

The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters is an umbrella organization that now represents 42 emergency, second stage and seniors' shelters. These shelters employ more than 800 people across the province in numerous types of positions from crisis counseling, to child support to batterer's intervention programs. Shelter staff efforts are augmented by close to 1,500 volunteers supporting shelter operations.

In 2006-07, women's shelters had to fill more than 1/3 of their positions. Some of the positions remained vacant for months at a time. Approximately 75% of the positions in shelters are funded by government through contract. However any salary increases by government require the shelter to find the dollars to provide similar increases for all of their staff. Shelters feel the burden of limited resources and the ongoing need to fund raise for program dollars. Added to this mix are vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue and intergenerational differences.

In her *Guidebook on Vicarious Trauma: Recommended Solutions*, author Jan Richardson points out the "Anti-violence workers' exposure to traumatic material and bearing witness to atrocities is constant, routine and day-to-day. There are few professions that expose staff exclusively to violence against women and their children primarily inflicted by men, or those in a partner relationship, or by other trusted individuals. It is this experience that makes the work different. In comparison, emergency workers such as police and nurses see a range of individuals and situations over a given shift, not all of which would be identified as traumatic." A copy of her Guidebook has been provided to all shelters and a link posted on our members only web page.

Thanks to funding from Alberta Employment, Industry and Immigration, ACWS was able to embark on the following three pronged approach to address human resource issues in Alberta's women's shelters:

1. A one day strategic planning session
2. Setting strategic directions for human resources
3. Web based resources for members

Key outcomes of the project include:

- Shelter directors who attended the workshop gained new strategies to address human resource issues at the shelter and a confidence in their skill level to implement these new strategies.
- Key priority issues identified with a plan to address them. This includes
 - Leadership training on key topics
 - Practical information on staff wellness
 - A volunteer human resource consultant who will work with shelters one on one to provide support on serious issues
 - A small committee that is developing a template for human resource policies in shelter
- A searchable on line data base of shelter human resource policies and information resources for ACWS members.
- Job postings and descriptions on the ACWS web page.

1. STRATEGIC PLANNING SESSION

On September 27, 2007, shelter directors attended a workshop with Graham Lowe, a well known human resource consultant. His approach was to help shelters create quality workplaces and future workforce capacities through a discussion of the current strengths, gaps and successes. During the day shelter directors worked with him to identify:

- current issues (needs analysis)
- best practices currently in place at shelters
- short, mid and long term strategic goals to address human resource crisis.

However, it was also recognized at the session that the salary/benefit gap for shelter workers in comparison with the province and private sector was a significant barrier to workplace stability.

A synopsis of the discussion follows. Based on this session, ACWS then began working on the strategic directions requested by the membership and individual shelter directors looked at operationalizing specific initiatives at the shelter level. The Powerpoint presentation and report was circulated to all members and posted on our website as a resource.

WHAT'S WORKING WELL

- Board-staff day/retreat with follow up dinner / activity / fun – interaction opportunity, understanding
- Staff communicating openly and honestly in healing circle – shows respect, honouring coworkers
- RRSPs, topping up wages through fundraising – get equitable benefits and pay
- Performance reviews – give feedback, identify strengths, concerns – annual, probation
- Daily communication: we love you and can't leave (chicken soup for soul) – notes, gifts, etc
- Office space – closer, more interaction
- Being proactive on burnout – encourage sick days, paid spiritual days, meditation room
- Being flexible and adaptable to staff needs, i.e., scheduling
- Appreciative inquiry, intense training, lots of time for this
- Sponsoring social events for staff – movie night, pot luck, Christmas exchanges
- Pot luck lunch monthly, or order in food
- Succession planning – involving staff, developing staff

BIGGEST HR CHALLENGES OVER THE NEXT 5 YEARS

- Increasingly competitive labour market so need to have best working conditions.
- Attracting staff in rural communities.
- Knowledge loss with retirement or turnover.
- Space limitations because increasing client needs.
- Growing demands of clients and governments creating stress, within old staffing model.
- Recruiting and training new board members, helping them understand their role.
- Impact of board transitions on staff (trust, security, etc).
- Succession planning for senior managers.
- Dealing with burned out workers.
- Rigid funding model limits staffing budget allocations.
- Collaborating with other community agencies to meet client needs. Maximize resources.
- Housing affordability impacts recruitment, plus clients.
- Program growth: space and human resource needs.
- Develop higher-level staff competencies (IT, public relations, outcome measures/evaluation, data)
- Attaining cultural diversity in staff – representative of community.
- Achieving staff cohesiveness with shifts.
- Impact of changes in government – funding impacts.
- HR manual that does not have to be changed

CHANGES IN HR POLICIES & PRACTICES

- Put wellness days into policies (Spiritual days too, so many per year).
- Include staff in board standing committees.
- Door prizes at staff meetings.
- Health seminars for staff, health clinics.
- Training policy: require X days per year.
- Formalize informal practices – standardizes, fairness
- Help staff understand how policies support them. Improved communication.
- Eliminate language about sick days...emphasize wellness (the goal)
- Rethink performance appraisals.
- Management appraisals –part of retention interviews.
- Every second Friday afternoon off.
- Incentives for attendance – wellness days. Need to evaluate.
- Sharing staff across agencies – better fits, PD opportunities. Build sector capacity.
- Charge for training. Allocate some % of funds to future program growth.
- Board binder – information about the shelter, its staff.

COLLABORATIVE ACTION (In order of priority 1-3)

- Policies for grievances and terminations. ¹
- Succession planning¹
- Review accountability requirements, reporting – document best practices. ¹
- Review contract model – best practices in other sectors, with other government service providers. Staffing model, management requirements, standards, funding formula. (related to above) ¹
- Sharing staff (regional, provincial, international). ²
- Bring together program managers for learning and development ^{2/3}
- Sharing ideas, resources, policy manuals, lessons, practices. ³
- Attendance policies and practices. ³
- Shelters as business partners – employment placement. Partner with other employers in recruitment.³
- Broad strategy to partner with educational institutions⁴
- Wellness retreat for EDs ⁴

HOW YOU CAN ENABLE SOLUTIONS AS A LEADER

- Retention interview.
- Enable more staff training opportunities. Trading staff with other shelters.
- Special projects for casual workers. Enhanced their role on team.
- In rural communities, seek referrals from existing staff. Develop recruitment networks.
- Become focus of ED role in upcoming changes. More on fund-raising; delegate other roles.
- Increased communication – daily staff meeting to start day.
- Enable succession planning – take to board, develop strategy.
- Develop organizational skills to follow-through on implementation.
- To improve cohesiveness, use new technology to get input (blog).
- Show leadership and direction by taking more time off.
- Plan my exit – be a mentor.
- Maternity leaves – term positions. Proactive communication.
- Take care of yourselves. Make this part of how we operate. Mental health days. Get creative –encourage wellness or PD DAYS
- Get new training. Look after own professional development.

2. SETTING STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS FOR HUMAN RESOURCES

Based on the results of the workshop, ACWS then looked at how to best meet the needs identified in the session. Follow-up sessions were identified based on these discussions and augmented with the ACWS Bursary Programme. Three sessions were held with shelter directors on the following topics:

- Leadership, with the School of Business, University of Alberta (October 7, 2008)
- Negotiation, with the School of Business, University of Alberta (October 8, 2008)
- Creative Leadership, Banff Centre of Management (February 5 & 6, 2009)

These sessions further informed the the following short and medium term strategic direction: Through informed leadership shelter directors will work to build a shelter culture with

- Caring, expert, ethical and committed staff
- That engages the younger generation working at the shelter
- With high quality client focused services
- Healthy succession planning and
- A culture of responsibility within the shelter

The table below illustrates the needs identified through the consultation process and how they are being addressed as part of a medium and long term strategy with ACWS membership.

Needs Identified By Membership	Strategy
Performance appraisals	A human resource consultant provided a training session on performance evaluation. Given the high turn over of executive directors, the presentation was focused for both shelter directors and their shelter board representative. The presentation, as well as ways to align with organizational mission, accountability agreement and related information was provided to the membership. These items are also provided on the web page (Members Only). The same human resource consultant is available to the membership for one on one consultation.
Performance Review framework and Collaborative solutions to handling grievances and termination; Succession planning; delegation and how to measure its effectiveness	This same consultant is now working with ACWS to provide information on policies and gaps to assist in these and other personnal issues and policies. As information becomes available it is posted on the ACWS Web Page. She is also available to provide one on one consultation for members needs.

Needs Identified By Membership	Strategy
Employee Benefits – low cost or no cost	Through the Friday files, ACWS regularly provides information on possibilities to provide low cost benefits to staff. We also facilitated a change in our employee benefit provider, who is available to all members, at a reduced cost with increased coverage.
ED and staff wellness	At the World Conference of Women's Shelters, ACWS ensured there was a staff wellness stream in order to gain an understanding of what shelter workers were doing around the world. Links to these presentations are also on our webpage. Resources on vicarious trauma were provided to the membership and we will continue to address this issue through the identification of resources and information sharing.
Contract Negotiation for the benefit of staff and clients	Two educational sessions were held on negotiation with the faculty of business and a lawyer was brought in to discuss contracting procedures with Executive Directors.
Management Training (including funding alternatives, and appreciative inquiry)	We will continue to provide information and training opportunities to our members on identified areas of importance.
Additional Information on Alberta Labour Standards information was also requested.	This information will be placed in a template policy manual currently being created for shelter directors.
Policy templates and manuals	See above.
Best practices in program delivery	ACWS has obtained funding from another source to implement identified "best" practices learned at the World Conference. 9 shelters will share their outcomes with the membership through the project and at project completion.

3. WEB BASED RESOURCES

ACWS created a special place on our website for employment available with position descriptions and encouragement to consider a career with women's shelters. Shelters are able to post their own information on our website and a broadcast e-mail is sent to various stakeholders. In addition, in our Members Only page we have a human resource centre, where shelter members are able to post their policies and search for relevant policies so that they can learn from one another. Other relevant resources are also posted.

ALBERTA COUNCIL OF WOMEN'S SHELTERS

General Ledger Report 04/01/08 to 03/31/09						
Sorted by: Date						
	Date				Debits	Credits
Revenues	10/22/07	Grant money received				16,550.00
Expenses	09/28/07	Level I	Facilitator	The Graham Lowe Group	4,078.13	
	05/31/09	Level I	Facilitator	Barbara Burton	1,000.00	
	05/31/09	Level I	Staff time	ACWS Staff time	2,750.00	
	05/31/09	Level II	Facilitation	ACWS	8,600.00	
	04/30/08	Level III	Website design	DEVICE media	2,460.00	
	05/31/09	Level III	Website Maintenance	ACWS Staff time	3,300.00	
				TOTAL EXPENSES	22,188.13	
FINAL BALANCE					-5,638.13	