

Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS) Outcomes Conference

April 13, 2011

Lana M. Wells Keynote Address

Good evening everyone, I am so pleased to be here tonight to open up the ACWS Outcomes Conference: Celebrating Successful Shelter Practices. For those in the room that know me, over the last 15 years, I have been a big advocate of developing the capacity of the not for profit sector to demonstrate impact— because I believe in the power of outcomes – identifying them, achieving them, and then using them to inform policy and practice.

The opportunity to speak at this conference, gave me the chance to stop and reflect on my time with ACWS, and where the organization and the shelter movement is today. The power of this 'collective' is evident in numerous innovative programs and initiatives, throughout the province and on the national and international stages.

Jan Reimer, Carolyn Goard, ACWS staff and Board, and everyone in this room who continues to support women, children and families during immensely traumatic and violent times, I commend you. Please know you are deeply appreciated and needed!

Writing this speech, I had the opportunity to reflect back on my time as President of ACWS, and I remembered one of the first major projects I engaged in (well besides hiring the new provincial coordinator), which was to understand how information was being reported by shelters and how it was being used by the government, and by ACWS and by the individual shelters. This information quest ended in a partnership with (at the time) the Canadian Outcomes Research Institute, where in consultation with shelter directors, we designed a survey that shelters would use with their clients and then created a database system to collect this important information. We wanted to understand and learn about the women and children that were accessing the shelters along with the impact of the services being delivered to these women and children. For example, several of us in the movement wanted to know how many women were going back

into their relationship because of financial stress – and we found out – around 55% were going back into their relationship b/c they did not have the means to leave. This was the tipping point for us. We immediately met with Social Services to see if we could look at a policy to help resource women to have choice -- choice around leaving the relationship by providing financial means. The province was very receptive to this information and immediately put a policy in place. This is the power of the collective; this is the power of using information to create social change.

It is this dynamic between the shelters and ACWS that is so critical. Shelters are the front line. You and your organizations are experiencing and understanding what is happening to women and children who are living in our community. These families are being shaped by laws, social and community norms, funding and government structures and it is only when we understand these experiences from a collective perspective, can we see the solutions that need to take place on a broader level. And this is where ACWS plays a pivotal role.

I believe the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters is an ambassador for Alberta's women's shelters. Not only do they provide support to frontline organizations, but they also draw on the collective knowledge and wisdom and identify practical solutions – this is using outcomes and information for practical purposes; it's what's needed if we want to move the needle on domestic violence.

I think of ACWS as always being in the future. They are tapped into leading edge thinking on ending domestic violence. From their strategy on Domestic Violence in the work place, to the Walking the Path Together project, and Engaging men and boys as leaders, these are critical leverage points that can create the type of change we seek to see in our community. While an important role of ACWS is to support the shelter system to ensure there is a strong infrastructure for women and children in crisis, over time, ACWS has become a leader in implementing solutions that will help put an end to domestic violence. They are champions for those who do not have a voice. They represent the collective sitting here tonight.

Data has become an important resource in ACWSs efforts to educate policy makers as to the prevalence and impact of domestic and family violence in our communities. ACWS has mindfully and carefully used statistical data to increase the impact of the stories of the women and children the shelters support and to highlight the very real human costs of family violence. Information is power, telling our story and gathering evidence is critical to influencing social change.

When I think about the roles the shelters play in their communities around the province, they are often the only safe place for women and children experiencing violence. I have watched the shelters evolve into providing crisis intervention, early intervention and some now providing prevention programs in order to better serve their community. In Alberta, we need a family violence framework that includes funding that provides for both prevention and intervention. It is when these strategies intersect that we can end this epidemic.

George Albee was a pioneer in the field of clinical psychology. He was the author of ground-breaking studies in the 1950s and '60s that explored how factors such as poverty, racism and child abuse related to mental illness and emotional problems. He said that “no epidemic has ever been resolved by paying attention to (only) the treatment of the affected individual.” What he means is that if we are only focusing on the victims, we will not end the social problem. We also need to focus our efforts further upstream — to prevent the violence from happening in the first place and we need a comprehensive strategy to do this.

We all know that the shelters play a critical role in Alberta, for many women and children (around 12000 a year) you are the only haven from fleeing domestic violence. As a result, we need to ensure that the shelters are properly funded by the government, and that the organizations have a duty to ensure their programs and services are achieving their stated outcomes and that at the local level, you continue to be a voice for those women and children.

ACWS role is to gather the information we are learning from the women and children and front line workers and translate the learning's to educate policy makers, to help the business community and the overall community understand their role in the solutions. ACWS role is to help frame this information in a way that influences norms, policies, resources, and leadership.

It is from this continuous learning cycle, it is from this type of relationship that I believe we will provide better services to clients, we will understand the patterns of domestic violence better and be able to identify where the best leverage points are to prevent it from happening in the first place. And it is only when working together – both the shelters and ACWS that makes you are a strong, powerful movement in Alberta.

I often think how much ACWS and its members have accomplished over the last three decades, the power of this collective is exemplary – and I often wonder if you opened up your membership, to other organizations around the province that are supporting, preventing, trying to end domestic violence how this would make you a formidable force in Alberta – many of us can learn from this synergistic relationship.

Getting back to the power of outcomes- I believe that by coming together for 3 days, to learn from one another, to hear back from evaluation reports, hear about how people have applied the learning's, to seek better understanding and better practice, you are once again leading the way of being a high accountability system, a caring system, a healthy system.

I want to congratulate ACWS and the members for collecting data in a systematic way over the last 9 years. There is so much richness in this data and so many stories on how you have used it to create change for those most vulnerable. You have changed lives!

I would like to thank you again for inviting me here tonight. On behalf of the community, thank you for doing what you do, and thank you for being a continuous learner! Have a great conference!