

**FAMILY LIFE RESOURCE CENTRE  
REVIEW OF THE OVERFLOW AND OUTREACH PROGRAM  
MARCH 2023**

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## 1. THE CONTEXT

Unfortunately, too many women in Canada continue to experience violence every day because of their gender, gender expression, gender identity or perceived gender. Prior to the pandemic violence against women services were already stretched. Analysis done by CBC just months before the world came to know about the pandemic, revealed that in November 2019, an average of 620 women and children a day were turned away from domestic violence shelters across Canada. That's nearly 19,000 times a month if November is typical, but it's not. Many women choose not to take action as the holidays approach. Not only is the number of women turned away each day in the hundreds, but it is also growing. Statistics Canada figures show that the number of women turned away from shelters increased 69 per cent from 539 in 2014 to 911 in 2018, based on data from all the shelters in the country.<sup>1</sup>

Shelters and VAW advocates have been sounding the alarm for some time that they are doing more with less as they respond to more complex situations and a wider diversity of women. Increasing demand, along with a critical lack of affordable and safe housing, chronic underfunding and lack of stability in funding, have had serious repercussions on shelter space capacity. The *More than Just a Bed* report completed in May 2019, months before the WHO declared the COVID-19 pandemic found that VAW shelters were taking in more people than they have funded beds, keeping people longer than guidelines allowed and were almost always operating at or above capacity. When shelters are at capacity women are referred to other shelters and the chore of calling around for space begins in an already saturated service sector.

The issue of emergency housing capacity for survivors of gender-based violence [GBV] has only been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic in communities across the country, Peel Region being no exception. Consultations done with shelters and other violence against women services in Central West Ontario, which includes the Region of Peel found that shelters in cities such as Brampton, Mississauga, Toronto, and Halton were continuously full as women and their children struggled to find affordable housing resulting in prolonged stays at emergency shelters. Women seeking escape from abusive partners were increasingly being transported to shelters in more rural areas or worse being turned away.

Evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic indicates that intimate partner violence increased during the pandemic due to stressors like income loss or precarious employment, service disruptions, and lockdown measures. In Canada, national surveys of violence against women service providers demonstrated significant pandemic-related impacts, including challenges in delivering services (e.g., demand for personal protective equipment, physical distancing

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<sup>1</sup> CBC Investigates. March 2020. Women, children turned away from shelters in Canada almost 19,000 times a month. Accessed <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/womens-shelters-turned-away-domestic-violence-1.5483186#:~:text=That%27s%20nearly%2019%2C000%20times%20a%20month%2C%20if%20November,leave%20their%20families%20as%20the%20holiday%20season%20nears.>

measures, technological support) and women accessing them (e.g., who are sheltering at home with violent partners). Service providers reported observing increases in the severity of violence experienced by survivors and mental health challenges (e.g., increased suicidal ideation).

In 2020-21, the Government of Canada provided an initial \$100 million in emergency funding to over 1,200 organizations, including women's shelters, Indigenous shelters off-reserve, sexual assault centres, women's organizations and other organizations providing supports and services to those experiencing gender-based violence. The Salvation Army Family Life Resource Centre (FLRC) located in the City of Brampton in the Region of Peel, received \$600,000 in emergency funding (\$400,000 from Women Shelters Canada and \$200,000 from the Canadian Women's Foundation). While this funding was welcomed, the issue of limited shelter capacity existed long before the pandemic and will not disappear in the post-pandemic years.

## 2. SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

The Salvation Army Family Life Resource Centre is an emergency short term shelter for women and their children escaping intimate partner violence, located in the north of the Peel Region. The Centre utilized funds received from the federal government to expand its Overflow/Outreach Program model during the pandemic. The Centre is interested in assessing the effectiveness of its Overflow/Outreach Program model in increasing capacity and response to the needs of women and children escaping violence.

The program review considered data on service usage, the level and adequacy of services, whether and how the overflow facilities contribute to the safety of women and their children, how such a model may be sustained.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted with service users, and front-line workers and management of FLRC and partner agencies, and the hotel. Service use data was collected for the Overflow/Outreach Program.

### 3. FINDINGS

Many gender-based violence services have long used hotels and motels to stretch emergency housing capacity, accommodate households who cannot be properly housed in a community shelter model, or as a bridge while waiting for shelter availability or other housing. Social distancing measures only served to exacerbate the short fall facing shelters prior to the pandemic.

Shelters serving women and children escaping violence are unique even within the general shelter sector. The heightened risk and potential for lethality for women and children means that finding a place to stay at the time when it is required is critical and many are unable to wait until space comes available. Due to lack of support or fear for their safety and that of others, women often do not have the option of temporary accommodation with family or friends. With the onset of COVID-19, increasingly more domestic/sexual violence and human trafficking programs expanded their use of hotels as part of their pandemic response strategy as public health directives limited their capacity.

#### *The Model*

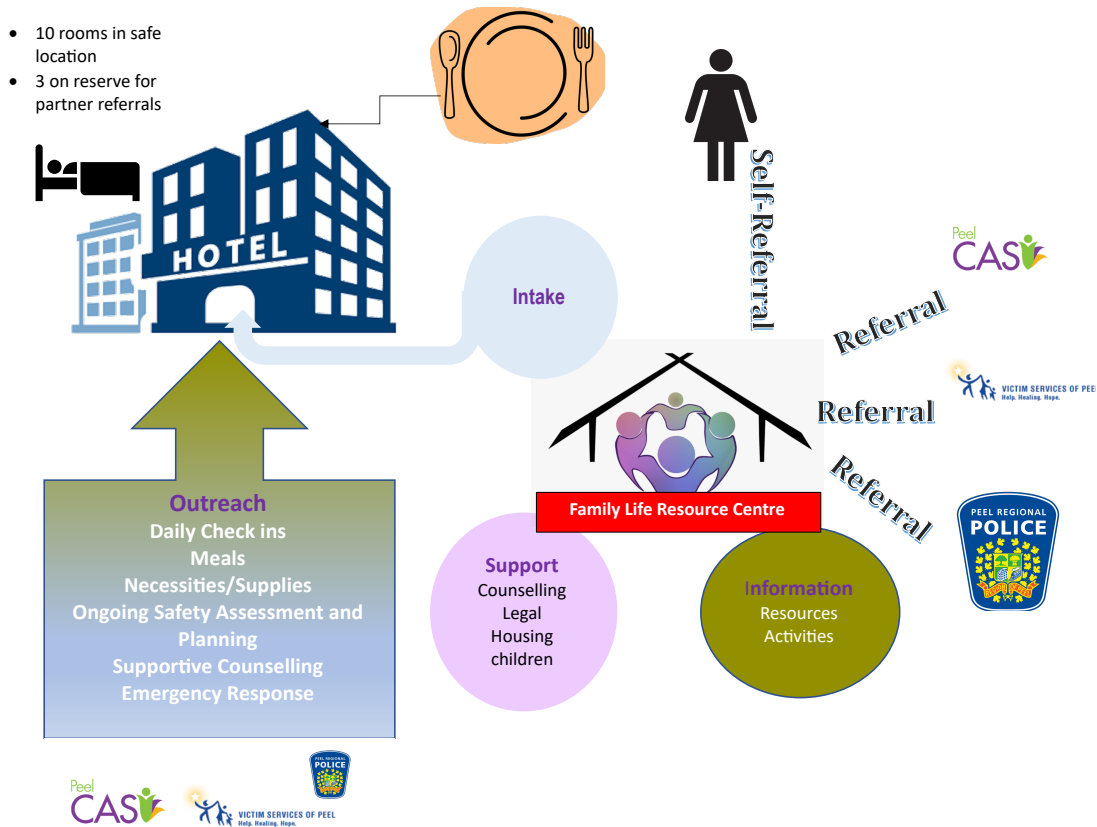
To increase its capacity to offer women and children safe and supportive emergency housing, FLRC, contracted with a local hotel in July 2020. During the pandemic placement in hotels offered more flexibility in how survivors' immediate housing needs were addressed as shelters limited capacity to adhere to social distancing protocols.

Beyond the contract with the hotel, program partners included Peel Children's Aid Society (PCAS), Victim Services of Peel (VSOP) and Peel Regional Police (PRP). Beginning in June 2020, five rooms were reserved at the hotel. This expanded to ten rooms in April 2021 as demand intensified. Three of the rooms were set aside specifically for emergency referral from program partners. Women and children staying in the hotel were supported by FLRC Outreach Program staff in addition to being connected to a care team at the main shelter.

Access to the overflow/outreach program happened through self-referral by directly calling the FLRC crisis line, or through a partner agency. As the program gained profile in the community several women also walked into the hotel asking for assistance. Hotel staff, now more aware of the issue of gender-based violence and a woman's need for support, would quickly connect with the shelter to access help.

Once contact was made with FLRC an assessment was conducted to ascertain whether the individual/family met the criteria for FLRC services and to assess the adequacy of the program in meeting the safety and support needs of the woman or family. Since FLRC admission criteria limits the admission of women without children, the overflow program allowed the shelter to extend services and supports to single women.

## Family Life Resource Centre – Overflow/Outreach Project



Conversations with the Overflow/Outreach project partners and service users alike confirm the challenges facing the shelter sector, and the immense need for emergency shelter to support women who by necessity or choice escape from an abusive relationship. The lack of available emergency shelter space and affordable housing continues to be one of the leading barriers for women fleeing violence, leaving women and their families in unsafe and dangerous circumstances. In some cases, it may result in children being removed from the home by child protection agencies due to concerns for the safety of the children, thereby separating children from their mothers. To be safe women were often forced to relocate to shelters outside of their area. While at times this is required to reduce risk of harm, in many cases it results in an added financial burden for travel, isolation from their community and family supports, and difficulties navigating an unfamiliar region. However even placement in a different region is becoming less of an option as the GTHA expands.

Several past service users who participated in the focus group reported living in their cars prior to accessing accommodation through the overflow/outreach program. Some of the women had children and/or were pregnant at the time, putting both them and their children at increased psychological and physical risk.

Upon being admitted to the hotel accommodation women/ families<sup>2</sup> were met either by FLRC outreach staff, referring agency staff or both to assist residents to settle and ensure their immediate needs were met. FLRC outreach staff attended in-person at the hotel at least three-times per week. Every attempt was made to connect with women within a 48-hour period of a woman/family being admitted to the hotel.

Outreach workers conducted daily checks, in some cases twice per day. During the height of the pandemic routine wellness checks were also conducted via zoom by counsellors twice a day (morning and evening). In person check-ins were also conducted by staff once per day, while observing COVID health protocols, to facilitate delivery of essentials such as food, baby formula, diapers, cleaning products etc. Similar to clients staying at the main shelter, those staying in the hotel were connected with a staff care team for ongoing support and services including legal, housing, children services etc. These women and families were also invited to participate virtually in events and activities conducted at the shelter.

Continuous needs and risk assessment and safety planning was a key feature of the overflow/outreach project. Often this was done in collaboration with the referring partner agency as many continued to provide specialized support throughout the woman/family's stay at the hotel. If and when space came available at the main shelter women/families could be transferred to the main shelter. Upon leaving the hotel or shelter follow-up services were offered for up to one-year.

To support the safety and security of FLRC clients the hotel reserved rooms in a specific area away from the more public sections of the hotel. No information about the individuals were allowed to be shared by hotel staff nor were phone calls transferred to rooms. With the consent of clients, hotel staff were given limited information in high-risk situations and instructed to contact FLRC or the police at any time if concerns arose.

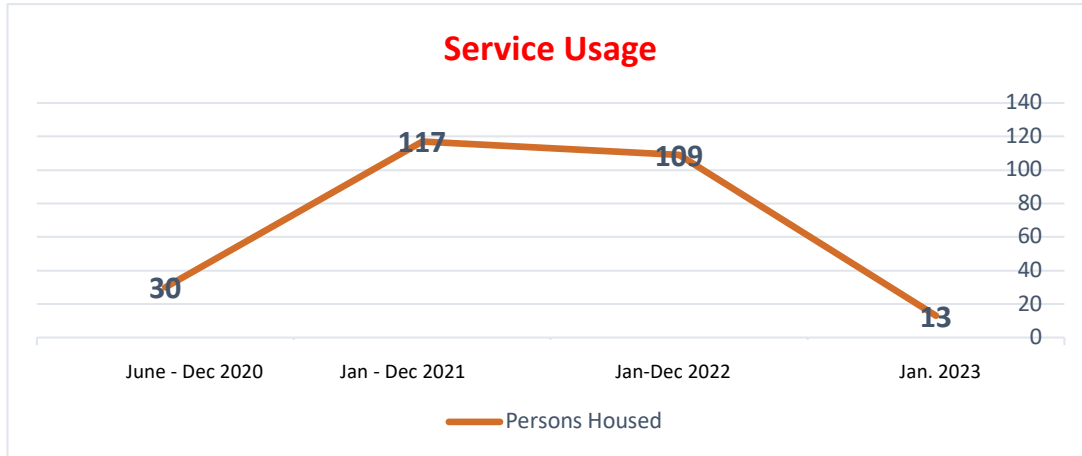
FLRC provided training to hotel staff on intimate partner violence and identifying and responding to risk.

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<sup>2</sup> The term families is used here to describe a unit consisting of a woman and her children.

### Service Use

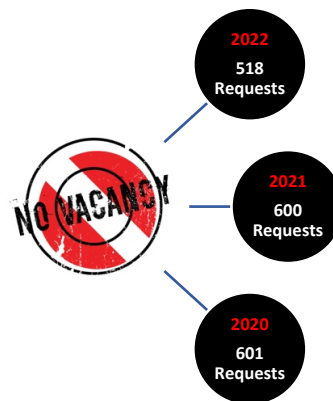
Over the period from June 2020 to January 31, 2023, the overflow program provided accommodation for 256 women and 343 children, totalling almost 600 persons who would not have otherwise been housed. 17 of these residents were newborns.



It is worth noting that some of the women supported by CAS and Victim Services of Peel did not stay for extended periods as those organizations continued to provide support. Often CAS just needed time to put things in place for families. The overflow/outreach option was also vital in responding to the staggering surge in calls for service due to the housing crisis and the complex needs of women experiencing mental health and addictions.

Human Trafficking survivors were not kept for long period of time at the shelter. As previously mentioned FLRC is designed to provide accommodation for single women. However, due to sheltering in place and COVID protocols this rule was relaxed to fill the gap in shelter demand. This enabled us to support expecting moms, senior women and those being trafficked. With shelters being chronically full, this served to reduce the number of “turn aways” and was essential for immediate crisis response.

Despite the overflow space, between 2020 and 2022 FLRC was unable to accommodate 1719 requests for emergency accommodation.



### Partnership

The program has been a vital resource for other organizations seeking to keep women and children safe. Peel Children’s Aid Society stated that situations which come to their attention because of intimate partner violence make up about 35% of their case load and these numbers continue to be on the rise. Partners also spoke about the increasing



level of violence including strangulation and cases that involved addictions. Victims Services of Peel and Peel Regional Police are regularly responding to emergency situations at all hours and more often than not victims require immediate shelter. In situations where women and children are at risk the need for safe housing options that allow the family to stay together is paramount. Through FLRC overflow/outreach program this is more possible. Without such a program partners stated that they would face real difficulties in attaining safe, timely accommodation while keeping families in the community and region when it safe to do so.

The helpful and immediate response of FLRC staff reduced the number of hours partner agency staff spent in search of space, allowing them to be able to refocus their efforts on attending to the well-being of the family.

*“We were having to bring children to a place of safety due to extreme violence. We called FLRC and within a half-hour space was found at the overflow.” [CAS DV Team]*

Partners spoke of the continued collaboration and communication with FLRC resulting in a seamless transition from the point of admission and settlement of the family, to conducting a more in-depth assessment of need and risk factors. Partners worked collaboratively with FLRC Outreach staff to put in place a safety and service plan. The collaboration continued with the ongoing monitoring of situations, especially those that were high risk. Partners were also able to share components of the safety plan, necessary to keep residents safe, with hotel staff.

The overflow program supported keeping women in the region safely, thereby maintaining connection with existing formal and informal supports and services. Partners felt that it was an appropriate measure for “lower risk” situations, but also voiced that in emergency situations they were able to safely house families in high-risk situations for a short period of time until something more adequate could be arranged. This they felt was due to effective coordination among the agencies and with the hotel. Partners felt that the success of the partnership stemmed from the historically close relationship between partners and believed that the program was needed and should be extended.

Navigating privacy and confidentiality of service user information and obtaining consent from women to share information was a constant area of negotiation. Particularly difficult was determining what information was necessary to share with partners, and with hotel staff. This was especially complex in the case of child protection which has such rigorous legal limitations.

The upheaval in working schedules, move to remote service delivery, and service demands posed some challenges for partnership collaboration. Some partners felt that the inability to meet on a regular basis has fractured the relationships somewhat and that partners needed to be intentional in rebuilding and strengthening the partnership. The void caused by limited opportunities to connect may have caused confusion about how the model worked, the intake

process and what the program offered. During focus groups with front-line staff of partner agencies the lack of clarity about the program processes and protocols was evident.

### *Service User Satisfaction*

In speaking with survivors who had stayed in the hotel the desperation of their different situations was evident. Women reported living in precarious situations while pregnant or remaining in dangerous situations while waiting for emergency shelter space to come available. They welcomed the offer of space in a hotel and reported feeling, safe, supported, and included in the overall shelter programs and activities.

*“I was an emotional wreck when I came in. Staff supported and helped me to be where I am today. They tried to provide you with what you needed – educated you about different regional and local housing options that were available.” [Client]*

As the pandemic risk waned, where appropriate, staff advised those living off site in hotels of the activities being conducted at the shelter and encouraged them to attend. A number of respondents indicated that they so benefitted from programming and enjoyed participating in activities and support programs at the main shelter that they tried very much not to miss events.

Hotel residents felt that the shelter staff were polite and extremely responsive. Staff were intentional and creative in efforts to establish a sense of community among hotel residents. The connection experienced among residents created a sense of family and informal support. Survivors remarked that staff went above and beyond their role. For example, staff made an effort to celebrate birthdays, etc. which brought positivity to an otherwise distressing circumstance.

FLRC has traditionally only accepted women with children. Hotel accommodation allowed the Centre to extend housing to single women, several of whom were pregnant and gave birth during their stay. Some of the pregnancies were high risk and women felt relieved to be in a safe, warm, and stable environment free from abuse. They spoke highly of the level of support they received and the assistance with other children and with necessary items during and after their pregnancy.

*“They were the only shelter that accepted me – I was sleeping in my car with my son. Everywhere I called just rejected me. When I was put in touch with the outreach program the [worker] was able to offer me some place to stay.”*  
*[Client - mom with high-risk pregnancy]*

### *Safety & Security*

Although when no alternative was available a few high-risk cases were successfully housed at the hotel, there is a general feeling among partners that high risk cases were not appropriate for hotel residency. Cases categorized as high risk included those where the woman has just recently fled an abusive situation and the abuser had access to firearms, had substance use or mental health issues, where charges were pending or where the abuser had a history of tracking the woman. Another factor to consider was the proximity of the hotel to the family residence or other family and friends who may not act in a woman's best interest. Situations where the CAS was involved because the children were at risk, but workers had concern that mom may be apt to return home, may also be deemed as high risk.

Program partners pondered whether hotels or for that matter other possible accommodations not formally part of the VAW sector were capable of putting in place the types of security and safety nets required by women and children escaping violence. To complicate this further was the need to balance how much information to share with hotel personnel regarding a woman's situation to keep her and/or her children safe. Partners pondered what needed to be in place to ensure that hotel staff treat that information with the level of confidentiality required.

Women escaping violence can be vulnerable to predators. Often, human trafficking networks operate through legitimate businesses such as hotels to undertake their operations. Specifically, human traffickers use hotel and motel rooms to set up encounters between victims of sex and their purchasers and for recruitment purposes. One participant in the focus group disclosed that she had been approached by a trafficker and the trafficker became aggressive.

For safety reasons hotel management decided to put all FLRC clients in the same area of the hotel away from public spaces, entrances and exits. Women staying at the hotel interpreted this as segregation and felt stigmatized.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

Based on the interviews with stakeholders, there is no doubt that the Overflow/Outreach Program was an essential resource in keeping women and children safe in the Region of Peel during the pandemic. Program partners and users alike agreed that without the additional space many more women and children would have been turned away, having to remain in unsafe situations or live precariously on the streets or in their cars. Many of the women who participated in the focus group represented the most marginalized and vulnerable groups in Canadian society - indigenous, racialized, newcomers some of whom spoke limited English. The loss of the program as funded ended, with the receding threat posed by the pandemic, has been deeply felt within the sector and most harshly by the women themselves. Women again are being turned away, with no safe place as demand for emergency shelter space continues, much as it did prior to the pandemic, to outstrip capacity.

Hotel residents also spoke of the assistance they received when transitioning to permanent housing, for example completing housing applications, obtaining furniture through local furniture banks; awareness of resources in areas to which they were moving i.e., food banks, assistance with moving expenses. Most important was the continued support received from the outreach program up to a year after leaving the shelter.

*“Sometimes with all the other stress it’s hard to have the strength to look for housing and be able to stand on your own.” [Client]*

Hotel residents who later transitioned to the main shelter did not report any noticeable differences in the level of support received when compared to living off site at the hotel.

### *Facilities & Necessities*

Women reported very different experiences while staying at the hotel. Some women seemed to be able to effectively navigate their stay while others appear to have some difficulty. Initially women and families were relieved to find some place to stay that was relatively safe and offered access to needed supports and services, however over time this feeling was eclipsed by everyday needs and occurrences. Women who had access to additional resources, i.e., those who were working or had funds appear to manage better. Apart from a bed bug scare, women reported that the actual rooms were adequate for their needs although confining for the kids especially during lockdown.

The most prevalent concern aired by women was their experience of being stigmatized and treated disrespectfully by some hotel staff. Women described some of the hotel staff as rude and condescending. They perceived that they were treated differently from other residents and not allowed access to amenities such as the ice machine etc.

*“I have a couple of kids – we were all staying in one room. When I asked for cleaning products to clean my room if it got messy, I was ignored, but then [they] would complain to the shelter that my room was a mess.”[Client]*

Women were dissatisfied with the quality of the food provided. Some women who had the means bought their own food, but those who could not had to rely on the catered meals. The hotel did not have the facilities for women to prepare their own meals. Options for caterers were limited by the requirement to be able to respond quickly and at all hours for food delivery and the limited budget, due to funding constraints, that could be allotted for meals. Women asked that in the future meals be more nutritious and tastier, and responsive to the cultural diversity of clients.

Nothing has changed with respect to access to affordable housing, and even though there appear to be plans on the horizon to increase the offering of affordable and safe housing that will take some time. In the meantime, women continue to make hard choices to stay in unsafe situations as they wait for emergency shelter space to become available.

While it is recognized that hotel accommodation is no substitute for the security and proximal support offered in women's shelters, it does offer a viable alternative. With strong collaboration between sector partners and a willingness and benevolence on the part of hotel owners a safe and supportive atmosphere that mimics the shelter in many respects, can be achieved.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Conversations with partners and service users point to a few areas that can be improved. The following recommendations are made with a view to offering women viable options when they need to escape violence, and enhancing the practice of using hotels as overflow when demand outstrips shelter capacity.

### **Expanding and Staffing of Emergency Accommodation**

The pandemic simply exposed gaps that already existed in the VAW/GBV sector. The problem of shelter and staffing capacity existed prior to the pandemic and will continue.

Adequate funding is required to continue and indeed expand programs and staffing that offer additional options for emergency housing for women and children escaping violence. Additional THSP funding is necessary to further develop outreach and overflow services to serve women in the community and those unable to secure shelter space.

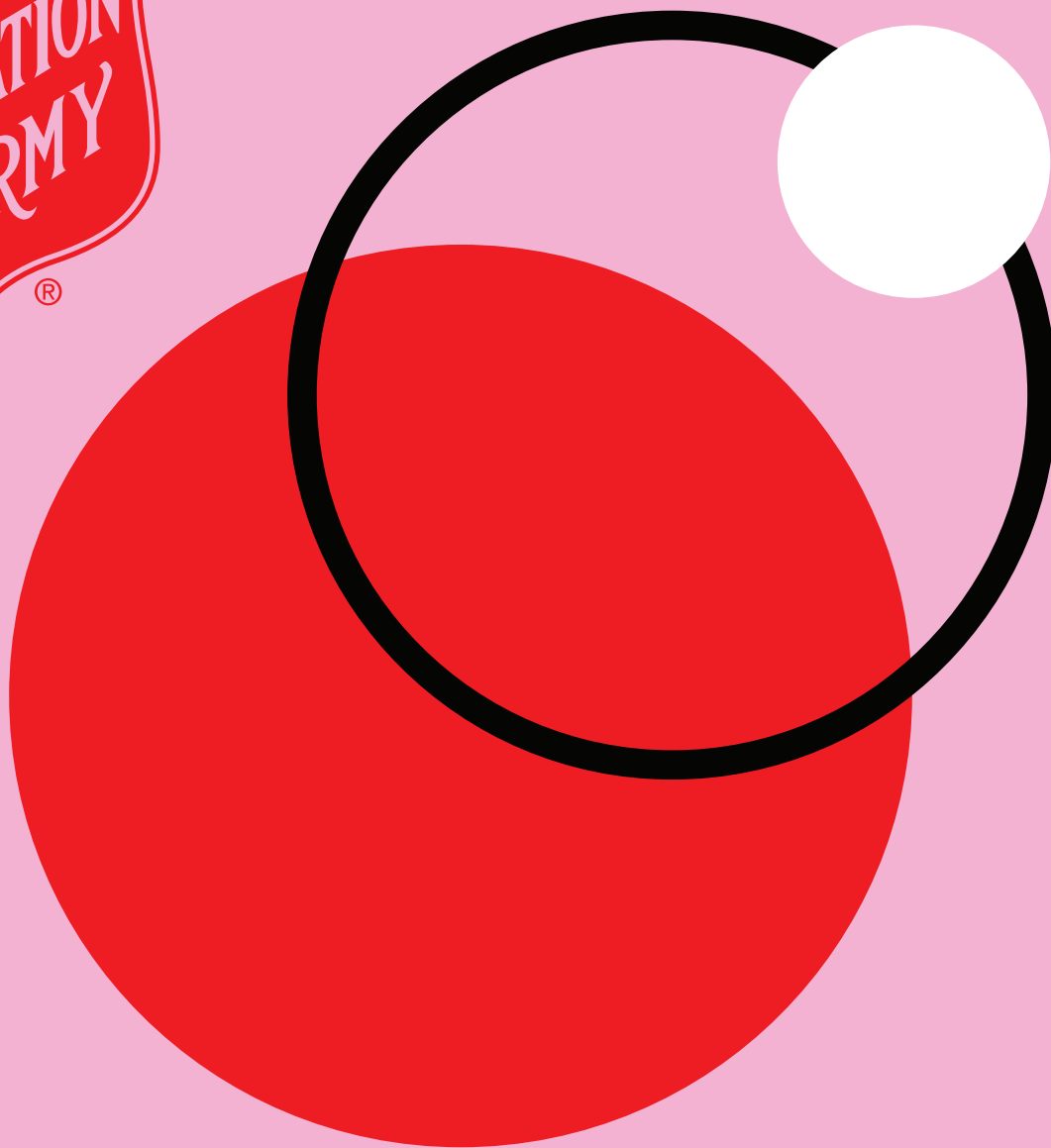
### **Strengthening and Clarifying the Partnership with Sector Agencies**

Create a resource to orient partner staff to the model and provide updates. The resource should:

- Clearly define the role of each partner and what partners can expect from each other.
- Identify eligibility criteria for admission to the overflow program, and the process for settling and connecting women/families with services and supports
- Outline the supports that may be offered by the shelter

The CAS/VAW agreement form outlines the service objectives and responsibilities of each partner agency. This form should be introduced earlier in the intake process when CAS is the referring agency or is involved with the family.

Establish some collaborative means for jointly being involved in service planning to avoid duplication of services and make the most of scarce resources.



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