

In 1996, Cathy Wood was hired as the Executive Director of The Villa. Her vision for the agency was for women to have a place to go to heal from addictions to alcohol, drugs, gambling and nicotine. Cathy sought more effective treatment strategies to help women, and she incorporated these innovative approaches into Client programming. Cathy was always ahead of her time and a leader in the addictions and mental health field. Cathy's family, friends and colleagues were deeply saddened at her passing in October of 2003. She will always be remembered for her commitment and dedication to Aventa, and the for the many lives she touched along life's journey.

In 1996, The Villa reported a 25% increase in the number of Clients over the previous year, and more than double the number of women they had provided services to just a few years prior. An American study by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse found that women were catching up to men in the consumption of alcohol and drugs. Substance abuse problems manifest in women differently than men; the problem is inner-directed and often leads to depression, low self-esteem and anxiety. Many women with addictions have a history of childhood sexual or physical abuse and women don't do as well in co-ed programs. The Villa's programs were based on a client-centered, holistic approach which addressed the biological, emotional, social and spiritual needs of each woman through educational classes, support groups and individual counselling.

The Edmonton journal reported a 69% increase in the number of callers to the 24 hour problem gambling helpline over the previous year. 60% of the callers identified having an addiction to VLTs and 48% of all callers were women. This increase was partly attributed to gamblers having more awareness about help and supports, but it was mainly due to a rise in the number of people with a gambling addiction. By the time a gambler seeks help, they feel desperate and may have already lost their homes, families and employment and often see suicide as the only way out. AADAC reported seeing an increase in problem gambling since the VLT program was introduced in 1992, including those who had no gambling addiction prior to VLTs.

The Villa submitted a proposal to AADAC for an outpatient gambling pilot program, which was approved. Executive Director, Cathy Wood, described VLTs as "the crack cocaine of illicit drugs" for women gamblers, and "highly addictive and highly stimulating". Many women were seeking help for gambling problems, specifically for an addiction to VLTs. Some described it as a way of escaping and numbing the pain they experience in their day-to-day lives. While they were playing the machines, nobody criticized or judged them, and they could block out everything else.

**The Medallion of Distinction Award** from the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse was presented to The Villa Recovery Centre for Women for outstanding service in the area of addiction services in 1996. For over 25 years, The Villa Board, Staff and Volunteers had committed themselves to improving the quality of life of women with addictions, as well as their children and their families.

