shelters were able to develop new programs and implement promising practices. Outreach programs increased in scope, as did child-focused services. The funding has had tremendous impact on existing shelter services. Ongoing and additional funding will be needed to sustain these changes and support second-stage shelters under development.

Women: the invisible homeless

Women must make difficult choices to keep themselves and their children safe



When facing domestic violence, women's options can be extremely limited given the power imbalances that exist.

Abusers often control and isolate their partners, so women may be without supports, employment or nearby friends and family. Women may even stay with an abuser because they have nowhere else to go and/or no money for transportation and shelter.¹¹ Women with children may find it even more difficult to leave if they do not have the means to provide stable shelter for their children on their own. They may avoid emergency social services for fear their children will be apprehended by Child and Family Services and/or returned to the abuser. Consequently, women's survival strategies may focus on staying out of view of the available social support structures.

When women flee violent homes with their children, finding stable housing and financial supports are major barriers to their safety. In some cases women are forced to choose between homelessness / sub-standard housing (and potentially losing their children) and returning to a violent home.

[11] The impact of the closure of Saskatchewan Transport Company on women attempting to leave domestic violence situations, Response to STC Closure by Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan. Available: <https://pathssk.org/2017/07/07/response-to-stc-closure/>

Women forced to live on the streets face a high risk of physical and sexual assault. Homes for Women's report on women's homelessness notes that to avoid violent victimization on the streets women experiencing homelessness often seek alternative shelters, such as "couch-surfing, doubling up with other families in conditions of extreme overcrowding, cycling in and out of abusive relationships, trading sex for temporary accommodation, and other survival strategies." These strategies are often categorized as relative homelessness,¹² rather than chronic homelessness.¹³ However, "when the price women and girls pay for shelter is violence and abuse, their homelessness is qualitatively different from a person [who is couch-surfing] in the home of a friend and every bit as profound and as absolute as that of men on the street or in homeless shelters."¹⁴

Common understandings of homelessness focus on 'rough-sleepers,' who tend to be men. Homeless women face disproportionate danger of physical and sexual violence on the streets, so they tend to employ strategies to stay off the streets.

Justice Macklin acknowledged this fact in his decision on the sexual assault case of Angela Cardinal (R v Blanchard). He argued that women such as Ms. Cardinal "stay up all night walking, as it is too dangerous to sleep outside".¹⁵

Homeless women are often forced into the unenviable decision between the dangers of the streets, domestic violence or using whatever means necessary to find temporary accommodation.

For women fleeing domestic abusers inability to find housing is a major barrier to safety. The stakes of not finding shelter are high: women falling into homelessness face losing their children, they face high risks of physical and sexual assault on the street and they may be under threat from a domestic abuser. As noted above, when abusers believe the relationship is at an end, they become more likely to commit severe assaults and murder against their former partners.

Homeless shelters typically offer little protection from domestic abusers and are generally male-dominated spaces. Second-stage shelters have emerged as the best option for women seeking security, services which support children and other provisions which can help them rebuild their lives.

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[12] Relative Homelessness: Those living in spaces that do not meet the basic health and safety standards including protection from the elements; access to safe water and sanitation; security of tenure and personal safety; affordability; access to employment, education and health care; and the provision of minimum space to avoid overcrowding. Available: <http://www.humanservices.alberta.ca/homelessness/14630.html>

[13] Chronic Homelessness: Those who have either been continuously homeless for a year or more, or have had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years. In order to be considered chronically homeless, a person must have been sleeping in a place not meant for human habitation (e.g. living on the streets) and/or in an emergency homeless shelter. Available: <http://www.humanservices.alberta.ca/homelessness/14630.html>

[14] Quotation from Homes for Women (H4W) brief: Housing First, Women Second? Available: <http://ywacacanada.ca/data/documents/00000382.pdf>

[15] R v Blanchard, 2016 ABQB 706. Available: <https://www.canlii.org/en/ab/abqb/doc/2016/2016abqb706/2016abqb706.html?resultindex=2>

Domestic Violence is a major contributor to homelessness



According to a 2016 Statistics Canada Report, “Nearly one quarter of all women cited domestic abuse as a factor leading to their most recent housing loss. The number was higher for newcomer women [40%].”¹⁶

Another Canadian study placed the number even higher, citing 38% of women who reported becoming homeless immediately after separating from violent partners.¹⁷

Inadequate response to women's homelessness

All levels of government can make significant progress in prioritizing the needs of women. When a woman feels unsafe or under threat in her home because of the violence posed to her or her children by an abuser, then she is homeless. When developing housing strategies, this reframing of our understanding is urgently required to keep women and children safe. When occupying the family home is not a safe or viable option, housing supports must create policies that prioritize families fleeing domestic violence and understand that housing issues dealt with by women facing domestic violence are different from those dealt with by people who are homeless for other reasons.

[16] Statistics Canada 2016 Report: Homelessness Partnering Strategy Coordinated Canadian Point-in-Time Counts, available: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/communities/homelessness/reports/highlights-2016-point-in-time-count.html>

[17] Women First: An Analysis of a Trauma-informed, Women-centred, Harm Reduction Housing Model for Women with Complex Substance Use and Mental Health Issues, available: <http://homelesshub.ca/systemsresponses/21-women-first-analysis-trauma-informed-women-centred-harm-reduction-housing-model-women>

Federal Government Policies

The 2017 Federal budget was the first ever to introduce a gendered impact lens on expenditures. This was a welcome development. Although the budget mentioned the housing needs of women fleeing domestic violence and women's experience of homelessness, there were few details regarding specific funding increases for programs that support women or survivors of abuse.

In addressing homelessness, the budget identified that its major "investments will benefit a large number of homeless men, who are the predominant users of shelters in Canada."¹⁸ Resources for homeless women will only receive investment through a number of currently unidentified community projects. Although men are currently the predominant users of homeless shelters (excluding domestic violence shelters), this characterization fails to acknowledge the reasons women do not access these services as consistently as men and why women's homelessness may be less visible.

The budget stated that \$5 billion would be allocated over eleven years under the National Housing Fund to address the needs of seniors, Indigenous peoples, domestic violence survivors, people with disabilities, mental health issues and addictions issues, while \$2.1 billion will be allocated over eleven years for the Homelessness Partnering Strategy, with money going to programs like Housing First. Neither the Homelessness Partnering Strategy, nor the National Housing Fund earmark specific funds/accountabilities for programs that are tailored to meet women's needs. The uncertainty around available capital and operating dollars allocated for specialized services for women, like second-stage shelters, makes it difficult for women's service providers to plan strategically.

- **Women who experience violence in their own homes are homeless**
- **Women who flee violence are homeless**
- **Women who stay in women's shelters are homeless**
- **Women who couch-surf with family, friends and strangers are homeless**

Roundtable Report, June 21-22, 2017, Women's Shelters Canada

[18] Government of Canada, Budget 2017's Gender Statement. Available: <http://www.budget.gc.ca/2017/docs/plan/chap-05-en.html?=&wbdisable=true>

Provincial and Municipal Government Policies

In July 2017 the Government of Alberta launched the Alberta Provincial Affordable Housing Strategy. The strategy retains the commitment to a Housing First model by providing graduates of Housing First with “more opportunities to progress into stable housing.”¹⁹ It also introduces a new suite of “integrated tenant services” (not unlike those on offer to women through second-stage shelters) through the introduction of tenant support workers. The strategy contains no gendered analysis, and makes no mention of women’s housing needs. Nor is there any indication that the new tenant support workers will have any specialist knowledge or training in dealing with complexities of domestic violence cases.

The consequence of these omissions is that a sizable sector of the homeless population is ignored: one that is particularly vulnerable. When women fleeing abuse are left out of government definitions of homelessness, programs that serve women fleeing abuse remain underfunded and women are more likely to go without safe shelter.

While not a requirement of federal funding, the SPDAT (Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool) screening method is the gatekeeping and standard assessment tool employed by Housing First programs. The tool prioritizes those facing chronic or absolute homelessness,²⁰ but fails to account for the hidden homelessness of women or the danger women face from abusers while attempting to find secure, permanent housing. Housing First has been criticized for (1) predominantly benefiting homeless men (who are generally the most visible of the homeless population);²¹ (2) ignoring the complexity of serving families²² and those in domestic violence situations, and (3) benefiting a small number of private landlords who have little interest or expertise in serving vulnerable populations²³ – rather than investing in new low-income housing solutions.²⁴



Second-stage shelters are unique in accommodating and understanding the needs of women fleeing violence, alongside other issues such as poverty, addictions and trauma. They provide wrap-around supports, secure facilities, specialized child-care and programs for women.

[19] Alberta Provincial Affordable Housing Strategy 2017. Available: http://www.seniors-housing.alberta.ca/documents/Provincial_Affordable_Housing_Strategy.pdf

[20] Absolute Homelessness: Those living on the street with no physical shelter of their own, including those who spend their nights in emergency shelters. Available: <http://www.humanservices.alberta.ca/homelessness/14630.html>

[21] Homes for Women (H4W) brief: Housing First, Women Second? Available: <http://ywcacanada.ca/data/documents/00000382.pdf>

[22] Shiff, Jeanette Waegemakers and John Rook. “Housing First: Where is the Evidence?” University of Calgary. Available: http://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/HousingFirstReport_final.pdf

[23] MacLeod, Timothy. “Participant Perspectives on Housing and Landlords.” Wilfred Laurier University. Available: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2984&context=etd>

[24] Cohen, Rachel. “Housing First’ Policy for Addressing Homelessness Hamstrung by Funding Issues.” Moyers & Company. Available: <http://billmoyers.com/2015/01/31/housing-first-policy-addressing-homelessness-hamstrung-funding-issues/>

Current Social Housing programs offer similar barriers to those of Housing First. Under the Social Housing Accommodation Regulation (SHAR), the “Number of Dependents” and “Rent to Income” are the most heavily weighted categories in SHAR’s scoring system. Eligible applicants can score a maximum of 24 points depending on the number of dependents and a maximum of 21 points for Rent-to-Income. 32 points are required to be deemed in the highest need of housing. Points awarded for rent-to-income place women at a disadvantage because they have little to no income and they do not pay rent to emergency shelters.

Under the SHAR women fleeing domestic violence are awarded between two and 15 points on a discretionary basis. This discretionary approach can lead to inconsistent service delivery, as staff and individual service providers have not received specific training to deal with the context faced by a woman facing domestic violence.

One way to remove inconsistencies would be to introduce a new category of homelessness, “Threat of Violence”. This category would allow service providers to provide immediate and direct support to an individual facing a high risk of violence, assault or murder. Government workers should work with women’s shelters to apply domestic violence assessment tools and training for staff, so they can assess the danger faced by women and children fleeing domestic violence.

Unlike Alberta’s housing services, other provinces currently give priority to victims of abuse.



Other Provinces make domestic violence a priority for social and affordable housing:

- Ontario’s public housing sector has a Special Priority Policy* that prioritizes victims of abuse (e.g. physical or sexual violence, stalking, threats to person/children/ property/ pets).²⁵

The housing demand from victims of domestic violence was so great that the Ontario government recently began a portable housing benefit program** for victims of domestic violence. This allows mothers to find stable homes with government support, and frees up more space in women’s emergency shelters – and in subsidized housing for high-risk individuals who are not facing domestic violence.²⁶

- British Columbia Housing also has a priority placement program for women fleeing violence. Second-stage shelters are part of their housing strategy for women’s homelessness / housing. As well, women’s shelters are also able to provide portable rent supplements and support services through the homeless prevention program.²⁷
- In Manitoba, since 2005, a priority housing protocol exists for individuals wishing to leave an abusive relationship and live independently in public housing. Under this protocol, these individuals are given priority in receiving a placement in a Manitoba Housing unit.²⁸

[[25] Government of Ontario. Special Priority Policy Review within Domestic Violence Action Plan. Available: <http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Asset966.aspx>

[26] Government of Ontario. Piloting a Portable Housing Benefit for Survivors of Domestic Violence, available, <http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page13794.aspx>

[27] BC Housing, Priority Placement Program. Available: <https://www.bchousing.org/housing-assistance/women-fleeing-violence/priority-placement-program>

[28] UN Women - Global Data Base on Violence Against Women. Available: <http://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/americas/canada/2005/manitoba-priority-housing-protocol-2005>

Conclusion

The Second-Stage Shelter project allowed shelter directors to better articulate where second-stage shelters fit in the housing service continuum, illustrating how they are different from emergency shelters, transition housing, and emergency homeless and housing supports.

Further, the government funding provided to Alberta second-stage shelters had a significant impact on the services shelters are now able to provide. Our data shows that second-stage shelters can dramatically improve the lives of women and provide them with the safety, shelter and supports they need in their healing journey.

Secure facilities and women-centred services provided by second-stage shelters cannot be found in current homeless or housing models. From our research, we know that 67% of the women entering second-stage shelters fit traditional definitions of homelessness (and we contend that anyone who cannot safely return home due to the threat of violence is in critical need of safe housing/shelter). Yet, emergency and second-stage shelters are not generally considered to be part of homelessness support services – despite sheltering thousands of women and children each year who find themselves without a safe home due to the actions of an abuser.

Women's relative invisibility on the streets is matched with a relative invisibility in government strategies for solving women's homelessness. The first step is for governments to conduct a thorough gendered analysis of policy frameworks and budgets to account for the differing needs of women and men, including domestic violence survivors. Threat of violence needs to be defined as a high priority category for housing supports, bringing Alberta in line with many other provinces. Governments can strengthen existing housing services by recognizing and incorporating the expertise of second-stage shelters more fully into the continuum of housing and homelessness services. Supporting these initiatives through sustainable funding, staff training and development will prove to be valuable steps in reducing homelessness and keeping women and children safe.



About the ACWS Second-Stage Shelter Research

Sixteen members of ACWS either offering second-stage residential programs, or in the process of building or planning second-stage shelters began to meet formally in 2013 to support implementation of Phase I of the Second-Stage Shelter project. The purpose of Phase I was to collectively develop strategies that promote a common understanding of and support for second-stage shelters in Alberta. Phase I included a promising practice review, a second-stage logic model, implementation of new data collection tools and a Phase I report.

Phase II of the project began in April of 2015, and included tool finalization and training, development of an Acuity Scale, data collection with training and support, quarterly data review, staff and client interviews and a final report to synthesize project outcomes for both phases and identify next steps for ACWS and participating members. The full length Second-Stage Shelters report was completed in 2017 and is titled: Building Informed Service Delivery in Second-Stage Shelters. It is available here:

<https://www.acws.ca/collaborate-document/2853/view>

The research project identified several measures of success, including a life free of violence, stability when leaving shelter and at follow-up, progress and achievement of goals that women set for themselves, women's satisfaction with shelter services as well as program completion. Participating shelters implemented a variety of tools, including the Danger Assessment, Domestic Violence Survivor Assessment, Parental Stress Index, Goal Attainment Scaling and Client Feedback Surveys.

Shelter directors suggested several directions for further study to be undertaken in the future. These areas include:

- Clarifying shelter goals and success measures;
- A review of shelter tools to address any issues or challenges associated with their use;
- Further testing and development of the Acuity Scale;
- Review/repeat of the Danger Assessment study to better understand any current trends with respect to risk of femicide for women across the province.



Participating Organizations

The project included sixteen ACWS member organizations that either currently deliver second--stage shelter services, or were in the process of planning or building second-stage shelters. Those organizations represented both rural and urban areas across Alberta and included:

Operational Second-Stage Shelters

Member Organization	Location
Brenda Strafford Centre for the Prevention of Domestic Violence	Calgary
Catholic Social Services	Edmonton
Discovery House Family Violence Prevention Society	Calgary
Dr. Margaret Savage Crisis Centre Society	Cold Lake
Grande Prairie Women's Residence Association	Grande Prairie
Hope Haven Society	Lac La Biche
Lloydminster Interval Home Society	Lloydminster
Medicine Hat Women's Shelter Society	Medicine Hat
Rowan House Society	High River
Sonshine Society of Christian Community Services	Calgary
Waypoints	Fort McMurray
Wings of Providence Society	Edmonton

Developing Second-Stage Shelters

Member Organization	Location
St. Paul & District Crisis Association	St. Paul
Wellspring Family Resource & Crisis Centre Society	Whitecourt
Central Alberta Women's Emergency Shelter	Red Deer
Mountain Rose Women's Shelter Association	Rocky Mountain House