

ACWS ORIENTATION MANUAL–INTRODUCTION

The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters recognizes the challenges for frontline counsellors working in shelters. You do very difficult, demanding work often with minimal resources. You are able to multi-task: juggling answering the telephone, monitoring the door and giving out medications and bus tickets all at the same time. You listen as each woman shares her story of abuse.

You support women as they learn how to keep themselves safe.

You educate women about the impacts of abuse. You impact the lives of the thousands of women and children who turn to shelters for support and safety. You help save lives every day.

It is hoped that the information in this Orientation Manual will supplement the knowledge that you have, as well as enhance your learning in other areas. It is very affirming to acknowledge that there is a growing body of research validating the work that shelters have been doing since the 70's.



As the understanding has grown about the dynamics of domestic violence, so has the awareness of the complexities of issues that women and children face when impacted by domestic violence. In order to continue to provide the most comprehensive services possible, it has become necessary for shelters to collaborate with other service providers in the community. Collaboration has the, “potential to build community ownership, reduce fragmentation of services, improve client accessibility and identify new approaches” (Denham & Gillespie, 1998).



Collaboration at the frontline level means establishing relationships with other service providers in the community that provide specific programs or resources for women and children. Examples of collaboration include: establishing both informal and formal partnerships with substance abuse agencies, mental health counsellors, lawyers, child welfare workers, income support staff, immigrant serving agencies, resources providing parenting supports, Aboriginal serving agencies and the law enforcement personnel in your area. It is only by working collectively, that the huge societal issue of domestic abuse can be addressed.

Besides providing safe refuge, shelters often act as bridges for women by facilitating connections to a variety of resources in the community. When women are assisted to make these linkages in the community, they feel more supported as they embark on their journey of healing.

HISTORY OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SHELTERS IN CANADA

Organized responses to the issue of violence against women began in Canada in the 1960's with feminist activism. Prior to that time, the prevailing view was that violence against women was a private matter. Throughout the 1970's, grassroots feminists became increasingly aware that there were many women impacted by abuse who needed support and assistance. Those involved in the women's movement gathered

in consciousness raising groups, women's drop-in centres, health centres and action groups. Many of these groups were funded by the Secretary of State Women's Program as well as by federal and provincial Status of Women's Councils. Others were independent and autonomous. There was recognition that women leaving abusive relationships needed access to housing and financial resources. Some women's drop-in centres began allowing women to stay overnight. Some women volunteered to have their homes used as refuges for women. This was the onset of safe houses (Tutty, 2006).

In Canada, the first shelters opened in 1973 and included Vancouver's Transition House, Ishtar in Langley, B.C., Oasis House (now Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter), Interval House in Toronto and Interval House in Saskatoon (Herbert & Foley, 1996 cited in Tutty, 2006). By 1975, eighteen shelters had been opened in Canada and another 57 were opened between 1975 and 1979 (Rodgers & MacDonald, 1994 cited in Tutty, 2006). These first shelters used a holistic and empowering approach in which women supported women to move on in their lives. It was the women's movement who drew attention to the issue of domestic abuse as a political issue. Gillman (1988) (cited in Tutty, 2006) stated that in the early days many of the staff were volunteers and some workers were former residents of shelters. If shelter workers were paid, it was usually minimum wage and often the monies came from short term federal grants. By the mid-80's, many shelters received some provincial funding to cover operating costs.

Prior to 1970, there was not a name for violence against women by their partners. "Wife beating" and "wife battering" were words used by feminists to describe the circumstances in which violence was taking place and to stress who the victims were. Later words like abuse, family violence and domestic violence were used. Feminists lobbied for the criminal justice system to be increasingly involved. The term wife or woman assault was used which emphasized the criminal nature of the offence (Denham & Gillespie, 1998).



During the 1980's public awareness of the issue of domestic abuse grew and there was greater interest by a variety of individuals and organizations to take action to end violence against women. For example, social service workers, police, lawyers, religious institutions and researchers began to take a serious look at the issue of domestic violence. There was an increased focus on the criminal aspects of domestic violence. It was then that the federal, provincial and territorial governments provided some funding for shelters. The number of shelters in Canada increased from 78 in 1978 to 400 across the country by the end of the 1980's. "The issue of woman abuse became accepted as a legitimate social issue" (Denham & Gillespie, 1998).

In the 1990's there was an increased demand for accountability during a period of economic cutbacks. Work began on developing best practices for addressing violence in women and children's lives. There was more awareness of the needs of Aboriginal women, immigrant women, women with disabilities, lesbians and women from other minority groups. The complexities of the issue of domestic violence became evident (Denham & Gillespie, 1998).

Between April 1, 2005 and March 31, 2006, there were 106,000 admissions of women and dependent children to shelters across Canada (Taylor-Butts, 2007). At that time, Taylor-Butts stated that there were 553 shelters known to be in operation. Taylor-Butts highlighted that many shelters provide an extensive range of services

not only to the women and children within the facilities but also to women who were former residents as well as many who had never resided in a shelter. Outreach services were also identified as important components of shelters services.

More recently there has been a realization that women experiencing domestic violence may experience trauma and there has been a developing body of knowledge supporting this perspective. For example, the research and writing of Judith Herman, Aphrodite Matsakis, Bessel van der Kolk, Stephanie Covington and Lenore Walker have contributed to the literature on the connection between violence and trauma in women's lives. Although there has been a move towards increased professionalization in shelters, the grassroots feminist values of empowerment through listening, understanding and validating women's experiences are still essential components of shelter work.

"The cornerstone of effective intervention with abused women has been provided by the interaction of the feminist-political model of understanding battering behavior as a means of controlling a women and the posttraumatic stress model of assuming that any normal person can have major psychological disruption from experiencing trauma ..." (Walker, 1992 p. xi).

OVERARCHING FRAMEWORK OF THE ORIENTATION MANUAL

The primary purpose of the ACWS Orientation Manual for Frontline Counsellors is to provide a framework recognizing the significance of maintaining the fundamental feminist principles that guided the early years of shelters. At the same time, this manual acknowledges the recent bodies of knowledge that have emerged to enhance the valuable work that is being done in shelters to support and empower women.



A feminist perspective emphasizes respectful relationships that value each woman's individual rights and her safety and dignity regardless of her age, ethnic background, abilities or disabilities, sexual orientation, or economic status. Working from a feminist perspective means that frontline counsellors are knowledgeable about the power imbalances in society that contribute to the violence that women experience. There is also recognition of the systemic oppression that many marginalized women encounter.

The realization that many women impacted by domestic violence suffer from symptoms of trauma became evident as women began to speak about the impacts of abuse. Integrating a feminist perspective and a trauma informed model of supporting women in shelters emphasizes that women's behaviors and symptoms are a result of victimization and are not pathological. Both frameworks acknowledge the importance of empowering women and support a strength based intervention approach.

A feminist perspective and a trauma model emphasize the significance of providing safety which continues to be a prime focus for shelters. The concept of safety has shifted from a primary focus on physical safety from an abusive partner to a more comprehensive view of safety involving emotional safety and strategies for managing trauma symptoms. Women are empowered when they gain knowledge that increases their sense of safety and control in their lives.


By normalizing the symptoms of trauma and the impacts of abuse as understandable responses to


experiencing violence, women are assisted to regain control over their lives and to learn healthy ways to cope with the symptoms. Education and knowledge are empowering for women. Shelters have historically played a significant role in assisting women to understand the dynamics and impacts of abuse. As our knowledge has grown about the impacts of violence, so has our responsibility increased to pass on that information to the women we serve.

A strength based approach to intervention is relatively new terminology but speaks to the work that shelters have been doing for a long time. By focusing on women's strengths rather than on their deficiencies, women are encouraged to recognize the qualities that contributed to their survival and to the survival of their children and then to build upon these strengths.

The Orientation Manual provides an overview of information that was identified by the Steering Committee as being beneficial for frontline counsellors to know and understand. The information provided is grounded in theory and suggests best practices in the work of providing support to families impacted by domestic violence. The Manual is not a policies and procedure manual as each shelter has their own manual that covers procedural information. It is hoped that the Orientation Manual will enhance and provide more in depth information about specific service delivery interests.

The Manual is not linear in that different modules overlap and references are made to other modules where further information on a specific topic can be found. The Manual is like a weaving made up of a variety of different strands or pieces of information which come together to create a tapestry which represents years of knowledge and understanding about supporting women and children affected by domestic violence. Each topic discussed in the Orientation Manual was chosen because of the topics relationship to the core services that shelters provide. Each module is discussed from a theoretical basis and then linked to practices that are suggested for inclusion in shelter work. Case studies are provided where ever possible to provide real life stories to accentuate the information.

Each module also has at least one section titled "A thread for your tapestry of interventions".  These sections provide strategies and interventions or ways of thinking about certain areas and all come from experts in the field of domestic violence.

In some modules there are "Ideas to think about".  Links to additional materials is outlined at the end of each module as well as additional resources you may choose to refer to in order to further your understanding and knowledge of specific topics. Each module interconnects with others in the Orientation Manual providing a strength and depth that each module on its own does not possess. The concepts and ideas are woven together in such a way that they provide a visual tapestry of the work that is done in shelters

This tapestry provides a framework which will support you in your challenging work. This structure is flexible allowing for individual differences yet describes common threads that define the work done by the shelters represented by the Alberta Council of Women Shelters. One of the goals for the Manual is to standardize practice and to ground the work that is done in theory. The modules presented are linked to the ACWS's Aspirational Service Standards (Appendix). By connecting the work that you do as a frontline counsellor to a theoretical framework a greater sense of value and professionalism is evident. The work is viewed as more purposeful and is grounded in research.

It is hoped that the Orientation Manual will act as a blueprint or pattern for you as you weave your own tapestry incorporating your experiences and learning.

REFERENCES:

Denham, D. & Gillespie, J. (1998). Two steps forward, one step back: An overview of Canadian initiatives & responses to end woman abuse 1989-1997. Ottawa: ON. National Clearinghouse on Family Violence. www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfv-cnivf/familyviolence.

MacLeod, L. & Kinnon, D. (1997). Taking the next step to stop woman abuse: From violence prevention to individual, family, community and societal health. A practical vision of collaboration and change. Ottawa: ON. National Clearinghouse on Family Violence. www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfv-cnivf/familyviolence.

Tutty, L. (2006). Effective practices in sheltering women: Leaving violence in intimate relationships. Phase II Report prepared for the YWCA of Canada. www.ywca.ca/public_eng/advocacy/Shelter/YWCA_Shelter_ExecutiveSummary_EN.pdf.

Taylor-Butts, A. (2007). Canada's shelters for abused women, 2005/2006. Juristat: Canadian Centre for Justice Studies. www.statcan.ca/bsolc/english/bsolc?catno=85-002-X&CHROPG.

Walker, L. (1992) in Mary Ann Dutton, A model for assessment and intervention: Empowering and healing the battered woman. NY: Springer Publishing Co.