

Blueprint of Promising Practices:
Building Communities to Support
Client-Centred Collaboration

November 2023

ACWS
Alberta Council of
Women's Shelters

This project has been supported by Women and Gender Equality Canada.



Women and Gender
Equality Canada

Femmes et Égalité
des genres Canada

Canada

We Are All Treaty People

ACWS acknowledges the traditional lands upon which we live, work, and play. We recognize all Albertans are Treaty people and have a responsibility to understand our history so we can learn from the past, be aware of the present, and create a just and caring future. ACWS celebrates and values the resiliency, successes, and teachings Indigenous people have shown us, as well as the unique contributions of every Albertan.

The ACWS office is located on Treaty 6 land in Amiskwacîwâskahikan, which is the traditional territory of the Plains Cree and an ancient gathering place of many Indigenous peoples for thousands of years. These lands have also been home to, and a central trading place of, the Blackfoot, Nakota, Assiniboine, Dene, the Métis people of western Canada, and the home of one of the largest communities of Inuit south of the 60th parallel.

We honour the courage and strength of Indigenous women. We honour them as life givers and caregivers as we honour and learn from their continuing achievements, their consistent strength, and their remarkable endurance.

Our members serve all nations and all peoples. They are located on Treaty 6, 7, and 8 lands across this province which include the five Métis territories of Alberta.

Project Overview

The Blueprint Project is an action-based research initiative led by the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS) and funded by Wage & Gender Equality Canada. This project seeks to address gaps in risk assessment, information sharing, and client-centred, culturally appropriate services that were identified through interviews and consultations with Alberta service providers.¹ The primary strategies employed by the Blueprint Project to address these gaps are to

- A.** Develop and enhance the intersectionality of valid and reliable assessment tools and protocols to be used by various agencies to support the safety of those living with or fleeing domestic violence
- B.** Promote cross-sector collaboration to reduce the barriers people experiencing domestic violence face navigating multiple complicated systems that may not fully understand the dynamics and complexities of abuse

To accomplish the goals of the project, the Blueprint Project brought together individuals and agencies with diverse purposes, perspectives, and lived experiences in geographic and identity-based communities. The project convened two Community Working Groups in the communities of Grande Prairie and Red Deer, Alberta to develop a team of collaborating agencies in each community. These collaborating agencies work together to provide wrap-around supports that are client-centred, inclusive, intersectional, and trauma-informed. The Community Working Groups developed and executed Information Sharing Agreements to enable service providers to share client information with one another with client consent. The Community Working Groups have also helped inform the development and testing of the Iris ACWS Care Platform to facilitate information sharing.

¹ Alberta Council of Women's Shelters. (2021, June 13). *Inventory of Promising Practices*. <https://acws.ca/inventory-of-promising-practices>

The logo for MOSAIC features the word "MOSAIC" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A small orange heart is positioned above the letter "i". The background of the logo area is decorated with a pattern of colorful, irregular geometric shapes in shades of pink, orange, purple, teal, and blue.

MOSAIC

Measure of Survivor Abuse Impacts
and Complexities

(MOSAIC)[®] @ September 2023

The logo for the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS) consists of the acronym "ACWS" in a large, bold, purple font. Below it, the full name "Alberta Council of Women's Shelters" is written in a smaller, black, sans-serif font.

ACWS
Alberta Council of
Women's Shelters

The project also convened Communities of Practice focused on the 2SLGBTQ+, Indigenous, and Newcomer, Immigrant, and Refugee communities. These groups were identified as a focus in the project because they face significant barriers to accessing services and face multiple forms of oppression that must be considered in all aspects of service provision. The Communities of Practice are comprised of people from across the province who identify as a member of the communities and of service providers who are working to create more inclusive policies and practices within their organizations and systemwide to support members of these communities more effectively. These communities developed and enhanced a variety of tools to support more inclusive and intersectional service provision for community members who have experienced domestic violence. These tools include the Danger Assessment for Survivors in Same-gender Relationships (DA-R), the MOSAIC (formerly the Acuity Scale), empathy maps, and the Guide for Gaps.

The Blueprint Project also assembled a Provincial Working Group to spread the learning and share the resources developed by these Community Working Groups and Communities of Practice throughout Alberta.

The start of the Blueprint Project coincided with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, shelters and their partner agencies and organizations were faced with unprecedented demand for services amidst unprecedented staff turnover.² Despite this, the Blueprint Project made a tremendous impact on those who have been a part of these Community Working Groups and Communities of Practice. The promising practices that follow represent key learnings from the Blueprint Project evaluation about the practices that helped to create this impact and build communities to support client-centred collaboration.³

² Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters. (2023, February 14). *The 2021-22 ACWS Domestic Violence Shelter Workforce Survey*. <https://acws.ca/workforcesurvey/>

³ More information about the Blueprint Project evaluation methods and findings can be found in the Blueprint Project Evaluation Report.

Information Sharing Agreement Signatories Grande Prairie



The Foundation

The lessons from the Blueprint Project showed that these elements must be present to establish a firm foundation for successful collaboration.

- **Articulate a clear, compelling, and unique purpose.** A clear and compelling purpose draws people to the project. It helps them see how the project connects to their professional and personal needs and interests. It helps them see how being part of a project can benefit their organization, their clients, and themselves. The uniqueness of the project must also be clearly articulated to distinguish it from similar efforts and demonstrate the value added for members.
- **Ensure multi-level engagement.** Engagement from multiple levels within participating organizations creates buy-in, promotes more effective implementation, and supports project sustainability. Organizational leaders should be involved to show that the work is a priority and ensure adequate resources and capacity are allocated to support it. Managers or coordinators should be involved to identify ways new practices can be integrated into policies and programming. Frontline staff should be involved to determine how new practices will be implemented in their day-to-day work with clients. Including all of these levels ensures different perspectives are represented in the collaboration and supports sustainability within the collaboration and organization should there be a transition.
- **Develop trust among partners.** Trust is essential for effective collaboration and must be a primary focus from the outset of the project. Dedicating ample time early in the project to build relationships and begin to establish trust supports ongoing relationship building and facilitates stronger collaboration throughout the project. In cases where trust has been eroded, special attention must be paid to understanding what has undermined trust in the past and what will be required to rebuild trust.
- **Create capacity for change.** For client-centred collaboration to work, organizations must have adequate capacity to effectively engage in the collaboration and implement changes within their organization. The organizations involved in the collaboration must be encouraged to realistically examine whether their capacity is sufficient to do this. If it is not sufficient, organizations should take time to build greater capacity to enable them and their partners to maximize the benefits of the collaboration.

Information Sharing Agreement Signatories

Red Deer



The Floor Plan

The Blueprint Project evaluation revealed that the following elements provide the structure required for the collaboration to function effectively and fulfill its purpose.

- **Establish clear expectations** and accountability. To effectively engage, members of the collaboration must understand what they must commit to the project and what they can depend on from others. Having clear expectations enables members to effectively plan and allocate resources for the project. It also helps them recognize that the time and effort they dedicate to collaboration will not be wasted when they know others they trust are working alongside them to support and sustain the work.
- **Bring together diverse people** and perspectives. Providing effective wrap-around services requires service providers to understand both the landscape of the organizations in their community and the needs of diverse clients. Convening a group of people with diverse personal and professional experiences and perspectives is essential to support that. Representation from a wide variety of organizations and sectors helps members identify the strengths and gaps in the services available in the sector. Representation from diverse identities is critical to understanding different lived experiences and the challenges faced by people who experience multiple oppressions.
- **Promote active exchange of knowledge and resources.** The value of convening people with diverse experiences and perspectives cannot be fully realized unless there are opportunities to learn from one another. This requires creating an environment where people feel comfortable sharing and ample time is dedicated to sharing information and resources throughout the project. When sharing and learning are established as group norms, people are drawn to the work and reap benefits that extend far beyond the collaboration.
- **Embrace multiple ways of knowing.** Developing knowledge and resources to support inclusive and intersectional client-centred services requires a process that is as inclusive as the product. Members must recognize that knowledge comes in many forms and is obtained in many ways, and a broad range of knowledge is needed to effectively support

they face challenges. This support helps to promote staff wellbeing and retention. It also motivates people to stay engaged in the collaboration and contribute more to the work. Ultimately, feeling a personal connection builds and sustains the momentum of the collaboration.

“Before the Blueprint Project, I thought I knew what was happening in my community, but I didn’t know that domestic violence was so prevalent and there are so many agencies working on it. I thought I was alone. Now I feel a sense of belonging in the community because I’ve had a deeper level of engagement with all these agencies.”

– Community Working Group Member –

- **Create personal connections.** Helping members forge personal connections that extend beyond the professional realm has a catalytic effect. These personal connections help members feel a sense of belonging that makes them want to participate even when it is not required or when it may be difficult. These connections help people develop a system of support that they can reach out to when

people who are experiencing domestic violence and who also experience multiple oppressions. Experts with academic knowledge must work alongside experts with lived experience and traditional knowledge to develop a holistic approach to serving clients that considers all aspects of their intersectional identities.

- **Create tangible benefits.** In addition to learning from one another, members appreciate the opportunity to contribute to improving and developing resources that enhance the services they provide. Members feel valued and valuable when they are a part of designing or refining practical tools that will benefit others. The tangible benefits of gaining new skills and tools members can implement with their clients provide motivation and encourage continued engagement.
- **Develop and utilize trusted standardized tools.** Effective client-centred collaboration requires a common language and standardized process to share information, assess risk, and measure progress. Tools used to support the work must also be effective and affordable. Engaging community members in developing, enhancing, or collectively learning about the tools strengthens quality, builds trust, and ensures adoption and consistent implementation.
- **Provide ongoing training.** Tools are only helpful in supporting client-centred collaboration if people know about them and utilize them correctly. The limited capacity and inevitable transition within

partner organizations can make this difficult. Providing training at regular intervals helps to raise awareness about the tools by keeping them front of mind. It also ensures that members have the information they need when they need it making application of the tools more efficient and effective

- **Integrate adaptive change management strategies.** Change is difficult when working across a system of diverse organizations with unique policies and practices in an unpredictable environment. It is especially difficult when there is so much at stake when working with people who are experiencing trauma. Implementing change in this context requires ongoing conversation and adaptation within organizations and within the collaboration. It requires preparing for ongoing experimentation, adjustment, and iteration in addition to long-term planning. Members at all levels must have ownership in the development and implementation of the changes so they are familiar enough with the process and goals to reflect and adjust as needed.

Resources and Tools Created or Enhanced During the Blueprint Project

The Community Working Groups created and tested...

- **Iris ACWS Care Platform** - A proprietary online platform that allows Blueprint agencies to securely manage client information and data (CRM) and, with client consent, to share information between agencies that have signed onto the Information Sharing Agreement.
- **Information Sharing Agreements** – Signed agreement between community agencies that allows agencies to collect and share a client’s personal information with each other with the client’s consent allowing for a coordinated and collaborative approach to service provision.

The Communities of Practice created or enhanced...

- **Danger Assessment for survivors in same-gender relationships (DA-R)** – A severe abuse assessment tool for same-gender relationships.
- **Measures of Survivor Assessment Illustrating Complexity (MOSAIC) Scale** - An evidence-based tool that is used to better understand how many different circumstances in a survivor’s life can intersect in ways that intensify their experience of domestic abuse and increase their need for support as they recover.
- **Guide for Gaps** – A BuzzFeed-style quiz to assess where an organization is at regarding inclusivity of the 2SGLBTQ+ community.
- **Empathy Maps** - A sampling of the experiences of the Community of Practice members to help others understand and empathize with the circumstances members of their community encounter.

The Mechanical Elements

The Blueprint Project evaluation demonstrated that the following elements are critical to creating and maintaining an environment that fosters community and collaboration.

- **Centre inclusion.** When inclusion is an expressed intention in both the process and the product of the work, it creates an environment that promotes connection and authenticity. This enables people to develop and strengthen personal and professional relationships and feel a sense of belonging.
- **Provide compensation.** When members are not affiliated with an organization or are volunteering their time outside of their professional responsibilities, it is important to compensate them for the time and effort they contribute to the collaboration. Compensating members for

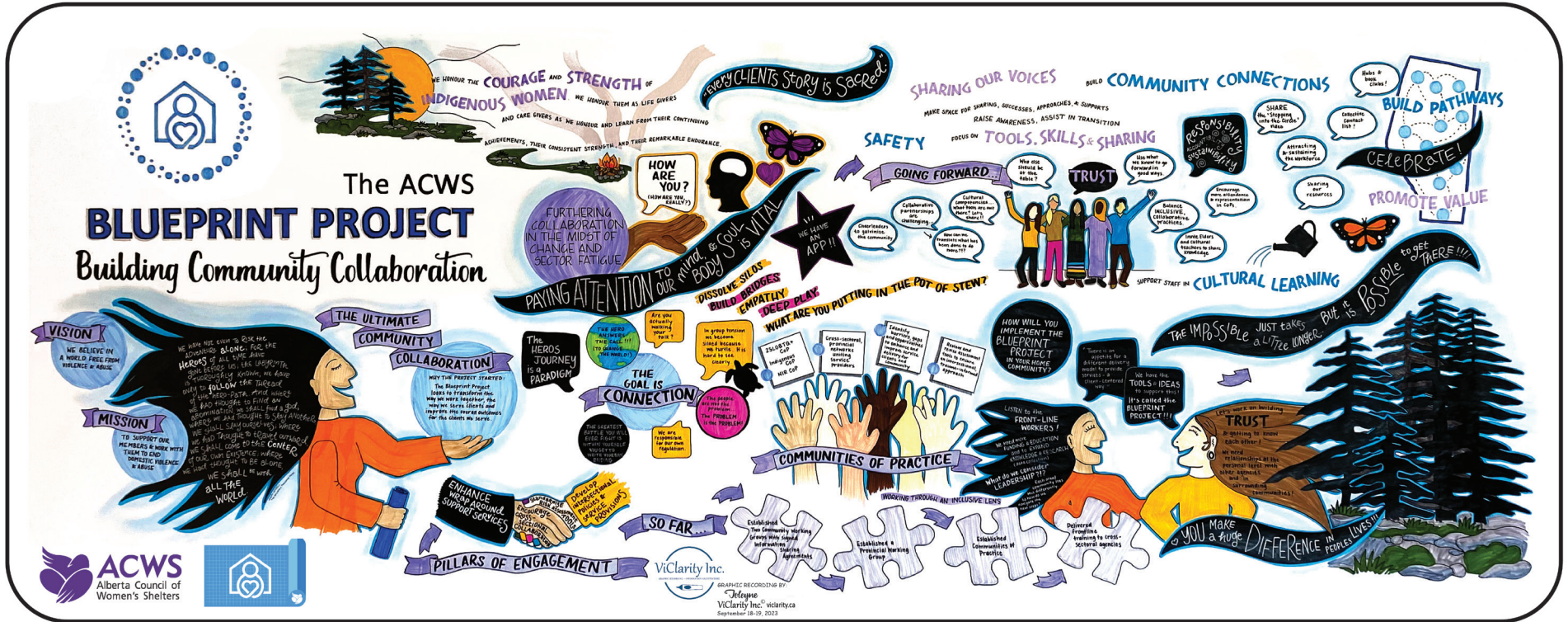
“The nature of this group is to make the world more inclusive, so it would fall naturally that the people in the group are inclusive of one another. We all want the same thing. I think part of the energy comes from who we want to be as people in the world and the difference that we want to make in the world. We’re already making that difference among [this group], which is really special.”

– Community Working Group Member –

- **Create a welcoming and safe environment.** A welcoming and safe space is essential for having conversations that promote learning and relationship-building. Simple strategies to let new and returning members know they are always welcome include introductions and icebreakers at the beginning of each meeting. Defining what safety means for the group and making a collective commitment to maintaining a safe environment is also critical. To ensure safety, intersectionality and culturally competent care must be considered in all aspects of the work.
 - **Promote consistency.** Setting expectations for consistent participation and planning for transition from the outset helps to ensure the success and sustainability of a collaborative effort. Interacting with the same people from one meeting to another allows members to establish a rapport. It also maximizes productivity when people have a common understanding of where the collaboration currently is and where it needs to go. Transition is also inevitable, so it is important to have a process for transition established within the member organizations and the collaboration.
- their time shows members they are valued for their experience and expertise. It expands membership in the collaboration beyond those who are currently engaged in the sector to include more diverse perspectives and experiences.
- **Communicate methodically.** A regular cadence of communication in multiple formats is important to keep members informed and interested. Providing options for where members can find information (for example, shared drives, websites, their email inbox) and different formats for them to interact with it (for example, print and video) ensures members have the information they need in the format that works best for them.

Blueprint Project Graphic Recording

This graphic recording was part of our Blueprint Launch in September, 2023, capturing conversations and presentations into text and pictures. It gives meeting and conference attendees an opportunity to absorb content on a visual level and reflect on what has been said during the day.



NOTE: Enlarge this image to 11x27 inches for best viewing.

This report was created in partnership with Dialogues In Action.



Dialogues In Action

Portland, Oregon

www.dialoguesinaction.com

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