



# SLWAR

Street Level Women At Risk

**Strategic Plan**

**2023 - 2026**

## Copyright Information

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## Acknowledgements

A special thank you to Street Level Women At Risk participants; your insights and recommendations provide the foundation for this Strategic Plan.

We would like to extend our gratitude to the Women's Advisory Group members; your guidance continues to inform the work of Street Level Women At Risk through this Strategic Plan.

A sincere thank you to the Street Level Women At Risk staff team for sharing your experiences and expertise that informed the direction of this Strategic Plan.

We would also like to extend our gratitude to the Governance Group for your leadership in the preparation of the Strategic Plan.

We want to express our appreciation for the insights and ideas shared by the Collaboration Advisory Group, without which this Strategic Plan would not have been possible.

Finally, we are grateful for the financial assistance provided by the City of London that supported the development of this Strategic Plan.

## Message From the Street Level Women At Risk Governance Group and Leadership Team

We are pleased to share with you the Street Level Women At Risk Strategic Plan 2023 – 2026. This is a transformative time in the homeless prevention sector. This plan outlines the change we want to inspire and the strategies we will implement in the coming years.

In 2014, our community came together to complete an extensive community consultation regarding women engaged in survival sex work in London. This included consulting women with lived and living experiences and service organizations working within multiple systems, conducting an international literature review, and reviewing housing models in other communities that serve street involved sex workers. Our community agreed that we needed to do something different to change the outcomes for women engaged in survival sex work. London's Community Plan Regarding Street Level Women at Risk and the Collaboration Advisory Group were formalized in 2015 and have provided our road map to change outcomes for this priority population.

Since operations began in 2016, using a housing stability approach, Street Level Women At Risk has provided rapid response, housing finding services and housing allowances, intensive in-home support, and intentional connections. Our extensive three-year evaluation demonstrated that Street Level Women At Risk is helping women engaged in street involved sex work to exit homelessness, secure permanent housing, and maintain their housing. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the housing crisis, and the opioid crisis, Street Level Women At Risk has continued to successfully partner with women on their journey towards housing stability, long-term health, and well-being.

This strategic plan process is our first refresh since London's Community Plan Regarding Street Level Women at Risk was created. It has provided us the opportunity to affirm the collaborative vision for Street Level Women At Risk and to look at how we must grow and change to continue to achieve our goals in this increasingly challenging climate.

The dedication and diverse expertise of the Collaboration Advisory Group and Governance Group are unprecedented in their scope and longevity. Though their staff or agency names may have changed, the steadfast commitment to Street Level Women At Risk has not wavered. It is a testament to the original commitment made to endorse London's Community Plan Regarding Street Level Women at Risk. All are still important and appreciated. The Collaboration Advisory Group organizations believe in the possibilities for every woman we serve to be our neighbour, our colleague, our teammate, and our inspiration.

As has always been true, the voices of women with lived and living experiences have been our North on the compass. The Women's Advisory Group continues to thrive and grow in their roles and function. They have been a critical component to Street Level Women At Risk's success. With their wisdom, they have guided our work from the front line to the full collaborative. In the years since Street Level Women At Risk began, there has never been an instance where the recommendations of the Women's Advisory Group weren't fully endorsed by the diverse Street Level Women At Risk collaborative.

For the first time, women who are or have been participants in the Street Level Women At Risk program have contributed their voices and their hopes for the future of Street Level Women At Risk. We are listening! At the heart of our work in the coming years, ever present is the vision of the women we serve living safely, having autonomy, and achieving their goals, hopes, and dreams.

**Thank you to all who have participated in this process. Our new strategic plan will carry forward the best of our work from the past and challenge us in new ways to grow and adapt our vision for Street Level Women At Risk's future impact.**

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Section 1.0

# Introduction

## 1.1 About Street Level Women At Risk (SLWAR)

### Who We Are

SLWAR is a collaborative of 26 organizations, united to support women engaged in survival sex work and experiencing chronic homelessness in London, Ontario to secure permanent housing with supports and work towards achieving their goals.

### What We Do

We provide rapid response, housing finding services, housing allowances, intensive in-home support, and coordinated referrals and intentional connections. We focus on promoting choice and safety in sex work, health and well-being, and community integration and belonging.

## 1.2 Who We Serve

Individuals matched to the SLWAR program are those who identify as women engaging in survival sex work that is primarily street involved and who are experiencing chronic homelessness. For the purposes of the SLWAR program, survival sex work is considered to be trading sex for basic subsistence needs, such as food, clothing, or a place to stay, and/or for substances to avoid physical withdrawal from substance dependence that can be life-threatening.

The individuals referred to and supported by SLWAR are particularly vulnerable because they rarely access services, are often socially isolated, experience high rates of violence, and have complex co-occurring issues related to addiction, mental and physical health, disabilities, trauma, housing stability and homelessness, relationships with and access to their children, and economic insecurity. Participants may also have a history of human trafficking or are at risk of being trafficked and may have little choice related to their sex work.

## 1.3 How Our Journey Started

**2014** An extensive community consultation was completed to understand the experiences and needs of self-identifying women engaged in street involved sex work, identify gaps in available supports, and inform the development of a collaborative approach to improve housing, health, and well-being outcomes.

**2015** [London's Community Plan Regarding Street Level Women at Risk](#) (the Community Plan) was developed to address the multiple, complex, and co-occurring challenges, including addiction, mental and physical health challenges, difficulty finding stable housing, not having children in their care, feeling unsafe on the street, and a lack of supports, being experienced by self-identifying women who were street involved and engaged in survival sex work in London, Ontario.

**2016** SLWAR was formed and began operations in 2016. The Community Plan served as the foundation for SLWAR and continues to guide our work.





## 1.4 Our Principles

The Community Plan identified guiding principles based on consultation with individuals with lived and living experiences. These guiding principles are applied throughout all areas of our work.

- 1. Safety** – Factors, people, systems, and other interactions to assist each woman to be out of danger and feel secure are considered and addressed.
- 2. Housing First** – From the well-being of her home, each woman is provided with a variety of supports to meet her needs.
- 3. Active Engagement** – Understanding the gravity of illness and death on women and the impact of losing their children, we work from a place of urgency and assertiveness to support each woman in reaching her goals.
- 4. As Long as It Takes** – We work towards continuous progress, focusing on long-term safety, health, and well-being.
- 5. Housing With Support** – We actively work towards each woman achieving housing stability.
- 6. Women and Family Centred** – The unique strengths and needs of each woman and her family will be respected, and solutions will be customized to her experience and situation in her community of choice.
- 7. Relational Based** – Strong relationships and trust ground our interactions with each woman.
- 8. Strength Based** – We draw upon the personal resilience, experiences, resources, motivation, and hope of each woman as we work towards viable, long-lasting solutions.
- 9. Trauma Informed** – A deep understanding of the impact of trauma and violence in the lives of women and their families informs our work as we realize that the effect of trauma is pervasive and broad and touches many life domains.

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- 10. Respect** – Each woman and her family are always treated with dignity.
  - 11. Organizational Practices** – We adapt our practices to respond effectively to address the housing and health outcomes of each woman.
  - 12. Joint Agreements** – We create concrete memorandums of understanding with participating agencies with clear roles and responsibilities so that they function as an effective system.
  - 13. Women’s Experience Leads the Way** – Women with lived and living experiences are an active part of the process at every step of the way.
  - 14. Community Education, Readiness, and Support** – We work towards involving Londoners in creating safe and accepting communities.
  - 15. Harm Reduction** – Practices encompass a continuum of interventions, including prevention, education, and minimizing risk of harm.
  - 16. Fiscally Responsible** – Resources are used in effective, accountable ways.
  - 17. Sustainable Outcome Focused** – Results are measured, reported, and form the basis of change based on the guiding principles.
  - 18. Developmental Evaluation** – Learnings are captured and inform the continuous improvement of the Model.

## 1.5 Our Beliefs

- 1. Sex Workers Have Rights** – We support a human rights approach to sex work. We support participants' rights to self-determination, safety, and dignity within their lives and sex work.
- 2. Sex Work Occurs on a Spectrum** – We support women who have limited choice in their sex work to move towards having agency and autonomy to engage in sex work of their own free will.
- 3. Participants Are Experts in Their Own Lives** – We listen to participants as they define their own lived and living experiences and prioritize the voices of sex workers when informing our services.
- 4. We Are Witnesses to a Participant's Journey, Not Rescuers** – We acknowledge participants allow us to be part of their journey and our role is not to lead, but to provide support.
- 5. Housing Is a Human Right** – We believe that everyone has a fundamental right to adequate housing in which they can feel safe and secure.
- 6. Strong Relationships Are the Foundation of Success** – We strive to build strong, trusting, and supportive relationships by continuing to show up consistently and be present.

## 1.6 Our Approach

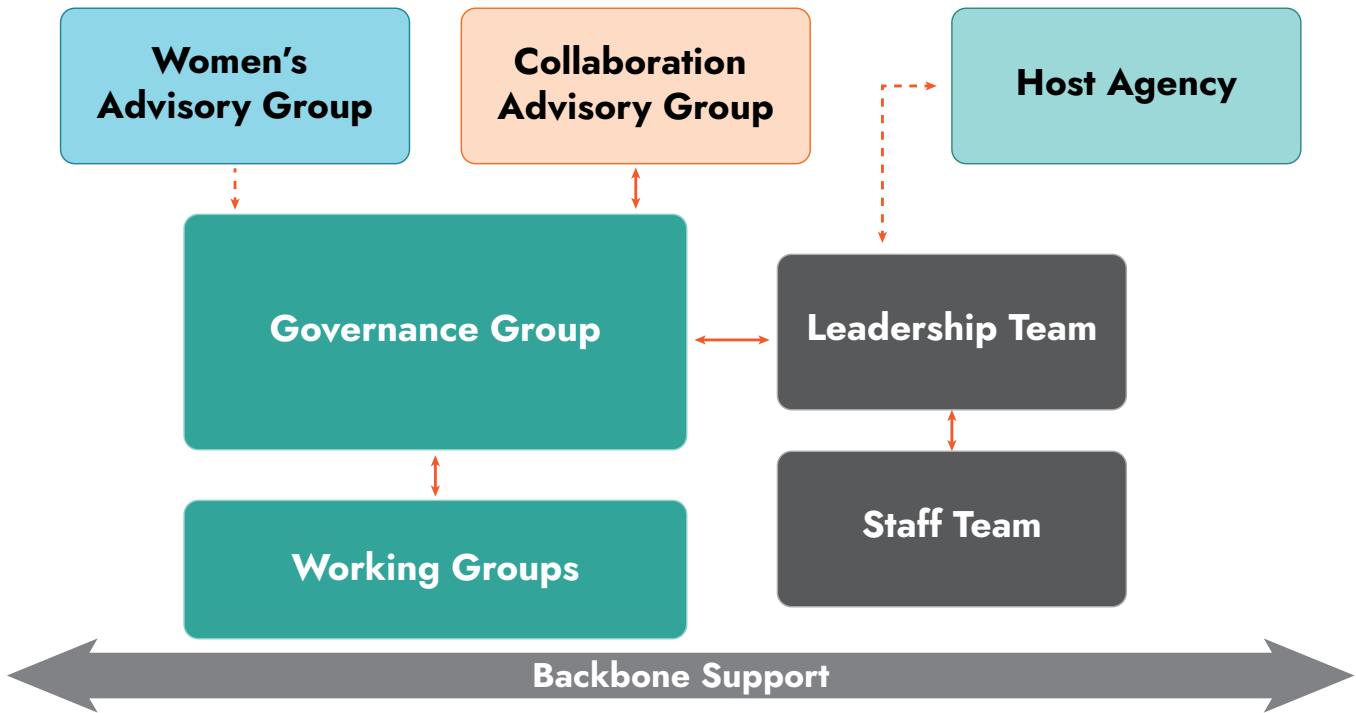
### The Participant Journey



Our approach focuses on the right housing, at the right time, in the right place, with the right level of support. For detailed information about program operations and the core components of a participant’s journey through the SLWAR program, please see the [SLWAR Program Guide](#).

We use a housing stability approach to assist individuals to develop lasting housing stability and a person-centred approach that focuses on respecting the unique strengths and needs of each participant and customizing solutions to their experiences, situations, and needs. Visit our [website](#) to learn more about our approach.

## 1.7 Our Structure



SLWAR works with a talented team of people, including:

- **Staff and Leadership Team** – The SLWAR program team focuses on the daily implementation and operations of the program.
- **Governance Group** – The Governance Group acts as the coordinating or steering committee for the development, implementation, and monitoring of the SLWAR Model.
- **Host Agency** – The host agency stewards financial and infrastructure resources for program operations and provides support with human resource management.
- **Women's Advisory Group** – The Women's Advisory Group (WAG), comprised of individuals who identify as women with lived and living experiences of survival sex work, informs and provides input on the implementation and direction of the SLWAR Model.
- **Collaboration Advisory Group** – The Collaboration Advisory Group (CAG) informs the development of program policies, helps to inform program operations, and reallocates staff to SLWAR to provide intensive in-home housing stability work.

For more information about the role of each of these teams, please see the [SLWAR Program Guide](#).



## 1.8 Our Impact

SLWAR brings community together to create long-lasting change. A three-year evaluation conducted by a third-party, independent evaluation firm demonstrated that:

### SLWAR Transforms Lives

**100%**

of participants secured permanent housing

**76%**

of participants remained housed

**65%**

of participants chose to decrease their involvement in sex work

**53%**

of participants did not receive any new charges

**71%**

of participants had improved quality of life

**57%**

of participants had increased contact with their children

### SLWAR Changes Communities

**96%**

of collaborative members were better able to support individuals who identify as women engaged in street-involved sex work

**93%**

of collaborative members had a better understanding of the service system

**79%**

of collaborative members agreed there were fewer service gaps for this population

Learn more about SLWAR's impact by reviewing the [full evaluation report](#).



Section 2.0

# About the Strategic Planning Process

## 2.1 Purpose of the Strategic Plan

The SLWAR Strategic Plan 2023 – 2026 builds on the [Community Plan](#) developed in 2015. The Community Plan remains the foundational guiding document for SLWAR. The Strategic Plan augments the Community Plan and guides the work of SLWAR over the next three years.

## 2.2 The Strategic Planning Process

To develop the SLWAR Strategic Plan 2023 – 2026, the following phases were undertaken:

### Phase 1: Listen to Our Community

The SLWAR community was engaged through focus groups and paper-based and online surveys to provide their insights and ideas about the direction of SLWAR over the next three years, including: 33 SLWAR participants; 9 WAG members; 16 CAG members; and 11 team members.

Respondents were asked about what SLWAR does well, what SLWAR should stop or change, trends that will impact SLWAR, and their big, bold goals for SLWAR over the next three years. In addition, each group was asked specific questions that related to their involvement with SLWAR. SLWAR participants were asked about whether they would refer a friend or family member to SLWAR. WAG and CAG members were asked about their role and whether it should change or stay the same. Additional questions focused on SLWAR's current decision-making process, geographic focus, population focus, and whether SLWAR is on the right path with its model.

Responses from the SLWAR team, WAG, and CAG were collated and a thematic analysis was conducted of qualitative data and descriptive statistics were prepared for quantitative data. Participant data was analyzed separately, but in the same way as the data from the SLWAR team, WAG, and CAG. A report was developed and provided to the Governance Group for review in advance of the strategic planning sessions. Summary results from the engagement can be found in Section 2.4.



## Phase 2: Plan Our Future

The Governance Group met over a series of three facilitated sessions to reflect on the community engagement data, discuss SLWAR’s strategic priorities, and identify corresponding strategies. An iterative process was used in that the Governance Group members continued to build on and refine the content developed.

Once the strategic priorities and strategies had been developed, the community engagement data was mapped to each strategy to ensure that the strategic priorities and strategies were inclusive of the ideas and insights shared by the community.

PHASE 2



## Phase 3: Create our Plan

Building on Phases 2 and 3, the content for the SLWAR Strategic Plan 2023 – 2026 was formulated and refined through a series of review and revision sessions with representatives of the SLWAR community. The final step was to design the Strategic Plan in alignment with the SLWAR brand.

The Strategic Plan 2023 – 2026 will guide the work of SLWAR over the next three years. SLWAR is committed to moving from strategy to action, as outlined in Section 4.0 of this document.

PHASE 3

## 2.3 A Snapshot of SLWAR Statistics

# 95 women have participated in SLWAR



**46**

women remain active in SLWAR

**33**

women have been discharged from SLWAR

**11**

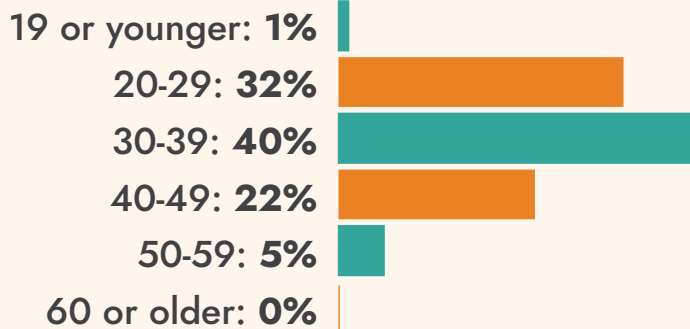
women have passed away

**5**

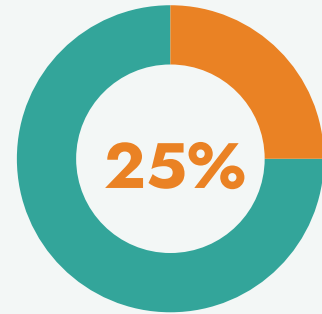
women started intake and became inactive



### Age at Intake



**34** is the average age at intake



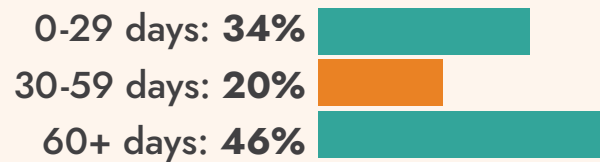
of participants (n=24) identified having Indigenous ancestry

**88**

women secured housing



### Length of Time to Secure Housing



**97%** of women received a housing allowance



**\$298** is the average monthly housing allowance amount



**57%** of women remain housed



**100%** of women accessed the Whatever It Takes Fund

## 2.4 What We Heard From Our Community

The following provides a summary of the results from the community engagement process. Themes from participants and the SLWAR team, WAG, and CAG are presented below.

### What SLWAR Does Well

#### We heard from participants that SLWAR:

- Helps women improve their lives
- Offers comprehensive wraparound supports
- Builds positive relationships
- Provides personalized and individualized support
- Supports securing and maintaining housing

#### We heard from our team, WAG, and CAG that SLWAR:

- Demonstrates program excellence
- Offers comprehensive wraparound supports
- Is an exceptional collaborator and partner
- Provides participant-centred care and compassion
- Has a strong leadership and staff team

**“SLWAR has always been a non-judgemental support and helped me with whatever I needed.”**

*~Participant*



## What SLWAR Could Improve or Change

### We heard from participants that SLWAR should:

- Change the name of the program to avoid stigma and negative perceptions
- Work to increase staff retention to decrease negative impacts on participants
- Continue to enhance communication with participants

### We heard from our team, WAG, and CAG that SLWAR should:

- Change the name of the program to avoid stigma and negative perceptions
- Work to increase staff retention and avoid burnout
- Share the work of SLWAR more broadly
- Continue to build partnerships
- Increase the focus on supporting SLWAR participants to graduate from SLWAR

## Trends That Will Impact SLWAR

### We heard from participants that SLWAR will be impacted by:

- The ongoing housing crisis affecting availability and affordability of housing
- Staff shortages in the health and social service sector
- Converging social, health, and economic crises that will increase demand for services

### We heard from our team, WAG, and CAG that SLWAR will be impacted by:

- The ongoing housing crisis affecting availability and affordability of housing
- Staff shortages in the health and social service sector
- Transformation of the service system at local, provincial, and national levels
- Changes to the location of sex work as a result of online work
- Differences in the demographics of women involved in sex work, including older women and women from equity-denied groups

**“The homelessness crisis is becoming a bigger issue by the day, and financially, the cost of rent has gotten so crazy. It’s not feasible.”**

*~Participant*



## Big, Bold Goals for SLWAR

### We heard from participants that SLWAR should:

- Continue to empower women to make positive changes in their lives
- Advocate for permanent housing for women and increase awareness about SLWAR
- Work to increase staff retention
- Expand services to meet the needs in other regions
- Build relationships to enhance access to care across the service system

### We heard from our team, WAG, and CAG that SLWAR should:

- Continue to empower women to move towards their future goals
- Raise awareness about SLWAR and its impact
- Expand the staff complement and support for staff
- Expand the SLWAR Model to other communities through promotion and training
- Provide opportunities for women to share their stories
- Consider expanding the population focus of SLWAR when and if appropriate
- Develop and/or advocate for supportive housing for SLWAR participants



# SLWAR Strategic Framework

## 3.1 Our Strategic Priorities



## 3.2 Strengthen Our Organizational Capacity

### Goal

A thriving organization with empowered people and ample resources to effect positive change.

### Strategies

1. Empower our team with the necessary resources and supports to do and be well in their work.
2. Increase and diversify our financial resources.
3. Amplify the voices of women with lived and living experiences.

## Why Organizational Development Is Important to Us

Our team is the reason we can do our work in the community. We are grateful for their talents, commitment, and dedication to our purpose and participants. The non-profit sector is experiencing higher-than-ever staff shortages and turnover. While SLWAR has fared better than many organizations, it is not exempt from this challenge. Across the system, there is a significant lack of understanding about the importance of having a skilled housing team to support positive outcomes for participants. A culture shift across the system and all levels of government is required to value the challenging and difficult work of housing team members and acknowledge them as skilled professionals and experts in the homeless-serving sector.

We heard from participants that staff turnover and staff-participant fit have a significant impact on them. We will be intentional about the way we invest in our team and advance together over the next three years. We will explore how we can best support the health and well-being of our team who give so much of themselves in this work, and we will advocate for fair and aligned compensation for our team.

With a focus on creating a safe and supportive environment for our team, SLWAR will be a place where our team is empowered to do their best work in supporting women experiencing homelessness and involved in survival sex work.

In planning for our future, we know our success is tied to our financial sustainability. We must secure the financial resources to support the longevity of our work. We will actively explore opportunities to diversify our revenue streams to continue to secure the resources required to do our work well.

Since SLWAR's inception, our greatest teachers have been women with lived and living experiences of survival sex work and homelessness. Their voices have informed the actions that we have taken, the services we have provided, and the plans that we have made for our future. As SLWAR continues to grow, we want to intentionally create opportunities for women to share their experiences and inform service delivery at SLWAR and across sectors and regions.

### 3.3 Enhance Our Strategic Partnerships

#### Goal

Enhanced collaborative action to support women experiencing homelessness and involved in survival sex work.

#### Strategies

1. Expand our cross-sectoral partnerships to meet the evolving needs of women.
2. Leverage the expertise of the Collaboration Advisory Group efficiently and innovatively.
3. Explore strategic partnerships that will expand housing opportunities for women.
4. Champion system change through the Whole of Community System Response.



## Why Strategic Partnerships Are Important to Us

When agencies and systems reconfigure how they work together and take bold, collaborative action, real change can happen. To continue to meet the evolving needs of participants, we will expand and strengthen our partnerships across sectors to address any existing gaps.

The CAG has been a critical part of SLWAR since its inception. As SLWAR grows and our needs change, we need to shift how we leverage the depth and breadth of expertise of the CAG. By doing so, we will create opportunities to further align our efforts to solve homelessness.

For women involved in survival sex work, safe, stable housing with supports can change everything, yet our community is experiencing a historic housing crisis. As part of our strategic plan, we will develop innovative, housing-focused partnerships. We will explore the idea of SLWAR becoming a housing provider, as recommended through our community engagement process.

Finally, London is moving towards a Whole of Community System Response. SLWAR has been an active contributor and will continue to be a champion and leader as the system response is implemented.

**“I am sincerely very proud to have been part of this innovative, kind, and impactful housing program.”**

*~Team Member*

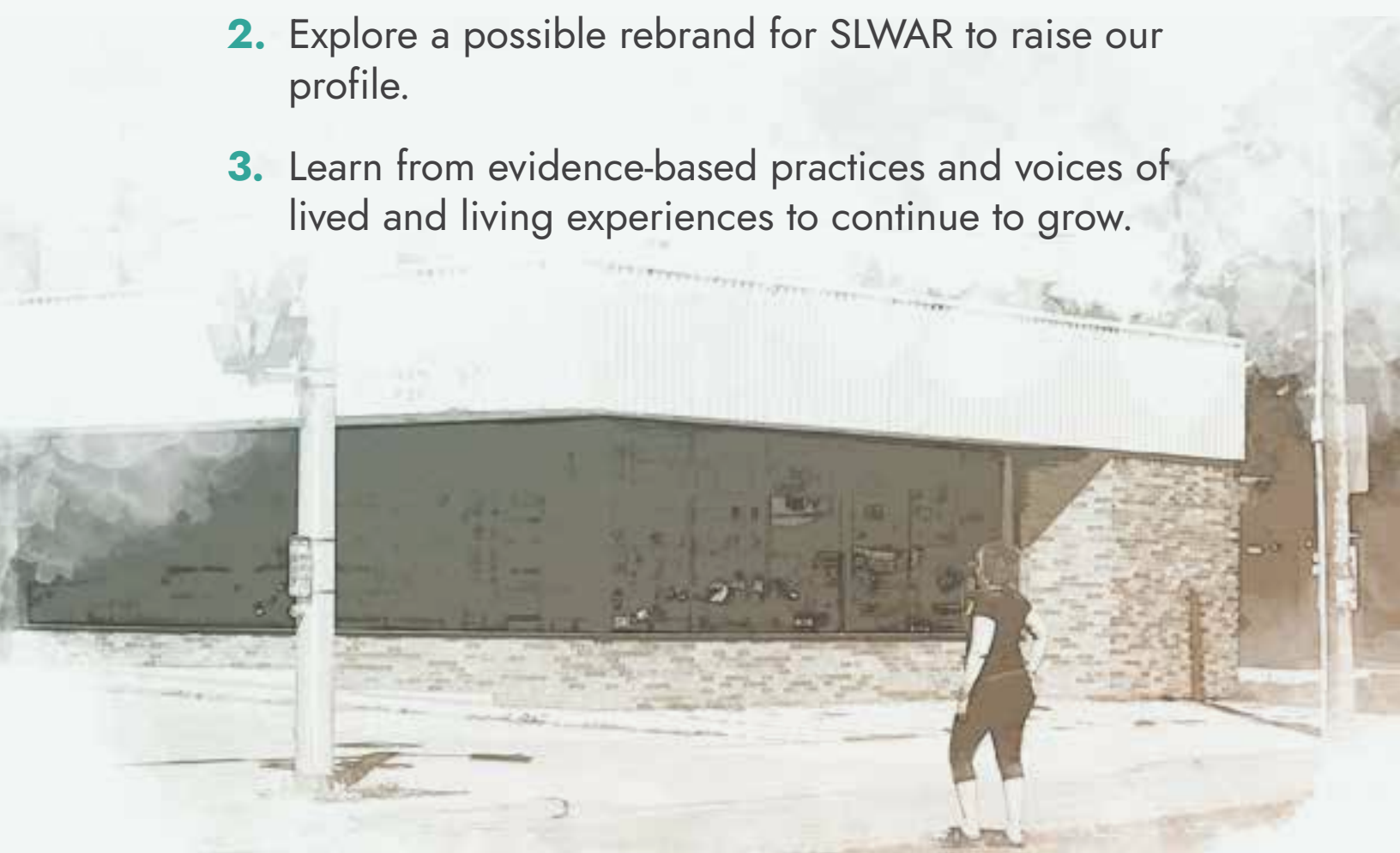
## 3.4 Steward Our Unique Experiences

### Goal

Improved outcomes for communities across Canada supporting women experiencing homelessness and involved in survival sex work.

### Strategies

1. Share SLWAR's knowledge and expertise with other communities across Canada.
2. Explore a possible rebrand for SLWAR to raise our profile.
3. Learn from evidence-based practices and voices of lived and living experiences to continue to grow.





## Why Stewarding Our Unique Experiences Is Important to Us

The experience of SLWAR is unique to us. We have had wonderful and challenging experiences that we leveraged to gradually and persistently build evidence-based practices. We have had interest from communities across North America about our work, and we have had the privilege to share what we have learned. It's now time for us to share with intention – through our program guide, workshops, trainings, and other opportunities that become available to us. It is through these opportunities that we can expand our impact.

We heard through our engagement that our full name, Street Level Women At Risk, may result in participants experiencing stigma when seeking housing or service. While our name was informed by individuals with lived and living experiences, we want to acknowledge the experiences of women involved with SLWAR. We plan to explore whether a rebrand would add value to participant outcomes.

The needs and experiences of women experiencing homelessness and involved in survival sex work continue to change, and while we are proud of what we have accomplished, we must continue to learn and explore new ways of working and thinking. We have made a commitment to reflect on our practice as well as learn from the practice of others to identify what we can adapt and integrate to continuously improve our service and outcomes.

**“The program as a whole is amazing”**

*~WAG Member*

Section 4.0

# Moving to Action

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While the Community Plan will remain our foundational document, this Strategic Plan will guide our work for the next three years. Our priorities, goals, and strategies will be achieved through concrete, concentrated action, with our progress being measured through key indicators.

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Throughout our journey, we will continue to listen to individuals with lived and living experiences and our partners and make needed adjustments along the way.

We are excited about the future. We look forward to the work we have ahead of us and the impact we intend to achieve.

**We hope that you will be part of our journey.**





**Strategic Plan**  
2023 - 2026