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EMBARGOED

**SURVIVORS DESERVE BETTER.  
SHELTERS DESERVE BETTER.  
ALBERTA DESERVES BETTER.**

**The 2021-22 ACWS Domestic Violence  
Shelter Workforce Survey**

Alberta Council of Women's Shelters  
02.14.2023

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# LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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

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

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

Our members serve all nations and all peoples. They are located on Treaty 4, 6, 7, and 8 lands across this province which include the six Métis regions of Alberta.

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# ABOUT ACWS AND THE WORKFORCE SURVEY

The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS) is the provincial organization of domestic violence shelters in Alberta. We bring four decades of experience and knowledge to serve our 39 members operating over 50 shelters across the province for those facing domestic violence and abuse. We advocate for ACWS members and work with them to end domestic violence and abuse through culture-shifting violence prevention programs, collective data and research, and front-line training. ACWS supports Alberta shelters in delivering their essential services which provide safety, support families, and improve communities.

Domestic violence and abuse remain serious and urgent problems in Alberta. Collectively, we are challenging the harmful beliefs and actions that perpetuate domestic violence and abuse in our communities.

ACWS and our members recognize the need for a skilled, well-supported, and professional workforce to effectively serve the needs of people fleeing domestic violence and abuse. Together, we have administered seven surveys on shelter operations, funding, staff compensation, and working conditions across Alberta's domestic violence shelters since 2002. This is ACWS' eighth Workforce Survey.

The 2021-22 ACWS Workforce Survey was designed using a two-part methodology. (1) In consultation with ACWS members from across Alberta, ACWS designed a survey for shelter directors (the Workforce Survey—Shelter Director Version) that collected information about funding, operational, and staffing issues, in addition to systemic workplace challenges they report experiencing (including the COVID-19 pandemic). (2) In consultation with shelter staff from across Alberta, ACWS designed a survey specifically for staff about their experiences working in the domestic violence shelter sector (the Workforce Survey—Staff Version). This is the first time that ACWS has included a survey specifically for staff as part of the Workforce Survey project.

Twenty-nine ACWS members, operating 38 shelters responded to the Workforce Survey—Shelter Director Version. One hundred and twenty-nine shelter staff responded to the Workforce Survey—Staff Version. There was strong representation from shelters and staff in every region in Alberta, and from shelters and staff in both urban and rural communities. All ACWS members were asked to review and provide feedback on this report before it was finalized, to ensure that the report accurately reflects their experiences and the information they provided to ACWS.

ACWS thanks everyone who contributed their time and insights to this project. Our work is enriched by your collective wisdom.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2021/22, ACWS member organizations across the province provided safety and support to thousands of Albertans experiencing violence and abuse. Between April 1, 2021, and March 31, 2022, our members sheltered **7,620** survivors of abuse and gender-based violence<sup>1</sup> and their children (ACWS, 2022). They provided outreach support to **7,303** survivors (ACWS, 2022). They developed almost **3,000** safety plans with survivors leaving abusive relationships (ACWS, 2022). They provided shelter and life-changing programming to over **3,000** children (ACWS, 2022). And they answered **65,390** calls for support (ACWS, 2022).

**ACCESSING A SHELTER  
“WAS THE GREATEST THING THAT  
COULD EVER HAVE HAPPENED TO ME.  
THEY HELP EACH AND  
EVERY ONE OF US  
TO GET OUR SELF-ESTEEM BACK  
AND TEACH US  
HOW TO START OVER.”**

This work provides an invaluable service to Alberta as a whole, but it is especially valuable to Albertans who experience high levels of vulnerability and marginalization, and who are at **high risk of serious and imminent harm.**

Research consistently demonstrates that in Canada the survivors who are most likely to access services through a domestic violence shelter are survivors who experience severe forms of violence and abuse, and who experience systemic barriers and discrimination based on their identity (Ansara and Hindin, 2010; Barrett and St. Pierre, 2011). This research speaks directly to the frontline experience of shelters across Alberta. ACWS research indicates that in 2021-22, **over 70%** of clients surveyed had experienced significant exposure to oppression and marginalization,<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ACWS recognizes that not all people who have experienced abuse and gender-based violence identify with the term “survivor,” and that some people may prefer to describe themselves and their experiences using different terms. We acknowledge that no term can adequately describe what it means to have experienced violence and abuse. We have chosen to use “survivor” as a term of respect for people who have experienced abuse or gender-based violence that emphasizes their personal power, strength, and resiliency. We also honour and respect the choice to be identified by a different term.

<sup>2</sup> This information was collected from shelters that use the Measure of Survivor Assessments Illustrating Complexity (MOSAIC), which is a tool that is used by shelters to better understand how many different circumstances in a survivor’s life can intersect in ways that intensify their experience of domestic abuse and increase their need for support as they recover. For more information, see ACWS, 2022.

and **72-85%** were at severe or extreme risk of being killed by their intimate partner (ACWS, 2022).<sup>3</sup>

Domestic violence and abuse survivors need highly specialized support from organizations that have been designed for them and from service providers who have been educated to meet their needs. For those survivors who do experience high risk of serious and imminent harm, **receiving support from a domestic violence shelter can literally mean the difference between life and death.**

The work domestic violence shelters do is crucial, integral, and necessary for the functioning of a healthy Alberta, and for the safety and wellbeing of Albertans fleeing violence. In the words of one survivor, accessing a shelter “was the greatest thing that could ever have happened to me... They help each and every one of us to get our self-esteem back and teach us how to start over” (ACWS, 2022, p. 18).

But even as shelters do their best every day to serve Albertans, they are struggling to meet the increasing demand for services, and their work is often hampered by systemic workforce challenges that negatively impact the wellbeing of the shelters themselves, the staff they employ, and the survivors they support. **In the past year, shelters have seen increasing numbers of survivors reaching out for help and increasingly severe and complex cases. They are navigating this surge in demand in the midst of record-breaking inflation, all-time highs in staff burnout and turnover rates, and stagnant government funding.**

**The Government of Alberta has not increased funding for domestic violence shelter staff wages in nine years, and it has not increased operational funding for eight years.** All told, the total amount of money the government provides to domestic violence shelters has only increased by 5% since 2015-16. This funding has partially supported additional shelter spaces across the province, but it in no way matches the demand for shelters, and it has not kept pace with rising cost of living.

The only exception to this stagnant funding was provincial and federal relief dollars during the pandemic. The Government of Alberta required that shelters return any unspent funding rather than allowing them to use those funds as part of a pandemic recovery program.

**Shelters deserve better. Survivors deserve better. Alberta deserves better.**

This report details the systemic workforce challenges shelters are required to navigate, and it tells the story of the brave and dedicated people who continue to work on behalf of survivors even in the face of tremendous obstacles.

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<sup>3</sup> This information was collected from shelters that use the Danger Assessment (DA), which is a validated tool developed by Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell that has been used by shelters in Alberta for almost two decades. The DA measures a survivor’s risk of being killed by a current or former partner. Completing the assessment with a shelter worker is voluntary. It can help survivors understand the danger they are in and make informed decisions about their safety. For more information, see ACWS, 2022.

# SYSTEMIC WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

## THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON SURVIVORS

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed extraordinary pressure on survivors of abuse and gender-based violence, and on the domestic violence shelters that support them. The pandemic has led to an increase both in cases of domestic violence and abuse and in the severity of domestic violence and abuse. The United Nations has confirmed the existence of a “shadow pandemic” of domestic violence and abuse cases that have resulted from, or worsened because of, the COVID-19 pandemic (United Nations, 2021). According to the UN, 1 in 2 women report that they or a woman they know has experienced a form of violence since the pandemic began, and 7 in 10 women report that verbal or physical acts of abuse by an intimate partner have increased in their communities (United Nations, 2021).

The pandemic has also led to an increase in the complexity of domestic violence and abuse cases. Of the ACWS members who completed the 2021-22 ACWS Workforce Survey, **69%** indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an increase in the complexity in the cases of the survivors that their organization serves. In particular, ACWS members report that as a result of the pandemic, survivors of abuse and gender-based violence have experienced increased isolation, declining mental health, and reduced service availability. **These complex factors make it more difficult for survivors to successfully leave abusive relationships and to heal once they have left the abusive relationship, and they increase the need for support from domestic violence shelters and their staff.**

**"HAS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC INCREASED THE COMPLEXITY OF CLIENT CASES"?**



The pandemic has increased mental health and addiction issues, close to beyond our ability to support, especially without increased staffing budgets.

– Shelter Staff

## THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON STAFF

For the domestic violence shelter staff who support survivors of abuse and gender-based violence, the COVID-19 pandemic has also been a particularly challenging time. Domestic violence shelter staff served on the front lines of this double pandemic, responding simultaneously to COVID-19 and gender-based violence. Every ACWS member remained open during the pandemic and continued to provide a full spectrum of supports for survivors even as other organizations suspended services or moved them online. **Domestic violence shelter staff worked in-person to support survivors navigating abusive relationships, despite the risk to their own health, and the health of their families. Some died.**

While the government provided multiple programs addressing first responder wellbeing (including first responders mental health grants, and the Supporting Psychological Health in First Responders funding), these programs predominantly supported male-dominated occupations, and shelter staff were excluded from accessing them.

During the pandemic, frontline shelter staff worked throughout. These positions are vital to shelter operations as well as the safety of those needing shelter. The compensation should reflect the important nature of these positions.

– Shelter Director

Domestic violence shelter staff have provided a crucial service to Albertans throughout the pandemic, but this service has taken a toll on the wellbeing of staff.

**76%** of staff who completed the 2021-22 ACWS Workforce Survey—Staff Version report that their stress has increased as a result of the pandemic. A further **72%** report an increase in their levels of burnout. And **51%** report a decrease in their overall wellbeing.

Despite these difficulties, domestic violence shelter staff have continued to go over and above to serve and support clients during extraordinarily difficult circumstances.

The amount of damage COVID-19 created for workers' mental health is difficult to express but it happened and does not seem to be changing.

– Shelter Staff





## THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON SHELTERS

Throughout the pandemic, domestic violence shelters have worked tirelessly to ensure that both their staff and the survivors they serve remain safe and healthy. To meet this need, they have had to navigate changing health restrictions (none of which were designed to specifically meet the needs of domestic violence shelters) and adapt their protocols and programs to respond to the evolving circumstances created by the pandemic.

“The financial and emotional impact of the pandemic has not ceased even though the infection numbers and deaths have gone down.”

– Shelter Director

**Shelters are now navigating an unprecedented situation, increased demand, an increase in the severity of abuse, and an increase in the complex circumstances survivors face that can intensify their experience of abuse.** And they are navigating all these factors with a workforce that is dedicated but increasingly overworked, stressed, and burned out. We anticipate that this situation will continue to intensify. Researchers have established that acts of gender-based violence—including domestic violence and abuse—tend to

increase following major disasters (Antasario et al., 2009; Harville et al., 2011; Larrance et al., 2007; Rezaeian, 2013; Schumacher et al., 2010).

The continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, together with skyrocketing costs of living, have created circumstances that most often lead to increases in cases of violence and abuse. The information contained in this report represents the beginning of even greater challenges to come.

We anticipate client needs to continue to be complex for many years to come and shelter services will be at a higher demand than we had been used to pre-COVID.

– Shelter Director

## THE DEMAND ON SHELTERS AND THEIR STAFF

### AMONG DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SHELTER STAFF...



Domestic violence shelters and their staff do an extraordinary amount of work.

**50%** of shelter staff provide support to more than 10 clients a week.

**11%** of shelter staff support more than 30 clients a week.

**45%** of shelter staff perform shift work.

**43%** have positions that require them to be on-call outside of their regular work hours.

**37%** work over and above full-time hours.

**51%** have experienced an increase in workload since the pandemic.

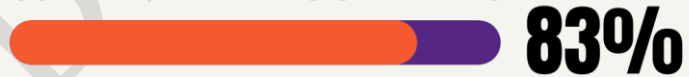
Across Alberta, shelter staff consistently cite the overwhelming workload as one of the biggest challenges they have encountered working in the domestic violence sector. This is a direct result of chronic underfunding based on an inadequate staffing model.

We are generalists. We go from fixing a toilet, to cleaning, to answering the crisis line, meeting with community partners to doing a Danger Assessment. When the house is full it puts an incredible amount of strain on our staff. Due to the ongoing impacts of the pandemic, clients cases are often complex, they have high needs and stay in shelter longer. We are seeing a higher amount of burnout—staff taking more wellness days. This impacts us mostly in our over night shift where we often have one worker—scrambling last minute to find a casual to come in. It also affects our ability to grow to meet the demand in the community.

– Shelter Director

**DOMESTIC  
VIOLENCE  
SHELTERS  
DO AN  
EXTRAORDINARY  
AMOUNT OF WORK**

**NEED ADDITIONAL STAFF TO MEET THE  
CURRENT DEMANDS ON THEIR SHELTER.**



**For all the work shelters and their staff do, it is not enough to keep up with the demand for services.** In 2021-22 alone, shelters were unable to grant over **19,000** requests from survivors for admission, and **10,000** requests to shelter children who would have accompanied them, due to lack of capacity to house them or safely meet their needs (ACWS, 2021).

While shelters will still actively work with survivors who are turned away to provide them with other resources and supports, these numbers speak to an extraordinary demand for an increase in the services and supports shelters are themselves able to provide.

**83%** of shelters report that they need additional staff to meet the current demands of their shelter. As the demand on shelters continues to increase, so too will the need for additional staff and support.

“  
We have an amazing staff team. Our biggest challenge is ensuring that they do not burn out. We are at our maximum capacity based on the staff we have, but the impact of having to turn clients away is very stressful. The clients we do accept tend to be very complex cases.  
”

– Shelter Director

## INFLATION

**Domestic violence shelters have not received a funding increase from the Government of Alberta for staff wages since 2014-15, and for operational costs since 2015-16.** Since 2015, the cost of living has increased by **20%** (Bank of Canada, n.d.). In 2021-22 fiscal year alone, the cost of living in Alberta rose by **6.5%** (Statistics Canada, 2023b).

Shelters are being asked to pay 2023 prices with 2015 dollars. This task is virtually impossible. Shelters cannot meet the demand for their services with the current levels of funding, and they will be unable to keep up as that demand continues to increase.

Current projections estimate that the cost of living will increase by **5.2%** in 2023 and **4.3%** in 2024, and as reported in the Globe and Mail, a severe recession in 2023 (Kirby, 2023) is on the horizon.

**To keep providing the current level of care and support that are critical to the safety and wellbeing of thousands of vulnerable Albertans every year, shelters need an increase in funding that covers both operational costs and staffing wages.**

This is an immediate problem that calls for an immediate solution.

**SHELTERS  
ARE BEING ASKED TO PAY  
2023 PRICES  
WITH 2015 DOLLARS**

# STAGNANT FUNDING

## STAGNANT FUNDING

2021-22 held many financial challenges for domestic violence shelters. Costs have soared across the province, but shelter funding from the Government of Alberta has not changed, for those with grant agreements as well as those who receive per diem rates. In the 2021-22 fiscal year, the extent to which shelters could rely on basic operational funding from the government dropped significantly.



Funding from the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services (formerly the Ministry of Community and Social Services) comprised **67%** of the overall budget reported by shelters who completed the 2021-22 ACWS Workforce Survey. That is a **13%** decrease from what was reported in the 2019-20 Workforce Survey, and it is the lowest government funding has been in the past two decades.

It is important to note that not all domestic violence shelters in Alberta receive funding from the Government of Alberta, and that for these shelters, navigating the financial demands of the past year has been an even greater challenge. Further, some ACWS members have opened additional beds without receiving additional funding in order to meet their local community needs and are now contemplating their closure due to financial pressures, which would seriously impact the number of survivors they are able to serve.



2021-22 also saw significant fundraising challenges. Fundraising comprised only **11%** of the overall budget reported by shelters who completed the 2021-22 ACWS Workforce Survey. This is the lowest number that has ever been reported in a Workforce Survey.

Decreasing fundraising numbers are especially concerning given that the government expects shelters to make up shortfalls in their budget through fundraising, while not permitting any fundraising costs to be covered by their grant (Government of Alberta, 2002).



The primary cause of this fundraising decrease is the combined impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and rising inflation. According to the *Giving Report 2022*, charitable donations had already declined by 8% between 2006 and 2019, as cost of living has increased and Canadians have become more concerned about sustaining their own wellbeing (CanadaHelps, 2022, 7). The *Giving Report* projects that combined pandemic and inflationary pressures will lead to an additional 12% reduction in charitable giving between 2019 and 2021, a decline that they say, “may prove catastrophic for many charities” (CanadaHelps, 2022, p. 6).

This decline in charitable giving is more likely to impact organizations that serve women and gender minorities, including domestic violence shelters (The Canadian Women’s Foundation et al., 2020; Ontario Nonprofit Network, 2020). These organizations are more likely to be labeled with negative gender stereotypes—such as being less competent than other organizations and needing constant guidance and monitoring—and they must work harder to be taken seriously by funders and donors (The Canadian Women’s Foundation et al., 2020).

Organizations that serve women and gender minorities are also less likely to garner widespread interest from all segments of the Canadian population. As the *Giving Report* notes, men are half as likely as women to identify gender-based or domestic violence as an important cause (CanadaHelps, 2020, p. 20).


The domestic violence shelter sector in Alberta is already reporting an even greater fundraising decline than what has been anticipated. **45%** of shelters that responded to the 2021-22 ACWS Workforce Survey report that the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced fundraising revenues by **25-50%**. An additional **30%** of shelters report that the pandemic has reduced fundraising revenues by over **50%**.

With shrinking donations and government funding, shelters have become increasingly reliant on short-term grants and project-based funding.

“The pandemic has impacted our ability to hold events and be active in the community. It’s impacted our ability to raise funds, due to the lack of events, isolation, and economy affecting donors.”

– Shelter Staff

In 2021-22, the amount of funding that shelters relied on from short-term government contracts and grants more than tripled. Much of this influx of funding has come from temporary grants designed to mitigate the increased costs associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. These grants were crucial to shelter functioning, allowing shelters to maintain health and safety protocols that protected both staff and survivors from illness. **Most COVID-19 government grants have now ended, leaving shelters to deal with the continuing legacy and aftermath of the pandemic alone.**



We just want decent funding. With the COVID funding disappearing, the ability to use those funds for extra needs will be gone. The extra food and transportation costs alone for clients will fall back to us with no ability to look for funding.

– Shelter Director

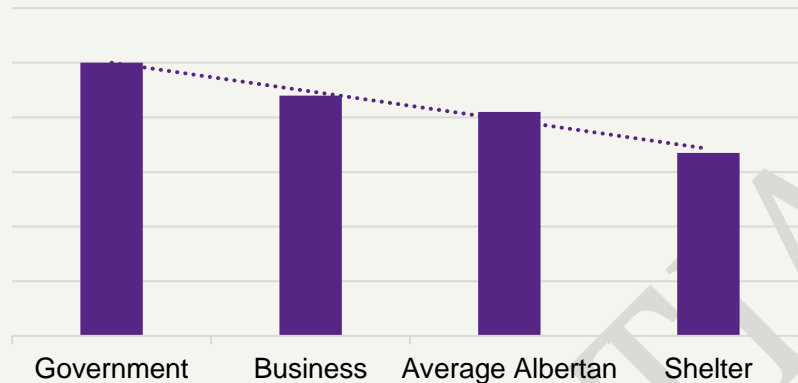
As we begin 2023, shelters are required to navigate an increasingly precarious financial situation. Costs are rising. More survivors are reaching out for support. Fundraising is decreasing. The government grants that sustained shelters through the first two years of the pandemic have ended. And government funding has not increased to meet either the rise in cost or the increasing needs of survivors. **Shelters remain committed to serving all survivors in need, but they cannot do so without help.**

## **STAGNANT WAGES**

Government funding for staff wages has been stagnant since 2014-15. **The current shelter staff wages are not keeping pace with inflation, are not adequate to meet the needs of shelter staff, and do not reflect the importance of the work shelter staff do.**

The Government of Alberta has a staffing model built into their contracts with domestic violence shelters that establishes how much funding they will provide for each shelter staff position.

## SALARY



Based on this staffing model, **the average wage of domestic violence shelter staff is 15% lower than what the average Albertan makes.**<sup>4</sup>

This wage gap increases when domestic violence shelter wages are directly compared to similar positions in the business sector. Overall, **domestic violence shelter wages are an average of 21% lower than comparable business sector wages.**<sup>5</sup>

The staffing model wages are also significantly lower than the wages for comparable positions in the Government of Alberta. Overall, **shelter wages are an average of 33% lower than comparable wages in the Government of Alberta.** And this does not include the value of benefits received by provincial employees. Nor are these benefits allowed to be covered under provincial grant agreements with shelters, leaving shelters alone to cover the cost of crucial employee benefits.

The gap between shelter and Government of Alberta wages is especially significant, given that a large percentage of shelter employees leave shelters to work for the government. **76%** of shelters who completed the 2021-22 ACWS Workforce Survey indicate that government recruitment is one of their greatest challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified and competent staff.

“We all need an increase in pay. Domestic violence shelters get great employees, and then government agencies scoop them away. The government decides what we can pay our people, and then turns around and pays them more to leave us. In small communities, this hits especially hard.”

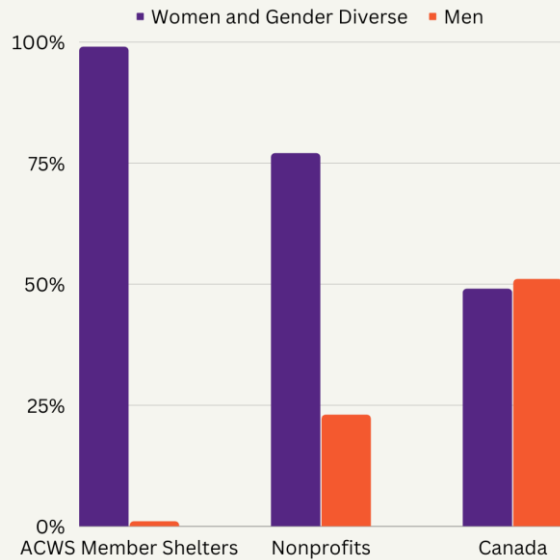
– Shelter Director

<sup>4</sup> This number was calculated based on the domestic violence shelter staffing model and the *2021 Alberta Wage and Salary Survey* (Government of Alberta, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> The comparisons of domestic violence shelter wages with business sector and Government of Alberta wages were calculated based on the domestic violence shelter staffing model and market research performed by Hanowski Consulting on behalf of ACWS.



# GENDER AND RACIAL PAY DISPARITIES



Domestic violence shelters have a diverse workforce.

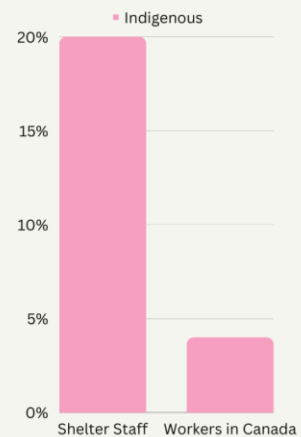
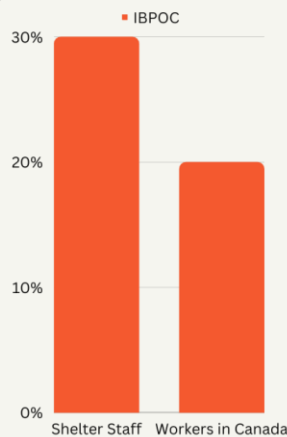
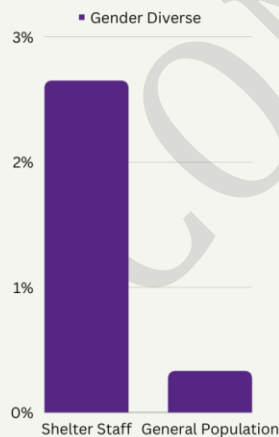
**96.5%** of shelter staff who responded to the 2021-22 ACWS Workforce Survey identified as women. This number is higher than both the number of women employed in the broader nonprofit sector (77%), and the total percentage of women employees in Canada (49%).

**2.65%** of shelter staff identify as gender diverse, which is eight times higher than the number of people who identify as gender diverse in the general Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2022).<sup>6</sup>

**33%** of staff identify as members of a IBPOC (Indigenous, Black, Person of Colour) community, which is over 10% higher than

the national average of IBPOC people employed in Canada (20%).

**20%** of staff identify as Indigenous, which is 15% higher than both the nonprofit average (5%) and the national average of Indigenous employees (4%).<sup>7</sup>

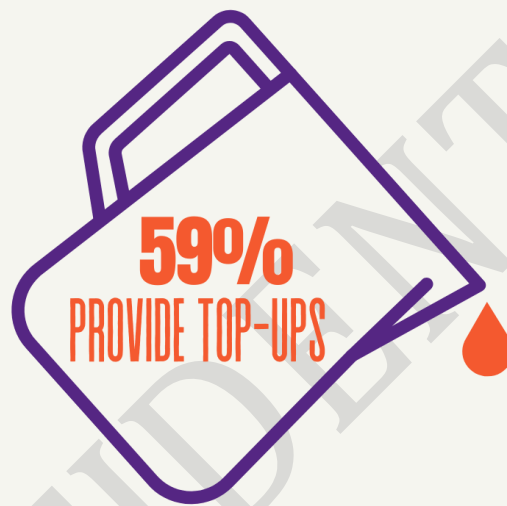


<sup>6</sup> There is currently no information available about the overall rates of employment for gender diverse people in Canada.

<sup>7</sup> The comparisons of Alberta domestic violence shelter staff to the employment of women, IBPOC communities, and Indigenous people in the broader nonprofit sector and the broader Canadian economy was done using analysis from Imagine Canada, 2022.

Women, gender-diverse people, and IBPOC communities all experience a significant wage gap. According to Statistics Canada, nationwide, women earn **12%** less than men (Statistics Canada, 2023a). In Alberta, women earn **14%** less than men (Briggs et al., 2022). This gap increases for women with intersectional identities. IBPOC women earn **33%** less than white men (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2022). Indigenous women make **35%** less than non-Indigenous men (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2022). According to TransPulse Canada, **half** of trans and nonbinary people make less than \$30,000 a year, and **40%** have low-income households (TransPulse Canada, 2020).

**Without a funding increase, domestic violence shelter wages will continue to remain low, and will perpetuate systemic gender and racial pay gaps. Shelter staff work hard, and their work makes Alberta a safer place for everyone. They deserve wages that are fair and equitable.**



**59%** of domestic violence shelters report that they provide top-ups to the staff wages over and above the wages provided through the province's domestic violence shelter staffing model. These top-ups allow shelters to acknowledge the valuable contributions of their staff and to support them in living with dignity.

The top-up model, however, is not stable or sustainable. Shelters often use fundraising dollars to provide the top-ups, which makes them dependent on the shelter's fundraising success. **With diminishing fundraising success and a looming recession, domestic violence shelters need stable and sustainable funding to provide fair wages to their staff for the important work they do.** You can't top up when you're pouring from an empty pitcher.

# THE IMPACT OF STAGNANT FUNDING

Stagnant funding for domestic violence shelters has negative impacts on the shelter sector, on the staff it employs, and on the survivors it serves. Here are some of the biggest impacts.

## THE IMPACT ON SHELTERS



In 2021-22, the rate of staff turnover for ACWS member shelters reached **45%**. **This is an unprecedented turnover rate in the Alberta domestic violence sector, and it is 18% higher than the national staff turnover average for domestic violence shelters (27%; see Women's Shelters Canada, 2022).**

Researchers estimate that it costs **30-150%** of a staff member's salary to replace them once they've left their position (Merchant and Whiting, 2015). Based on this estimate, **in 2021-22 alone, it cost ACWS member shelters more than \$2.25 million to fill vacant staff positions.**

**\$2.25**  
**MILLION**  
**WHAT IT COST**  
**ACWS MEMBER SHELTERS**  
**TO FILL VACANT POSITIONS**  
**IN 21/22**

This is a huge resource drain for shelters that are already struggling to keep up with increasing costs and rising demands, and it's one that could be alleviated by addressing the greatest challenges shelters experience in recruiting and retaining staff.

ACWS members report that their greatest challenges to recruiting and retaining staff include:

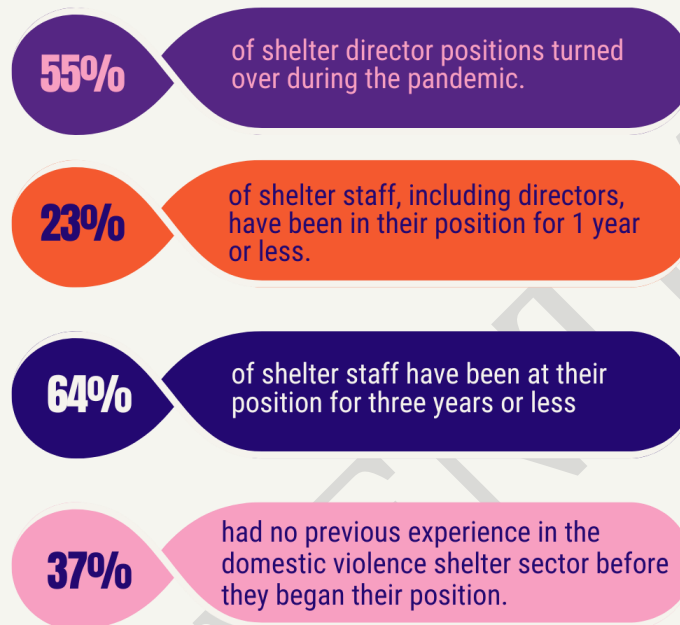


The challenges reported regarding attracting and retaining staff may be exacerbated for shelters in rural or remote areas. **79%** of shelters in rural areas and **78%** of shelters in northern Alberta indicated that their geographical location created additional staffing challenges.

It is difficult to find staff in Northern Alberta especially. We are seeing increased addictions and mental health in clients and the low wages do not reflect the type of work the workers are faced with.

– Shelter Director

Beyond the financial cost, staff turnover also impacts the overall functioning of the shelter. The skills and expertise of gender-based violence specialists can take years to develop, and are often unrecognized beyond the sector (Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children, 2002, p. 7). When shelter staff leave their position, they take with them a highly developed, specialized skillset that may take years to replace.



**More than half** (55%) of domestic violence shelter director positions turned over during the pandemic.

**More than one third** (37%) of shelter directors had no previous experience in the domestic violence shelter sector before they began their position.

**Almost two thirds** (64%) of shelter staff have been at their position for three years or less.

**Almost one quarter** (23%) of shelter staff, including directors, have been at their position for one year or less.

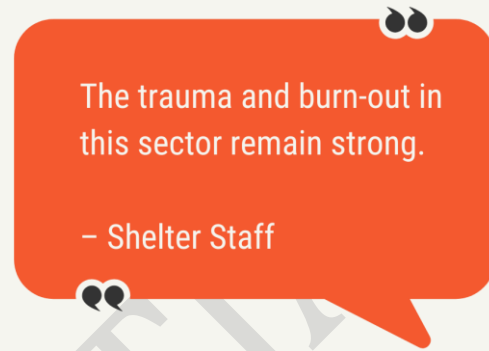
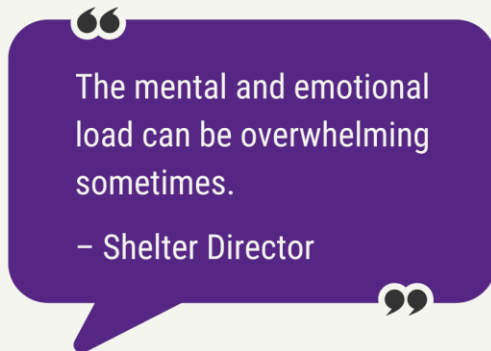
There is not enough pay for the emotionally taxing work we do.

– Shelter Staff

These numbers indicate that the domestic violence shelter sector in Alberta has lost a lot of skill and knowledge over the last few years. Many of the people who now work in the sector are relatively new, with much learning and growing to do. **The sector needs additional resources and support as we work to compensate for this knowledge drain, and to build up a highly skilled and competent workforce that can effectively meet the needs of survivors.**

## THE IMPACT ON STAFF

Stagnant funding levels have had a serious impact on shelter staff, and their wellbeing.



**More than one third** (37%) of domestic violence shelter staff report that they work an additional job. Working an additional job increases the risk that staff will experience burnout and will leave their shelter position.

**92%** of those who work an additional job report that they do so to supplement their income.

**94%** of staff who are thinking about leaving their job report that it is because of insufficient pay.

**78%** of staff who are thinking about leaving their job report that it is because of work-related stress.



## THE IMPACT ON SURVIVORS

**"DO STAGNANT WAGES NEGATIVELY AFFECT STAFF RECRUITMENT & RETAINMENT ?"**



**"DO STAGNANT WAGES NEGATIVELY IMPACT THE QUALITY OF CARE ?"**



**Two thirds** (67%) of shelters who completed the 2021-22 ACWS Workforce Survey report that stagnant wages negatively impact the quality of care that domestic violence shelters and their staff are able to provide. This impact happens for several reasons.

As this report outlined above, stagnant wages have led to increased difficulties in maintaining and recruiting a qualified workforce. **89%** of shelters report that stagnant wages have negatively impacted their ability to recruit and retain staff.

Additionally, as long as funding for wages remains stagnant, it leaves shelters vulnerable to hiring staff with less experience supporting survivors. Survivors thus may not receive the same level of support with a less experienced workforce that they would with a more experienced workforce.

“  
We often struggle with attracting and retaining staff due to low wages - this impacts our ability to increase our capacity to serve the community. Our numbers are high - when we do not have staff, we may not be able to intake a client or provide a service. i.e., childcare, support group, employment training, outreach.  
”

– Shelter Director

“  
Due to the wages being lower than comparable sectors for the most part we are only able to hire entry level staff. Once they attain some experience, they seek higher paying jobs out of the sector. Given that is extremely complex work and significant case management is required it takes time to gain the skills to assist. Lack of experience means that risk may not be appropriately measured, safety plans not realistic or pieces missing, clients not resourced properly.

– Shelter Director”

Finally, supporting domestic violence survivors is intense, demanding, and high-stress work. This is work that takes a toll on those who perform it. Research indicates that staff who support people who have experienced trauma are at high risk of experiencing burnout and vicarious trauma (Bober and Regehr, 2006; Jordan, 2010; Newell and MacNeil, 2010). To remain fully effective in their work, staff need to be able to care for their own wellbeing (Bober and Regehr, 2006; Jordan, 2010; Newell and MacNeil, 2010). When staff are unable to care for their own wellbeing, it can compromise the integrity of the support they are able to provide. (Lee and Miller, 2013; National Association of Social Workers, 2009).

“  
Personally, the most challenging thing to me can be burnt-out staff. Burn out plays a major part in how staff work on their shifts, and although I am sure it is not intentional, I believe it can seep onto clients.

– Shelter Staff”

One of the biggest indicators of staff's ability to care for their own wellbeing is their wages (Miller et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2019). Staff who earn inadequate wages are significantly less likely to be able to care for themselves than staff who earn wages that are adequate to meet their needs (Miller et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2019). **Stagnant funding for wages has severely**



**compromised the ability of domestic violence shelter staff to meet their own basic needs and care for their own wellbeing.** As committed and hard-working as shelter staff are, they cannot support survivors to the best of their abilities when their wages leave them unable to fully support themselves.

**Domestic violence shelter staff are dedicated to supporting survivors,** but it takes an incredible amount of time, knowledge, skill, and personal investment to learn how to do so successfully. One of the most effective ways to increase support to survivors is to increase funding for domestic violence shelters, and to ensure that shelter staff have the resources they need to fully care for survivors, and to fully care for themselves as they do so.

“  
Staff find it difficult to meet their needs in terms of housing costs and other basic needs, creating additional stress for individuals already working in a high stress profession.  
”

– Shelter Director

“  
I am there for the clients at their lowest points in life and I am there to be part of their successes in life and celebrate with them. It is life changing when you see clients gain back their confidence and able to live back their lives normally into the community free of fear and domestic violence. It's inspiring when you are considered a channel of blessings, peace, love and joy to these families as victims of domestic violence. That's just so beautiful about this job.  
”

– Shelter Staff

## CALL TO ACTION

Stagnant wages have created the inability to recruit and retain our most valuable resource—our human capital.

– Shelter Director

### IMMEDIATE ACTION

**ACWS calls upon the Government of Alberta to immediately increase shelter funding to accommodate inflation since the last adjustment.**

This funding increase is long overdue, and the need is high. A cost-of-living adjustment would help shelters handle the rising pressure of inflation. It would allow shelters to pay their staff a decent wage and better address the problem of high burnout and turnover rates. And most importantly, it would support shelters in meeting the needs of every survivor who reaches out to them for help.

A cost-of-living adjustment from 2015 funding levels would cost the Government of Alberta approximately \$10.3 million. The government has already committed \$12.9 million in additional funding to the Office of the Chief Firearms Officer, beyond the annual funding already received by that office, for the purpose of speeding up the process of buying and transferring firearms (Short, 2022). By comparison, the government has increased domestic violence shelter funding by only \$2 million since 2016, to fund additional shelter spaces. If Alberta can invest \$12.9 million in facilitating speedy gun sales, it can afford to invest \$10.3 million in protecting survivors of abuse and gender-based violence.

### LOOKING AHEAD TO 2024-25

**We call upon the Government of Alberta to work with ACWS to modernize shelter standards, update the shelter staffing model, and review operational funding.**

To accomplish this task, ACWS would establish a Domestic Violence Shelter Committee (DVSC) composed of ACWS members, other domestic violence shelters, and government representatives to review ACWS recommendations, including modernization of the staffing model, operational funding, and red tape reduction. The DVSC will provide the minister with recommended actions that stabilize the sector, support survivors, and work toward the end of domestic violence and abuse in Alberta.

The need is so great. I don't think we are even currently helping everyone who needs us, even with the hard work we do. I want to break the system and put it back together, so we are NOT needed!

– Shelter Staff



The domestic violence shelter workforce is filled with people who have dedicated their lives to supporting people in need. **85%** of staff who completed the 2021-22 ACWS Workforce Survey report that they chose to work in the domestic violence shelter sector to help people. **76%** say they chose their work because they want to stop domestic abuse and other forms of violence. And **70%** report that they chose their work because they want to be part of something bigger than themselves.

**Alberta, it's time to show some love to domestic abuse shelters and the survivors they support. It's time to show up for shelters as shelters show up for survivors and help ensure that every survivor who reaches out receives the care they need.**

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