



60 BARRIERS TO LEAVING

and How We're Dismantling Them Together

Our 2024–2025 Framework for Dismantling the Barriers Survivors Face



BATTERED WOMEN'S
SUPPORT SERVICES



Safety Changes Everything

MESSAGE FROM OUR BOARD & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Every day, survivors in British Columbia face not just one barrier but **sixty**, legal, economic, cultural, and structural forces that make safety precarious. These 60 Barriers to Leaving are not theoretical; they are the daily architecture of inequality.

Leaving is the hardest and most dangerous juncture in a survivor's life. It is the moment when risk peaks and systems reveal themselves, when every safety net is tested. Housing, policing, legal aid, and income supports are either present or absent, coordinated and/or collapsing. When a woman tries to leave to survive and cannot find safety, it is not her failure; it is the failure of our collective design.

At BWSS, we study leaving because it reveals what no statistic on violence against women or gender-based violence alone can: how safety is determined, constructed, denied, or rebuilt.

Each barrier is a point of intervention and every one dismantled is evidence of systems change.

In 2024–25, more than 45,532 requests for support were received across crisis, counselling, legal, housing, employment, and community programs. Our Justice Centre advanced precedent-setting legal and law reform, and our advocacy started to help shape public-safety policy across B.C. We also expanded housing options for women and gender-diverse survivors, building pathways from emergency shelter to long-term stability.

Through our employment and economic development programs, survivors gained confidence, skills, income, and renewed independence. Our trauma- and violence-informed counselling program continued to offer space for healing and recovery, while our innovations in training and education equipped thousands of survivors, front-line workers, helping practitioners, legal professionals, and systems leaders to respond with greater knowledge, analysis, safety, accountability, and care.

Each outcome proves that when safety is designed as public infrastructure, not left to individual courage or chance, lives change and systems evolve.

This reporting year, amid rising femicides and renewed scrutiny of the legal system in B.C., our work together has been both urgent and transformational.

Grounded in intersectional, feminist, and decolonial analysis, with your support BWSS continues to transform how safety is understood and delivered.

From the Board: We are deeply grateful to the survivors, staff, volunteers, allies, and funders who make this collective dismantling possible.

From the Executive Director: The year ahead demands continued resolve, to embed prevention and accountability into every system that shapes safety.

When safety is possible at the moment of leaving, it means every system has done its job and that is the world we are building together.



Jen Mackie
Board of Directors



Angela Marie MacDougall
Executive Director

HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

60 Barriers to Leaving and Why They Matter

Every survivor faces not one barrier, but many. At BWSS, we've mapped 60 barriers to leaving the interconnected forces that make safety precarious for women, girls, and gender-diverse people. They include housing shortages, poverty/low income, inaccessible legal systems, stigma, racism, isolation, trauma, and disbelief, the everyday architecture of inequality.

Leaving an abusive relationship is the most dangerous moment in a survivor's life.

It is when risk peaks and systems reveal themselves. Each barrier represents a point of intervention. Every time one is dismantled when a woman finds stable housing, a protection order holds, a counsellor listens without judgment...a system has changed.

Our goal is not simply to provide services. It is to make those services less necessary by changing the systems that amplify danger in the first place.

Your support meant survivors weren't navigating police, housing, and courts alone, systems moved with them instead of against them.

Read the Article on our Website

[All 60 Barriers to Leaving, Why Survivors Stay and What Systems Must Change](#)

READ MORE



IMPACT IS WHAT WE DELIVER. BARRIERS ARE WHAT WE CHANGE.

Traditional reports count what they deliver, the number of people served, programs offered, hours spent.

At BWSS, we measure something deeper: **where barriers shifted and systems began to move making it possible for survivors to leave abusive situations safely and to thrive.**

Every time a survivor reaches out, she reveals where the system holds and where it still breaks. Each call is both a plea for safety and a map of what must change.

Each unanswered call, denied protection order, family law ceding to post separation abuse or lack of housing isn't a personal failure for the victim/survivor, it is 'a system failure. So, every time those systems begin to work, every safety plan that holds, every protection order granted, and breach investigated, every woman who finds a safe home or stable income - a barrier has fallen.

We use the **60 Barriers Framework** because gender-based violence isn't an isolated act, it's a product of interconnected systems: housing, law, economy, culture, and health. Each barrier we track exposes where those systems break down, and how we can rebuild them.

We measure barriers because our goal is not particularly to grow our services, it's to make them less necessary: to build a world where leaving violence is no longer an act of risk, but a right to safety.

The **Six Spheres of Systemic Entrapment** illustrate how those barriers overlap showing why safety must be designed across every system survivors touch.

We measure barriers because our ultimate goal is not to expand services, but to make them less necessary to create a world where leaving violence no longer means risking your life.

From Sixty Barriers to Six Systems

What survivors teach us about how safety is built — or denied.



WHAT YOU MADE POSSIBLE IN 2024–2025

How you helped dismantle the barriers to safety —
system by system

01 SAFETY AS A SYSTEM

Barrier: Protection breaks when systems don't connect.

Your impact: 12,213 crisis calls linked to a safety plan with risk assessment, transitional housing, legal help, and coordinated safety responses.

Outcome: Survivors were resourced at the most dangerous moment — leaving.

02 SAFETY AT HOME

Barrier: Housing scarcity traps survivors in harm and not every survivor is ready to live alone

Your impact: Synchronicity Second Stage Transition House Program opened — 10 safe spaces designed for healing and transformation.

Outcome: Women and children escaped violence without being forced into homelessness.

03 CULTURE & COMMUNITY

Barrier: Silence and stigma keep survivors isolated.

Your impact: 2,882 people joined support groups, community programs, and outreach.

Outcome: Survivors found connection and the freedom to tell the truth.

04 HEALING & RECOVERY

Barrier: Trauma is often pathologized instead of understood.

Your impact: 5,720 counselling sessions with trauma- and violence-informed care.

Outcome: Survivors rebuilt their wellness on strength, not shame.

05 LAW & ACCOUNTABILITY

Barrier: Courts and police too often minimize danger.

Your impact: 97% of protection orders and 19 TRPs approved through the Justice Centre at BWSS.

Outcome: Accountability held and life-saving legal protection followed.

06 ECONOMIC FUTURES

Barrier: Financial control is a weapon of abuse.

Your impact: Thousands accessed work experience, employment skills, life-skills and theoretically sound training through AWARE, Strategic Interventions and My Sister's Closet.

Outcome: Survivors gained the power to decide their own future because economic safety is public safety.

When systems work, safety holds. Every one of these numbers represents a barrier dismantled and a survivor who now has choices. Safety Changes Everything. And because of you, that change is happening.

1

SAFETY AS A SYSTEM

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“You make it easy to see that each call is a threshold, on one side is danger, on the other is someone finally listening.” - Donor

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When danger peaks, survivors enter a maze of police, hospitals, housing, legal aid all under the threat of more harm by the abusive partner and the system itself. System players especially in the legal system notoriously do not speak to each other, and that silence can cost lives.

Safety collapses not necessarily because people don't care, but because systems aren't built to act in sync. Too often, survivors are left to coordinate their own protection navigating bureaucracy while in crisis.

With your support, BWSS can bridge that divide. Our crisis workers and volunteers act as connective tissue supporting survivors to navigate between systems, turning chaos into coordination.

Every call to our crisis line or appointment with an advocate is an act of redesign involving linking survivors to police accompaniment, legal protection, and emergency housing within hours.

THIS YEAR, BWSS CRISIS TEAM HANDLED 13,894 CRISIS APPOINTMENTS AND 12,213 CRISIS CALLS, NEARLY 50 CALLS EVERY DAY – EACH ONE A SAFETY DECISION IN REAL TIME AND 45 TRAINED AND SUPPORTED VOLUNTEERS MADE SURE NO CALL WENT UNANSWERED.



Our crisis line operates during the day, during the week - it is not 24/7.

Because of your support, safety is no longer a theory, it is a system that holds.

“We don't just answer phones, we connect the systems that should have answered sooner. - Crisis line volunteer

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Systems addressed:

justice, police, housing, health, immigration, social services, and information coordination.

Systemic outcome:

replacing disconnection with integration, safety not as a service, but as infrastructure.



“When I called, I thought I was asking for help. Now I know I was helping change a system.” -Survivor

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2 SAFETY AT HOME

“When I left, my abusive husband, violence followed me through job loss, paperwork, court dates, and eviction notices. BWSS helped me make safety real and not just a piece of paper.” - Rachel

Leaving an abusive ex/partner is the most dangerous moment when risk peaks and systems are tested. We work to make that moment survivable.

For many, protection orders may expire before they find stable housing. The private space that should represent rest and safety becomes the frontline of survival.

Leaving an abusive home doesn't guarantee freedom. The housing crisis in BC has turned safety into scarcity, where survivors must choose between danger and homelessness.



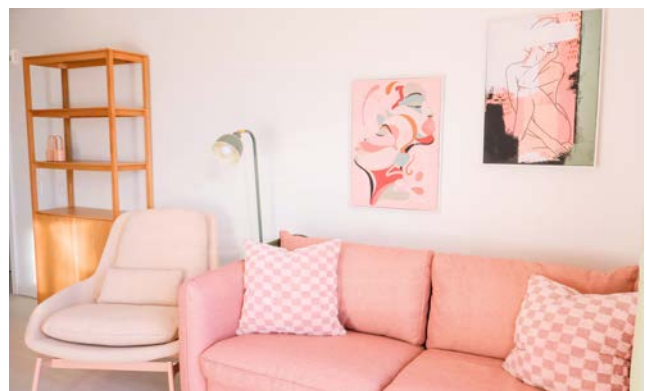
A New Chapter in the Housing Continuum

In 2024–25, BWSS launched **Synchronicity Second Stage Transition House**, a one-of-a-kind, long-term housing program for women and gender-diverse survivors of intimate partner and gender-based violence.

This program was made possible by **community fundraising and a new funding partnership with BC Housing**, marking a major expansion in BWSS's role along the housing continuum — from immediate crisis shelter, to second-stage stability, to economic independence.

Each unit at Synchronicity was intentionally designed to reflect dignity and restoration. The suites are **fully furnished with donated and new pieces**, art curated by a steering committee, and spaces filled with light and care. Survivors describe them not as “units,” but as *first homes*.

The launch event in fall 2024 celebrated not just a new building, but a new model of survivor-centred housing — one that integrates trauma- and violence-informed design, community connection, and economic empowerment.





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*“Every detail said -
you deserve safety
that feels
beautiful.”
- Synchronicity
resident*

”

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*“I donated because I
knew BWSS would put
their own positive spin on
this program model to
benefit women and
children.” - Donor*

”

WITH YOUR HELP, “SAFETY AT HOME” REFRAMES HOUSING AS PUBLIC SAFETY.

Where fragmented bureaucracies that leave survivors vulnerable after leaving an abusive home the creation of Synchronicity Second Stage Transition House addresses five interconnected systems: housing, justice, immigration, economic, and policing.

Each barrier reflects how the private sphere remains a site of state neglect, and BWSS’s integrated model redefines “home” as the foundation of safety infrastructure rather than its absence.

3 CULTURE & COMMUNITY

“I walked in the room alone and left with a support circle.” -
Maria, Survivor

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Violence thrives in silence and disbelief. For many survivors, especially Indigenous, Black, racialized, and immigrant women, seeking help can mean encountering isolation, stigma, language barriers, or communities that urge endurance over escape. Cultural and social isolation reinforce the very systems that make violence invisible.

On Tuesdays for 46 years, Healing Connections Drop-In Support Group has been a safe place for survivors to reclaim belonging.

On average, we host eight weekly support groups serving about **120 participants** - we create community as the first safety net.



An Engaged Community



Our multilingual, anti-racist programs turn silence into story, and story into leadership.

Your support keeps these circles unbroken, proving that belief is contagious.

**Wildflower Women of Turtle
Island Drum Group**

10 Week Support Group

**Latin American Women's
Support Group**

**16 Steps for Discovery and
Empowerment**

Black Women's Support Group

Healing Connections Drop-In

**Healing From Trauma through
Connection**

**How to Survive a Housing
Crisis**

CULTURE & COMMUNITY REFRAMES BELONGING AS SAFETY.

Survivors navigate invisible systems that perpetuate violence through silence, stigma, and cultural isolation.

BWSS confronts not just the violence itself, but the social architecture that allows it to continue, including cultural norms, linguistic exclusion, and institutional racism.

Thank you for helping to transform isolation into collective healing, story into advocacy, and survivors into leaders, making community itself a form of resistance and protection.



4 HEALING & RECOVERY

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“Counselling didn't tell me what was wrong with me, it helped me see where the problem is the problem and helped remind me what was right.” - Tina, Survivor

“My family said I made my bed and had to lay in it. BWSS reminded me that safety is not betrayal.” - Janene, survivor

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In most systems, trauma is treated as disorder, not context. Survivors are pathologized instead of understood. Healing becomes a private burden rather than a collective responsibility. But trauma and violence are social issues, they require structural compassion, not diagnosis.

BWSS redefines recovery through trauma- and violence-informed care. This year, our counsellors provided 5,720 counselling and group healing encounters.

Survivors learn to separate fear from intuition, silence from peace, to hear their own voice rather than the voice of their abuser and rebuild emotional infrastructure for safety.



You made healing possible, not as luxury, but as infrastructure.



“HEALING & RECOVERY” REFRAMES WELLNESS AS JUSTICE.

Trauma and violence informed practice challenges the systems that individualize suffering and instead locates trauma within structures of violence, patriarchy, racism, poverty, and colonialism. It connects healing to infrastructure, emphasizing that recovery should be **as reliable as public safety or healthcare**, a social investment, not a personal privilege.

Systems addressed: Health, social care, justice, and education.

Barriers dismantled: Pathologization, isolation, inaccessibility, systemic misunderstanding, and cultural exclusion.



5 LAW & ACCOUNTABILITY

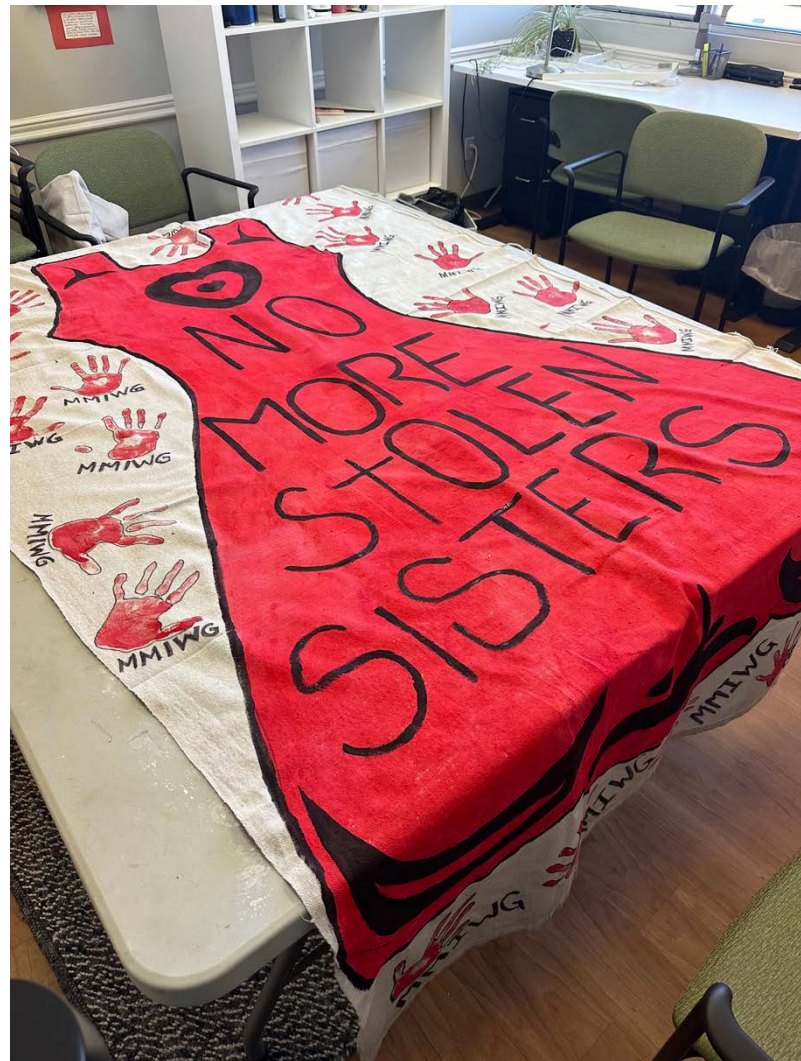
“This time, the court believed me.” - Daniella, Survivor

Justice delayed is safety denied. Too often, survivors face systems that doubt, delay, or dismiss them, courts that minimize coercive control, police who fail to enforce protection orders, and legal processes that retraumatize instead of repair.

Through the **Justice Centre at BWSS**, we're rewriting what survivor-centred law looks like. In 2024–2025, we provided 2,949 legal services, supported 103 hearings, and trained 325 legal professionals in trauma- and violence-informed practice.

Our report ***Justice or “Just” a Piece of Paper?*** exposed systemic failures in protection order enforcement and led to policy review across BC.

“When a protection order fails, it's not just paper, it's a system that wasn't built to hold.” - community member.



Protection on Paper, Not in Practice

Survivors turn to Family Law Protection Orders and Peace Bonds seeking safety, yet too often, those promises collapse under minimization of violence, bias, delay, or disbelief.

Orders expire before risk subsides, police dismiss breaches as “domestic matters,” and survivors are retraumatized by the very system meant to protect them.

Across race, class, and geography, the same story emerges: **safety depends on luck, not law.**

BWSS also intervened in the Supreme Court of Canada case ***Ahluwalia v. Ahluwalia***, advancing recognition of a tort of family violence — a landmark move toward accountability and compensation for survivors.

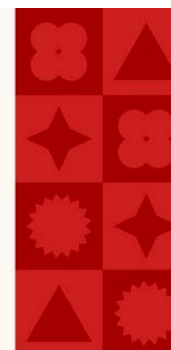
Your support helps turn justice from process into protection.

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“He broke the order again. The police officer told me to call if it happened a fourth time.” - Christina, Survivor

“The Police finally listened because my support work and I spoke together.” - Kayla, Survivor

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Family Law Protection Orders

Our team was able to get nearly **97%** of applications granted — demonstrating a high success rate in securing immediate safety measures through family law legal system.

Intimate Partner Violence Temporary Resident Permits

Nearly **95%** approval reflects effective advocacy for immigrant survivors without legal status.

Gender-based Violence Refugee Claims

A 100% success rate highlights rigorous, survivor-centred case preparation and coordination between our legal advocates and immigration legal counsel.



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“ Your magic hasn’t stop working for me and it’s always there to keep me succeeding. Thank you.” - Kayla, Survivor

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“JUSTICE DELAYED IS SAFETY DENIED.”

Across Canada, survivors face systems built to manage conflict, not violence. Courts call it “dispute,” police call it “miscommunication,” and Crown counsel call it “procedure.” This is not accident.

At BWSS, we’re changing that. Through feminist litigation, systemic reform, and survivor representation, we are reshaping law from a passive witness into an active protector.

“Increasingly, the courts are being asked to see family violence as a civil wrong, not just a private tragedy.” - Family Law Lawyer

6 ECONOMIC & CLIMATE SAFETY

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“When I started my journey with the AWARE Program I was completely broken. Without your encouragement and peace I never could find my job.” - AWARE Participant

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Economic justice and climate justice are not separate fights they're the same struggle for safety.



Economic dependence traps survivors, while the climate crisis magnifies instability. The same extractive systems that undervalue women's labour also exploit the planet, treating both as expendable.

BWSS builds safety by reimagining economies through justice. The AWARE Employment Program supported an average of 100 participants each month by connecting women to stable work and certifications.

Through My Sister's Closet and the Wear Justice campaign, fashion waste becomes funding for crisis lines, housing, and legal advocacy, creating a small but powerful model of circular care.

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“At My Sister's Closet, fashion is just the doorway, what we're really selling is solidarity.” - Manager, My Sister's Closet

“Every outfit we style funds another step toward safety.” - My Sister's Closet volunteer

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Financial independence is one of the strongest predictors of long-term safety. AWARE turns stability into protection.

WHO WE REACHED - THE SCALE OF SAFETY

Intersectionality in Practice



64% OF SURVIVORS SERVED

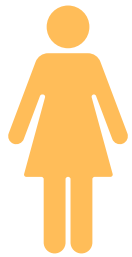
were Indigenous, Black, Immigrant or otherwise racialized women -- a mirror of the inequities created by racism, colonialism and geo-politics.

One in five were navigating Canada's immigration system including due to failed sponsorship by abusive partner, refugee claims, or without status.

16% identified as 2SLGBTQIA+, a rate above the provincial average, showing that BWSS continues as an inclusive, trauma- and violence-informed spaces for gender- and sexually diverse survivors who are dealing with intimate partner violence.

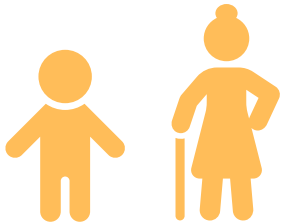
These intersections aren't side notes, **they are the system itself**. BWSS ensures safety holds where inequity once ruled.

AGE MATTERS IN SAFETY



85%

of survivors were adult women.



15%

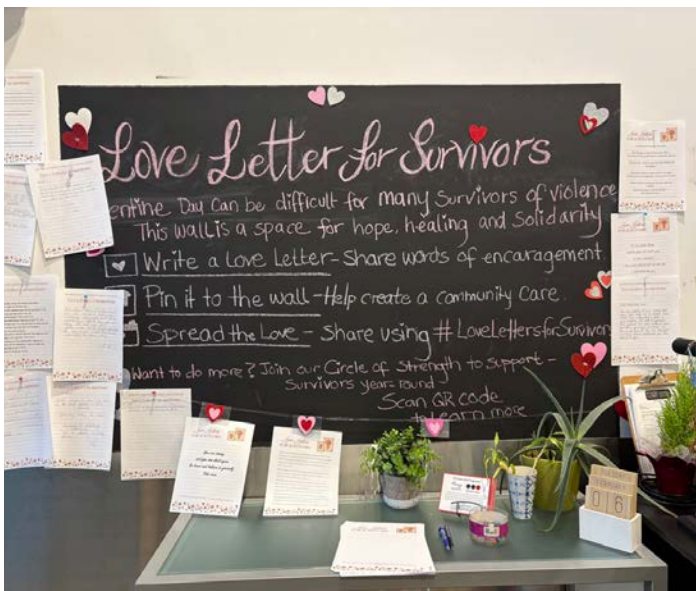
were youth under 19 or seniors over 65.

These numbers reveal invisible populations: young people experiencing dating violence and elders facing family or intimate partner abuse.

BWSS continues to press for youth prevention, supports for girls, elder-specific supports, and intergenerational models that make safety a right at every age.



DISABILITY AND VIOLENCE



Half of all survivors we served identified as living with a disability, whether physical, cognitive, or mental-health related. Research shows that many disabilities are caused or worsened by intimate partner violence itself, through physical injury, trauma, and chronic stress. This reinforces a critical truth that intimate partner violence both targets and creates disability, and accessible, trauma- and violence-informed care is essential to every survivor's safety.

INCLUSIVE SAFETY

At BWSS, inclusion is not a demographic note, it is a practice standard. We build safety plans, legal strategies, housing pathways, and healing spaces that honour gender diversity and relationship diversity as core realities, not exceptions.

Being inclusive means holding ourselves accountable to evolving language, practice, and survivor leadership. Safety grows when services evolve alongside the people who rely on them.



REFERRALS REVEAL THE GAPS

Of referrals received:

47% from community and social-service partners, proof that collaboration saves lives.

26% self-referrals, survivors trusting BWSS before the system does.

25% word of mouth - survivors referring other survivors.

Only 2% from police and **0.2%** from Crown or court. This shows how rarely public-safety systems connect survivors to community-based services.

“When systems fail to refer, survivors call us themselves.” - Volunteer

SAFETY REQUIRES NAVIGATION

BWSS facilitated 3,654 outbound referrals:

- **43%** to other anti-violence programs - mostly in jurisdictions outside of Metro Vancouver
- **33%** to housing or income supports
- **4%** to mental-health and addiction services



This data exposes a persistent truth that **most clinical systems remain neither trauma- nor violence-informed**. BWSS continues to bridge those gaps, so survivors aren't left to navigate alone.

SAFETY ISN'T THE ABSENCE OF VIOLENCE - IT'S THE PRESENCE OF SYSTEMS THAT WORK

Why did survivors reach out to BWSS?

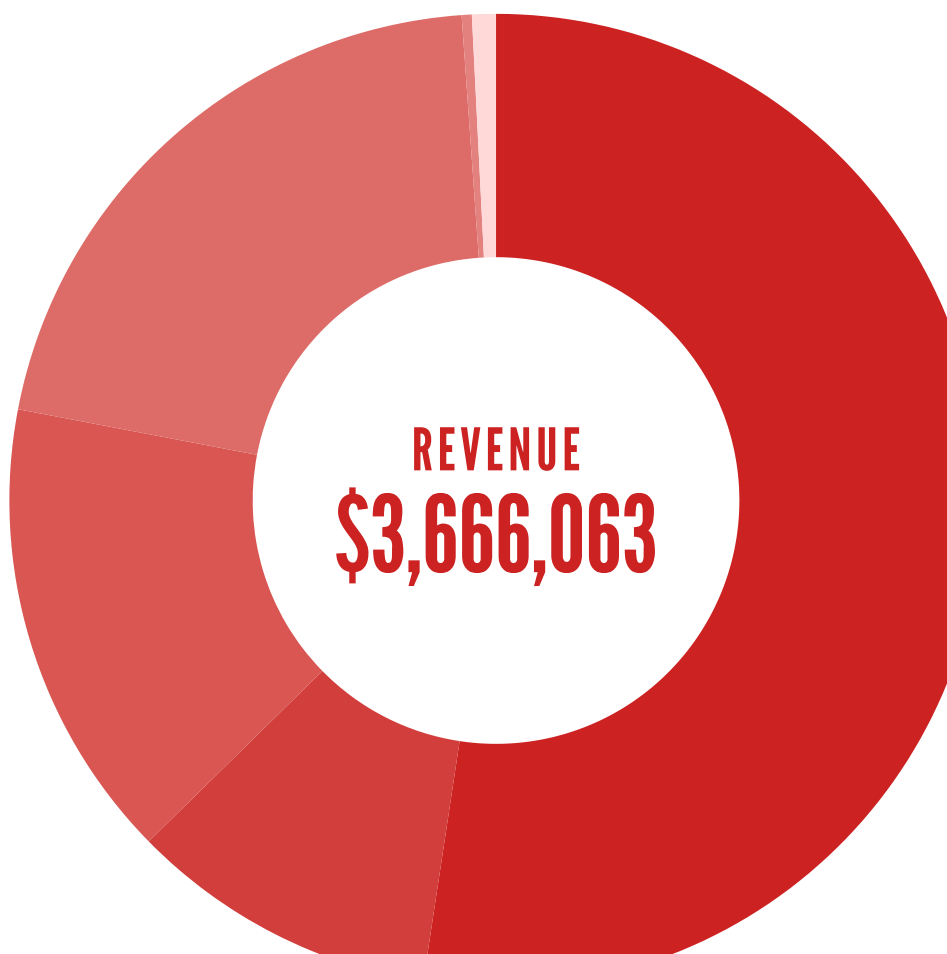
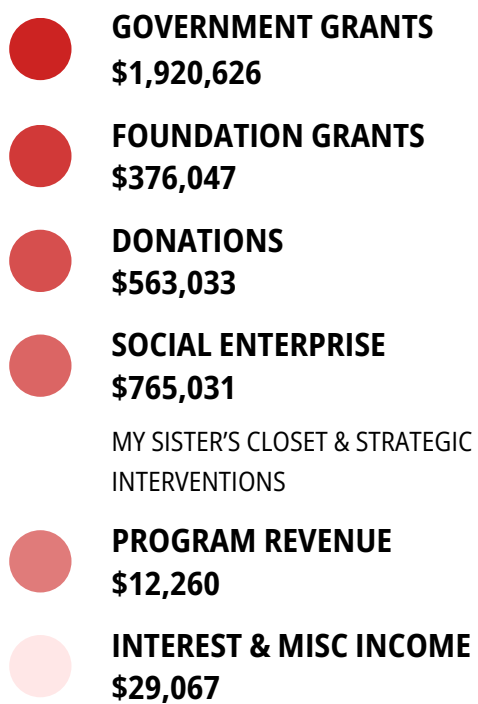
- **64%** intimate-partner violence
- **36%** sexual violence
- **5%** intergenerational abuse (child and elder)

Every case is a reflection of system design and redesign. BWSS turns crisis into coordination: crisis intervention, **legal advocacy, counselling, housing, and employment pathways** that move safety from reaction to infrastructure.

"Each intake is more than service because it forms a connection between safety and accountability." - Manager



FINANCES: REVENUE



FINANCES: EXPENSES

- **OPERATING EXPENSES**
\$732,309
- **PROGRAM EXPENSES**
\$962,263
- **WAGES AND BENEFITS**
1,736,646

EXPENSES
\$3,431,218.73

More than half of BWSS expenses (50.6%) go directly to wages and benefits — the counsellors, advocates, and frontline staff who deliver safety and address barriers every day. The rest supports programs (28%) including bus tickets, food for support groups, childcare subsidies, and essential operations (21%) such as rent, utilities, telecommunications, ensuring every dollar strengthens the systems survivors rely on most.

Thanks to you, safety is sustained.

Over half of BWSS funding comes from our government partners, whose support makes system-wide impact possible and **nearly one-third is powered by the generosity of donors, foundations, and our social enterprise, My Sister's Closet and Strategic Interventions.**

Together, you make it possible for safety to move from crisis response to lasting change. We are deeply grateful for every contribution that fuels this work.



THE YEAR AHEAD: SAFETY CHANGES EVERYTHING

Across the world, the forces that endanger women and gender-diverse people are evolving. Economic precarity, geopolitical instability, and the rise of misogynist online movements have made violence feel louder, closer, and more coordinated than ever.

But here's what we know:

every time survivors reach for safety, they change the future. While working so that every time systems respond with protection instead of punishment, they prove that violence is not inevitable.

Five Directions for 2025–2026 and Beyond

1. Build Safety as Infrastructure

We will continue advancing coordinated, survivor-led responses that make protection reliable in homes, courts, hospitals, workplaces, and communities. When systems act together, safety holds.

2. Strengthen Economic Futures

Through employment programs and our social enterprises, Strategic Interventions and My Sister's Closet, we will expand pathways to income, community participation, and collective purpose. Economic safety is public safety.

3. Equip Those on the Frontline of Change

We will deliver more custom training for responders, practitioners, and service systems across BC, deepening trauma- and violence-informed practice wherever victims and survivors turn for help.

4. Expand Community Safety Through Connection

Support groups, counselling, volunteer training, and justice advocacy will continue to grow — because belonging is protection. Violence isolates; community interrupts.

5. Protect the Story of BWSS

Our Herstory Project is gathering the voices of the women who built BWSS and the ending-violence movement itself. Their analysis and action changed what Canada believes safety should look like. We will ensure those stories guide everything still to come.







SAFETY CHANGES EVERYTHING



DONATE TODAY

Battered Women's Support Services is a
Canadian Registered Charity (130361611RR0001)
P.O. Box 21503, 1424 Commercial Drive, Vancouver BC V5L 5G2
Crisis Line: 604.687.1867 | Toll free: 1.855.687.1868
information@bwss.org | [@endingviolence](https://www.bwss.org) | [bwss.org](https://www.bwss.org)