Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters  
Practical Frameworks for Change  
High Level Results & Process Summary

This high level summary report looks at how the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters (ACWS) joined with eight member organizations in a learning collaborative to strengthen shelter practice through central evaluation of co-ordinated identification, training and implementation of promising shelter practices.

The ACWS Practical Frameworks for Change project was a legacy of the 1st World Conference of Women’s Shelters held September 8-11, 2008 in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Shelter workers in Canada and around the world came together to network, to share proven innovations, and to learn from international experts and each other. The conference inspired ACWS and eight member shelters to undertake the Practical Frameworks for Change project. Shelter directors assessed what they learned at the conference and then identified practices that they wanted to collectively implement and evaluate in their shelters to strengthen practice in the areas of Safety, Health, Cultural Competence and Legal Issues.

Results:
The project had a positive impact on shelter staff, improved quality of service delivery and ultimately helped enhance the safety and well-being of women in Alberta shelters. It also generated recommendations for further action. Furthermore, participating shelters planned to retain at least some of the new practices and most recommended that they be disseminated to the rest of the ACWS membership. The key results in the Practical Frameworks for Change Outcome Measurement Framework focused on women’s satisfaction with their relationship with staff, their safety, and their knowledge of various community resources that correspond with the promising practices areas identified (i.e., safety, legal, health and culture). Finally, staff from participating shelters increased their knowledge and competence of data collection and its relevance to service quality as a result of implementing the Practical Frameworks for Change project.

The following highlights information/results collected by the shelters over a period of 11 months between October 1st, 2009 and August 31st, 2010.

Women and Children in Shelter

- 2,177 women admitted with their 1,833 children;
- Women’s average age 32; 47% of children admitted were younger than 3 with 21% between 4 and 6 years of age;
- 58% of women self identified as Aboriginal, Metis, First Nations or Inuit and 9% of all women represented other visible minority groups;
- 39% of women in common-law relationships, 11% married and 24% separated or divorced. 46% living with partner at the time of shelter admission;
- 41% of women had a physical health condition when admitted;

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• 80% of women were unemployed; 77% needed financial support;
• 33% of women stayed in shelter less than 4 days; 47% stayed between 5 and 21 days; 20% stayed longer than 21 days.

Assessment Tool Results

1. Danger Assessment\textsuperscript{2}
   • Almost half of the women in shelter were in extreme danger of femicide, 17% were in severe danger;
   • Women experienced multiple forms of abuse with 96% having experienced emotional/verbal/psychological abuse;
   • Average woman in this project experienced emotional abuse at least 15 times per month, and physical abuse at least once or twice per month.

2. Domestic Violence Survivor Assessment\textsuperscript{45}
   • Women had the highest proportion of ‘preparation’ ratings (27%), followed by action ratings (26%), contemplation ratings (21%), pre-contemplation ratings (15%), and the proportion of maintenance ratings (12%)
   • Women appeared to be more ready to address issues related to culture (e.g. examining relationship options) and less ready to work on health issues (e.g. primarily mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress)

3. Women’s Shelter Exit Survey\textsuperscript{6}
   • Depending on the question, between 92% and 96% of women were satisfied with shelter services
   • Women were most satisfied with their increased ability to keep themselves and their children safer as a result of their shelter stay and least satisfied (although satisfaction rate here is still extremely high) with their level of knowledge about health-related community resources.

4. Staff Exit Survey and Stakeholder Interview Results\textsuperscript{7}
   • A majority of respondents (64% to 81%) had a positive opinion about the data gathering process and their role in it. In general the respondents understood the reasons behind the data collection requirements and their part in the process, and they often thought that the staff received the necessary training and were kept updated on changes as needed.
   • 80% of respondents thought that the PFC project has had an impact on their shelter. Over 80% were able to integrate information and skills that they have gained as a result of the project into their work, almost 80% thought that the project helped them better assist women and children in the shelter and almost 66% believed that the project helped improve services provided to women and children in emergency shelters.

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid 1, Appendix F, 113-114
\textsuperscript{3} Campbell, J. 1995; Campbell, Webster & Glass, 2008
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid 1, Appendix H, page 115-118
\textsuperscript{5} Dienemann, Campbell, Curry & Landenburger, 2002
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid 1, Appendix K, 125
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid 1, Appendices C & D, pages 102-111
Background Information:
The foremost purpose of emergency shelters is to provide a safe place for women and children escaping domestic violence. The secondary goal of emergency shelters is to support women and children in accessing the internal and external resources needed to live a violence-free life. Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters (ACWS) is a province-wide, voluntary organization supporting women’s shelters and their partners through education, research and services for the benefit of abused women and their children.

Through the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters (ACWS), Alberta’s women’s shelters work together in a learning collaborative to develop promising-practice knowledge and maintain high-quality service in Alberta’s shelters. Over the last few years, this collaborative has completed two significant projects. The first established the use of a common data base to collect information, enabling ACWS to compile and analyze anonymous data collected by shelters.8 The second project piloted the use of the Danger Assessment9 as a promising practice in risk assessment and supporting safety of women and their children. Those projects demonstrated that collection and analysis of cross-shelter data allows shelters to tailor their work to the individual needs of women. Women benefit as shelter workers gain knowledge, thereby becoming empowered to become informed advocates. Finally, shelters are better positioned through action based research to inform funders and policy makers about these needs. Fundamentally, this work enables women fleeing domestic violence to keep themselves and their children safe.

The ACWS Practical Frameworks for Change (PFC) initiative was the third major step in the work of the collaborative. As stated above, the PFC project began in September of 2008 with the first World Conference of Women’s Shelters. The conference attended by 800 women’s shelters workers from 51 countries was hosted by the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters. The goal of the conference was to facilitate the networking and sharing of views, ideas and challenges and to provide an opportunity for shelters from around the world to learn from one another about promising practices to guide work in women’s shelters. Prior to the conference, ACWS secured additional funding from one of the conference funders, Status of Women Canada, to support a follow-up project implementing and evaluating selected promising practices showcased at the conference by Alberta shelters.

Shortly before the conference ACWS member shelters were invited to participate in a “promising practice project” to follow their attendance at the conference. Eight Alberta shelters committed to identify and implement promising practices learned at the conference focusing on three key elements of shelter work: Safety, Health and Cultural Competence.

The coordination of the project by the ACWS’ Director of Member Programs and Services as well as the supportive work of ACWS staff and external consultants, were essential in the completion of the project. Also, the selection and work carried out by the leadership team, wherein members represented each participating shelter ensured collaborative success. This team met frequently to guide project implementation both as a group and in smaller task groups to support different project components.

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8 Alberta Shelter Trend Analysis: 10 years of Data Collection Informing Shelter Practice, 2011
9 Keeping Women Alive – Assessing the Danger, 2009, Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters
http://www.acws.ca/reports.php
Additionally, participating shelters’ contributions critical to the success of the Practical Frameworks for Change project were as follows:

- Participation of shelter management and staff in numerous meetings and teleconferences (60 meetings: 4 full day, 56 teleconferences, estimated 1,156 hours);
- Delivering and attending training both outside and internally in the shelter (16 staff/2 per shelter attend 6 major project training events);
- Developing and maintaining community partnerships;
- Holding innumerable staff meetings required to support project implementation;
- Putting in place new data gathering tools and assessment processes; and,
- Developing and monitoring data collection processes.

Analysis of the Process:

Phase I (October 2008-December 2008)
During the initial planning phase several assessment tools and practice interventions were chosen by the leadership team to support promising practice implementation in Safety, Health and Cultural Competence in all participating shelters including the creation of a common consent form

1. Assessment Tools:
   The first two tools described below were chosen to support shelter front line counsellors to better understand the needs of the women accessing shelter. The third tool ensured that women accessing shelter had the opportunity to assess how successfully the shelter’s had met their needs. The fourth tool offered the opportunity for shelter management and staff to respond to questions regarding training provided, tools implemented and their assessment of project impact.

   - The Domestic Violence Survivor Assessment (DVSA) tool was identified as a tool that encompassed all three areas of intervention addressed by the project: Safety, Health and Culture. As such the DVSA provided the primary framework to guide project implementation across all shelters. The DVSA is based on the Transtheoretical Model of Change (TM) which focuses on helping people through a process of intentionally changing their behaviour. Like TM the DVSA has 5 stages of change – Pre-contemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action and Maintenance. The difference between the two models lies in the DVSA’s focus of 4 primary issues – Safety, Culture, Health and Self-Strengths which are keys to understanding the abused women’s experience as she moves through the stages of change.

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11 Dienemann, Campbell, Curry & Landenburger, 2002
• The Danger Assessment (DA)\textsuperscript{14,15} was implemented as part of the ‘Safety’ component of the project. The DA requires the implementation of both a 20-item questionnaire and completion of the Danger Assessment Calendar.

• The third assessment tool, the Shelter Exit Survey\textsuperscript{16} generally measured a woman’s satisfaction with shelter services. Items gathered information about the woman’s overall satisfaction, her satisfaction with the shelter staff, shelter and staff sensitivity to her culture as well as specific questions related to her length of stay in shelter and the number of times she stayed at a shelter in the past.

• The Shelter Staff Survey was completed by at least two staff at all participating shelters who had been directly involved with project implementation. Interviews were also completed with shelter stakeholders including all members of the project implementation team and Legal Aid partners.\textsuperscript{17}

2. Practice Interventions

• The area of Health was supported by shelter staff’s administration of the DVSA to help identify the woman’s level of readiness to address issues related to her health, defined in the tool as ‘Feelings’ and ‘Mental Distress’ and to support service planning referrals. Training focused on increasing shelter staff knowledge and recognition of trauma symptoms in shelter residents. This training included basic strategies (e.g. relaxation, deep breathing, other grounding techniques) that shelter staff could easily teach women to assist in reducing their feelings of distress in moments when they felt overwhelmed by emotion.

• Women accessing shelter often are dealing with serious legal issues that compromise theirs and their children’s safety (e.g. custody and access, criminal court). A partnership was formed by Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters with Legal Aid Alberta which saw the initiation of a telephone line by Legal Aid dedicated specifically to calls from shelters.

• Fundamental to supporting organizational cultural competence are policies and procedures that provide the structural framework for individual staff activities. A survey based on the work of Dr. Sujata Warrior completed by management and staff at each participating shelter assessed organizational needs in relation to building cultural competence in their organizations.\textsuperscript{18} The consensus was for all participating shelters to develop written policies that support their efforts to be culturally competent and to develop definitions of cultural competence that would be consistent among shelters.

\textsuperscript{14} Campbell, J. 1995; Campbell, Webster & Glass, 2008  
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid 2, Appendix F, 113-114  
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid 2, Appendix K, 119-121  
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid 2, Appendices C & D, pages 102-111  
Phase II (January 2009-September 2009)
During the preparation phase external consultants were engaged to support the Leadership’s Team development of an Outcome Measurement Framework\(^{19}\) including the development of tools and methods and the data collection processes for the project.

The framework was developed with the following important considerations in mind:
- Attention to shelter resources in the project’s design;
- Availability of support to shelters and their staff throughout the Practical Frameworks for Change implementation process;
- Grounding the work in ethical research principles;
  - Possible ethical concerns included: confidentiality of women and their children; security of information collected; fully informing the women of everything that will be required of them; and, ensuring that there are no emotional risks to the women and children as a result of the project. The project was reviewed by ACWS’ Ethics Review Committee.
- Requirement that information currently collected on the common database may need to change and/or expand to meet the project goals; and,
- Transferability of the framework and the associated data collection requirements to a new common database.

Ultimately, the data collection process included the following key components:
- An evaluation plan was developed and approved by the ACWS Ethics Review Committee and the ACWS Board; (add description on how to develop an evaluation plan). Key components of the evaluation plan included:
  - Identifying and addressing possible ethical issues (e.g., using non-identifying case file numbers to record personal information, fully informing the clients of everything that will be required of them and ensuring that there are no emotional risks to women and children as a result of the evaluation).
  - Formulating research questions: For this project the question was *What impact does the use of the DVSA and the Danger Assessment tool have on the client’s safety, health, and perception of program’s cultural competence?*
  - Determining the measures to be used: Measures, in sequence from client intake through to exit included: demographics and history information, DVSA, Danger Assessment (Calendar and 20-items), a safety plan, the Exit Survey. In addition, implementation activity tracking. This second phase of the project also included 6 major training events and the development and/or revision of protocols and other documents supporting data collection work, assessment tool administration and practice interventions.

\(^{19}\) Ibid 1
**Phase III (October 2009-June 2010)**

Project implementation took place over a period of nine months. During this period the shelter leadership team met monthly by teleconference and individual support was provided by ACWS to shelters requiring additional training support. In addition two data collection audits took place – one in February and the other in April of 2010. The audits were based on cumulative information collected beginning on October 1, 2009. The purpose of the audits was to:

- Ensure accuracy and completeness of data entered;
- Address shelter questions or concerns related to data entry;
- Carry out preliminary data analysis and review;
- Set the stage for data clean-up; and,
- Identify additional research questions of interest to shelters for future analysis and reporting.

Data was downloaded from the common database to statistical analysis software (SPSS) for analysis. This decreased the amount of work for shelters (i.e., did not require double data entry) and ensured that all information collected could be connected using the non-identifying ID number to protect confidentiality of women and their children. The variables used in the analysis were selected in accordance with the original framework and included basic client demographics, admission and shelter statistics and survey information. Nine summary reports were produced for each audit – one for each of the eight participating shelters containing individual shelter data and one aggregate report summarizing information from all shelters. A PowerPoint presentation was also developed to assist the shelters in dissemination of the individual shelter audit information to their staff. A project summary report was also created with accompanying PowerPoint for dissemination and discussion by the Project Leadership Team. A full day face to face meeting facilitated by the evaluation consultant was held in November 2010 to review results, gather contextual input from shelters, brainstorm data interpretation, and to generally share shelter implementation experiences. ACWS provided individual support to shelters following both audits to facilitate data clean-up.

**Phase IV (July 2010-January 2011)**

This phase included:

- Stakeholder Feedback collected by the evaluation consultant using telephone interviews with the members of the leadership team and Legal Aid staff and an on-line survey with shelter staff who participated in training and/or used the tools that were implemented in the course of the project (16 individuals interviewed; 43 individuals completed surveys)
- Final quantitative data clean-up and analysis
- Qualitative analysis
- Report preparation dissemination to and final feedback from the leadership team
- Report dissemination
Lessons Learned:
Staff valued the training they received and the new tools they implemented, such as the DVSA and DA questionnaires. Related to this, staff also identified the support from shelter staff, management, and the ACWS implementation team to be the most helpful elements related to the project implementation.

As for the challenges faced in project implementation, staff from participating shelters identified the following:

- Some staff noted that the project was not effective in helping shelters become better in collecting information.
- There was also some dissatisfaction related to assessment tools.
- Demands on shelter time were identified as the most significant issue of the implementation process.
- In general, staff identified issues related to lack of clarity of expectations or about understanding of project in general.
- Due to the complexity and depth of the project, the cultural competency implementation plan did not achieve the goals that were originally established.

Recommendations:

- Ensure that the scope of future promising practice projects contains fewer key practices or is implemented in a way that builds upon another instead of implementing all key practices at the same time.
- In support of future projects, put in place communication strategies to ensure that shelter workers are fully informed about the projects, their purpose, process and results.
- Resources permitting, regular training initiative of all practices to be used should be supported and accessible to all shelter staff.
- Provide more training to support administration of the DA calendar and the DVSA.
- Work with tool developers as necessary, to review or revise existing tools.
- Ensure that future work in support of developing data collection processes in shelters is responsive to and reflective of different levels of shelter capacity and resource access.
- Put in place, processes to track information from multiple shelter stays and other shelter services received by individual women.
- Provide training to shelter staff to support collection of ‘sensitive’ information.
- Determine a consistent and accurate way to record and document services provided to women who stay in shelters for a short period of time.
- Additional funding should be sought to increase shelter staffing levels to assist in data collection processes.