

Putting Safety First: A Three Point Plan to Help End Domestic Violence in Alberta

2019 Election
Platform

Prepared by



ACWS
Alberta Council of
Women's Shelters

Putting Safety First: A Three Point Plan to Help End Domestic Violence in Alberta

One: Remove Systemic Barriers Facing Women Experiencing Violence.

Two: Transform Outcomes for Women Through Shelter Investment.

Three: Make Alberta a Model Province for Domestic Violence Response and Prevention.



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The Cost of Domestic Violence to Albertans

Alberta today has one of the highest rates of domestic violence in the country. Domestic violence has serious implications for the individuals involved. But it is also a whole of society issue: a public health crisis, a human rights and equality crisis and a resource crisis. The results of Dr. Robert Anda's Adverse Childhood Experiences study in the USA still ring true for Alberta 21 years on:

"Eradicating abuse of women and children in society would reduce the overall rate of depression by half, alcoholism by two-thirds and suicide, drug use and domestic violence by three-quarters, it would also dramatically improve workplace performance and vastly decrease the need for incarceration."¹

The implications of this cuts deep into families facing abuse and across every aspect of our society. Domestic violence places an enormous cost on our already strained and hardworking government and community resources. We all pay the bills generation after generation: in the health system, the criminal justice system, the education system and in both rural and urban parts of the province.

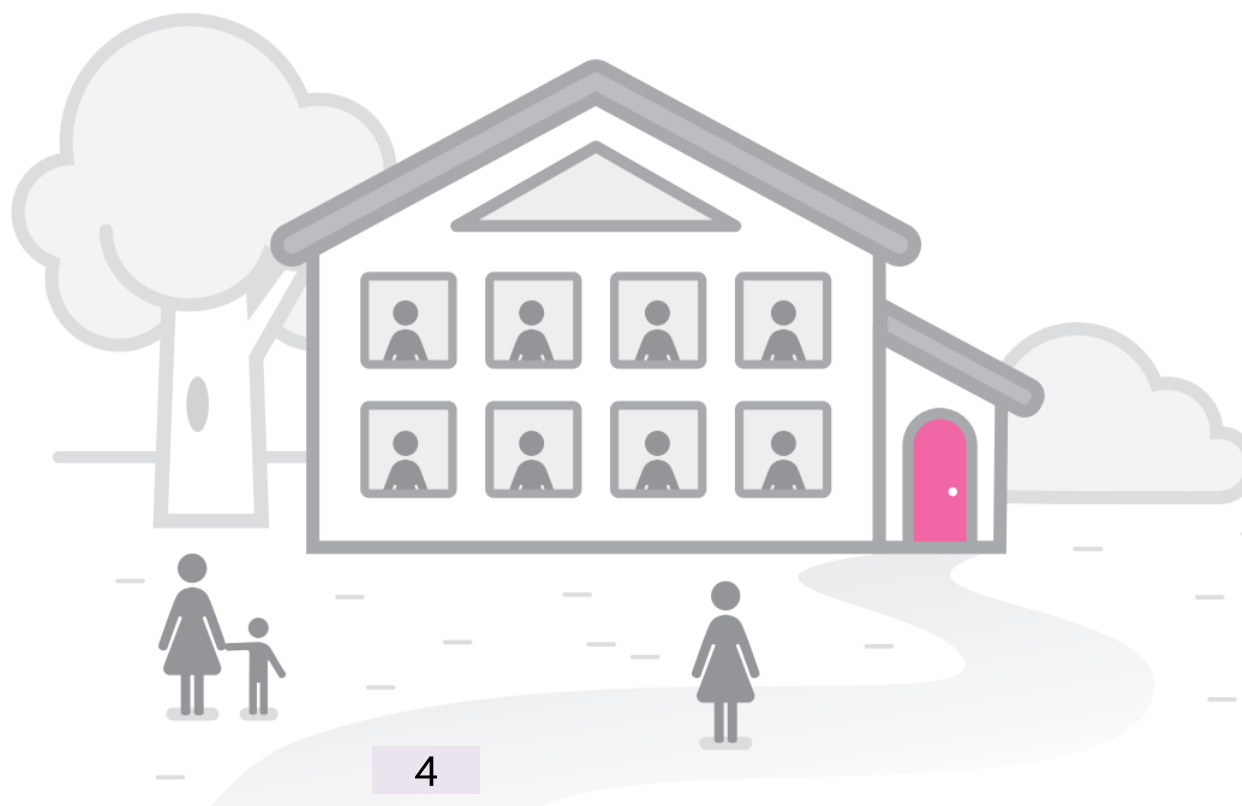
There are a number of models used to identify the costs of domestic violence. One model is to identify costs on an individual basis. Using this approach a University of Calgary study (2011) argued that a conservative² estimate cost the citizens of Alberta over \$100m per annum. Another model is to identify the cost per³ incident. A University of Saskatchewan study³ (2016) showed that the direct costs to the taxpayer of one serious incident of domestic violence is \$85,573. Police in Edmonton reported 2,954 incidents of criminal domestic violence incidents in 2018. That results in an estimated total cost of **\$252,782,642** of domestic violence in Edmonton alone.

Extrapolated province-wide for the 10,662 police recorded incidents of domestic violence⁴ brings the total cost to the tax payer to almost a Billion dollars (\$912,379,326) **per annum**. So, while cost estimates vary we can be sure that domestic violence places an enormous financial cost on citizens.

Women's Shelters Struggle to Meet the Demand

For decades Alberta's women's shelters have borne the brunt of chronic government underfunding, including for capital projects during the economic boom. The consequence of this neglect has been unacceptably high turn-away numbers from Emergency and Second-stage shelters for thousands of women, children and seniors every year.

Yet, despite the severe financial constraints shelters have stretched every available dollar to the maximum. Today, Alberta's shelters offer high quality, safe, wrap-around supports to women, children and seniors (48,447 were served in shelter or through outreach between 2015-18).

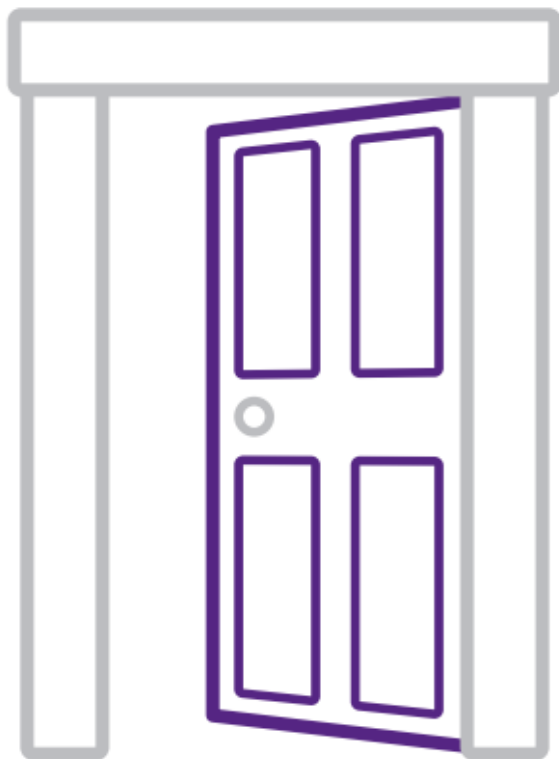


Choosing A Future Free from Domestic Violence

This election we have an opportunity: we can take the necessary steps to transform the fate of women facing violence, turning Alberta into one of the safest places in the country for women. But solving domestic violence requires a long-term, ambitious, whole-of-government approach. The days where vague commitments, or piecemeal interventions, were commonplace have long passed.

ACWS believes that domestic violence is a problem that can be solved. We believe women's shelters play an integral role in resolution of the problem. Our election platform is rooted in the experiences of members (identified through a consultation process) and our ongoing data analysis of women's experience.

Alone we cannot solve the problem but we ask that the next government makes a firm commitment to walking the path together.



A Three Point Plan to Help End Domestic Violence in Alberta

One: Remove Systemic Barriers Facing Women Experiencing Violence

Women are experts on their own experiences and needs. They should have a strong role in defining service expectations and outcomes. Gender-neutral services often fail to recognize and respond appropriately to women's uniquely barriered experiences of violence and abuse.

Research shows that placing women facing violence at the centre of service provision increases the likelihood of successful outcomes for them.⁵ Such services empower women, treat them with dignity and recognize the intersecting societal barriers women face that impede their path to safety. Government policies need to flip from a one size fits all to provide women-centered approaches across all areas but particularly in children's services, housing and criminal justice. An Indigenous lens also needs to be applied to all services.

Milestone 1.1:

Introduce a Portable Housing Benefit for women leaving abusive relationships (i.e. tied to the household rather than housing units) can stay together in safe alternative accommodation when escaping abuse (2020).

A Portable Housing Benefit, such as that introduced in Ontario, allows abused women and children to move to a different accommodation location of their choice. This means they can prioritize their own safety over financial constraints.⁶



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Milestone 1.2:

Extend and expand the pilot program providing free legal supports to sexual assault survivors to include domestic violence survivors (by 2022).

As a direct consequence of their abuse women may have limited or no employment and are likely to be the primary caregiver for children with no access to or control over the family's finances. These financial restrictions often place them at a significant disadvantage as they try to navigate the complexities of the legal system. This is especially the case when their partner may be fully employed and in complete control of all aspects of the family's resources. The 2018 pilot program providing financial resources for sexual assault survivors is a welcome start to redress this imbalance.

On evaluation of this program the government should expand it to include all those who face domestic violence and sexual assault.

Milestone 1.3:

Ensure that all recommendations of the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention are implemented in a timely way and establish an ongoing mechanism to review and improve the child welfare system to ensure it is fit for the twenty-first century (2022).

One in three child interventions involve domestic violence and at least 41% of children in Alberta shelters have past or current involvement from Child and Family Services. Extensive critiques of the many problems with the Albertan child welfare system are available, including from the report of the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention.

From a shelter perspective the child welfare system often neglects shelter expertise, the need for shelters to prioritize the safety of women (and by extension of their children)⁷ resulting in re-traumatization and further negative outcomes for women and children.

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Two: Transform Outcomes for Women Through Shelter Investment.

Shelters are the safest place for a woman facing abuse to go. Shelters are experts in safety planning, risk reduction and providing wrap-around care which can help a woman transform her life.

Shelters served 48,447 women, children and seniors in the past three years. In this same period 47,751 were turned-away due to a lack of capacity. Currently, the ACWS membership provides 217 second-stage shelter units. Based on current known levels of turn-aways the province requires at least 998 additional second-stage units to be constructed to meet existing demand.

The results of the 2015 \$15m funding investment indicates that funding to shelters has a significant positive impact on the lives of women, children and seniors. ACWS research shows that families are experiencing more successful stays in all types of sheltering programs, that specialized services for children have increased and there has been an increase in partnership arrangements with other agencies. Further investment in shelters will help to continue these improved outcomes for women, children and seniors.

Milestone 2.1:

Build at least 998 new second-stage shelter units across Alberta by 2024 and provide the necessary operating funds.

The work of shelters has a demonstrable positive impact on the lives of those they care for. ACWS data shows that 9% of women entering second-stage shelters were in stable housing but six months after their departure from the second-stage programme 68% were in stable housing situations.



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Milestone 2.2:

Establish a jointly-led shelter and cross-government action committee to develop strategies to eliminate turnaways implemented by 2024.

A key priority of the next government must be the elimination of turnaways so that all women, children and seniors receive the services they require. That almost as many women are turned away as receive service is an indication of the scale of the service crisis for Alberta's women's shelters. Solving this issue will require close collaboration between government and shelters focusing on how to increase capacity as well as identifying innovative models in shelter development.

Milestone 2.3:

Starting with the 2019/2020 budget link shelter funding formulas to cost of living increases.

Staff turnover in women's shelters is high due to stress and low pay. Government funding does not allow for cost of living increases, which would help to alleviate the most acute pay stresses on staff who are among the lowest paid in the non-profit sector. Resolving staff turnover rates will improve outcomes for women, children and seniors.



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Three: Make Alberta a Model Province for Domestic Violence Response and Prevention.

While Alberta currently has among the highest rates of domestic violence in Canada it also is a vibrant hub of high-quality practices, policies and expertise on how to solve domestic violence. Women's shelters are engaged in the collection and analysis of data on a grand scale amounting to one of the largest and longest running social justice databases in the country which helps to inform better practices and service outcomes for women.

The opportunity exists to turn Alberta in to a model province for domestic violence response and prevention. This would require coordinated actions by government, community organizations and academic institutions.

Milestone 3.1:

Domestic violence is a compulsory course for all social work students in Alberta (2020).

The Family Violence Death Review Committee (June 2018) and the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention identified the gaps in education on domestic violence as a significant issue in building informed system responses. Research by Mount Royal University indicates that Alberta has no specialized education for child intervention or domestic violence or Indigenous content and only two universities offer a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW). In B.C., seven schools offer a BSW program, six with Child Welfare specializations, two with Aboriginal/Indigenous specializations and one disability specialization.

Introducing mandatory courses on domestic violence is a cost-effective method of building appropriate domestic violence responses in to the system.

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Milestone 3.2:

Roll out domestic violence training for all government of Alberta employees, in compliance with 2018 OH&S legislation (ongoing).

Updates to Occupational Health and Safety legislation in 2018 recognized that domestic violence and sexual assault are potential risks to all employees within workplaces. To effectively account for this hazard employees should receive training on domestic violence and the way in which it constitutes a risk for all employees. The Government of Alberta has the opportunity to provide leadership in this regard by ensuring all GoA employees receive training.

Milestone 3.3:

Establish an expert panel on violence against women to advise on government policies, practices and prevention (2019).

Domestic violence and sexual assault are rapidly changing fields of expertise. The social understanding of these areas forms part of that change (eg. #MeToo). The scientific understanding is also subject to rapid change (eg. understanding of trauma in children). To account for these rapid changes, and to support government efforts to limit the costs of domestic violence on society, the government should seek external advice from academics, community leaders and practitioners.

¹ The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma. Van der Kolk, Bessel, M.D., Penguin Press (2015).

² Preventing Domestic Violence in Alberta: A Cost Savings Perspective, p7. School of Public Policy, University of Calgary. (2012). <https://preventdomesticviolence.ca/sites/default/files/research-files/Economic%20Impact%20of%20Domestic%20Violence%20in%20Alberta.pdf>

³ Economic Impact: The Cost of One Incident of Domestic Violence, p7. The Circle Project Association (2016) <http://www.circleproject.ca/cp2015/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Economic-Impact-Cost-of-Domestic-Violence.pdf>

⁴ Family violence in Canada: A statistical profile, p.35. Statistics Canada (2017) <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54978-eng.pdf?st=ijq-AN7L>

⁵ Please see Safety from Domestic Violence: Inventory of Promising Practices. Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (2018). <https://acws.ca/foundational-approaches>

⁶ For further information see A Safe Path Home: Solving Homelessness and Domestic Violence in Alberta. Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (2017). <https://acws.ca/collaborate-document/2854/view>

⁷ Child Custody and Domestic Violence: A Call for Safety and Accountability, p57. Jaffe, Lemon & Posson, SAGE Publications. (2003)

⁸ Recorded in private correspondence with ACWS & an anonymous researcher in Mount Royal University.

Five Questions for Every Candidate

1. How do you understand the purpose and the role of women's shelters and, in general, what would you do to ensure they receive support during the lifetime of the next government?
2. Will your government ensure the creation of 998 second-stage shelter beds and related operating funds by 2024?
3. Will your government support the introduction of a portable housing benefit for abused women?
4. Will your government extend and expand the pilot program providing free legal supports to sexual assault survivors to include domestic violence survivors?
5. Will your government tie shelter funding formulas to cost of living increases?

The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters includes 37 members working to end violence and abuse.

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