



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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In 2003, ACWS welcomed Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell, the pioneer who devised the Danger Assessment Tool, a powerful process of inquiry that determines the level of danger an abused woman has of being killed by her intimate partner. This groundbreaking tool helps women stay safer by identifying risk factors, reducing minimization and denial of danger, and building supportive relationships with helpers. In 2009 Dr. Campbell returned to Alberta to work with ACWS on creating a culturally appropriate risk assessment instrument for Indigenous women based on her Danger Assessment. From left to right, Jan Reimer, Janet Gladue, Helen Flamand, Alison Cunningham, Dr. Linda Baker, Mary "Cookie" Simpson, Darlene Lightning-Mattson, Sandra Ermineskin, Dorothy Sam, Delia Poucette, Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell.

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A commitment for social change

JAN

Jan Reimer was out of the province when she first heard that a woman named Betty Fekete had been shot and killed by her estranged husband in the lobby of her Red Deer apartment building. The man also killed the couple's three-year-old son, and then himself.

At that time, in 2003, Reimer was just two years into her job as executive director of the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters. She had come to the position after a long career in public service, having served as an Edmonton city councillor before being voted the city's first—and, to date, only – female mayor in 1989. As a politician, Reimer had attended the grand openings of women's shelters in the city and visited other shelters throughout the course of her work. But she'd never actually worked in one, and the realities of how these facilities operate and the social systems that affect their mission were new to her; the learning curve was steep. All of those currents were present in what came to be known as the Fekete case, which Reimer first read about in a newspaper while waiting in an airport.

Blagica (Betty) Fekete separated from her husband in the fall of 2002. She went immediately to the Central Alberta Women's Emergency Shelter in Red Deer and, after her husband showed up there and verbally abused staff, she was transferred to a shelter in another town because staff feared for her safety. When she came back to Red Deer, Betty applied for sole custody of their son, the start of an almost year-long series of court hearings. Betty always applied for sole custody, but the courts continued to grant her husband some access to the toddler.

Over the course of eleven months both Betty and her husband became well known among the RCMP detachment in Red Deer. Josif Fekete filed dozens of complaints, alleging that Betty was violating a court order by not using

a car seat for their son. He also complained that Betty was late for drop-offs and pick-ups. Betty, on the other hand, repeatedly told police that her husband was threatening to kill her. Two days before she was killed, she told both a police officer and a case worker from Child and Family Services exactly that—but the planned visit went ahead.

“It was such a graphic, tragic illustration of system dysfunction and the lack of respect for frontline shelter workers and court workers,” says Reimer. “Betty Fekete’s [husband] repeatedly threatened to kill her and at one point, he tried to run her and her friends off the road—but there’s no investigation. On the other hand, he made frivolous complaints to child welfare and phoned the police because Betty’s in a cab without a car seat for the little boy, and they investigate. What will always stand out for me is how a little boy was sobbing at the shelter, not wanting to go on a court-ordered visit and saying, ‘Daddy is going to kill me.’ The shelter workers and the court worker tried to stop the visit. But in the end, you had three dead bodies.

“I was angry—very angry,” Reimer recalls. She was also saddened by the toll the case took on the shelter workers. “There was a sense of, ‘If only they’d listened to us, they’d be alive.’ There had been all sorts of last-ditch calls to the courthouse, to Children’s Services, saying, ‘Stop this visit.’ And they couldn’t stop it. So, there’s that feeling of powerlessness. There was a lot of inertia and looking the other way by systems when it came to violence against women, with horrendous consequences.”

ACWS called for a public fatality inquiry into the Fekete case, and committed to do so every time a similar case arose; Betty Fekete’s death was hardly an isolated incident. The year before, a Calgary man fatally shot his two-year-old son, Cole Harder, and then himself, after a prolonged custody dispute; the child’s mother had obtained a restraining order against him following an assault. A few years later, Brenda Moreside, a Métis woman from northern Alberta, called an emergency number after her drunken boyfriend broke into her home, where he lived part-time. The operator told Moreside that he couldn’t be charged with breaking into his own home, and ignored Moreside’s plea to send help quickly because, she told them, her boyfriend was pushing against the door she was holding shut. Moreside’s body was found twelve days later.

Sometimes the province’s solicitor general would agree to conduct a public hearing, and sometimes not, Reimer says. But she always wanted to put in a request and force the ministry to respond.

The deaths reverberated across the province. Minister of Children's Services Iris Evans worked with ACWS to launch a provincial roundtable on domestic violence in 2003. According to Reimer, Evans called Premier Ralph Klein and said, "You need to do something about this." A working group travelled the province, consulting with individuals and groups. The roundtable yielded more funding for children affected by domestic violence and a major recommendation from the final report was for more collaboration between government agencies, with less fighting over jurisdiction and more coordination to achieve common goals.

In the wake of the roundtable and subsequent report, Reimer decided to tackle a systems gap that she had been hearing about for years: police response. When she first started at ACWS, Reimer had heard from shelter directors who said that the RCMP often didn't take women's complaints of violence seriously; that men would accuse their wives of being mentally unstable and the situation would be flipped into a case against the woman. While there was sometimes a solid police response to complaints about domestic violence, it felt like a "postal code lottery" for shelter workers, says Reimer. In other words, it was a matter of luck whether a police department in a particular area would take complaints about domestic violence seriously and try to collaborate with shelters. "If you had a good relationship with the RCMP, things were wonderful. If you didn't have a good relationship, it could be pretty toxic," Reimer says.

ACWS worked with Bill Sweeney, the Commanding Officer for the RCMP in Alberta, to mandate that every detachment have a Memorandum of Understanding with the local women's shelter in their area of coverage. Such protocols offer clarity for all involved: What can you do? What can't you do? How can you come together to help? Alberta was the first province in the country to develop a Memorandum of Understanding between RCMP detachments and women's shelters.

"It did make a difference. But it's only as good as the individuals that are willing to read it," Reimer says. "So much still depends upon individual relationships. Because if you have an employee who won't even come to the shelter, or they consider the shelter as the source of all their problems with vagrancy, those attitudes get in the way. Unless the system holds those individuals to account, you won't move ahead."

In 2006, as part of their presentation at an international conference on women's shelters in Mexico City, members of ACWS presented the

Memorandum of Understanding. Reimer spent several days listening to the challenges and successes of her colleagues from Central and South America. As the conference ended, there was a call-out for an organization to host the next conference. Reimer stood up and said that ACWS would do it. After returning to Edmonton, she brought the idea to the ACWS board and the group said: “Why just the Americas? Let’s do a world conference.”

That summer, ACWS began organizing the event, finding and inviting shelter workers from around the world to travel to Edmonton for the first World Conference of Women’s Shelters, which took place in the fall of 2008. More than eight hundred women attended, hailing from Europe, Africa, Australia, South America, and Central America. Reimer clearly remembers the round dance at the opening ceremony, and a feeling that was nothing less than magical. “There was a kind of unanimity in the room, a sense of common purpose, a sense of sisterhood.”

It was a representation of how women, and some men, working together can make a difference. While shelter workers sometimes change the lives of individual women, Reimer emphasizes that they also work toward systemic change. “One of the core values at ACWS, from the beginning, has been that this issue is a systemic one of women’s rights. It’s not only about two people’s relationship with each other. There’s been this vision that you’re not going to change the system by yourself, that there’s power in a collective. That’s how we can make change; that’s how we can make change for our staff and that’s how we can make change for women. That’s how we build safer communities.”

—Jan Reimer has been executive director of the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters since 2001. ACWS works with its members to end domestic violence through culture-shifting violence prevention programs, collective data and research, and front-line training.



By 2003—the year that Josif Fekete took a sawed-off shotgun and followed through on his blunt threats to kill his wife—activists and women’s shelter workers had spent more than thirty years fighting for institutions and individuals to recognize the harms caused by domestic violence and highlighting the ways social systems can prevent women from achieving safety and justice. As the Fekete case demonstrated, there was still much work to do.

“Women and children are not believed. . . . Every day in Alberta women’s shelters, staff see women’s and children’s safety minimized by the system that should support them. Abused women are often advised by authorities to keep silent about the spoken threats against them, because speaking up might jeopardize child custody. The criminal justice system listens to father’s rights groups and perpetrators, putting the woman and child last in the line of authority, dismissing their truth,” Reimer wrote in an editorial penned for the *Edmonton Journal*, soon after the killing of Betty Fekete.

She was writing on behalf of the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters, the organization that was first formed by a handful of shelter board members and directors back in the early 1980s. At the time, there was tremendous grassroots energy in the women’s shelter movement, but also tremendous struggle to keep these operations afloat. Phyllis Ellis, the director of the Women’s Bureau, which was an Alberta government-established clearinghouse for information on women’s issues, recognized the need for a provincial body to guide and serve shelters that were individually fighting to become full-fledged social service organizations. Ellis arranged a meeting in June 1981 with board members of existing shelters, and the women realized they would be stronger if they joined forces.

“At first there was no Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters. That was the vision of what we wanted to become. The vision was also to get recognition from the government that shelters are a social service,” recalls Loretta Bertol, the first coordinator for the organization that would eventually become ACWS.

Jean Reynolds, who led the board for Unity House in Fort McMurray, was a founding member of ACWS. She had worked with a big oil company in the northern boom town and felt she knew what the group needed to do to gain clout and government recognition: set up an office, establish bylaws, send out newsletters. The Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters was formally incorporated in 1983 with ten founding members and, from the beginning, their biggest fight was over shelter funding. The organization was soon working with the province’s newly created Office for the Prevention of Family Violence and, by 1986, the office stated it had worked “in consultation with the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters” to develop a “new equitable funding base for Women’s Emergency Shelters.”¹ However, no further details

1 Alberta Social Services and Community Health, Annual Report, 1985-1986, 26.

were provided. It wasn't until 1988 that the relationship was more clearly outlined, as another government report explicitly stated that the government, in consultation with ACWS, had developed a "standard contract [that] clearly outlines the responsibilities of the Minister and the shelters, and ensures consistent application of the funding and program policy."²

"The assurance that we'd have funded staff positions was the most important thing that ACWS did," recalls Marilyn Fleger, who served as executive director of the shelter in Camrose in the late 1980s. "The provincial negotiations really, really made it better for all the shelters."

ACWS operated with just a handful of staff for almost thirty years; member shelters pay annual dues, but as shelters could join and leave the organization at any time, funding was variable and unpredictable. Fleger, who served as provincial coordinator for ACWS from 1990 to 1994, remembers some tense moments in those early days. Part of the problem was that, for years, every shelter was represented by one of its board members at ACWS meetings, with executive directors of shelters sometimes permitted to attend meetings but denied official board positions. By 2000, ACWS was representing almost forty shelters, making board meetings unwieldy and inefficient. In 2001, ACWS conducted an organizational review and managed to whittle its board structure down to eleven representatives, but there were still shifts in the years to come, as ACWS tried to ensure fair representation for shelters in Edmonton, Calgary, rural Alberta, and First Nations.

Despite the fluctuations, the work at ACWS was always driven by a set of strong core values: to advocate for women's shelters, to share knowledge and best practices, and to shape policy and public opinion to keep women and children safe. For smaller shelters, ACWS was also a lifeline for professional development.

"We were relatively isolated at the shelter in Peace River. We were not able to get, and still aren't able to get, many professionally trained social workers," says Brenda Brochu, whose work advocating for the opening of a women's shelter in Grande Prairie is documented in Chapter 1; she later headed the shelter in Peace River. "I'm not denigrating [the shelter employees'] work, but it was the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters that really provided that link to the outside world where we could learn about best practices and try to implement them in our shelter. We had a very good shelter here, but ACWS

2 Alberta Social Services and Community Health, Annual Report, 1988-1989.

was a big contributor to that. We weren't just a community shelter; we were a community shelter and ACWS."

At ACWS meetings, directors would talk about the training or programs they had managed to secure for their staff and clients, often spurring sister shelters to ask for the same. Even directors of some of the biggest shelters leaned on ACWS for support, says Karen Blase, who headed CWES in Calgary in the late 1990s. "I think ACWS was important for knowledge sharing, for emotional support for the shelter staff and directors, and for strategically linking to the legislators," she says.

In 1994, a former social worker named Arlene Chapman stepped in to lead ACWS. She remembers working with seventeen Alberta shelters when she began her tenure; by the time she left the position in 2001, just seven years later, there were thirty-five. Chapman came into the job determined to advocate for the kind of systematic changes that would improve the lives of women: "Legislation impacts the lives of every woman and child in a family violence situation. I live here. My children live here. My grandkids are going to live here. It impacts us all," she says.

One of the biggest legislative battles brewing at the time was over gun control. In the wake of the Montreal Massacre, groups led by the Coalition for Gun Control were calling for stricter regulations and more comprehensive tracking of firearms. It took several attempts by both Liberal and Conservative politicians to get legislation off the ground, such was the vociferous debate around the issue in Canada. Gun control advocates included health care, crime prevention, suicide prevention, and women's rights groups, among others. In June 1991, representatives from the National Action Committee on the Status of Women even stormed into a parliamentary committee hearing, demanding public hearings on a gun control bill being proposed by Conservative Justice Minister Kim Campbell. Some Conservative back-bench MPs were already pushing to have their own government's legislative proposal watered down, but Campbell's bill was eventually passed, and those seeking a Firearms Acquisition Certificate were then required to go through a more detailed screening process, a mandatory safety training course, and a twenty-eight-day waiting period before acquiring the certificate.

When a Liberal federal government was elected in 1993, it pushed ahead with the Firearms Act, which would require the registration of all firearms and firearm licence holders and create a new central licensing system. The Act became a flashpoint for western provinces, where rural voters hold a lot of

political sway and anti-Liberal political activism is often instinctive. Premier Ralph Klein characterized the Act as an assault on law-abiding gun owners in Alberta. The issue became political and media fodder, and eventually the subject of a constitutional court challenge by the government of Alberta.

Despite this political climate, Arlene Chapman and ACWS remained staunch public defenders of gun control legislation. In 1995, Chapman presented a brief by the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters to the Senate, in which she argued, "Gun control is not about guns; it is about violence. When guns are readily accessible, they become the vehicle for expressing violence. Women are stabbed, strangled and beaten to death, but most women murdered by their husbands are shot to death. . . . Gun control is not a solution to domestic violence, but it can play an important role in preventing avoidable deaths and acknowledging that women and children, together with men, have an interest in building a society free from violence."³

When Alberta and other provinces challenged the Firearms Act at the Supreme Court of Canada, ACWS obtained intervenor status in the case. Chapman received hate mail, was called a Nazi, and was accused of trying to take away farmers' guns; at one point, the police escorted her to her vehicle after a conference. But she stood her ground, wrote newspaper editorials, and continued to argue that the legislation was in the best interest of women's safety. In 2000, the Supreme Court of Canada struck down the provincial challenge. But years later—and years after the registry of non-restricted firearms was dismantled by a subsequent Conservative government—Chapman is still convinced of the necessity and righteousness of her advocacy.

"Hand guns have been registered in this country [for decades]. So, if you don't have a problem registering handguns, why is there such an outcry about registering a long gun?" says Chapman. "You have no idea how many women I've personally talked to who had their husbands put a shotgun in their mouth. But let's not have gun control? You're telling me that wasn't a good piece of legislation?"

Chapman handed over the reins of ACWS to Reimer in 2001, and the former mayor was almost immediately tapped to offer comment on a number of high-profile cases involving women's safety. The public inquiry into the Fekete case attracted pages of newspaper coverage, and women's shelter workers filled the court benches during the proceedings, there to witness the

3 Arlene Chapman, ACWS Brief for Presentation to the Senate, September 20, 1995.

legal dissection of a case that so intimately touched the core of their work. The 2003 provincial roundtable had put another spotlight on the issue of domestic violence, and ACWS continued to maintain strong, long-term relationships with allies in the provincial government, like Iris Evans.

But sustained media attention to domestic violence is not to be expected without the ongoing efforts of its champions and allies. “Like with every flavour of the week, the week *ends*,” says Reimer. “You have to continue fighting again to bring awareness to the issue.”

Reimer came into the job after a period of symbolic, and financial, attacks on women’s organizations across the country. Economic headlines in Canada in the 1990s were dominated by stories of the country’s debt, and national funding to women’s advocacy organizations across the country was slashed from \$13 million in 1993 to about \$8 million in 1998. There were fewer organizations advocating for women, and in Alberta most of the budget-cutting was coming from the Klein-era provincial government; the Advisory Council on Women’s Issues closed in 1996, followed by the closure of the Alberta Status of Women Action Committee the following year. At the same time, the rise of Men’s Rights Associations contributed to a narrative that women were actually afforded unfair privileges in Canada and that women’s organizations like ACWS and shelters are simply “special interest groups.” In particular, Men’s Rights groups insist that men are victims of discrimination in a court system that, they allege, unjustly sides with women in custody disputes and domestic violence cases. Reimer recalls attending a roundtable meeting on domestic violence where members of a father’s rights group were picketing outside the venue. They wore white hazmat suits that Reimer says were meant to symbolically protect them from women’s shelters that they considered to be “a cancerous virus” or a “plague.”

Threads of those narratives were amplified by some politicians in the Reform Party, a populist conservative party founded by Albertan Preston Manning, which thrived almost solely in western Canada. In 1998, Manitoba Reform MP Inky Mark called for an audit of the federal Status of Women Canada department and suggested that equal funding should be given to men’s groups. “For whatever reason, men have basically been neglected. If we really believe in the principle of equality in this country, we need to be equal,” Mark said in a 1998 newspaper report.⁴ In the same year, an *Edmonton Journal*

4 Chris Cobb, “Women’s Funding Unfair, Men Say,” *Edmonton Journal*, October 5, 1998, A3.

editorial took aim at one of the country's foremost women's rights organizations when it argued, "Advocacy groups aren't meant to go on forever, they're meant to be around as long as their cause is pressing and as long as they have popular support. The National Action Committee on the Status of Women's best days are behind it."⁵ The editorial conceded that gender inequality had been an issue in Canada, but it suggested it was time to do a wholesale review of the funding and efforts that had been working toward that goal.

Women's shelters have also faced pressures from more unlikely forces, too. In the early 2000s, several Canadian municipalities launched plans to end homelessness. These plans typically advocate for Housing First models of care, where individuals experiencing homelessness are given secure, independent housing, even if they're still dealing with addiction or mental health issues, on the assumption that a stable home is the first step toward a stable life. While the goals are laudable, Reimer says, bureaucracies start to parse housing options into "temporary" versus "permanent" housing, with the latter being the preferred investment, without regard for context or the actual length of residents' stays. Reimer thinks women's shelters started to lose their profile and opportunities for funding during that time because they didn't "count" as permanent housing, even if women actually used the services for long periods of time.

"If you have a homeless man and he stays in 'permanent housing' for one day and then leaves, that still counts [as 'permanent housing']. But if a woman stays in a safe, secure environment for six months to a year, it's not permanent enough?" says Reimer.

When Reimer first assumed leadership of ACWS, she thought she would stay for a couple of years. But more than two decades later, she continues to lead an organization that now supports forty members operating fifty shelters across the province for women, their children, and seniors who are escaping violence and abuse. Her budget was around \$120,000 at the start of her tenure and has since grown to almost \$2 million. In addition to supporting shelters, training staff, and spearheading research, the organization is also trying to change the cultural and societal dynamics that allow domestic violence to occur in the first place. In 2005, it launched "Breakfast with the Guys," an initiative where male leaders are invited to talk to other male members of the community about the important role men can play in the lives of women and

5 "Time for Review of Equity Funding," *Edmonton Journal*, July 19, 1998, A10.

girls who are living with abuse. “It was a unique way to welcome men into the conversation and debunk the myth that domestic violence is a women’s issue or that it doesn’t involve men,” says Reimer. In 2012, ACWS launched Leading Change, which focuses on prevention through education about attitudes that perpetuate gender-based violence; the program engages schools, universities, corporations, and sports teams. It’s all part of an effort to change attitudes in society, and in the process such programs have raised both the profile and the scope of practice for ACWS. The former mayor is widely credited for transforming the organization.

“When Jan came in, ACWS was a small, little provincial organization with an executive director and few other staff. That’s no longer true. Jan has taken it to the next level, which wouldn’t have happened with anybody but her, simply because she brought those connections from having been the mayor of Edmonton, and she was a trusted public persona,” says Catherine Hedlin, the former director of the shelter in Medicine Hat. “In a lot of ways, the problems are still the same: there’s not enough money; it’s still seen as a women’s issue; we forget about the kids; we are subject to political will, as the provincial budget changes. But I look at what ACWS is now versus then, and there’s almost no comparison.”

Marta Burns, a long-time board member of WINGS of Providence, a second-stage Edmonton shelter, says Reimer helped ACWS become “a voice for all of the shelters across the province.” While individual shelters might have to be mindful of local community reaction to their advocacy, she says, ACWS can advocate powerfully on behalf of the entire collective.

The ACWS slogan is “we’re stronger together,” and the organization strives to act as a public voice on behalf of all member shelters, including those that must walk delicate lines in their political activism in order to maintain community support. It also offers a public voice for shelters that might not have the time or budget to employ communications departments or run social media campaigns.

It’s all part of a four-decade journey from grassroots activism to an established shelter system. When women opened the first transition houses in Alberta in the 1970s, they couldn’t have known that their efforts would create the foundation for the development of dozens of future shelters in the province. With each wave of women who pitched in to establish safe spaces for their sisters, neighbours, and friends, they learned new lessons. At first, those lessons were about basic operations: how to find a space, keep the lights

on, and pay staff on shoestring budgets. The next wave of leaders took on different challenges, like how to care for children who witnessed domestic violence or how to make services culturally appropriate for the many different women who access shelter services. This work was happening as the shelter movement matured organically, as shelter workers and leaders began to see the gaps within the system they had built, but also as the government required women's shelters to meet new standards. Then, yet another wave of shelter leaders pushed for their organizations to engage in research, such as Danger Assessments in second-stage shelters, which was shared with both the academy and government to influence policy, programs, and society's understanding of domestic violence and the most effective ways to combat it. Their public advocacy also led to new programs such as a provincial benefit for those escaping domestic violence, and funding for positions such as staff to work with children who have experienced trauma.

Leaders in the shelter movement have advocated at the most prestigious and powerful government and judicial institutions in this country; they have presented their ideas to Senate committees and to the Supreme Court of Canada. But their efforts were built on a foundation that started with women who spoke at town hall gatherings, or with local politicians, or in city council chambers. Brenda Brochu attended a community meeting in Grande Prairie and declared that there needed to be a women's shelter in the booming resource town. Ruth Scalp Lock went before her city council, again and again, to get a location for a shelter for Indigenous women in Calgary. Yvonne Caouette met with the mayor of St. Paul and the community influencers at the Knights of Columbus to seek funding for a women's shelter in her small town. Carol Oliver worked connections with Calgary's business community to secure support for a new building for the Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter. It was this small-scale, hyper-local activism that established the terms and set the precedent for the high-profile, high-level advocacy that women's shelter leaders now routinely do as part of their mandate.

"For people who are involved in this type of work, it's more than just a job. It's a commitment for social change and a commitment to be a voice for women who sometimes can't speak," says Pat Garrett, the long-time executive director of WINGS. "It may not have happened as quickly as we would have liked, but I think that commitment and dedication to the movement has paid off. We all have connections to our grassroots beginnings, but we're so much more than that now. We're a vital part of the community. It's been an exciting journey."