



# A Call for **Safe** Housing:

A Report on the Need for  
Housing for Domestic  
Violence **Survivors** in  
the District of Columbia



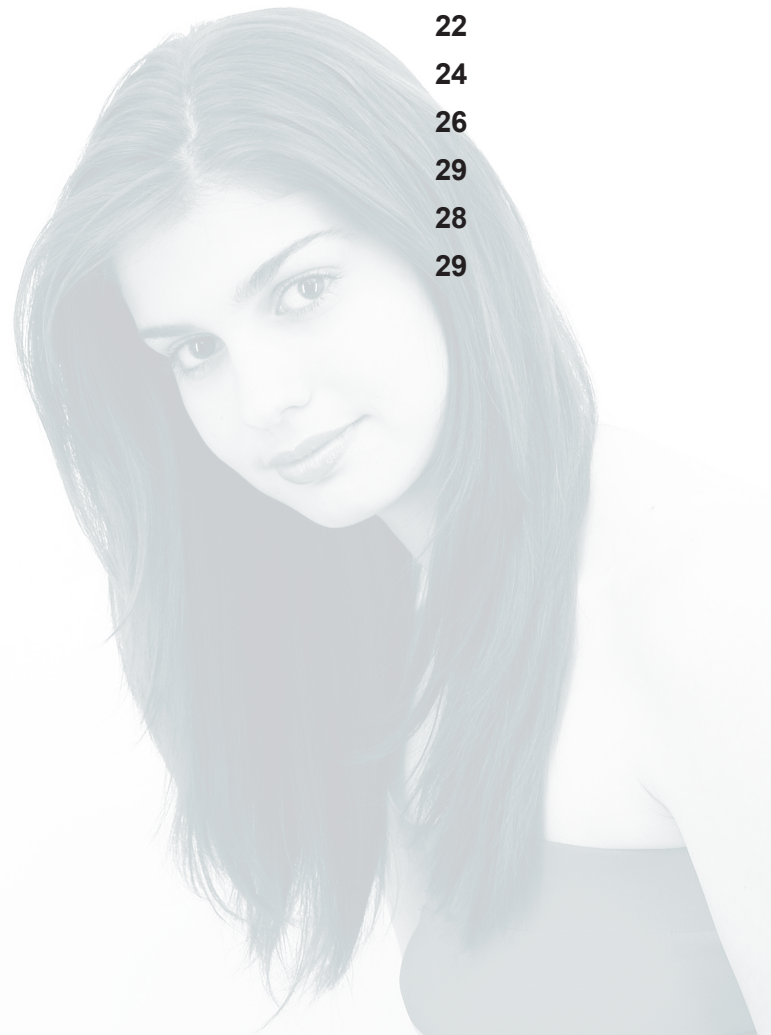




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## Introduction:

# Domestic Violence/Intimate Partner Violence

Domestic violence (DV) is one of the fastest growing and most serious violent crimes in the United States. In the last several decades, the frequency of this violence has not only increased, but also intensified. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, one in every four women will experience some kind of domestic violence in her lifetime. An estimated 1.3 million women are physically assaulted by an intimate partner each year. Statistics indicate that the majority (73%) of those who experience family violence are women between the ages of 20-24. Increasingly, however, reports are being received from men and boys who also have experienced domestic violence.<sup>a</sup>

**An estimated 1.3 million women are physically assaulted by an intimate partner each year.**

**-National Coalition Against Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence is a pattern of behavior used by a spouse or a partner to maintain power and control over another in an intimate relationship. There is no typical abuser, but advocates and experts on domestic violence maintain that the violence follows a typical cycle or pattern of behavior. This pattern may include, but is not limited to, uses of physical violence; intimidation; isolation; emotional, sexual, and even economic abuse and control; stalking; and coercing or forcing a person to change their behavior. Domestic violence can result in psychological or physical trauma and even death.<sup>b</sup>

Few people realize that domestic violence usually follows a cycle that intensifies over time. The cycle consists of three main stages: the *Tension Building* stage; the *Incident* or *Battering* stage; and the *Calm* or *Honeymoon* stage. Some people begin the explanation of the cycle at the honeymoon stage suggesting that this is the calm period. In reality, the calm stage is generally a period of false hope; it is the time when the batterer is actually manipulating the victim into believing





that he has changed. This too is a form of violent behavior. Regardless of where one begins in the cycle, the aggression is continuous. The cycle may occur many times over but almost always escalates over time. Though victims may want to believe that their abusers will change, few ever do without intervention.

The U.S. Department of Justice and the American Psychological Association report that between 3.3 and 10 million children witness domestic violence each year in the United States. Between 1993 and 2004, children resided in 40% of all households where domestic violence occurred. Researchers further suggest that a child's prolonged exposure to the mother being abused by the father increases the risk that violent behavior will transfer from one generation to the next.<sup>c</sup> The consequences of this violence spans generations and can last a lifetime. Without intervention at the time of witnessing the domestic violence, adult survivors may have similar reactions as those who experienced other forms of child abuse.

Domestic violence does not discriminate. It crosses the demographic lines of age, race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, gender, sexual orientation, educational level, religion, and ability—physical or mental. This violence occurs in every type of household—from mansions to public housing. It can occur in the homes of college professors, corporate executives, doctors, lawyers, judges, and clergy, as well as in the homes of day laborers, store clerks, and homemakers. Violence against a spouse or intimate partner is, for many people, a hidden way of life that is rarely discussed with family or friends. The very nature of its secrecy allows the violence to continue at disproportionate levels of intensity. However, while violence may be a secret issue, it is also a public problem that affects every family member and every individual within every community. Moreover, domestic violence is a societal issue because when a person is battered, high costs are incurred in the form of health care, lost wages, and the involvement of the criminal justice system.

The secrecy of domestic violence coupled with shame and fear of reprisal make it difficult for women to leave their situation. The process of leaving is equally daunting, especially when children are involved. Reorganizing one's life can be overwhelming when personal and child safety are at the forefront of one's mind. Researchers for the National Institute of Justice indicate that the risk of intimate partner homicide is highest when a victim of domestic abuse tries to leave the relationship, obtains a restraining order, or secures another shelter of protection. The abuser becomes angered and threatened, and is more apt to inflict grave bodily harm.<sup>d</sup>





**“When I went to court, DC suddenly felt very small because my abuser followed me to the courthouse. I could not focus on what was going on inside the courthouse...I couldn’t hear the judge because all I could think about was him waiting for me outside.”**

**-Survivor**

When women do muster the courage to flee from abuse, they often have nowhere to turn. Many women cannot find safe and affordable housing and return to live with their abuser or on the streets, which can eventually lead to a life of homelessness and even despair.

This report highlights the complexities faced by women in the Washington, DC area who have experienced domestic violence. The report will:

- **Explain** the challenges met by women survivors of domestic violence when seeking safe and affordable housing in Washington, DC
- **Emphasize** the various barriers faced by DV survivors when seeking adequate housing
- **Explore** how survivors and service providers navigate the pressures of finding housing that is safe and secure
- **Present** an approach for intervention that includes safe housing provided by the District Alliance for Safe Housing, Inc. (DASH)





## The Need:

# Safe Housing in Washington, DC

On any given night in Washington, DC, a woman is fleeing domestic violence. Her plight may be compounded by the fact that she is impoverished and dealing with mental illness and/or addiction. With or without these additional challenges, she is distraught, desperate, and alone. If she is fleeing with children, her situation is intensified.

The Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) reported that from 2002 to 2005, the number of domestic violence calls increased 22% from 9,045 to 11,053. MPD further reported that domestic-related calls accounted for 65% of all interpersonal crime calls in 2005. From 2001 to 2004, in cases where a victim-offender relationship could be established, there were 51 murders attributed to domestic/family violence, including 41 adult/youth victims of domestic violence, and 10 child/infant victims of child abuse.<sup>e</sup>

From January to June 2007, there were 12,806 calls to MPD and five homicides related to domestic violence. On average, MPD receives a call related to domestic violence *every nineteen minutes*. The majority of DV survivors who seek legal protection orders at the two Domestic Violence Intake Centers<sup>f</sup> in the District are women from wards 6, 7, and 8. In the first six months of 2007, 51% of the calls related to domestic violence came from east of the Anacostia River, in Wards 7 and 8.

In November 2006, Washington, DC participated in the National Census of Domestic Violence Services (NCDVS), which was designed to address the safety needs of DV survivors. Among the DV programs that participated in the 24-hour survey period, 16 adult women sought emergency housing assistance, 11 required transitional housing, and 57 adults and one child sought non-residential services from local domestic violence programs.<sup>g</sup>

As of 2007, there are only an estimated 48 emergency beds in confidential safe houses for women and children fleeing domestic violence in DC. In addition to



**"Sometimes women won't go to the court system because of their abuser. You are so terrified and you just go home and deal with it."**

**- Survivor**

offering housing, these safe houses provide support groups, case management, and activities for children. The facilities offer a first point of contact for women fleeing domestic violence—who are in need of a safe and tranquil space.

Women who have sought emergency shelter from such domestic violence programs state that they face considerable challenges that sometimes result in being turned away. For example, the demand for safe, emergency housing outweighs the supply and the safe houses are often filled to capacity. In addition, some DV safe houses are unable to accommodate male children over the age of 12, single women, and women struggling with addictions or serious mental illnesses. While these screening policies exist to promote a safe, communal living environment for women and children, the result is that many victims are unable to access these safe shelters that provide services specifically designed to address the impact of DV.

Victims who are able to engage the criminal justice system to address DV may be eligible for emergency housing through the DC Superior Court Crime Victims Compensation Program, which provides emergency housing in the form of a 30-day hotel voucher with a possibility of extension. This is a life-saving option for many victims. However, this option is not available to victims who fear that engaging the justice system will only increase the abuse. It is also not an option for many immigrant women who fear that any contact with governmental systems will result in deportation.

The situation is equally grim for DV victims seeking long-term safe housing options. In 2005, the DC Fiscal Policy Institute found that the affordable housing situation in the District was worsening. Specifically:

- The problems were concentrated among DC's poorest households
- Three in five District households with income below 30% of the area median income (\$25,440 for a family of four) spend half or more of their income on housing<sup>h</sup>

It can take months or even years to obtain housing subsidies. This is caused by the lack of available housing in DC, the length of the application process, and the eligibility requirements to obtain housing subsidies.





# Domestic Violence is a Primary Path to Homelessness for Women

The prevalence of DV victims in the District homeless system is consistent with national trends. The National Alliance to End Homelessness states that domestic violence is the immediate cause of homelessness for many women and children. In addition, research indicates that many women in the homeless system report being victims of domestic violence at some point in their lives.<sup>i</sup>

While many victims find their way to the homeless system seeking refuge, these shelter programs are not ideal for victims and their children who require increased safety and confidentiality, as well as intensive services that address the unique economic, emotional, and physical impact of domestic violence.

When the option for these women is to “wait out the night” in the homes of friends or family (who also may be living in similarly dangerous situations) or homelessness, the only other alternative may be to return to the home of their abuser.<sup>j</sup> Thus, there is an overwhelming need for more safe housing specifically for DV survivors.

**“My attacker knows where the [homeless] shelters are...he’s looked for me there.”**

– Survivor



**“Housing should come to them [DV survivors] because of their domestic violence. Don’t put me in a situation where you are walking unprotected...your abuser could be anywhere.”**

– Survivor



## What You Will Find in this Report

From June to August 2007, DASH set out to understand the dynamics that impact domestic violence survivors and their search for safe housing. DASH conducted focus groups with both survivors and providers to hear first-hand some of the obstacles to securing safe affordable housing. Survivors and providers voluntarily agreed to participate in either a confidential focus group, a one-on-one interview, or a survey. The research team:

- Conducted 22 focus groups (16 survivor groups and 6 provider groups)
- Visited 20 sites (13 survivor groups and 7 provider groups)
- Collected nearly a dozen completed survivor surveys
- Completed a series of one-on-one interviews with both survivors and providers

The survivors interviewed provided a variety of voices, including women living in emergency domestic violence shelters, homeless shelters, and transitional housing; women living in hotels with assistance from the Crime Victim's Compensation Program; women receiving mental health and substance abuse assistance; women living with HIV/AIDS; women recently released from prison; immigrant women; women in the faith-based and lesbian communities; and women in the Deaf, hard of hearing and Deaf-blind communities.

The providers interviewed offered a wide range of services and generally have a specific expertise to meet particular target populations. For example, a provider may specialize in supporting women living with HIV/AIDS, but may not be familiar with the intricacies of helping women who have experienced or are fleeing domestic violence.

What follows in this report are the overall issues and concerns related to safe and affordable housing that were conveyed by survivors and service providers. Each section includes detailed data and information about the realities confronting women and their families as they try to obtain safe housing in the Washington, DC area. The report highlights these needs, issues, and challenges





using quotes from the diverse focus group participants so that their voices can be clearly heard.

For ease in understanding the data, the research is separated into two primary sections: voices of survivors and voices of service providers. As will be made clear, there is an interconnection between the two sets of data with service providers reinforcing many of the desires, needs, and concerns raised by their clients. Together, this information highlights how domestic violence affects not only the lives of mothers and children but also those who are committed to serving them.



## Key Findings: Survivors

The voices contained in this report provide a diverse yet similar picture when discussing their lives as survivors. As the research indicates, the housing needs of survivors in Washington, DC reflect many of the national trends and tendencies—there is a scarcity of affordable housing everywhere.

In our focused discussion, five key themes emerged:

1. **Survivors Have Vivid Definitions of Safe Housing**
2. **Accessing Safe Housing Presents Thorny Challenges**
3. **Circumstances Push Women Back to their Abusers**
4. **Survivors of Domestic Violence Face Barriers to Housing**
5. **Additional Barriers Prevent Survivors from Accessing Housing**

### 1. Survivors Have Vivid Definitions of Safe Housing

A woman's ability to feel free and in control of her environment is directly related to her sense of security. When survivors were asked to define what safe housing was to them, they overwhelmingly replied that it was defined by clean, green space, where housing was affordable, childcare was available, and personal and family safety was not threatened. Responses included:

- "A drug free zone."
- "It would have trees and an area for children to play."
- "A place with intercoms and secure doors...a place where the police are all around."
- "A place that is therapeutic. I don't need a schedule, I need therapy."
- "Someplace secure...from your abuser and other people in the place."
- "I need someplace that has everything I had at home."
- "A place where I can think and be quiet."
- "I need a safe place where my kids can come...because you know, right now we are separated from our kids and ... it hurts."
- "It would feel like home."





## 2. Accessing Safe Housing Presents Thorny Challenges

One of the strongest themes that emerged repeatedly when women were asked about safe housing was the challenge that they face when trying to find emergency, transitional, and permanent housing.

When domestic violence survivors finally locate housing, it is often in areas that may aggravate their situation or peace of mind. For example, they can be placed in red zones—drug-infested areas that can trigger their own substance abuse issue, near their abuser, or far from their place of employment. In all, these complications add to the challenges voiced by DV survivors to obtaining safe and affordable housing.

- ➔ “Finding safe housing is not really the problem. Even if we could find it, we cannot afford it...that’s the problem.”
- ➔ “If I don’t find housing I can’t go back. I’m not gonna take [my newborn] around certain things and this is one reason why I left. When he gets older, [domestic violence] will affect him.”
- ➔ “If I don’t find housing I’m going to be homeless...that’s it...I’m going to be homeless.”
- ➔ “I live with my in-laws because I do not want to leave my son or my brother. When there are problems with the husband, the family supports the husband, even if he is not there. I feel comfortable for my son, but not for myself, so I would like to leave.”
- ➔ “I found an apartment but it’s on a drug strip. If I can get myself out of domestic violence, why should I subject myself in front of the crossfire?”
- ➔ “It took me an entire year to find a place; I had to leave because there was a lot of domestic violence in my home. It took a year but I found a place.”
- ➔ “What we need is someone to show us how to get housing. How do you find safe housing?”



**“I have a client right now who has to leave her [safe] situation in two weeks. She has two children—a girl 12, a boy 10. The boy refuses to go back [to live with the abuser]. He has told his mother, ‘If you go back I’m not going’... they are all scared but they have to leave where they are. What do I do?...Oh God, I just want to take her to my house...”**

**-Service Provider**



## Key Findings: Survivors

**“If I can’t find it [housing], I’m going back. It’s like death, but if I gotta keep calling the police... I can’t have them [4 children] out like that in the street, if I gotta suffer, I gotta suffer.”**

- Survivor

**“I thought my time ended in 7 days...you just gave me 15 days of hope.”**

- Survivor upon learning she could stay longer in the hotel



**“You are on the waitlist forever .... That’s not help...yes, I would go back to my batterer....”**

- Survivor

### 3. Circumstances Push Women Back to their Abusers

Women dealing with the cycle of domestic violence can often find themselves competing for affordable housing with the general population, including the homeless. This competition can force women to become separated from their children and/or put their children in harm’s way. The high demand for housing places women in a position of negotiating their safety, their children’s housing situation, and their overall sense of security.

When women are able to obtain emergency housing, their tenure is often extremely limited. For women who receive housing through the Crime Victim’s Compensation Program, the limited stay is often too short for victims to mentally and physically recover before they must begin searching for more permanent residency. The process of navigating the welfare system, coupled with the limits of stay in emergency housing can be extremely taxing on domestic violence survivors. When these women are unable to find transitional or permanent safe housing, they are sometimes pushed back to their abuser.

- “The sad thing is that when I was with my abuser I had more stability.”
- “You just got your butt whipped, and they act like you can get your life together in 30 days.”
- “You need time in the house. Thirty days to six months is not long enough to process the past and consider future housing.”
- “I will be out of the shelter in two weeks. I can’t go back to my abuser; I will be dead.”
- “I don’t know what I am going to do, I have to leave by [date]; I just pray to God.”





#### 4. Survivors of Domestic Violence Face Unique Barriers

Victims of domestic violence face barriers to obtaining housing that are directly related to the impact of abuse. Abusers often isolate victims so that they have no support networks or financial resources to draw on when they are ready to leave. As part of the abuse, many victims are coerced into criminal activity, or are not allowed to work, obtain job training, or learn English. Abusers often ruin their victim's credit or stalk and harass victims at their workplace, causing many victims to lose their employment. This creates challenges to finding housing because landlords typically prefer tenants with an employment history and solid credit records.

- ➔ “I was in cosmetology school and working, but I had to leave because the abuser came to the school threatening [the teacher]; the school did not want trouble so they asked me to leave. I would have marks on my body and everything and they did not like that.”
- ➔ “We bring our abuse to the job and this causes us to lose our jobs. Employers don't want you when they know that you have been abused... they are afraid.”
- ➔ “You can't go to family and friends, they may tell [the abuser]...they may see you in a store and tell your abuser. No, we have no help.”
- ➔ “Half of us don't have jobs or good credit...so therefore the list they give us [of housing options] really is not helping us.”
- ➔ “I sold drugs for my man, that's abuse, but I pulled time for that. Now I have all kinds of problems and housing is just one, you know what I mean? I mean I had an interview today and once they found out I had a criminal record for intent to distribute they said I could not get a job... That's my problem. How can I find housing—safe housing—something I can afford with no job?”



## Key Findings: Survivors

**“My faith had everything to do with me getting out and staying in. It kept me in the relationship...and it kept me alive so many times.”**

**-Survivor**

### 5. Additional Barriers Prevent Survivors from Accessing Safe Housing

Barriers that prevent survivors from accessing safe housing include language, health status, race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. Immigrant women may face language and cultural barriers that make it difficult to seek help leaving violent situations. In addition to not having access to culturally appropriate services, they might feel their (or their spouse's) immigration status will be compromised if the violence is reported. Women in faith-based communities might have similar reservations about reporting their abuse. Lack of community understanding or belief may cause them to feel ashamed or stigmatized and may prevent them from seeking help.

Many women participating in the focus groups spoke of disabling health problems, chronic illness, and depression, which may be directly related to experiencing abuse over time and prevent survivors from securing housing. Often housing programs are not physically accessible or do not have the services or confidentiality protocols in place to allow women living with mental illness, HIV/AIDS, and other debilitating health conditions to feel safe. Domestic violence among same sex partners provides yet another barrier, particularly for male victims, who cannot access DV shelter programs.

- “A big problem for the [immigrant] community is that they [housing programs] ask for too much documentation in secure places.”
- “My social worker told me about Section 8 and public housing, but I have no documentation so those services can't help.”
- “With my religion (Islam), [abuse] was not seen as bad enough to get the courts involved. I believe that if a man feels that you don't have anyone to reach out to, and then he has more sense of power.”
- “I told my Buddhist priest about the abuse. She advised me to stay. The rationale was that I had to change myself or else I would find someone else who would abuse me as well.”
- “I should have left, but I stayed because of my faith. The culture of Muslims, which I come from, tries to make things work. I would have





liked to have someone or someplace to go where I could think about if this was the right person for me—someplace to clear my head and cool out for a week or so.”

- ➔ “It is hard to ask for help in the Deaf community because it is a very small community.”
- ➔ “It [housing programs] should be to serve all populations...It’s hard for people to understand how I got in this situation. I made certain decisions to be in this situation. But they won’t help me because I need other things.”
- ➔ I needed treatment. I lived with a man who hit me in the head and I needed treatment, but I got nothing from [housing program].”



## Key Findings:

# Service Providers

The voices contained in this section of the report were collected to provide additional details regarding the experiences of domestic violence survivors. Through the use of focus groups comprised of service providers that work directly or indirectly with DV survivors, qualitative data were collected that identified three key themes:

- 1. Clients Face Obstacles when Trying to Access Safe and Affordable Housing**
- 2. Circumstances Push Women Back to their Abusers**
- 3. Providers Have Learning Curves in Working With Survivors**

## 1. Clients Face Obstacles when Trying to Access Safe and Affordable Housing

Similar to survivors, service providers identified barriers faced by women when accessing emergency and permanent housing. Because most providers specialize in serving particular populations, the barriers they shared were often specific to the populations they serve. For example, providers serving Latina women talked about how the lack of culturally aware, Spanish-speaking staff prevents their clients from feeling comfortable accessing many of the safe housing programs. Providers serving Deaf women spoke of how the lack of accessible resources, coupled with the closeness of the Deaf community, creates barriers to leaving for their clients. At the same time, collectively the providers recognized that economics, mental health issues, substance abuse, social and cultural pressures, and other variables significantly compounded the problems confronted by those seeking safe and affordable housing when leaving violent relationships.

- ➔ “There is a real fear on the part of our clients that they will be separated from their children once they are identified as a domestic violence survivor. Another concern they have is leaving their abuser and leaving their children behind with the abuser especially if their children are not allowed in various shelters.”
- ➔ “Language is also a major barrier for our clients. Since English is often times the second language or the women are Spanish-speaking only...





they may be initially divided or disconnected with the majority of service providers throughout the city. Our women are often hesitant to go outside of their community due to trust issues.”

- ➔ “The Crime Victim’s Compensation Program is great, but often Deaf women get lonely and leave. Plus the hotel is a scary place...or can be.”
- ➔ “Lack of documentation is a huge barrier for immigrant women. ...In addition, many agencies or landlords will not take clients who do not have proper citizen or immigrant documents.”
- ➔ “There can be feelings of betrayal and anger if the other women find that they are living with women who are HIV positive.”
- ➔ “For a lot of women, especially in the Latina community, the social isolation creates a lot of problems. When you are fleeing an abuser or leaving a bad situation the last thing you want is to be separated from your support system—your family, your friends, your society.”

## 2. Circumstances Push Women Back to their Abusers

Providers said the biggest obstacle that tends to push women back into the homes of their abusers is financial instability. Control over the family finances is one of many ways that abusers seek to assert power over their partner or spouse. Because of this, many women are wholly unaware of their financial situation or have never been able to maintain a sustained level of income. This and other financial factors make the possibility of obtaining market rent nearly impossible.

Other circumstances described by providers that push women back to their abusers include those related to immigration, fear, guilt, and a lack of awareness about services in the community. Confronted with these barriers, plus a need for safety and childcare, a woman may be likely to stay with (or return to) what is familiar; despite the fact that it is potentially violent.

- ➔ “Several women are caught ‘between the cracks.’ They have an income that does not allow them to qualify for Section 8. At the same time, their income does not allow them to pay market rent. Consequently, they have nowhere to go. The stress of this...leads these women back into the cycle of violence out of which they either recently escaped or previously experienced.”
- ➔ “The recurring challenge seems to be finances, which is linked to homelessness. Rent in the District is extremely too high for most women to afford, which forces them to consider staying with their abuser.”
- ➔ “Low-income housing is often in places that may trigger negative experiences of the past.”



- ➔ “Women do not want to leave their homes for a lot of reasons. For one, there is money. It is vital for survival and many of these women will leave behind financial stability upon leaving their abusers.”
- ➔ “Placement into safe housing often forces women to return to their abusers because there is so little [time] and the [intake] process is very difficult. Women generally do not have time to waste or spare when fleeing to wait for alternative housing.”
- ➔ “[One woman] came to us and we gave her all the information and told her that she would have to go to [another place] to try and get shelter. Well, she didn’t know the process and they took her name off the list [for shelter]. She came back to us but we couldn’t take her so she had nowhere to go. The woman went back home and when she got there her abuser was there with his friends...they were drinking...he wanted to teach her a lesson for leaving and she was degraded in front of his friends and raped by her abuser.”

### 3. Providers Have Learning Curves in Working with Survivors

Providers work extremely hard to offer the best services and support to their clients. However, they are keenly aware that at times they are not sufficiently trained about how to effectively support DV survivors. Providers have an array of competing issues to consider, and it is rarely a clear cut path to offering the support and guidance survivors truly need. Providers can be challenged to know the best practices, including safety planning with the survivor, partnering with police on behalf of DV survivors, or knowing the eligibility requirements for safe housing programs.

When offering support, service, and guidance, providers are vested in and fight for the rights of DV survivors. However, providers may struggle with how to screen for domestic violence within their client population or how to respond appropriately when domestic violence is disclosed. This becomes even more complex if a survivor is an immigrant, has a disability, or is dealing with mental illness, addiction, or chronic illness because the safe housing options become even more limited.

- ➔ “We often know what to do for servicing our clients, but...I mean I have a client right now who has to leave her [safe] situation in two weeks. She has two children. They are all scared but they have to leave where they are. What do I do...I want to bring this family to my house but, of course, I cannot do that...I feel helpless.”





- “We need tips about how to get women to open up—a lot of women try to hide it. What are the signs of women with DV? How do we identify them?”
- “What if a woman feels that this is a safe place and she wants to share her hurt? We are not trained to help her. How long can we do that—tell women they are safe here but we can’t really help them? What is the responsibility of the providers in moving a woman to the next step?”
- “So often shelter staff says to the women, ‘Just don’t go back.’ Well, this is not helpful and it does not take into consideration the experiences of these women.”
- “We really need training on the various shelters in the city and about how they operate. This will help us when referring clients to places and give us some level of comfort prior to sending these women off to a new place.”
- “We need updated training to know what programs have changed and what the places offer in terms of services. The information needs to be comprehensive—we need names, hours of services, services offered, etc. And we need continuous training.”
- “It is a myth that places offer housing and can provide supportive services. I think we need to find out what is really true.”
- “There needs to be joint awareness building—our staff needs training in how to deal with DV survivors. At the same time, DV staff needs training in how to deal with HIV/AIDS.”
- “There also needs to be awareness of how to [work with] women who have HIV/AIDS; confidentiality is key, along with non-segregation and non-stigmatizing.”
- “We need training to teach women how to self-advocate. How do you speak up for what you need and want? We need to train them in how to interface with landlords and different agencies that they have to contend with.”



## Recommendations

In the absence of safe housing options specifically for DV survivors, women and children seek refuge from violence and abuse in any way they can. While some survivors stay with friends and family, many others find shelter in the homeless system or seek support from caseworkers at their day-treatment centers, mental health programs and medical clinics. Thus, above all, it is critical that these programs strive to provide *DV-informed* services. This means that regardless of where a survivor turns to for safety, she will be met by service providers that can support her and her children in staying safe, convey information on the dynamics of abuse, and provide resources and referrals to safe housing and services that directly address the impact of abuse. What follows are three recommendations to promote DV-informed responses:

- 1 Increase the supply of safe emergency, transitional, and supportive permanent housing for *all* DV survivors and their children.** Survivors and their children require confidential housing that incorporates the elements they define as safe, including housing that is secure, therapeutic, clean, drug-free, and affordable. Safe housing options in the District should be expanded and created along a continuum of care. Survivors and their children require immediate, emergency refuge where they can receive support and safety within an adequate amount of time to move from crisis. Victims and their children also require transitional housing options, where they can continue to receive safety and services for one to two years, as they begin to gain economic stability and independence. In addition, long-term supportive housing is needed to provides survivors and their children an opportunity to maintain the stability needed to ultimately break intergenerational cycles of violence.





All survivors—regardless of disability, immigration status, addiction, disability, gender, and sexuality—need access to safe housing options.

- 2 Build the capacity of all existing housing programs for women to be safe housing programs for survivors.** All homeless and affordable housing programs in the District should incorporate policies and procedures that are informed by the specific safety needs of survivors, and offer services to respond to the specific impact of domestic violence on women and children. Because a significant number of women in the homeless system have experienced domestic violence, services offered in all housing programs should include: safety planning, counseling for women and children, economic empowerment, and linkages with resources including support groups and legal services. Staff requires on-going, intensive training and technical assistance on the dynamics of domestic violence, how to support victims and their children to stay safe, and available community resources.
- 3 Provide domestic violence training to staff at nonresidential programs serving specific populations, including immigrant women, women living with HIV/AIDS, women with disabilities (including mental illness and addiction), the lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered community, and the faith-based community.** As evidenced by the focus group data, providers working in myriad social service program settings are frequently confronted with clients struggling with domestic violence. Because there are so few safe housing options, these providers work with their clients to patch together safety plans and seek out creative solutions, if only for the short-term. These frontline workers require further support through intensive domestic violence training and access to information and community resources available for survivors and their children.

# The District Alliance for Safe Housing, Inc.

DASH was founded in October 2006 informed by focus group data conducted with survivors and service providers, and grounded in the philosophy that access to safe housing is a human right that all survivors in the District must be afforded. The DASH mission is to ensure access to safe and sustainable refuge for victims of domestic violence through the development and management of safe housing and related services, while increasing the capacity of other community-based organizations to expand housing for victims throughout the District of Columbia.

DASH is implementing the following three-pronged strategy to respond to the overwhelming lack of safe housing options for domestic violence survivors in the District:

## **1) Develop safe housing for domestic violence victims and their families to ensure safety from violence and promote living without fear of abuse.**

DASH will provide access, safety, and acceptance to victims of domestic violence by providing a “low barrier” housing program that accommodates victims regardless of disability, chemical addiction, immigration status, sexual orientation, etc. DASH’s pilot housing site will be an apartment-style residence of co-located emergency and transitional housing.

Renovation will incorporate principles of universal and green design so that the space will be a model facility that provides a peaceful sanctuary from abuse that is accessible to all victims. Program elements will address the complex economic, emotional, and spiritual issues that may stand between women and a safe, stable future.

Safe housing—both for short-term emergency situations and longer-term transitions—is the essential foundation for many women to rebuild their lives. Research and evaluation of shelter programs consistently shows that respite from the chaos and crisis of living with abuse allows women to establish healthy and productive lives for themselves and their families.

## **2) Deliver targeted housing resources to victims and their families to improve access to safe, affordable housing through the Housing Resource Center.**

The DASH Housing Resource Center is the critically important second strategy in the three-pronged approach to addressing the lack of safe housing options for domestic violence survivors. The DASH safe housing program will provide immediate shelter for survivors and their families, but like all residential programs, it will have limited capacity. Therefore, the DASH Housing Resource Center will address battered women’s housing





needs by providing individual, face-to-face support to survivors, web-based tools for exploring housing options, and technical assistance on housing to case managers at other organizations serving domestic violence survivors.

It is critical to note that while housing is a key need for clients at community-based organizations across the city, few organizations (and none specializing in domestic violence) have been able to dedicate resources specifically to developing and maintaining expertise in all available housing options. For this reason, the DASH Housing Resource Center meets a huge unmet need.

**3) Increase the overall well-being and safety for women and children in the District by providing training and technical assistance to community-based programs and groups to develop program-rich housing for their clients.**

DASH is venturing to inspire an affordable housing movement for victims in the District. In addition to addressing the immediate need for safe housing resources, DASH is assisting victim service and community-based agencies to build capacity to provide housing programs specifically for domestic violence victims. Thus, over time a diverse range of victims and their children who typically fall between the service cracks in the system will have multiple options available to them for safe housing and stability.

DASH will build safe housing capacity in the District by providing the following technical assistance and training:

- ➔ Mentoring processes to provide ongoing consultation and review of developing projects
- ➔ Generating resource guides to identify and secure financing, developers, architects, and other supports to create housing for victims
- ➔ Matching both nonprofit and for-profit community developers and architects with prospective housing programs;
- ➔ Assisting individuals and groups to develop proposals to secure grant awards and other funding for service-enriched housing for victims.

# Conclusion

**“The first thing to do when empowering women is to listen to the woman and hear her out and let her know that she is not alone. Empowerment is not an overnight process.”**

– Service Provider

The outspoken, honest, and sometimes blunt voices of the survivors and providers in the District has painted a vivid picture of what it is truly like to need, search for, and secure safe housing within the city. The survivors reached deep within themselves to tell their stories and chronicle their journeys. In addition, the providers shared their triumphs, dilemmas, and challenges around providing DV services and advocacy.

For women who have experienced domestic violence, having options and choices is critical because the violence is largely about stripping women of their personal choice, power, and control. Despite the challenging situations in which survivors of domestic violence find themselves, they still desire meaningful economic independence and family safety and security. Finding safe, affordable housing provides a vehicle to achieve this improved way of life and supports a woman's path to empowerment.

**“I want the life that I had before; whatever me and the other women have gone through, we want a place to go and to stand on our own.”**

– Survivor

Service providers are aware that empowerment is crucial to success. Many service providers, especially those whose primary clientele do not readily identify as domestic violence survivors, are frustrated when they cannot provide their clients with the tools needed to make the best choices. Service providers are passionately devoted to uplifting and sustaining the lives and livelihoods of survivors and their families.

Clearly the voices and experiences heard in this report are pivotal to the DASH commitment to being a strong, viable partner within the community. As a whole, service providers and survivors collectively acknowledge and share the same frustrations and hopes. The stories these survivors and providers have shared will inform the DASH approach to being a bridge for women and their children faced with the choice between living without a home and living without abuse.

Building the capacity for safe housing is the best possible response to their call.



# Appendix

## Overview of Methodologies

This study was conducted between June and August 2007, and involved collection and analysis of qualitative data. This report presents the qualitative findings from 22 focus groups conducted among survivors of domestic violence and the domestic violence service delivery community. The following section describes the methodology used to gather this data and construct this report.

## Qualitative Methods

Qualitative data were gathered using two methods. The first method was the review of literature on challenges and barriers to access safe and affordable housing by survivors of domestic violence. The second method was to conduct focus group interviews with survivors and service providers.

To inform the research, focus groups were conducted among various organizations that provide services to women who have experienced domestic violence. Organizations were selected throughout the city to ensure a diversity of participants. The participants represented various racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, religious faiths, educational attainment levels, and abilities.

The purpose of these community discussions was to explore the challenges faced by women in trying to access safe and affordable housing throughout Washington, DC. Areas of inquiry included defining: safe housing, challenges and barriers to accessing safe housing, specific services that were accessible, and reasons for possibly returning to an abuser.

Seventeen focus groups were organized by DASH and included women who participated in the various programs. Survivor focus groups were conducted among the following:

1. CCNV (Community for Creative Non-Violence) – Provides shelter for homeless men, women, and children
2. Community Connections – Trauma Services – Mental Health Agency
3. Crime Victim's Compensation – Metropolitan Police Department
4. DAWN (Deaf Abused Women's Network)
5. Hannah House – Transitional homeless shelter
6. Mary's Center For Maternal and Child Care
7. Miriam's House – Residence for homeless women living with AIDS
8. My Sister's Place – 24-hour Emergency shelter for women and children of domestic violence



9. N Street Village – Provides services for homeless women
10. New Endeavors by Women – Provides services for homeless women
11. Our Place – Provides resources for women who have been in the criminal justice system
12. Women of Freedom – A faith-based organization for women in transition
13. Women's Collective - Provides HIV Care Management and HIV Prevention Services to women and families

## Provider Focus Groups

1. COHHO (Coalition of Housing & Homeless Organizations)
2. Community Connections – Trauma Services – Mental Health Agency
3. La Clinica del Pueblo - Provides free, culturally appropriate health services in the Latino community
4. Mary's Center For Maternal and Child Care
5. New Endeavors by Women – Provides services for homeless women
6. Women of Freedom – A faith-based organization for women in transition
7. Women's Collective – Provides HIV Care Management and HIV Prevention Services to women and families

## Study Limitations

Some study limitations should be noted. First, the focus groups were designed to develop insights from women survivors of domestic violence from all races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds regarding their experiences in finding safe and affordable housing. Though every effort was made to speak with a broad cross-section of focus group participants, some gaps exist.<sup>1</sup> The research data should be interpreted within the context of the time span and the demographics of the participants. Specifically, all focus groups were conducted with women participants. While an effort was made to solicit responses from victims in the gay, lesbian, and transgender communities, gaps exist in the data highlighting the unique challenges these victims face.

Secondly, the survey instrument was constructed and administered by the authors of this study. Therefore, issues of reliability that are consistent with self-administered surveys should be considered.

Despite these limitations, this study identifies challenges faced by women survivors of domestic violence when seeking safe and affordable housing that are consistent with national trends.



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- k The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) states that the problem of violence committed against and within lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) and HIV-positive communities is pervasive. Additionally, domestic violence affecting LGBT individuals continues to be grossly underreported through-out most of the country. Scheduling conflicts and time limitations prevented Whitman-Walker Lesbian Services Program from participating in the study





