

WE NEED TO DO THIS: A HISTORY OF THE WOMEN'S SHELTER MOVEMENT IN ALBERTA AND THE ALBERTA COUNCIL OF WOMEN'S SHELTERS

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Your child


**hears
feels sees
knows...**


what goes on in the home.

When children are aware a parent is being hurt and the security in the home is threatened – they need help.

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Call for more information.

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Your Child Hears, Sees, Feels, Knows was a poster campaign launched by ACWS in 2006. Aimed at Indigenous Peoples and community members across Canada, this poster was produced in both English and French and was intended to educate about the impact of domestic and family violence on children. This poster was produced with funding from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) and was distributed to 44 on-reserve women's shelters across Canada.

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Fighting for equitable funding for First Nations shelters

CLARA

When Clara Moberly was a child, she and her siblings would run to a neighbour's house when the fighting in their home got bad. The family lived in Wabasca, one of several communities that make up the Bigstone Cree Nation in northern Alberta. The population totals just a few thousand residents and, at the time, the closest women's shelter was about three hundred kilometres away in Edmonton.

Then, one day, Moberly stopped running. She hid under the kitchen table instead. Looking back, Moberly wonders if her instinct to stay with her mother was a sign she would do something different in her life.

The first shelter on Bigstone Cree Nation opened in November 1992. Moberly remembers the Nation's social development director at the time, Gordon Auger, observing that women and children fleeing violence would often leave the community to get help. That journey was both physically and culturally difficult.

"When you're going off reserve, there's racism and you're looked at differently. If you didn't know anybody in Edmonton and you're sent over there with your four children, you're not looked at the same, you're being judged," says Moberly. "There's that mentality of, 'She's just a dirty Indian,' you know? The relationship is not there. How do you expect the person to talk to you, and to share what they're going through, if the relationship is not there?"

In the early 1990s, the Bigstone band council applied for a stream of federal funding that had opened for the creation of on-reserve shelters. The shelter in Wabasca was among the first of those to open in Alberta. Moberly had recently moved back to the reserve after studying child and youth care in Lethbridge, and she was hired as the shelter's first director. One of the

first women to stay was a mother of three children. “She just had enough,” Moberly says. “I think she was just waiting for something like this to go into our community, instead of her having to go out.”

The shelter was housed in a four-bedroom house, with a fenced yard for children. The shelter also ran a twenty-four-hour crisis line, and Moberly had to ensure that her small staff were all trained to handle calls from anyone in crisis, including those with suicidal thoughts. Operational funding came from Indian Affairs (the federal agency now known as Indigenous Services Canada), but Moberly recalls it was just enough to cover expenses like food and basic wages. There was no money for specialized programming or support for children.

Just as distressing as the financial wrangling was the early community resistance toward the social service that Moberly and her team were running. She thinks many residents simply weren’t comfortable talking about difficult issues, like sexual abuse or domestic violence. The shelter was a physical acknowledgment that those problems exist in the community and that people would be held accountable for their actions. Sensitive issues can open deep wounds and difficult conversations, Moberly says; she has some understanding for the hostility she faced.

“You were swears at and people said things just to hurt you, like, ‘Madam Moberly is running her whore house.’ That type of thing. I had an incident in one of the local stores where a man came up to me and threatened me,” she recalls. “I’d just say that I can understand where you’re coming from. I’d just say that I empathize with him. And I tried to explain what the shelter was about. I told him, ‘Look, this is what I went through. I wish somebody was there to protect me. I wish somebody would have helped me. Or would have helped my mom because this is what I saw my mom and dad go through.’ That’s the example I would use. There was no point in judging them, and it really helped them to understand.”

Moberly still feels proud remembering how her staff persevered and how they stuck together, even through the most difficult of circumstances. “We were always very protective of each other. We had to be that way because who else was going to be there for us?” Moberly sometimes received threatening phone calls at the office. The speaker on the other end of the line would insinuate that he knew where she worked in the building. Moberly would recognize the voices. She says she’d let them talk and when she saw them in the community, she’d still shake their hands. She was willing to put the verbal

harassment aside and keep reaching out to people, because she believed domestic violence needed to be acknowledged, no matter how many obstacles were put in the way of having those conversations. “These are critical issues that nobody wants to talk about. I think we really opened up a lot of doors at the time. To say, ‘Hey, it’s about time we start talking about this because it’s not right and families need to be safe, and children need to be taken care of.’”

Moberly’s mother died of a brain aneurysm two years before the shelter opened. Moberly remembers her as a kind woman who never judged anyone. She thinks that if her mother had been alive to see the shelter in operation, she would have said, “It’s about time.” Working at the shelter also gave Moberly the chance to reflect on her relationship with her father, with whom she maintained a close relationship, despite the events of her childhood. “I had a lot of respect for my dad,” she says. “When he was not drinking, he was probably the best father. He always provided for us and protected us. He cooked for us when my mom was gone for medical reasons. But on the other hand, when he drank, he used to beat my mom up. Later I learned about the cycle of violence and I used to see it, even if I didn’t know it at the time. After he hit my mom, when she had black eyes, I used to see them lie down on the bed, and he’d be holding her and protecting her. I saw all of this in my home.”

Moberly planned to work at the shelter for just a few months, but she stayed for three years. One day, toward the end of her tenure, she went to her father’s house for lunch. Her dad was now seventy-seven. He told her that he heard something on the radio about family violence. They had never really talked about her job at the women’s shelter, but it seemed like an opening. She spoke to him in their native Cree language, and said: “I am the director of the women’s shelter here, where women and children can come for a safe place. It’s a haven for them because they’re running away from family violence.” He didn’t reply.

Before she left that day, Moberly tried again. She remembers her father was sitting by the window when she asked, “Do you have any regrets? For hitting mom?”

“He didn’t have to say anything. But when I sat there and I watched him. When I saw those tears . . .” Years later, Moberly’s own voice cracked as she recalled the conversation with the man who cared for her and loved her, yet who also hurt her and her mother.

Moberly went on to serve as a band councillor for the Bigstone Cree Nation. She says the community has come to accept the work done at the

shelter. “It’s a very different outlook now compared to that time. I’m not saying there’s no violence, but I think the shelter is more accepted now. We’ve opened a new shelter in a beautiful new building. The building has been accepted. The services, the program have been accepted. I think we really opened a lot of doors. It’s about time we started talking about this.”

—In 2015, the Bigstone Cree Women’s Emergency Shelter moved into a new facility. The shelter is now called the Neepinise Family Healing Centre. The facility was named for Janet Gladue, who succeeded Clara Moberly as executive director of the shelter. Gladue served almost twenty years in the role and spear-headed efforts to open a new building to shelter women and children. Her Cree name is Neepinise, which means “summer bird” in Cree.



Stand on the shores of Lake Athabasca in Fort Chipewyan and the waters appear vast and endless. Turn around and the view is a panorama of thick boreal forest. Fort Chipewyan is renowned for its natural beauty; the stunning landscape is partly defined by its remote location in northeastern Alberta. But for women, and others, needing to leave the area, the community’s remote location is a distinct drawback. For much of the year, there is no road to exit or enter by land, and the trip can only be made by plane or boat. In winter, an ice road leads 250 kilometres both north and south over frozen rivers and marshes, to the towns of Fort Smith and Fort McMurray, respectively.

Indigenous leaders for years have raised alarms that women in their communities must travel to major centres to get formal help to escape domestic abuse, in cities and towns that are removed from their culture and language, where it is likely Indigenous women will face racism, and where they have no support systems. But a lack of transportation options and infrastructure has meant that even women who want to leave don’t always have the ability to do so. At home, the housing crunch on most reserves means that many houses are overcrowded at the best of times, which makes even informal networks of help, such as staying at a friend’s or an auntie’s house, an unappealing option, and makes permanently leaving an abuser much more difficult. In addition, relationship networks on reserve can make it complicated for women to seek help with friends or relatives who may have familial or friendly ties to their abuser.

In the early 1990s, five women's shelters opened on reserves in Alberta: women from the Stoney Nakoda Nations, the Bigstone Cree Nation, Sucker Creek First Nation, and the communities of Maskwacis and Fort Chipewyan finally had access to shelters in their home communities. In the early 2000s, a sixth on-reserve shelter opened on the Kainai Nation. Some of these communities are within closer and easier reach to big centres than others.

The flurry of building in the 1990s occurred at the same time that shelters in other parts of the province were starting to enjoy more social acceptance and more funding, from both government and charitable sources. On reserves, band councillors and chiefs advocated for a service they knew existed for women elsewhere in Alberta. The federal government eventually released funds to build and operate shelters on reserve, with capital funds distributed through the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC).¹

At the time, some remember, family violence still wasn't widely discussed in many First Nations communities. "When you think back, family violence was real hush-hush. Nobody talked about it. Nobody left the home when they were abused," says Joyce Badger, a founding board member of the Sucker Creek Women's Emergency Shelter, which opened in 1992. Statistics show, however, that regardless of tendencies to suppress, conceal, or accept what was occurring, Indigenous women in Canada experience domestic violence at much higher rates than their non-Indigenous counterparts.² The persistence of such violence against Indigenous women has meant that many normalize the presence of violence in their lives, says Janet Gladue, who served as director of the Neepinise Family Healing Centre from 1996 to 2015. One of the biggest challenges in Gladue's twenty years of shelter work was to change that way of thinking. "It's hard for some people to accept that you don't have to live like this, that there's another healthy way of living, that you can always change and have a better life."

While on-reserve shelters allow women to stay close to home and offer culturally familiar services, they present challenges relating to confidentiality that might be found in small communities everywhere, communities where everyone in town knows where the shelter is, and where there might only be one or two degrees of separation between staff and clients. "I guess there was a worry that people were going to know each other's stories. I think that still

1 CMHC, "The Role of Housing in Dealing with Family Violence in Canada," 2-4.

2 <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2022001/article/00004-eng.htm>

happens today,” says Beryl Willier, who served as the executive director of the shelter in Sucker Creek First Nation, which is located about 350 kilometres northwest of Edmonton. “I still think people on reserve feel leery. There’s the stigma they feel coming here, and that people know that they’re from here. But once they get here, they’re fine. With the younger generation, they’re past those issues.”

Shelters have become important pieces of infrastructure in First Nations communities, and they face the same budget shortfalls that affect virtually every type of infrastructure on reserves in Canada. “I can sit here and talk about our infrastructure, our capital, our housing. I can talk about everything that’s on reserve and it’s not the same as off reserve. That’s how they’ve always operated,” says Moberly, who went on to work as a band councillor for Bigstone Cree Nation. While other women’s shelters in Alberta are funded by the provincial government, on-reserve shelters are funded at the federal level, by the various iterations of the Ministry now known as Indigenous Services Canada.

Since they first began to open in the 1990s, on-reserve shelters have almost never received funding that’s proportionate to what off-reserve shelters receive in Alberta—the same disproportion that is evident in public funding for education, healthcare, and other rights guaranteed by treaty—but it took both time and collective action to clearly document the discrepancy.

Dorothy Sam, a member of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation, became executive director of the Eagle’s Nest Stoney Family Shelter in southern Alberta in 2004. The shelter had a twenty-bed capacity, and Sam quickly realized that the shelter’s funding was not sufficient to keep it running. “I experienced many sleepless nights thinking of how we would keep afloat,” she says. “We cut back on lots of expenses and tried various things such as fundraising and asking for donations. We broke even with the fundraising and decided that it was a lot of work with not much return. We received donations from hotels for toiletries and some companies would give discounts or do work for free. We were able to keep the staff working and the much-needed shelter operating,” she says. At the end of that first year, Sam recalls, the shelter “squeaked by” with a \$5 surplus.

Fred Badger was a band councillor in Sucker Creek when the women’s shelter first opened, and he was one of the founding members of its board. He remembers one day meeting with Solomon Yellowknee, who was on the board of the shelter in Wabasca. “We had coffee and we started talking, and

we found out that we were being funded differently. So I said, ‘Let’s your board and my board meet,’” he remembers. “The next thing we know, the other reserves heard about it, and we decided to meet in Edmonton and we formed an organization. I don’t want to say we embarrassed the feds about the funding; I don’t know what word to use. We didn’t feel good. We want it to be at par with the province. That was our intent.”

Dorothy Sam remembers that when the group met in the early 2000s, they discussed the fact that Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) hadn’t raised their funding in more than a decade. At that point, the group met with ACWS, which asked the on-reserve shelters to join their membership. The shelters agreed. “We brought our concerns to ACWS that we thought there was a huge disparity in funding, but we could not prove it. Jan [Reimer] asked all the other shelters if they would share their funding so that a comparison could be conducted, and that was done.”

In 2005, ACWS commissioned a survey of on-reserve shelter directors in the province, which compared their funding levels to other shelters of a similar size. It found that the five on-reserve shelters were being underfunded by an average of \$200,000 annually, or by more than 50 per cent; according to the report, it would have taken over \$1 million to address the total funding disparities.³ On-reserve crisis counselors earned an average annual salary of about \$23,000, while women in the same job earned about \$38,000 in provincially funded shelters. INAC had raised funding only a negligible amount since 1994, the report revealed. Reimer described the \$1-million overall difference in funding as no more than a “rounding error” for the federal government, a negligible sum within a multi-billion-dollar budget, and yet First Nations have had to fight, lobby, and advocate repeatedly in their mostly unsuccessful attempts to achieve parity.

The report offered one sobering reality after another. “Respondents explained there is no formula to determine the amount of funding each shelter will receive, despite vast differences in capacity based upon the size of the shelters and access to resources resulting mainly from geographic isolation,” reads the report.⁴ “Respondents identified the secondary issue facing on-reserve shelters as the absolute lack of housing on the reserve, and that if women and children fleeing abuse want to set up a new household, they have

3 Tasha Novick, *Seeking Parity Between On-Reserve Shelters and Shelters Funded by the Province of Alberta*, the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters, February 2005, 8.

4 *Ibid.*, 6-7.

to leave their families and the only community they know to come to larger urban centres.” In other words, underfunding in one service area—on-reserve housing—only amplifies and complicates the underfunding in another area—crisis shelter; it’s a dynamic that’s repeated over and over again, anywhere that services overlap.

The data in the report confirmed what shelter leaders on First Nation reserves had always suspected. Seeing the funding discrepancies illustrated in hard numbers was an important catalyst for those demanding change, in addition to serving as the evidence they needed. “It was pretty upsetting, that they would think we’re not worth getting the proper funding. We were more aware and it gave us that boost to start fighting for more funding,” says Sam.

In March 2006, she and Reimer travelled to Ottawa to attend the Aboriginal Policy and Research Conference to present the ACWS analysis, and to then serve as delegates at the Federal, Provincial, and Territorial Ministers’ meeting on Aboriginal Women and Violence. They were part of a national effort to draw attention to the funding disparities. The following year, the first National Aboriginal Women’s Summit was held in Newfoundland and Labrador, bringing together premiers and representatives from Indigenous women’s organizations. On the first day of the gathering, Beverley Jacobs, the president of the Native Women’s Association of Canada, announced that the organization wanted to see a ten-year plan to reduce the number of Indigenous women who are sexually assaulted, murdered, or missing. “It’s a crisis situation that we’re in right now, where there’s over five hundred missing and murdered Aboriginal women in the last fifteen to twenty years,” she told a reporter, adding that the women were victims of “racialized and sexualized violence.”⁵ Jacobs articulated a direct link between the lack of shelters on reserves and the peril facing Indigenous women. “Usually, she’ll end up in an urban centre living in poverty, raising her children in risky situations. She has to find a way of survival to feed her kids, so she ends up on the street, maybe missing or found murdered.”

By the end of the summit, Bev Oda, the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Status of Women, announced a five-year investment of almost \$56 million, with most of this devoted to enhancing operational budgets at thirty-five

5 Tara Brautigam, “Aboriginal Issues: Women Gather to Devise Anti-Violence Plan,” *Daily Herald-Tribune*, June 21, 2007, 6.

existing shelters that serve 265 First Nations communities in Canada. About \$2.5 million was reserved for the construction of five new shelters.

“It was a huge relief,” says Sam. “We were happy that we were finally heard, and our pleas did not go on deaf ears. It felt like maybe we did matter after all, where we were previously ignored. It was nice to finally feel that there was some equality with funding.” The money helped to provide more services in shelters and to address safety issues and allowed shelters to more consistently meet the bare minimum of service standards, from adequate staffing to the purchase of supplies like toiletries and infant formula.

For a short period, on-reserve shelters achieved funding parity with their off-reserve counterparts. But, Reimer says, that equality was short-lived; when Alison Redford served as premier between 2011 and 2014, she increased salaries for provincial non-profit workers in Alberta. Once again, on-reserve shelters were left behind.

After almost thirty years in operation, some on-reserve shelters have grown, both operationally and physically. Janet Gladue remembers that the four-room house that housed the first women’s shelter on Bigstone Cree Nation was often crowded, with limited space for programming, and children were cared for in the basement while their mothers were in workshops. Gladue said it was “like a dream” to start thinking about a new space, but eventually she was able to commission plans and designs for a new, bigger building, which would include welcome improvements such as private washrooms for clients. Gladue approached the band council for some funding and then made applications through the provincial First Nations Development Fund. It took several years to amass enough grant money for the project, and the new building was completed in 2015, shortly before Gladue retired.

On-reserve shelters also developed programming specifically to meet the needs of Indigenous women and families. “Alberta’s on-reserve shelters had a dream: to reclaim their traditional teachings of putting the child at the centre of their communities,” reads a description of Walking the Path Together, a multi-year project by five on-reserve shelters and ACWS to offer a holistic program to interrupt cycles of family violence. Each participating shelter hired an Eagle Feather Worker who connected with families, over the course of several years, with the ultimate goal of reducing the likelihood that children would grow up to accept violence in their own relationships. The Eagle Feather Workers endeavoured to understand each family’s gifts and needs, and they worked with the entire family system to address issues

such as exposure to family violence, the normalization of violence, unhealthy coping strategies such as drug use, and the need for role models of healthy relationships. The Eagle Feather Workers conducted proactive outreach in the homes and communities of those who were participating, rather than waiting until clients came to the shelters for services.

More than 456 adults and children were involved in Walking the Path Together over the course of five years. The program was widely applauded by participants and organizers. ACWS had received funding through the Alberta Safe Communities Innovation Fund and National Crime Prevention Centre, but the arrangement wasn't renewed at the end of its term. "This initiative cries out for ongoing sustainable funding," states a final evaluation report prepared for ACWS. "While the on-reserve shelters are able to build on some of the tools developed . . . it is with heavy heart that we see a successful project end without a means to continue in a way that could significantly impact children exposed to violence on reserve."⁶

Meanwhile, on-reserve shelters had been adapting in other ways to new challenges that emerged over the years, such as more women facing homelessness, or struggling with mental health and addiction issues. Staff must be nimble enough to talk down someone with suicidal ideations or who is in the midst of another crisis, and stay focused on their core work to provide a safe environment for women and their children. As Fred Badger, from the Sucker Creek Women's Emergency Shelter, reflects with pride, "The shelter took in anybody, not just status Indians. Anybody who needs help and we had the room, we'd take you in. That's what I'm proud of. And that we had a good board, and the board tried to help as much as we could, to try to make a better place for clients and the staff."

Beryl Willier watched the length of clients' stays at the Sucker Creek shelter increase over time. "When I first started, women were staying maybe one to five days. Later, almost every client that came in stayed for the full twenty-one days. Some of them asked for extensions, and some of them asked to go to the second-stage shelter," she says. "To me, that means we're having a positive impact because women are getting the services they need, versus saying, 'I don't want to be here. Nobody's helping me. I feel isolated.' We're making sure

6 Irene Hoffart, *Walking the Path Together Evaluation - Phases I and II*, report to Safe Communities Innovation Fund, 2014; report prepared by Irene Hoffart, copyright by the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters.

we're supporting them the way they need to be supported and not trying to make them fit our ways.

“Our mandate has always been safety and change, because that’s our job. We provide safety and we give you as many tools as we can to promote change. But in the end, it’s still yours.”

In the years since *Walking the Path Together* wrapped up, several on-reserve shelters have decided not to continue their membership with ACWS, stating that they want to “exercise autonomy, advocate and promote our own agenda at the federal level.” But their values and teachings have informed an action plan that guides ACWS relationships with all First Nations shelters, and with Indigenous women and their families more broadly. Their teachings have also informed a high-level Statement of Principles and Values for the organization. The evolving relationship with First Nations shelters is part of a long journey for ACWS, which grew from a loose coalition of ten member shelters in 1983 to a powerhouse coalition whose scope and mandate now influence policy and public opinion as well as the lives of the women they serve.