

## **Journey to Trauma-Informed Practice in a Domestic Violence Shelter**

### **Executive Summary**

After the devastating June 2013 floods in Southern Alberta, Rowan House Emergency Shelter in High River began the journey towards a trauma-informed service delivery model.

Rowan House is one of the first women's emergency shelters in Alberta to embark upon a journey to formally develop into a trauma-informed domestic violence service. Developing trauma-informed services is considered a best-practice approach in the literature for all human services. With respect to trauma-informed domestic violence (DV) services, much of the literature comes from the United States and suggests that offering trauma-informed domestic violence services recognizes the pervasiveness of trauma and its impacts on a survivor's ability to cope, to access services, and to feel safe in a new environment (Fallot & Harris, 2006; 2009). In domestic violence services, many women and children have experienced multiple and complex traumatic events in addition to the trauma associated with domestic violence. As such, the more a shelter incorporates trauma-informed approaches into its services, the more opportunity for shelter clients and staff alike to experience an environment that operates within a "do no harm" philosophy ((National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health, 2012)).

The literature suggests that taking a trauma-informed approach builds awareness among staff and clients of: how common trauma is; how its impact can be central to one's development; the wide range of adaptations people make to cope and survive; and the relationship of trauma with other issues such as substance use and abuse, high risk behaviours, homelessness, poor physical health, revictimization and mental health concerns.

In essence, Rowan House has adopted the philosophy identified in the literature on trauma-informed care to put safety first and specifically avoid re-traumatizing those who seek their services and those who are on their staff. This knowledge is the foundation of any organizational culture of trauma-informed care and it has become the foundation of Rowan House Emergency Shelter. Because trauma-informed practice changes the question from what's "wrong with you" to "what's happened to you", Rowan House practices changed to reflect this understanding. By expanding on this paradigm shift, we were able to develop a strong trauma-informed practice in all aspects of our service delivery. As a result, our new statement of practice after fully engaging all aspects of our agency became:

**Rowan House Trauma Informed services take into account an understanding of trauma in all aspects of service delivery.**

**Safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration and empowerment are the core values at Rowan House.**