



## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### ***KEEPING WOMEN ALIVE – ASSESSING THE DANGER***

*Based on a Report Prepared for the  
Alberta Council of Women's Shelters*

*by:*

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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It is exciting to see the results of this action based research project on Danger Assessment useage in a group of Alberta shelters. Nine shelters contributed their expertise, time and ingenuity in collaboration to ensure successful project implementation over a two year period. Along the way many challenges were addressed and overcome in the pursuit of a better understanding of the dangers that women accessing shelters face. This report is, first and foremost, a testament to women's courage. It also attests to shelters' domestic violence expertise and their willingness and commitment to do whatever it takes to improve services for women.

The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS) wishes to convey its deep appreciation to the women whose voices are reflected here for their participation in the project and to the nine sheltering agencies for their inspiring work.

In particular our thanks go out to members of the project team including:

### ***The Shelter Executive Directors***

Pat Vargas, A Safe Place (Sherwood Park)  
Sharon Gamblin, Columbus House of Hope (St Paul)  
Lisa Falkowsky, Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter  
Cathy Miller, Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter  
Dorothy Sam, Eagle's Nest Stoney Family Shelter (Morley)  
Natasha Carvalho, Phoenix and Musasa House (Medicine Hat)  
Janet Gladue, Bigstone Cree Nation, Wabasca  
Brenda Brochu, Peace River Regional Women's Shelter  
Joy Johnson Green, Sonshine Centre (Calgary)  
Gerri Karsten, Sonshine Centre (Calgary)  
Pat Garrett, WINGS of Providence (Edmonton)

### ***The Members of ACWS Shelter Information Systems Committee***

Lissa Samantaraya-Shivji, Chair  
Penny Giacomoni  
Dianne Finch  
Patti Smeenk  
Lenora Wiebe

The ACWS Shelter Information Systems Committee in collaboration with Dr. Kate Woodman (former ACWS Research and Evaluation Specialist ) provided excellent leadership and oversight of the project. The staff of the nine participating shelters working directly with the women accessing their shelters ensured our success.

**ACWS STAFF**

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***Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell***

We wish to express our sincere gratitude to Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell of Johns Hopkins University, who has worked tirelessly over the last 30 years to develop and research the Danger Assessment Tool. Dr. Campbell served as an advisor and mentor to the project team. It has been our privilege to work and learn with her.

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## INTRODUCTION

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Violence against women is recognized by the United Nations as a pandemic, whose reports tell us that globally one in three women is a victim of violence. Canada is not immune.

In his book, *War on Women*, Canadian author Brian Vallee states that between the years 2000 and 2006, the number of Canadian women stabbed, shot, strangled or beaten to death by their spouses or partners was nearly five times as many as the Canadian soldiers and police officers killed over the same period in the line of duty<sup>1</sup>. When he continues his analogy on war, he remarks that women's shelters are really the refugee camps from the war at home.<sup>2</sup>

Shelters have long recognized that domestic violence deaths are preventable deaths and have worked tirelessly in their efforts to provide a responsive and effective continuum of services ranging from prevention, intervention, crisis counselling and follow-up. Statistics Canada observes that the work of shelters has made it possible for many women at high risk of femicide to find safety and to plan to minimize ongoing risk and that overall rates of spousal homicides for both female and male victims have been declining in Canada over the last 30 years (1977 - 2006).<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, thousands upon thousands of women and children around the world are alive and thriving because of the determination and courage of shelter workers who stood beside them when they were needed.

## PROJECT BACKGROUND

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In 2003, the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS) invited Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell, an internationally recognized expert in intimate partner violence, to a training session for shelter workers on the utilization of her lethality assessment tool (Danger Assessment). The majority of shelter directors in the province attended and expressed great enthusiasm for the potential of this tool to support their work in keeping women safe.

The Danger Assessment tool was originally developed in 1985 to empower women at risk with information that reduced the likelihood of further exposure to her risk of femicide. It consists of a Calendar to assist in recall and 20 weighted questions designed to measure risk in an abusive relationship.

Following the training, some Alberta shelters began utilizing the Danger Assessment tool for women in contact with their shelter. Those shelters pioneering this work were extremely concerned about the consistently high number of women who were at risk of future assault and/or homicide when they came to shelter. As ACWS began tracking these scores provincially we saw that more than three quarters of the women in emergency shelters and more than 90% of women in second stage shelters were at serious risk of danger in their

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<sup>1</sup> Vallee, Brian. *War on Women*. Toronto, Key Porter Books Limited, (2007) p. 29

<sup>2</sup> Vallee, p. 30

<sup>3</sup> Sauv e & Burns, The Statistics Canada 2008 report on Canada's shelters (May 2009)

intimate partner relationship based on Dr. Campbell's Danger Assessment tool.

Following some tragic femicides and murder suicides in the province, shelters in Alberta became increasingly active in advocating for sound risk and Danger Assessment procedures based upon strong community collaboration. ACWS sought and obtained intervener status at the Fekete Inquiry. In this case, Betty Fekete's assertions of the danger her husband presented to herself and her son were discounted despite interventions by shelter staff at the local women's emergency shelter in collaboration with a court worker. And then it was too late; with Joseph Fekete killing his son Alex and his wife before turning the gun upon himself. Shelter workers know that lives can be saved in Alberta and across Canada if women and children are believed. They see strong value in a tool that can be used to communicate with community stakeholders on the dangers women face in abusive relationships in order to ensure effective safety planning and legal interventions occur.

Recognizing that there are many different risk and Danger Assessment tools in use, all with goals to increase public safety, ACWS hosted a conference in 2006 that focused on these tools, thanks to a Community Incentive Grant from Alberta Children and Youth Services and the County of Strathcona.<sup>4</sup> It became very clear at that conference that the best safety plans are created when community providers share information derived from the various assessment tools that they are utilizing.

An outcome of the conference was a collaborative research project with Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell, ACWS and nine member sheltering agencies to examine the utilization of the Danger Assessment tool in Alberta shelters in order to:

- Inform women's shelter practice in keeping women and children safe;
- Provide accurate evidenced-based research for use by community stakeholders in keeping women and children safe; *and*
- Pilot a train-the-trainer model using Canadian/Alberta data.

## **THE CANADIAN AND ALBERTA CONTEXT**

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The Statistics Canada 2008 report on Canada's shelters (Sauvé & Burns, May 2009) included the following highlights. For each highlight, the comparable Alberta annual statistics are provided where available:

1. Between April 1, 2007 and March 31, 2008, approximately 101,000 women and children were admitted to 569 shelters across Canada.
  - Alberta shelters housed 12,387 women and children during this period, or about 12% of the total of Canadian women using shelters.
2. On April 16, 2008 (snapshot day), nearly 80% of these women and children were attempting to flee an abusive situation. The remainder were seeking shelter for reasons other than abuse.
  - Alberta's women's shelters report similar percentages on an annual basis.

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<sup>4</sup> Presenters at the ACWS Danger and Risk Assessment Training included, Karl Hansen, Jeff Edleson, Jane Coombe, Jay Silverman, Linda Baker, Naomi Manuel and Sharon Meredith

3. On snapshot day, nearly half of the female victims of abuse in shelters were admitted with their children. Slightly more than one in five women did not have their children with them when they were admitted, and the remaining women did not have any parenting responsibilities or their situation was unknown.
  - In Alberta, almost half of the total admissions to emergency shelters were children.
4. The types of abuse cited by women seeking shelter were psychological or emotional abuse, as well as physical abuse. For three-quarters of women in shelters, the abuser was a spouse or former spouse.
5. One quarter (25%) of the women in shelters on the snapshot day were there to protect their children from witnessing the abuse being inflicted on their mother. The women also wanted to protect their children from abusive situations, such as psychological abuse (20%) and physical abuse (12%).
6. 25% of women residing in shelters on snapshot day had reported the most recent abuse incident to the police.
  - On average, 34% of women in Alberta emergency shelters reported receiving police services. In comparison, 49% of women at second stage shelters reported receiving police services.
7. 16% of women had laid charges against the abuser, and 15% had obtained a restraining or protection order against the perpetrator.
  - Alberta emergency shelter rates here are equivalent to the national rates; however, in second stage shelters 50% of 2007-2008 cases resulted in charges being laid, and 43% resulted in the batterer's arrest.
8. More than 9 in 10 women who left shelters for abused women on April 16, 2008 did not plan to return to live with their spouses (Sauvé & Burns, May 2009, page 5).
  - Emergency Shelter Exit Surveys at Alberta shelters indicated that, of women who identified where they would go after this most recent shelter stay, 14% indicated that they would return to the same relationship.

Alberta's incidence of domestic violence is amongst the highest of Canadian provinces. There were a total of 170 deaths from domestic violence in our province between 2000 and 2006, for an average of more than 20 such deaths per year over that period. These figures underestimate the actual rates, since cases where no charges had yet been laid, or where the case was unsolved or labeled as a suspicious death are not included. Further inaccuracies in the count arise from the fact that different police services within the province do not count these deaths in the same way. In 2008, the RCMP reported 14 family violence deaths in their jurisdictions in Alberta.

The Premier's Roundtable on Family Violence (2004) identified a number of key areas for government action, including social change; provincial leadership; collaborative, coordinated community response to family violence, development of services and supports; and program accountability.

Thanks to funding from the Alberta Children and Youth Services' Community Incentive Fund, this research project was able to support three of the pillars of this framework for action by:

- a) Providing a framework for community collaboration through information sharing, and support for collaboration;
- b) Supporting evidence-based practices, and expanding community based action research and evaluation; and
- c) Assisting in the provision of services and supports to abused women and children through Alberta's shelter network.

Overall rates of spousal homicides for both female and male victims have been declining in Canada over the last 30 years (1977 - 2006). The work of shelters over that period has made it possible for many women at high risk of femicide to find safety and to plan to minimize ongoing risk.

Social changes have also played an important role in the reduction of the number of women killed by their intimate partners. For example, women are marrying at a later age, having smaller families and improving their financial status, potentially reducing their risk for intimate partner violence (IPV). Gun control legislation may also play a role. However, it is important to note that the rate of spousal homicide against females in Canada remains between 3 and 5 times higher than the rate for males (Statistics Canada 2008).

## **STUDY METHODOLOGY**

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The study used four measures: the Danger Assessment Calendar, the Danger Assessment Questionnaire, a demographics form and an Outcomes Collection form that asked women to rate their perceived level of risk before and after completing the Danger Assessment. Women who consented to participate in the study were asked to sign an Informed Consent form and, if they completed all study components, were given a \$20 grocery voucher as an honorarium. Data was collected from 509 women between November 1, 2007 and January 31, 2009 at ten research sites<sup>5</sup> across the province by shelter staff certified in the use of the Danger Assessment.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

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This Executive Summary provides key outcome information from the study. The data analyses reported here are those based on Danger Assessment (DA) scores in relation to demographics, type and location of shelters, and abuse-related issues.

### **1. Key Demographics:**

- a) Marital status: Higher DA risk levels are more characteristic of those living in a common-law or cohabiting relationship, recently separated, or single ( $p = .003$ ).

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<sup>5</sup> A Safe Place (Sherwood Park), Columbus House of Hope (St Paul), Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter, Eagle's Nest Stoney Family Shelter (Morley), Phoenix Safe House and Musasa House (Medicine Hat) an on-reserve shelter, Peace River Regional Women's Shelter, Sonshine Centre (Calgary), and WINGS of Providence (Edmonton)

b) Cultural background: Over half of the respondents in the study self-identified as Aboriginal (Figure 1). A significant difference in DA scores was found for cultural background groups (Figure 2), with the Aboriginal group reporting the highest risk scores, followed by the English-Canadian group and the 'Other' group ( $p = .000$ ). Aboriginal women were also significantly more likely to report increased physical violence, including violence when the woman was pregnant, suicide threats, partner unemployment, and partner's use of illegal drugs or addiction to alcohol.

Figure 1: Participants' cultural background by percentage

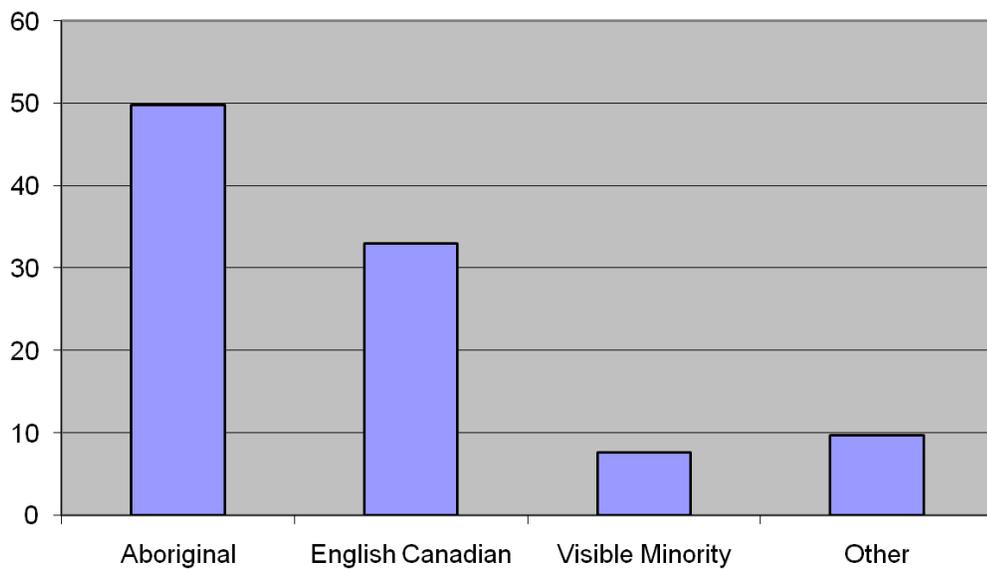
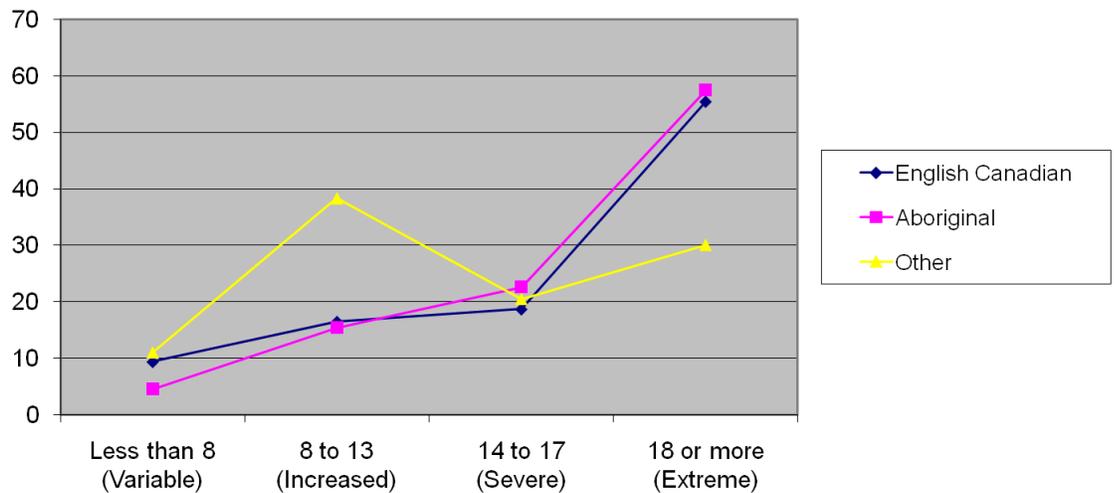


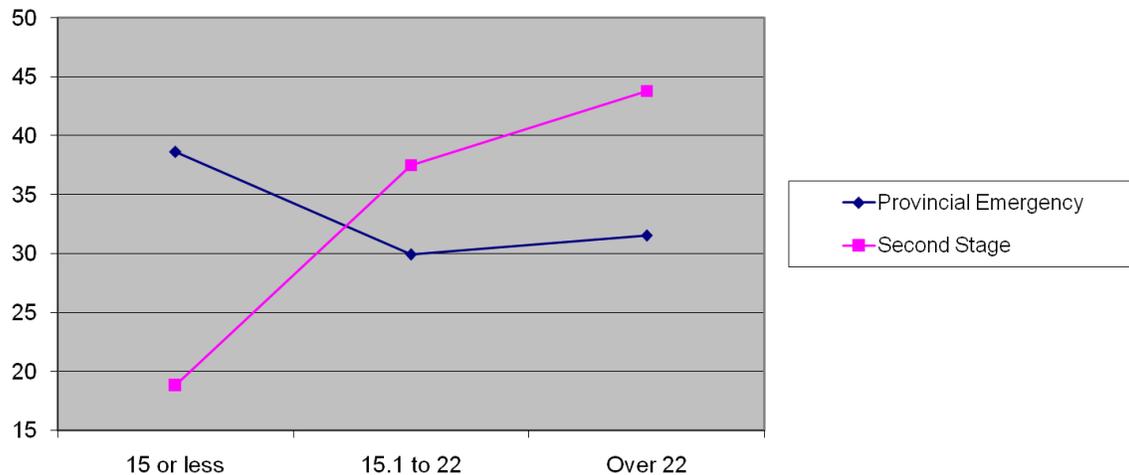
Figure 2: Participants' cultural background by DA scores



## 2. Danger Assessment (DA) Scores by Shelter Type:

- a. Significant differences were found between DA scores for emergency and second stage clients ( $p = .024$ ). A greater proportion of second stage clients scored above 22 (43.8% as compared to 31.5% of women in emergency shelters) and fewer second stage clients score 15 or less (18.8% as compared to 38.6%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: DA score by shelter type



- b. Second stage clients were more likely to report that their partner had used a weapon or threatened to use a weapon against them, and the weapon used was more frequently reported to be a gun. Women in second stage shelters were also more likely to say that they believe their partner is capable of killing them and to report increased incidences of physical violence, threats to harm the children and stalking or controlling behaviours (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Danger Assessment items by Type of Shelter

	Emergency	Second Stage
Q1. Increased physical violence?	65.9%	85.4%
Q5. Use or threat to use a weapon?	43.0%	59.6%
Q5a. If yes, was the weapon a gun?	13.8%	45.0%
Q6. Does your partner threaten to kill you?	46.9%	72.9%
Q9. Does your partner ever force sex?	48.3%	69.6%
Q10. Does partner ever try to choke you?	54.4%	68.8%
Q13. Does your partner control your daily activities?	76.7%	93.8%
Q15. Have you been beaten while pregnant?	36.6%	60.0%
Q17. Does your partner threaten to harm your children?	17.8%	65.2%
Q19. Partner stalking behaviour?	66.3%	85.4%

### 3. **Frequency of Shelter Use:**

- a) About 40% of participants were using a shelter for the first time, while 44% had used a shelter between 2 and 5 times and about 15% had been in a shelter 6 times or more (Figure 5).
- b) A significant relationship was found between number of emergency shelter stays and increasing risk levels on the DA ( $p = .018$ ) (Figure 6). Women who have had multiple emergency shelter stays are at particularly high risk of lethality. Safety planning with these women is of particular importance. It is important to note that Aboriginal cultural background is also strongly related to increased number of shelter stays, both for emergency shelters ( $p = .000$ ) and for second stage shelters ( $p = .004$ ).

Figure 5: Previous Stays in Emergency Shelters

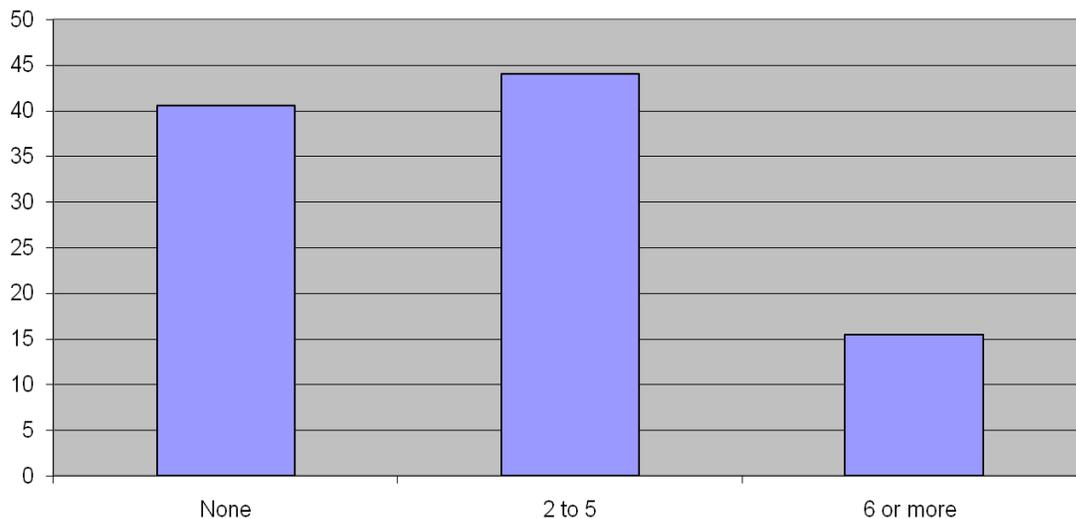
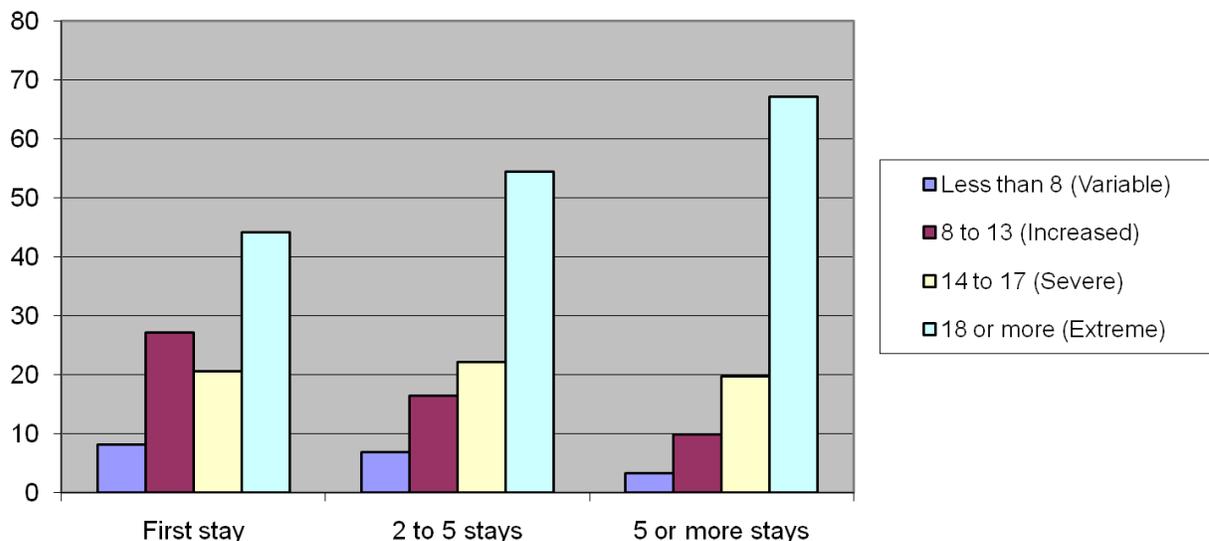


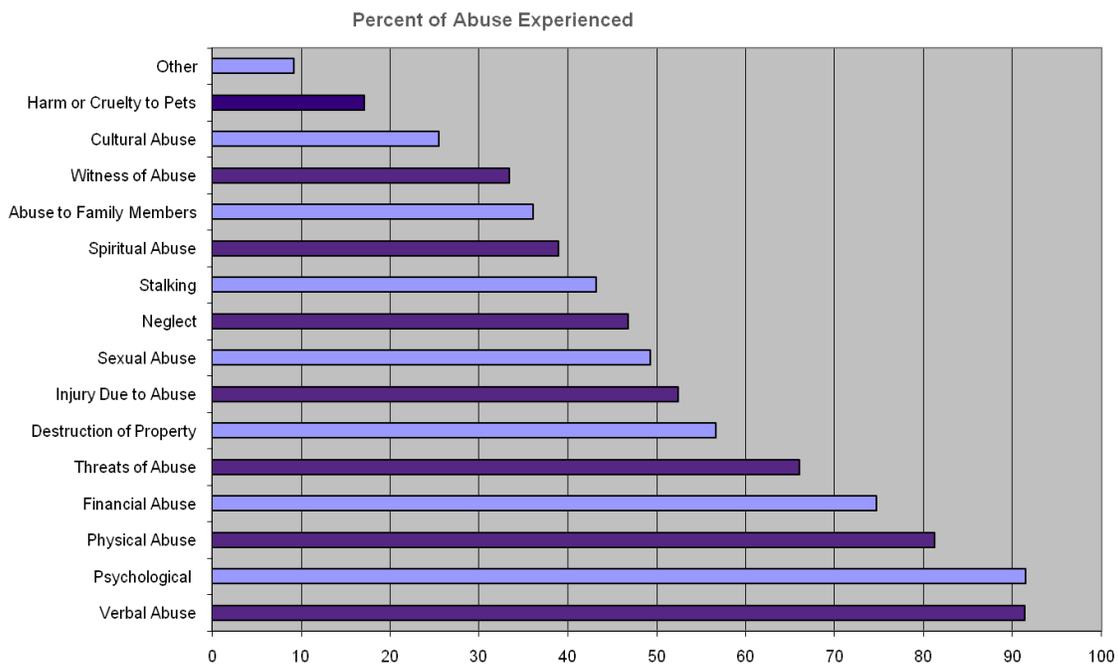
Figure 6: Danger Assessment scores by number of Shelter stays



#### 4. **Types of Abuse:**

The most frequently reported types of abuse were psychological/emotional abuse and verbal abuse, with 91.4% of participants reporting having these experiences (Figure 7). The second most frequently reported type of abuse was physical, with 81% of respondents reporting its occurrence. Higher DA scores (22 and higher) were related to more frequent reporting of sexual abuse, abuse of family members, destruction of property, harm or cruelty to pets, threats of abuse, physical injuries due to abuse, spiritual abuse, cultural abuse and stalking.

Figure 7: Types of abuse



#### 5. **Relationship to Abuser**

The largest proportion of abusers were common-law partners (46.3%) and husbands (21%). Former partners and boyfriends accounted for about another 25% of responses. Women who were separated or living apart, and those in common-law or live-in relationships, were at slightly higher risk, although this relationship was not statistically significant.

#### 6. **Length Of Abusive Relationship**

The range of reported length of the abusive relationship was from 0 to 55 years, with an average length of 5.7 years (median and mode 4.0 years). Most relationships (about 66%) were 9 years or less in length.

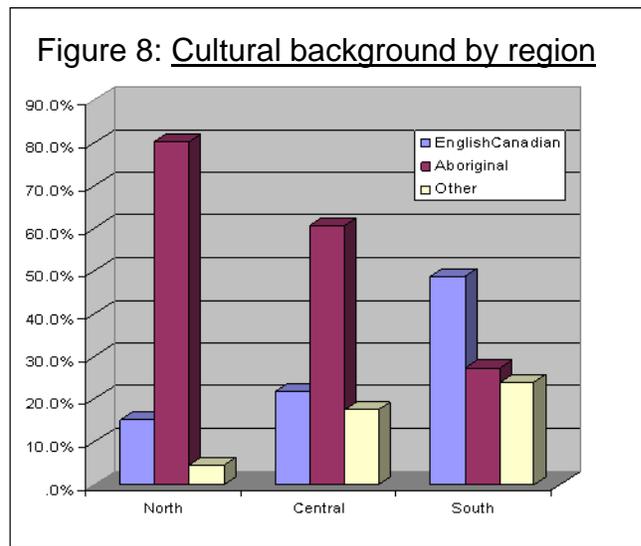
## Regional Differences

### 1. *Proportion of Aboriginal Women*

The shelter population for the Northern region of the province includes a significantly larger proportion of Aboriginal women (81.1%) than is found in either the Central region (60%) or the South (28.7%) ( $p = .000$ ).

### 2. *Proportion of 'Other' Cultural Background*

The "Other" cultural background group makes up only 4.9% of the Northern shelter group in comparison to 18% of the Central group and 23.9% of the South region group. No Northern region participants reported that they were born outside Canada, but 12.5% of Central region participants and 32.4% of Southern region participants reported being born elsewhere ( $p = .000$ ) (Figure 8).



### 3. *Number of Children*

Many of the results cited may be more influenced by the distribution of the Aboriginal population than by regional factors. For example, there was a significant regional difference in the number of children women reported as living with them prior to this shelter stay ( $p = .019$ ). The difference here appears to be primarily the larger family size in the Northern region, which may reflect the larger number of children born to Aboriginal women in Canada.

### 4. *Danger Assessment Scores by Region*

- a. Some tendency can be seen for the North region to have a slightly higher number of high-risk cases and the South region to have a higher proportion of relatively lower-risk cases, but the trend did not reach statistical significance.

- b. The responses to a number of specific questions on the Danger Assessment did vary significantly by region, as summarized below. (Note: check marks identify those regions with a significantly higher proportion of affirmative responses,  $p < .05$ ).

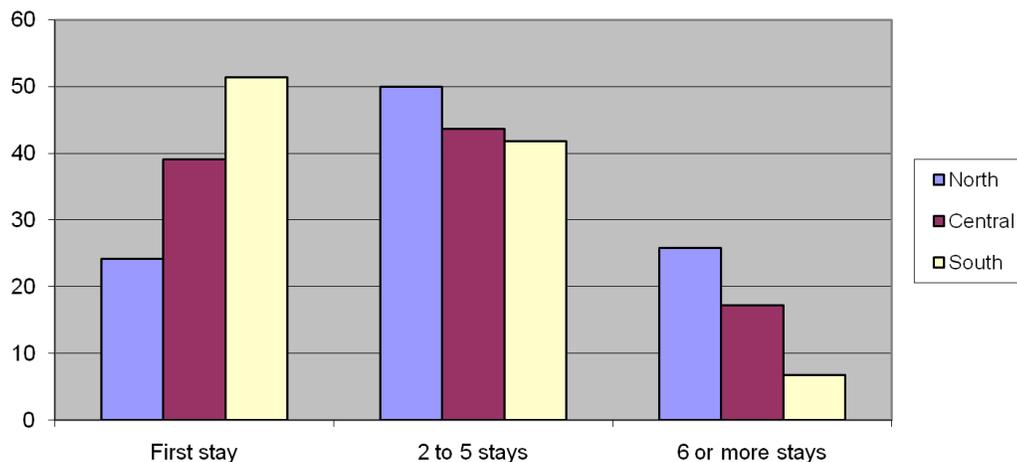
Figure 9: Danger Assessment items by region

	North	Central	South
Q2. Does your partner own a gun?	✓	✓	
Q2a. Was the gun used in an assault?		✓	
Q3. Have you left your partner?	✓		✓
Q4. Is your partner unemployed	✓		
Q6. Does your partner threaten to kill you?		✓	
Q11. Does your partner use illegal drugs?	✓	✓	
Q16. Does your partner threaten to commit suicide?	✓		
Q17. Does your partner threaten to harm your children?		✓	

### 5. Number of Shelter Stays by Region:

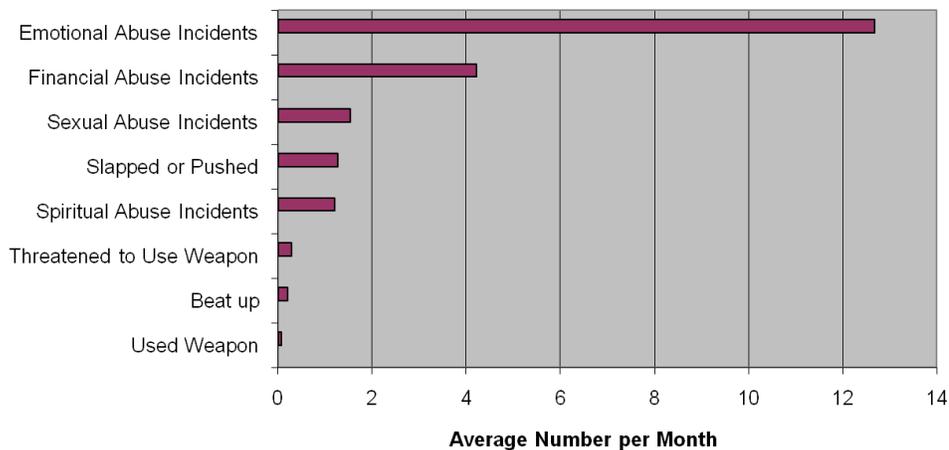
More women at the participating shelters in the South were using the shelter for the first time (51% in the South compared with 24.2% in the North), and a larger proportion of women at Northern shelters had 6 or more shelter stays (25.8%, compared to 6.7% in the South) ( $p=.000$ ). The reasons for these differences may lie in comparative resource scarcity in the North (e.g. housing, addiction treatment, second stage shelters). The increased number of shelter stays in the North may also be related to the higher risk levels of the shelter population there and to reduced access to housing and second stage shelters.

Figure 10: Emergency shelter use by region



## Danger Assessment Calendar Results

The Danger Assessment (DA) Calendar is the first of two components that make up the DA tool. It is used to assist women to identify the frequency, severity and types of abuse that she has experienced in the year prior to her current shelter stay. 407 women in 7 shelters completed an average of 5.4 months of abuse history. (While some women completed more than 12 months, others completed less than a year of the Calendar because the pattern was apparent in fewer than 12 months and/or it was too painful to go back the entire year). The resulting data indicate that the average woman in this sample experiences emotional abuse at least 12 times per month, and physical abuse at least once or twice per month. It is important to note that the number of months completed on the Calendar do not reflect the length of the relationship.

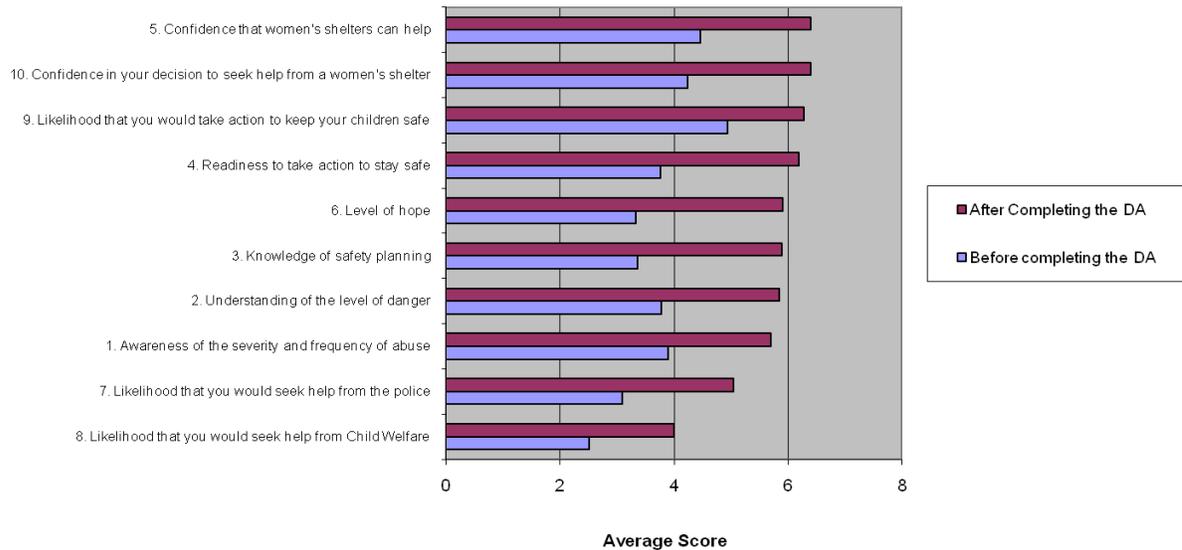


### 1. Outcomes Information Collection Form

- a. Of 423 women who provided Calendar data, 30% were from the North, 27% from Central Alberta, and 43% from Southern Alberta.
- b. Overall, the experience of completing the Calendar and the 20-item DA Questionnaire had a very significant impact on women's perceptions of their risk of lethality and continuing abuse. The use of the DA significantly contributes to women's safety, in that it helps them to estimate risk more realistically and to better understand the need for safety planning for themselves and their children.
- c. The women's perception of risk changed significantly from "pre" DA to "post" DA ( $p=.000$ ) on every DA question. The average ratings on the questions also increased in every case (Figure 12).

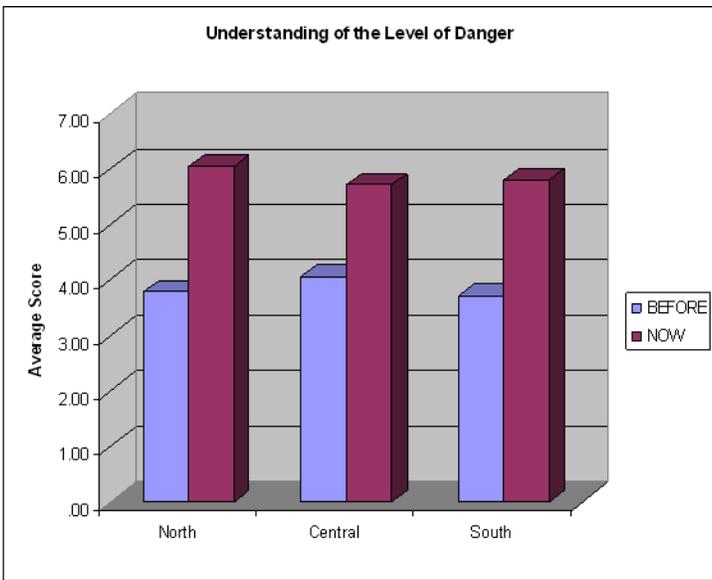
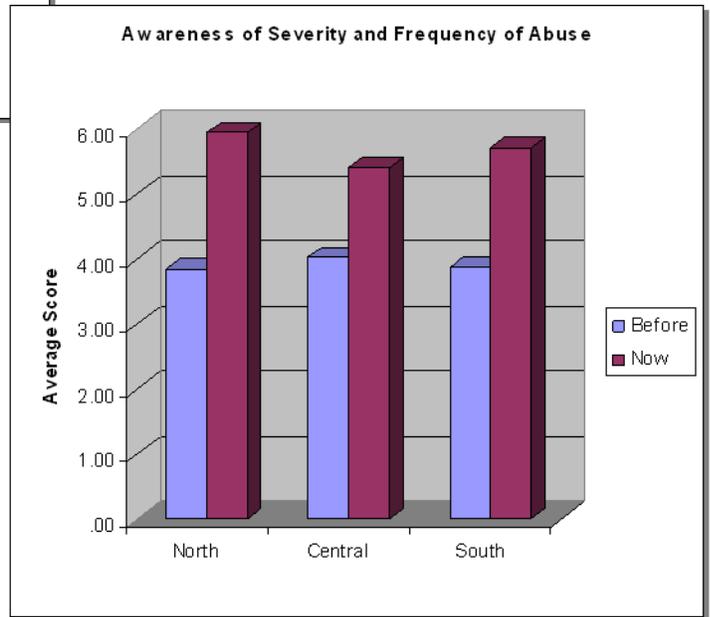
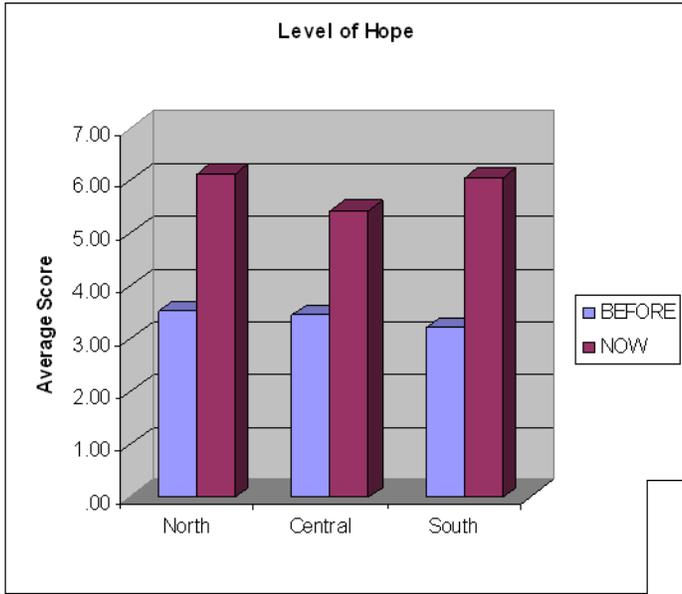
Figure 12: Changes in women’s perception of risk of lethality

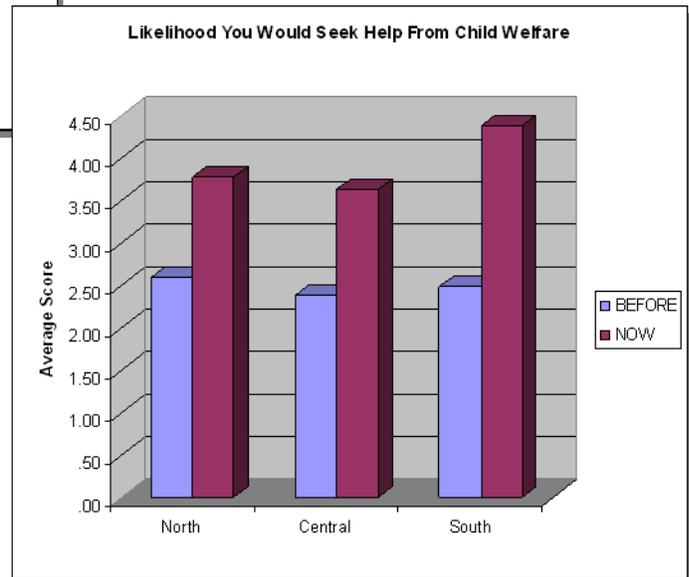
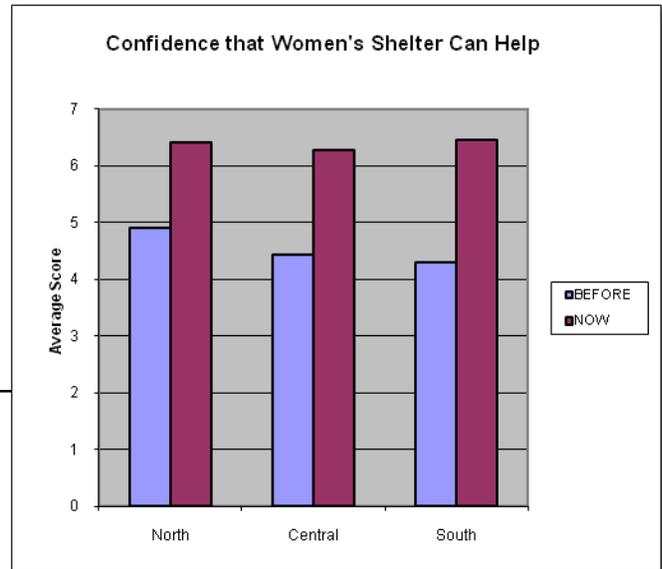
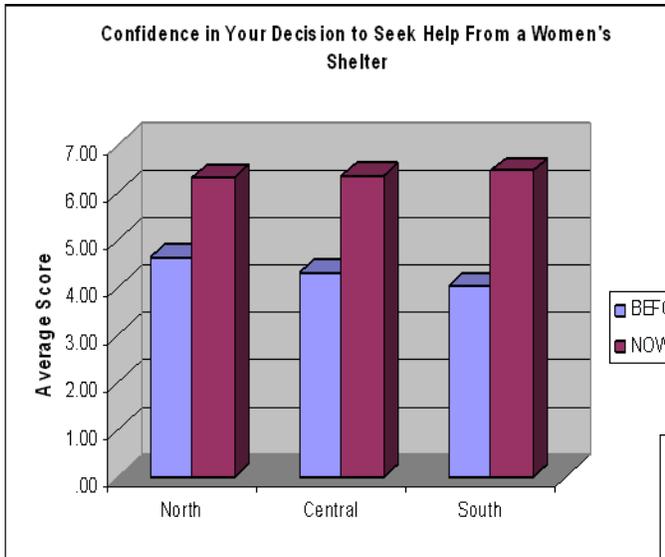
*Women’s Assessment of Change Before and After the DA*



- d. Women’s confidence in shelters as a source of help was relatively high prior to the completion of the DA (4.47). In comparison, women initially estimated the likelihood of their seeking help from either the police or Child Welfare as relatively low (3.10 and 2.5 respectively). After completing the DA, women said that they were much more likely to seek assistance from the police (increase in mean from 3.1 to 5.0), while their likelihood of seeking help from Child Welfare increased more modestly (2.5 to 4.0 – neither low nor high).
- e. A comparison of scores of women’s assessment of change demonstrated an increase of the average ratings before and after DA administration in each region. There were no statistically significant differences among regions when the rate of change in women’s knowledge of safety planning, readiness to take action, likelihood that they would seek help from the police and likelihood that they would take action to keep children safe were compared.

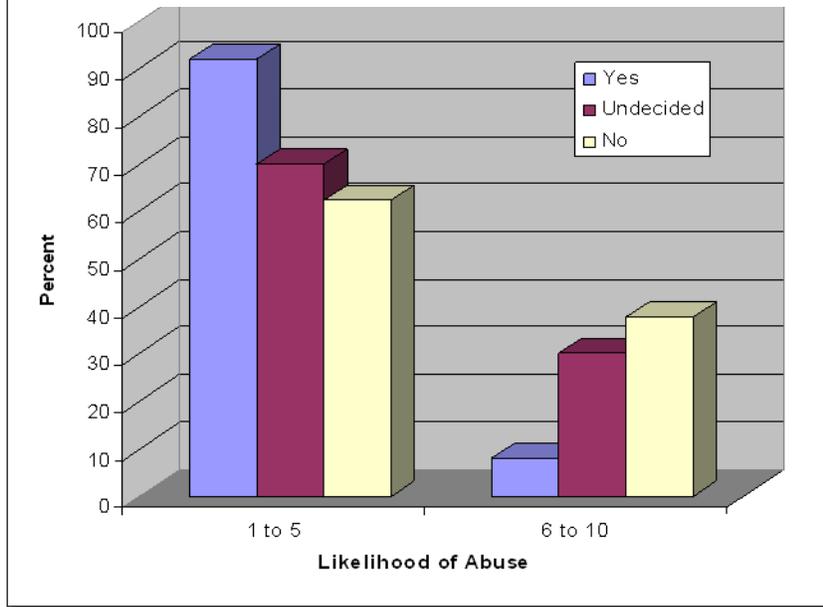
However, women in the North were more likely to demonstrate a higher degree of change in their awareness of the severity and frequency of abuse, their understanding of the levels of danger and their levels of hope. Women in the South showed a higher rate of change in their levels of confidence that women’s shelters can help, likelihood that they would seek help from Child Welfare and their confidence that they would seek help from a women’s shelter. (See charts that follow).





- f. 81.7% of women indicated that they did not intend to return to the abusive relationship. Although this figure is high, at 8 women in 10, it is slightly lower than the Statistics Canada rate for the 2008 shelter report, which showed 9 in 10 women having made this decision.
- g. There is a significant difference in DA scores between those who have made the decision not to return and those who are returning or are undecided ( $p = .009$ ). More of those who are not returning perceive a higher degree of danger of further physical abuse than those returning to the abusive relationship do.

Figure 13: DA scores by decision to return to the abusive relationship



## DANGER ASSESSMENT RESEARCH OUTCOME TOOL QUALITATIVE DATA

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### 1. *Women's Experience of Completing the DA and the Calendar*

- a. A large number of participants commented about how difficult the experience of completing the Calendar was for them. They often reported feelings of anxiety, physical discomfort, and spoke of the emotional pain entailed in this sort of recall and the wish not to have to 'keep going back'. They also frequently mentioned that completing the DA components brought regrets and self-criticism about not having acted sooner.
- b. For many other women, however, completing the DA and the Calendar was seen overall as a positive, useful experience although it was somewhat uncomfortable.

### 2. *Key Qualitative Themes*

The following themes were consistently reported on the outcomes document responses:

- a. Confirmation that they had made the right decision when they chose to leave, or that they were survivors of these experiences and no longer victims;

- b. Improved understanding of abuse, reduced minimization of risk, better awareness of risk and understanding of the escalating patterns of abuse in their relationship;
- c. Awareness of the need for personal change and/or action, and the urgency of making these changes or taking action;
- d. Changed views of the abuser, in that he is seen more clearly as the source of the problems in the relationship;
- e. Increased understanding of safety planning and the intention to implement its components;
- f. Increased awareness of the importance of children's safety;
- g. Awareness of and intention to use community resources (e.g., police and legal assistance) more often; and
- h. Key barriers to change for some women were mistrust of authority, and feelings of powerlessness to change their situation.

### **3. *Qualitative Feedback from Shelter Workers***

Shelter Workers in all nine shelters affirmed their perspective that employing the Calendar in addition to administering the 20-item DA Questionnaire enhanced their ability to support women in better identifying and understanding the level of danger that they were in. In their words:

- Working with the women on the Calendar helped further the trust connection.
- A wonderful way to see patterns and frequency of abuse.

They also identified how difficult it was to hear the reality of women's stories, and how they recognized the pain that women were experiencing:

- It was heart-breaking to hear some of the stories.
- Some abuse was daily, so hard to put on a calendar.
- Some were too scared to look back or bring it all to the surface again.

### **4. *Community Partner Focus Group Results***

Community Partners gave generously of their time to participate in focus groups around the province at the beginning and the conclusion of the research. Generally there was great interest expressed by all community partners in utilizing Danger Assessment results to inform collaborative safety alert processes for high risk women, a great tool to support collaboration. The suggestion was made that the Danger Assessment tool may be helpful for utilization by Victim's Services and other community service providers who have contact with women experiencing domestic violence. Other specific suggestions emerged from our Funders, and from our Justice, Education, and Alberta Children and Youth Services colleagues.

**Funders said:**

- Great tool to increase outcome measurement capacity at the shelter level and the broader system level.

**Justice said:**

- Results of value to prosecutors, especially in terms of building the woman's motivation to give evidence in court.
- Useful for safe visitation issues.
- Great value to police in supporting statements they gather from women.

**Education said:**

- Need to integrate shelter expertise on children exposed to family violence and risk assessment to schools.
- Wide application from health care settings to premarital courses.

**Children's Services said:**

- Information from the Danger Assessment could support more positive interventions with women and their families, especially in the context of enhanced collaborative efforts with shelters in ensuring children's safety.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

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**Practice-Focused Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1:** A number of the findings in this study point to the need for improved access for abused women and children to second stage shelters that allow them to remain safely housed while creating a new family future. Access to second stage shelters is particularly an issue for Aboriginal women living in the Northern region of the province. Both infrastructure and service supports should be addressed as essential components of assistance to this very high-risk population.

**Recommendation 2:** Aboriginal women are over-represented in the shelters in general and are at higher risk than the other cultural groups. This pattern has been a consistent theme for many years. An action plan needs to be developed between ACWS, their member shelters, government and community stakeholders to address these issues.

**Recommendation 3:** Women at second stage shelters were found to have higher risk levels than those at emergency shelters. This pattern probably reflects a longer history of abuse, greater severity of abuse, increased awareness and a decision to leave the abusive relationship. However, additional study is needed to fully understand this group and to identify proven and promising practices in risk reduction for this group. It is clear, however, given the elevated risk level for this group, that second stage shelters need to be secure environments to ensure the safety of the women and children in their care.

**Recommendation 4:** The use of the DA significantly contributes to women’s safety, in that it helps them to estimate risk more realistically and to better understand the need for safety planning for themselves and their children. All shelters in Alberta should be encouraged to implement the DA as a “promising practice” that will assist them in both individual advocacy for women and children, as well as provincial advocacy.

**Recommendation 5:** For second stage shelters, efforts should be made to obtain the most recent DA results for a client if she has come directly from an emergency shelter. If there has been no emergency shelter stay, or if there has been a period of more than 2 months since her last emergency shelter stay, the DA should be re-administered at the second stage shelter.

**Recommendation 6:** The following additional steps toward implementation of the DA as a standard component of shelter practice should be considered:

- a) Development of a single protocol for administration of the Danger Assessment tool should be developed to support uniform application across the province;
- b) Women who are not fluent in English should, whenever possible, have an interpreter available to assist them to complete the DA. This is particularly true of the shelters in the South of Alberta where the proportion of non-English speakers is highest, due to higher rates of immigration;
- c) Shelters that are currently using the DA but did not participate in the study should be assisted to adopt the recommended protocol for administration;
- d) In general, the DA is to be administered to women early in a woman’s emergency shelter stay as the basis for safety planning, especially considering that some women may leave shelter within a few days after admission. In second stage shelter settings, administration of the DA can be later, after there has been more time to develop a rapport with residents. Each shelter would develop a protocol regarding when the DA is to be administered considering length of stay, and both the benefits and barriers identified in this report by both staff and women in undertaking the Calendar and the danger assessment.
- e) Women are to be advised that if it is too upsetting for them to complete the calendar, they may stop at any time. Shelter staff should provide encouragement and support during the process.
- f) This study was unique in that it was the first to use the DA Calendar to identify incidents of non-physical abuse (e.g. verbal, emotion/psychological). This additional component should be continued. Women’s responses to its inclusion resulted in comments to the effect that these types of abuse were often more hurtful to them than physical abuse was. There were also responses from women whose abuse history did not include physical abuse, who stated that including these questions validated their experience – they understood that there didn’t have to be physical abuse for the abuse they suffered to be ‘real’.
- g) Proven practice for the Calendar ensures that it is completed in the woman’s own hand to ensure that it can be used in court.

**Recommendation 7:** The DA training manual currently in development in Alberta should reflect learnings from this project related to DA administration and be revised to be consistent with a provincial protocol when it is complete. Its contents should be consistent with the recommendations from this report concerning the importance of standardized and accurate implementation of the DA.

### **Considerations for Future Research Projects**

The process and outcomes of this study have been very important learning experiences for ACWS and for the participating shelters and their community partners. It has created a very substantial beginning for the development of future research and practice initiatives that will continue to build knowledge based on the work done by Alberta shelters. With these future initiatives in mind, the ACWS/shelter learning collaborative should consider the following recommendations that arise from their experiences in completing this action research project.

**Recommendation 8:** ACWS should have a stronger role in supporting research sites to monitor study protocol implementation in future studies. If research on the Danger Assessment continues, ACWS should provide support to the shelters to use both DA components in sequence - the Calendar first, followed by the Questionnaire.

**Recommendation 9:** In the forthcoming study of the province's on-reserve shelters, it will be important to ensure that confidentiality of responses is reinforced with women using the shelters, as they are concerned about individually identifiable data and/or about Children's Service or Police access to information.

**Recommendation 10:** ACWS should consider hiring an internal research position to assist shelter personnel to participate in research activities and to ensure that research design and materials are developed with ease and accuracy of analysis in mind.

**Recommendation 11:** Future ACWS Danger Assessment research projects should ensure that:

- a) A standard set of variables is collected by each shelter;
- b) The variables use a standard, optimal format;
- c) A standard protocol is in place at all shelters for the meaning and implementation of each question in the data set;
- d) All necessary information gathered in the Calendar component is recorded and entered for the analysis; and
- e) All variables in the database are linked through the use of non-identifying case numbers to permit full data analysis.

**Recommendation 12:** Continue to work toward the inclusion of more shelters in the learning collaborative, with special attention to regional representation.

**Recommendation 13:** The large Aboriginal population using women's emergency shelters is not well understood at present. Classifying these women as 'Aboriginal' loses important information on diversity within the group. Additional demographic information should be

collected to reflect this diversity, including, for example, her First Nation, her current status, and her usual residence prior to coming to the shelter (e.g. on or off-reserve)

There are important differences between Aboriginal women and others that also need further exploration and clarification, and may require a different approach to assessment. Consultation with the staff of shelters that have large Aboriginal populations should be undertaken to further clarify some of these issues (e.g. should the DA be the tool of choice, given that many women in this group do not wish to complete all questions? How can assessment reflect the fact that abusers may be more diverse – including family members and others as well as intimate partners?).

**Recommendation 14:** Further study of sub-groups within the shelter population is needed to clarify their patterns of shelter use. These sub-groups of interest include:

- a) Women whose number of stays in either type of shelter exceeds 4;
- b) Women whose length of stay in emergency shelters is very brief (2-3 days) – do they have special needs that the shelters are not meeting currently? Are they returning to an abusive relationship? Do they differ in any important way from women whose length of stay is longer?
- c) The qualitative responses for a small number of women (probably under 5%) were indicative of a sense of hopelessness and despair that they could not get the help they needed to get away from their abuser. Although the number is small, if it were extrapolated to the overall shelter population, it would include a significant number of women. Further study is needed to identify these women while they are in shelters, and to determine and provide the interventions they need to resolve what appear to be failures from the system of help.
- d) Batterers whose abuse brings women to shelter, including their demographics, any changes in behaviour after a partner's stay in shelter, their involvement in battering programs and the effects of different interventions on the woman and her family.

**Recommendation 15:** This project used a pre-post rating of women's perception of their risk of further abuse before and after completing the Danger Assessment. However, the 'pre' measure was completed retrospectively, which may have biased the outcome measurement. To more accurately measure the impact of Danger Assessment completion on women's perception of risk, the design of future studies should endeavour to include a true 'pre' assessment of women's perception of their risk before administering the Danger Assessment components.