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

Alexandra Zabjek

Carolyn Goard, left, sits at a window with a former client and her daughter in a bedroom at the YWCA Family Violence Prevention Centre in Calgary. Carolyn was dedicated to a whole-family approach to healing, and was instrumental in shifting the women's shelter movement in Alberta into the age of modernized data management.

"If you've got the data, they can't argue with you"

CAROLYN

Soon after Carolyn Goard started her job at YWCA Sheriff King Home in Calgary, she made a puzzling discovery. Inside a locked storage room in the basement of the building, there were dozens of boxes that each contained hundreds of yellow, green, orange, and blue forms.

Shelter staff had been filling in these forms, by hand, as Goard would learn, since the shelter first opened in 1983. It was part of the government-mandated system to track shelter occupancy and activities throughout the year. Staff at shelters across the province would fill out the forms and mail copies to the government, which would then send each shelter's annual data to the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters. By that time, in 1998, ACWS had twenty-seven member shelters and was a central voice for advocacy for women's shelters in Alberta.

"At the end of the year, ACWS would pull all the numbers together and the province would pull all the numbers together, and there was always a difference. And then we would haggle about it. Occupancy was important because government managers have to report one data point to their political masters when it comes to shelters, and that's occupancy. But it's hugely complex," says Goard.

Government officials wanted to count the number of "heads on beds" in order to determine funding, in the same way it had always done for homeless shelters. But women's shelters are all designed a bit differently from one another and operate differently as well. A woman with two children might come to a shelter and be placed in a bedroom with two double bunk beds; by the shelter's standards, the room is considered "full," even if there is an unused bed in the room.

Goard says some government officials would publicly state that women's shelters in the province were operating at 50 per cent capacity on the basis of "heads on beds," discounting the realities of how capacity limits are calculated, that placing two traumatized families in one bedroom is not good practice, and ignoring the differences between the busiest big-city shelters and some of the rural shelters with more modest caseloads.

Goard had worked as a psychologist before coming to the YWCA, where she was hired as the clinical director responsible for overseeing research development. She discovered other forms in those stacks of boxes, too, such as pre- and post-test forms from outreach work that shelter workers had been doing for years. She realized there was a lot of information contained in those colourful sheets, information that could be used to evaluate the success or shortcomings of programs. But that wasn't easy to do if the data was manually scrawled onto pieces of paper and shoved into boxes that were locked away.

Like much of the non-profit world in 1998, Sheriff King Home wasn't a particularly tech-savvy place, but it also wasn't immune to the wave of computerization that was sweeping through office environments. Around the same time, Goard had made a professional connection with a person whose work would put the shelter—and eventually other shelters in the province, too—on a path to digitization. Kelly Ernst had made a name for himself in Calgary's non-profit world with his PhD work on methods for measuring the success of social programs. He had created a database, called HOMES, for social service agencies that would enable them to do outcome measurement: social service workers would be able to assess data from their own programs and use this as a basis for making program adjustments. Ernst approached the management team at Sheriff King, asking them to consider implementing HOMES. His vision included working with other social service sectors so they could all amalgamate their data and more effectively advocate for funding and system change.

"It was an affordable program, and it was a way to get all of that stuff out of boxes. And besides, I'd been hired to do some research, and to do research, you've got to have something," says Goard. "HOMES started the road for shelters to do things like use data to demonstrate outcomes, both individually and collectively. It was a really exciting time. We started producing hard numbers that nobody could quibble with."

Other Alberta shelters followed Sheriff King's lead, and most signed onto HOMES within a few years, with the support of ACWS, which also secured

funding so every shelter could purchase a computer. Shelters began to use data to tell their own stories. Instead of the government talking to the press about occupancy rates, individual shelters and ACWS could now produce annual releases about such data as their turn-away rates—the number of women who were turned away from shelters each year because of a lack of room. In Calgary alone, thousands of women were turned away from the major shelters every year in the early 2000s, and those numbers grabbed headlines.[1]

As Goard explains, "When you're delivering services to people, you collect data for two reasons: to inform your practice, and to advocate for system change and more funding. Data brings knowledge and power, because you never know what the government is going to do with that same information. Shelters and ACWS became a lot more sophisticated in using data to inform practice and tell more complex stories, with the ultimate goal being increased accountability to women and their families."

Shelters like Sheriff King began to use their own data to transform their outreach work in areas such as women's, children's, and men's group programming, and they collaborated with partners like Resolve Alberta, a Prairie-based research network focused on ending violence against women and girls. Then, a few years after arriving at Sheriff King, Goard attended a family violence conference in California that would become pivotal in informing how women's shelters operate in Alberta. One of the conference speakers was Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell, a professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing, who had studied intimate partner femicides. Campbell had also spent time volunteering at a women's shelter in Detroit, where she heard stories of abuse that included the same patterns of behaviour that she had identified in her academic studies of women murdered by their partners. "I kept thinking, 'That's really scary, but you don't seem to be as scared as I am,'" Campbell said of her conversations with women at the shelter, who described what their partners had done to them.[2]

Campbell developed a tool called the Danger Assessment to assess the risk of a woman being killed by her partner. The Danger Assessment contains questions such as: "Does he own a gun?" "Has he ever threatened or tried to commit suicide?" "Do you have a child that is not his?" "Do you believe he is capable of killing you?" Women are also asked to mark incidents of abuse on

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1   Mark Reid, "Shelter Crisis Grows," *Calgary Herald*, March 18, 2001, B1.
2   "Jackie Campbell: Creator of the Danger Assessment," *American Journal of Nursing* 121, no. 10 (October 2021), 68.

a calendar. "You don't have to ask, 'Are you sure it hasn't gotten worse?' They can see it for themselves," Campbell says. The Danger Assessment was refined and academically tested over time, and it is now considered a validated tool to assess a woman's risk of being killed by her partner.

Goard returned from the conference determined to bring the Danger Assessment to Sheriff King. ACWS jumped in, too, to facilitate training of shelter staff across the province so they could also complete the Danger Assessment with clients. Goard says that validated tools like the Danger Assessment, combined with the action-based research that women's shelters had become known for, led to new ways of both telling the stories of shelters and keeping women safe.

Goard thinks that nowhere was this more the case than with second-stage shelters. The first second-stage shelters in Alberta opened in the 1980s in Edmonton and Calgary. Emergency women's shelters have relatively short time limits on how long a woman and her children might stay, but second-stage shelters offer up to two years of secure housing and support services. These shelters are an integral part of the support system for women leaving abusive homes, but for decades most of these operations didn't have permanent government funding contracts in Alberta. Instead, they relied on fundraising and rent payments to sustain their operations. The first two second stage shelters in Alberta to receive modest funding from the province—Discovery House in Calgary and WINGS in Edmonton—were considered "pilot" projects for decades.

The importance of second-stage shelters cannot be overstated; while the moment of immediate crisis might seemingly be over for a woman by the time she settles into a second-stage shelter, the threat to her safety is actually higher once she's there. At that point, it's clear the woman is moving on with a life that doesn't include her partner, and that decision can provoke an intense response from an abuser. Women who work in shelters instinctively know this pattern of danger to be true, says Goard, but the Danger Assessment helped to quantify the phenomenon.

In 2009, ACWS conducted a study of Danger Assessments in nine Alberta shelters including emergency and second-stage shelters. Overall, the study found that women at second-stage shelters had higher risk levels than those at emergency shelters; for example, women in second-stage shelters were more likely to report that their partners had used a weapon against them or threatened to do so, and they were also more likely to say they believed their partner

was capable of killing them. The study recommended improved access to second-stage shelters for women and children, particularly for Indigenous women in northern Alberta.[3]

"It was a huge game-changer," says Goard, "because much of the criticism of shelters was, and I'm sure sometimes still is, that women just go to shelter to take a break. And so when you can actually demonstrate the level of risk with a credible tool like the Danger Assessment, it's hugely important."

Goard credits that research, and the dozens of reports and advocacy campaigns that came before it, for government action on women's shelters in Alberta. In 2014, NDP Opposition Leader Rachel Notley raised ACWS data on turn-aways on the floor of the Alberta Legislature, asking what the government would do for the thousands of women and children who couldn't get into shelters every year. The following year, in the lead-up to a provincial election, the party put it in their platform that they would increase shelter budgets to decrease the number of turn-aways.

"When the NDP got elected in 2015," Goard remembers, "they made good on that promise. And $5 million of new money was given to second-stage shelters. That money didn't just come out of the blue. Advocacy for second-stage funding was ongoing by ACWS since the time those two original pilots started in 1987. But when we had access to data and started producing reports in a way that we had never been able to do before, the whole couple of years before that funding came through, we were actively advocating with some colleagues in government to get funding. With all the reports that we had created, we had built up credibility over the years, and people were listening.

"We never could have done that if we didn't have the data to support our argument and the narrative. But if you've got the data, they can't argue with you."

—Carolyn Goard worked as clinical director of the YWCA Sheriff King Home for three years, before being tapped as director for the organization. During that period, she served three years as the President of the ACWS Board. After ten years with the YWCA in Calgary, Ms. Goard came to the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters as director of member programs and services. She spent ten years in the position prior retiring in 2018.

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3   Kathleen Cairns and Irene Hoffart, *Keeping Women Alive – Assessing the Danger*, report prepared for The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, June 2009.

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In 1988, Linda MacLeod—the author of *Wife Battering in Canada: The Vicious Circle*—visited Alberta to deliver a presentation for the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters. MacLeod's book, published in 1980, was one of the first on the topic of domestic violence in Canada, and it became a seminal work for understanding what abused women experience and what help was available to them. To coincide with her visit, MacLeod penned a piece for the monthly ACWS newsletter, in which she wrote:

> In times of major ideological change, history can be instantly rewritten. Shelters must be prepared to go through a period of scrutiny and possible criticism. Shelters must be ready to demonstrate positively that they do not "break up" families, and that shelters have done much to ultimately reduce wife battering by giving women the knowledge and choice to live without violence. Shelters must be prepared to shout their successes to the skies and to the press, and not to be discouraged by overt attacks or by threats of withdrawal of support. Shelter workers must also be prepared to share their expertise, to share ideas about individualized, community-based solutions.[4]

MacLeod wrote those words shortly after the Alberta government developed a standard funding model for provincially funded shelters.[5] It was a huge win for women's shelters, a guarantee they could cover basic wages and rent for their operations. But MacLeod warned that, although shelters had been recognized by government as an important social service, shelter workers would have to remain persistent in communicating the value of their work. Because with new money comes new scrutiny—not just from the public, adjusting to a new social service that acknowledges the existence and harms caused by men's violence against women, but also from government officials who would now probe the budgets and programs of women's shelters. The government

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4   Linda MacLeod, ACWS Newsletter, vol. 2, no. 1 (January 1989).
5   The standard funding model only applied to shelters the provincial government chose to fund. Most shelters opened without a funding agreement in place; negotiations with government happened after operations had begun.

was now funding women's shelters, and officials wanted accountability. They wanted those colour-coded forms to be completed.

This shift represented the start of a long journey to enhance the services offered in women's shelters in Alberta. Over the years, this would evolve into sophisticated projects like the action-based research spearheaded by Goard, or the Danger Assessment data that was used to lobby for second-stage shelter funding. But in the mid- to late-1980s, the era of standardization started with the basics, namely a re-evaluation of the staff and spaces that had come to define women's shelters.

Women were drawn to shelter work for a variety of reasons. There were women like Lena Neufeld, who was thrown into her job at Harbour House in Lethbridge in 1986, and had an interest in social work, but no formal training. There were women like Ardis Beaudry, a homemaker who wanted to improve the lives of vulnerable women and helped to found WIN House in Edmonton, but never had to rely on her work for a steady paycheque. There were also women like Ruth Scalp Lock, who wanted to help Indigenous women get culturally appropriate help. In the 1980s, women from federal unemployment programs were sometimes sent to shelters to fill positions, whether they were suited for the work or not.

"Before it was, 'You've got two feet and a heartbeat, we'll hire you.' Now it's, 'We want to see skills. We want to see degrees or a diploma. We want to see people who are committed to the field. We want to enhance your skills by giving you training.' We want to unify the work that everyone is doing, so that across the board everyone is doing safety planning and Danger Assessments," says Kristine Cassie, who spent more than a decade as the head of YWCA Lethbridge, which oversees Harbour House.

Some women were drawn to work or volunteer in women's shelters because they, too, had experienced abuse at the hands of their intimate partners. Women like Brenda Brochu, of Grande Prairie, advocated for the opening of a women's shelter after she reflected on her own experience leaving an abusive partner and realized that some women don't have the same resources to also leave. That real-life experience was sometimes seen as an asset—in fact, in the early days of some shelters, organizers wanted a certain portion of staff to be formerly battered women.[6] That kind of stipulation fit within a radical

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6   Larissa MacFarquhar, "The Radical Transformations of a Battered Women's Shelter," *New Yorker*, August 19, 2019.

feminist ideology, where the goal was to completely upend the social norms and rules of institutions believed to have been established by a patriarchal society that discounted women's experiences and sought to continue men's dominance of them.

But the chaos and distress of abusive relationships could seep into the increasingly professionalized environment of a women's shelter. Women facing abuse, or the direct aftermath of such an experience, could struggle to maintain the professional distance required for their work. What's more, their own extreme situations could interfere with the shelter's ability to staff itself consistently. When Marilyn Fleger arrived at the shelter in Camrose as executive director in 1986, no one talked about the fact that almost half the staff was living through abuse while at the same time working to help others escape from it. One time, police brought in a group of siblings whom she recognized as the children of a staff member. Another time, Fleger was covering the night shift when a staff member called at two o'clock in the morning to say, "My husband's just taken off drunk with my two-year-old. Can I have the next shift off?" Fleger says she encouraged the women to address their situations, but that didn't always happen. There was a lot of denial, and it was difficult to keep people as staff if they were always in crisis.

In the early years, women who went to shelters could expect to find a safe bed and compassionate staff. Workers would sit at whatever donated dining table the shelter had been able to find and listen to the stories of women in distress. But they often didn't have the training to help women assess how serious their situations were, or how to get out of them. The 1990s not only saw new demands from government, but new staff taking on leadership roles; these leaders often came to women's shelters with experience in other social service agencies that had operated for much longer within the fold of official government regulations and standards, and the accountability protocols that are required of publicly funded institutions.

This all led to moments of hard thinking about what a shelter is for: What's the mandate? How do you work to not just provide a temporary safe haven, but to break the cycle of violence? Pat Lowell was on the board for the shelter in Pincher Creek when a new executive director was hired; she remembers that the new director wanted to professionalize the service and create formal case management plans, with goals for clients and interventions for children who had witnessed violence in the home.

"We had to think about things like, 'Are we the ones to be parenting the children? Is it our job to keep them busy? Is it our job to deal with that crying child?' Because we have a mother here. If anything, maybe we should empower her to be a mother to this child in this environment. Or mom would go off and be gone for the afternoon. Maybe she's looking for a job. But what if she's coming back at eight o'clock at night and smelling like booze? We really had to think about our mandate. That we can't *just* be providing shelter. That we need to be providing intervention and assistance to help a woman, and her kids, break this cycle of violence."

When Gerry Carter arrived as executive director of the shelter in Medicine Hat in 1992, ten years after it opened, the first thing she knew she needed to change was the physical structure itself: it was an aging duplex in a rougher part of town and there was no possibility of confidentiality, since the space was so cramped. Carter remembers as many as fifteen people being squished into the one-bathroom house. She immediately looked into the organization's finances to figure out how to pay off the mortgage that came with an almost 20 per cent interest rate. She then moved on to a fundraising plan for a beautiful, purpose-built facility, which opened five years later.

But Carter was just as concerned about the high number of women who would return to the shelter for stay after stay. There were no programs or plans to get them to a better place in their lives. She wanted workers to do proper client assessments and to determine what they would need when they left, be it a contact at Legal Aid or a line on an affordable apartment. Carter says the shelter eventually worked with an assessment tool developed by the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters.

"How can you figure out what a person needs when they leave if you haven't done an assessment? It helped set goals for the client. What does she want to achieve? How can we help her get there? There were a lot of repeats because there weren't any women's programs in place. There weren't any support groups. So women would stay their twenty-eight days and they would end up coming back," she says. "We revamped all of the job descriptions and we started a training program for volunteers. There was a lot of work to do."

The number of programs offered in women's shelters grew steadily, for both clients and staff. Corrie Fortner started working at WIN House I in the late 1980s as part of a university placement program. Her job was to work with children, liaise with the department of children's services on behalf of mothers, and help those women with paperwork for the various government

agencies they inevitably had to deal with. Fortner remembers working with Indigenous women, immigrant women, and White women—and she remembers that WIN House offered training sessions to help her better understand different cultures in a way that reshaped her entire way of looking at people and her interactions with them.

"It was the first place I learned about diversity," she says. "It took off my blinders in terms of what our ingrained biases might be and how that shapes how we relate to people. I learned how a banking experience could be such a different experience if you were an immigrant woman, versus an Indigenous woman, versus a woman who'd never had exposure to a bank, versus a high-level politician's wife—I learned how it could be different, and also the same. Working at WIN House was an incubator for my career and for who I became as a human being."

While women's shelters have come a long way in tailoring services to meet the needs of diverse women, the sector in the late 1980s and early 1990s was still arguably ahead of its time when it came to inclusivity and social justice issues. The basic teaching sessions Fortner attended on Indigenous culture would lay the groundwork for future endeavours, like the "Bibles, Blankets, and Beads" manual that was published in 2002 by the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters as an introduction to Indigenous history in Canada, Indigenous kinship systems, and the effects of colonialism on Indigenous people. Such efforts have continued in the years since, resulting in a range of programs, guides, and partnerships to better serve women from all communities.

When Brenda Brochu partnered with Indigenous organizations in Peace River to organize a march in remembrance of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, the town manager was initially lukewarm at the suggestion. "We wanted to march down Main Street. But the town manager suggested that we just go down a back alley so that it would be less disruptive," she recalls. "Lily Parenteau from Native Counselling was incensed. She told them, 'We're not going down any back alley.' We went above the town manager to the councillors and we got permission and an RCMP escort to march with us and we went right down Main Street."

Brochu's work in the sheltering movement has always been rooted in upsetting the status quo that downplays or ignores the needs of vulnerable women. In Peace River, she was learning more about how bureaucratic parameters set by the government could harm Indigenous women who came to

shelters. For example, the federal government had required that shelter staff enter the Indian Registration Numbers of First Nations clients in order to receive funds, which were distributed through the province, to provide services for these women. Brochu objected to the collection of such personal information and refused to sign her contract with the province for provincial funding until the requirement to provide a status number was removed. The following year this requirement was removed for all shelters in the province.

The push to change the professional environment in women's shelters was coming, in part, from new staff with new ideas of how to run the operations, and in part from the Alberta government, which was demanding accountability. In 1989, the Ministry of Social Services developed "Core Standards" to be applied to every service under its purview, including child welfare programs, homelessness housing initiatives, and women's shelters. The department wanted full compliance by 1991. The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters became a key link between shelters and the government: it created a program standards committee to coordinate shelter-specific program standards that aligned with government principles. It later took on tasks like developing a generic funding contract for individual shelters to use with government. And research conducted by member shelters would often be used to create manuals and best practices documents to be distributed to all shelters. For example, Edmonton's WIN House conducted a research project looking into the psychological state of children in the shelter during a nine-month period in 1985. The report led to the release of a model protocol for all shelters, prepared by the Department of Family Services. Over the years, ACWS would release dozens of reports, manuals, and guidelines to member shelters, along with training programs. This continued into the 2000s and right up to today, including the training of shelter workers in how to conduct a Danger Assessment and the development of health and safety protocols in shelters during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I took thousands of hours of training that ACWS offered because you had nobody else to learn it from. Even social workers and child welfare workers weren't taking the kind of training on family violence that shelter staff were," says Lisa Morgan, who was the child care worker at the Dr. Margaret Savage Crisis Centre in Cold Lake in the 1980s.

Even shelter directors like Karen Blase, who headed the Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter in the late 1990s, remembers the emotional support she found from other shelter leaders through ACWS. Those connections were

important for those working in a sector that could take an emotional toll on staff. Blase remembers that when she first started her position, she met with two women who had previously held the same job. "They told me, 'This is the most beautiful, dangerous, and depressing job you'll ever have.' And they were right on all three counts." The work was at once fulfilling and inspiring, but also exhausting, and workers sometimes experienced secondary trauma. Blase stayed in the position for five years, and by the end, she says she was physically exhausted. "I think I stayed because I am a largely mission-driven person and the mission was so powerful and the impact was so clear."

But the changes that were happening in shelter operations weren't always welcomed by workers, or by boards. Barbara Young came to the board of Discovery House in Calgary in the 1980s and saw herself as a new type of board member, who didn't come from the social services sector but rather from the business sector. She felt board members needed to brush up on their governance models, streamline meetings, and develop more relationships with the business community. In Medicine Hat, executive director Catherine Hedlin clashed with her board on many fronts, including the issue of some board members wanting to be actively involved in the day-to-day operations of the shelter, sometimes dropping by the facility during the day. Their intentions may have been good, but Hedlin didn't think such actions were part of a board member's job description, nor did she think they were appropriate in a small community where clients might easily be recognized.

There were also instances where novice board members rose to the challenge of supporting the development of this new social service. Marta Burns started as a board member at WINGS, Edmonton's first second-stage shelter, in the 1990s. At the time, WINGS was housed in an old apartment building leased to the organization by the City of Edmonton for a nominal fee. But the building was old and small (Burns remembers attending board meetings in the basement, next to a noisy boiler that emitted loud hisses and creaks as they worked), and located on a steep hill, which made it hard for women with strollers to access. The board decided to hire a contractor to conduct a feasibility study on whether WINGS might be able to fundraise enough money for a new building. She remembers the contract was set at about $25,000. "What I remember about that board meeting is the enormity of that number for WINGS at the time. The thought of spending that much money when we didn't even know if we could raise money! I remember the whole board just sort of fearing that decision, but we decided to do it and we got the report and

it all worked out fine," says Burns, who now sits as a justice on the Court of King's Bench in Edmonton. "That $25,000 expense was such a big deal for us, but later on, it didn't seem nearly as traumatic."

WINGS was eventually able to raise $4 million to construct a new building in the southeast of the city. The organization secured a $1 million donation from an estate in Edmonton, money from the City of Edmonton and the federal government, and even funds from people like Burns's grandmother, who donated $100 to the cause. WINGS expanded from twelve units to twenty. "It was something that seemed a lot like a dream, but certainly we always knew that if we just kept going forward, we'd eventually get there, and we did."

That feeling of accomplishment, and even empowerment, was occurring at both the individual and the institutional level. Just as women realized they didn't need to stay in abusive relationships, so did women's shelters, as organizations, begin to understand their strengths and power in Alberta society. According to Carolyn Goard, that progression would not have occurred if shelters had not banded together under ACWS, which lent them more clout in negotiations with government and allowed them to share resources and knowledge across the province. "The reason shelters have been so successful is because they have come together, and we have information to back up what we're doing. So, if someone in government goes off the rails and does something to imperil services for women and children, the collective can go to the media and say, 'This is not right.'"

That power of a collective and that strength of media connections has been put to the test at various times during the last fifty years. Perhaps no more so than when ACWS joined forces with a group of women's shelters that has always had an extra layer of struggle in its fight for fair funding in Alberta—on-reserve women's shelters, where the federal government and a colonial system of funding have always complicated the fight to ensure women and children get the services they need.