

In September of 1997, The Villa launched its pilot gambling program as calls to Alberta's provincial gambling hotline had nearly doubled in two years.

The Villa's four week program was accessible as an in-patient or out-patient basis. Clients requiring housing would reside at The Villa's Sunalta facility, and receive treatment at The Villa Treatment Centre. Clients were assessed prior to treatment to screen for gambling severity, chemical dependency, depression/suicidal ideation, and severity of underlying issues, and paid a fee on a sliding scale according to affordability.

The program consisted primarily of group sessions which had an educational and therapeutic focus, and Clients were assigned to a Counsellor who also provided individual sessions. The emphasis on the treatment program addressed the holistic nature of problem gambling and included topics such as: characteristics of problem gambling, types of gambling and stages of addiction, powerlessness and unmanageability, self-esteem and assertiveness, depression, anger, leisure and nutrition, stress management, irrational thinking, grief issues, family violence/abuse, financial management, and relapse prevention. A collateral group was also offered to family and friends during treatment, as well as aftercare in the form of a support group, to Clients who had completed treatment.

For women, gambling is often linked to a loss in their lives, be it a relationship, a death or their children leaving home. The suicide rate for those who gamble is much higher than those with a drug or alcohol addiction, as the amount of financial devastation can leave gamblers with an overwhelming sense of hopelessness. Unlike other addictions, there is no physical effect on the body, so it can be easier to hide the addiction from family and friends, although this doesn't lessen the feelings of guilt and shame. By the time they realize they need help, they may have amassed a debt load that seems impossible to overcome.

In 1998 due to overwhelming positive feedback, The Villa was given permanent funding from AADAC for the gambling program. Since the program's inception, occupancy remained at 100% and The Villa accepted Clients from as far away as Ontario and the Northwest Territories. 95% of The Villa's gambling Clients identified that they were addicted to VLTs.

A report by Calgary-based Canada West Foundation revealed that gamblers spent more money on their addiction than they did on clothing, health and personal care combined. Gaylene McWilliams, The Villa's Gambling Program Coordinator, said that some parents asked their children for their allowance to finance their gambling addiction, while some ended up in jail due to theft relating to their gambling addiction. These children were left traumatized and scared, as their parent was not able to be there emotionally or physically.

An American study on the gambling effects of children revealed that of 1,000 adolescents surveyed, 8% had gambling problems and 15% were at risk. Children from gambling homes were more susceptible to depression, health problems, attempted suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, getting into trouble with the law and poor school grades. Those who grew up in a household with parents who gambled, were twice as likely as their peers to become gamblers.

Statistics compiled by the Calgary Distress and Drug Centre and the Gambling Line Summary Report showed that 50% of callers had addictions to drugs and alcohol as well as gambling and of that number 53% were women. In order to meet the full spectrum of Clients' needs, treatment facilities would need to be able to address both alcohol/drug and gambling problems concurrently. Since women gambled for different reasons than men and often engaged in different forms of gambling than men, it reinforced the need for gender-specific treatment.

Women entering the gambling program at The Villa who also had a chemical dependency problem were able to access both services in order of priority and clinical assessment.

In 1998, Credit Counselling Services began asking their Clients if their financial difficulties were related to gambling, and 30% of their Clients said gambling was an issue.

The provincial government held a Gambling Summit, where delegates were asked to consider making a recommendation to ban VLTs. Ultimately, they suggested limiting access to the machines, but not an outright ban as well as additional research into the impact of the machines. They also recommended holding a plebiscite.

In October 1998, due to overwhelming pressure from its citizens on the harmful effects of VLTs, the city of Calgary and Edmonton included a plebiscite on VLTs in their municipal election. 30 other municipalities across Alberta also held a plebiscite and six voted to have their VLTs removed. In order to do so required new legislation and a new bill, the Gaming and Liquor Amendment Act, was passed in 1999 and The Ministry of Gaming was created. With challenges to the bill and legal delays, it wasn't until 2003 when 200 machines were removed from the six municipalities.



By the end of 1999, The Villa's admissions had increased 34% over the previous year, and combining all program areas, the agency served a total of 775 women and their families during the fiscal year. The demand for recovery services remained very high, but unfortunately the wait list for residential services had now grown to two months.

As The Villa prepared to embark into the millennium, they began to prepare for expansion of their services, which included plans to move into a facility that would accommodate their Clients' needs and demands for services in the community. For nearly 30 years, The Villa had made progress in establishing the organization and creating awareness of the needs of addiction recovery services for women. The Villa Board and Management determined they could no longer delay their response to the overwhelming requests to increase the available number of beds for women seeking gender-specific addiction treatment in Alberta.

At The Villa Board of Directors strategic planning meeting, members voted to create a Facility Expansion Committee to begin working on an ambitious plan for expansion of the agency, which included a rebranding of the 30 year old treatment centre. The Villa was about get a fresh look and an new identity!

