

families are in a better position to remain safe from abuse. Many survivors depend upon their batterers because, due in large part to the dynamics of the abuse, they cannot afford to live independently. Some are not able to leave the abusive relationship because they cannot support themselves financially and many who do leave may return because they cannot find affordable housing. DASH will work to help survivors obtain and maintain affordable housing, through supports for job skill development and training, household budgeting, credit repair, and financial literacy. Additionally, DASH will partner with other providers to ensure comprehensive economic advocacy for survivors, to improve their prospects for long-term safety and sustainability.

**Goal 3: Increase training, technical assistance and advocacy to further improve access to safety and stability for survivors and their families.**

Homelessness among women and families escaping violence can be prevented by increasing accessibility to housing services and by providing support to survivors who have housing. For survivors seeking housing, addressing misconceptions about victimization can mean fewer administrative hurdles and result in enhanced accessibility to program services. For survivors who have permanent housing, effective interventions can allow them to maintain their housing, even after a violent incident. Emergency transfers in subsidized or rental housing, lease and lock changes, safety planning, and landlord compliance with federal and local laws can ultimately improve outcomes for victims wanting to retain their affordable housing. DASH will increase efforts to support housing and homeless service providers, city housing and service agencies, and private landlords and property managers, to build an inclusive, community-wide affirmative response to survivors.

**“Years ago a victim trying to move or change her situation to be safe would be told ‘you’re lucky to have housing, don’t complain’. Now they are treated with more respect and are given options like transfers and other safety measures.” – GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL**

**“I’m only as good in my job as the information I have access to, and DASH is the organization that provides the information.” – SERVICE PROVIDER**

**“Before the DASH training, I was totally unaware about the danger and disrespect of requiring women to have a protection order before they could be housed. This was absolutely critical information to have, and reinforced what women have been saying to me for years. We’ve now eliminated that requirement and made eligibility more open.” – SERVICE PROVIDER**

**“There has been a definite impact on us as a landlord and property management company. Because of the guaranteed rent we can waive certain background checks and as a result we are housing families that wouldn’t otherwise be housed.” – LANDLORD/PROPERTY MANAGER**

**“DASH’s HRC is hugely helpful. There are a dizzying array of steps to apply for housing in the District. Women are told - go here, go there, speak to this person and that person. DASH staff help women walk through this process and navigate the various systems. That’s a critical service.” – HOUSING ADVOCATE**

**“I’m going to school because I need a good job, but I also need a place to live. It’s pressure trying to go to school wondering where you’re going to lay your head that night.” – SURVIVOR**

**“DASH plays a vital role, not just in housing but also through a broader and deeper mission to provide services, support and advocacy. They have been the champion for more resources for housing in DC. Any gains the city has had in terms of quantity and quality of housing and support services for survivors, we have to give much of the credit to DASH.” GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL**

**“I’m happy long as I can sign something and it’s mine. I can open my own door, sleep in my own bed; my child is safe. I can decide when I come and go, and who can visit. I can lead my own life.” – SURVIVOR**

**“I don’t care if it’s a one bedroom or just a room. As long as I know it’s my room, where I can come and go as I please and pay my rent. I’m not choosy, I just want to be safe and happy, and not on the street.” – SURVIVOR**

**“Programs should [be] long enough to find permanent housing, somewhere you know you’re going to be stable... That makes sense. Instead of keeping moving me from 30 day shelter, to 90 day shelter... it doesn’t make sense, it’s ridiculous.” – SURVIVOR**

# Responding to the Call for Safe Housing

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Most importantly, we thank the women who shared their stories of survival with us. Their stories serve as a testimony to their struggle, courage, great resourcefulness, and perseverance. This report is dedicated to them.

## INTRODUCTION

The District Alliance for Safe Housing (DASH) was founded in 2006 to provide families experiencing domestic violence with emergency and long-term safe housing, and homelessness prevention services. The organization’s mission is to be an innovator in providing access to safe housing and services to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault and their families as they rebuild their lives on their own terms. Today, DASH is the largest dedicated domestic violence organization in DC addressing survivors’ safety needs through housing and related services, training and technical assistance, and public policy advocacy.

DASH was established in response to the shortage of basic housing services for survivors in the City. DC wait lists for subsidized housing are consistently five years or more and there is no priority for women or families escaping violence. Based on numerous stories from survivors and housing providers, DASH founders knew that demand for safe, affordable housing far exceeded supply, and that families’ health and well-being were jeopardized as a result.

Aiming to create the most relevant and responsive program possible, DASH set out to better understand the nature and extent of survivors’ housing needs in the District, and develop services accordingly.

## THE FIRST FIVE YEARS

In summer 2007, DASH conducted focus groups throughout the City with domestic violence survivors and service providers, and the findings were clear: survivors in DC were experiencing significant and prolonged challenges finding stable housing. The most common barriers were:

- 1 A severe shortage of affordable housing stock;
- 2 A lack of awareness among many service and housing providers about the dynamics of domestic violence and survivors’ safety needs; and
- 3 The adverse economic impact of abuse, often resulting in poor employment, credit and rental histories for survivors.

Survivors reported experiencing repeated

cycles of violence and homelessness, and numerous difficulties getting into even emergency shelter. Many who had entered shelter, complained of not feeling safe in these settings and expressed that the programs were not addressing the trauma they had experienced. They also felt anxious about where they would go once their shelter stay, typically 30-90 days, was over. Many had no choice but to return to their abuser when their time in shelter expired and others talked about the various ways they would try to stay off the streets.

Responding to these barriers, DASH was created to not only provide effective, low-barrier housing services to survivors, but also to improve their access to housing regardless of where they turned for help. In a 2007 report titled *A Call for Safe Housing*, DASH articulated the following goals to broadly guide their work:

1. Increase the supply of safe emergency, transitional, and supportive permanent housing for all domestic violence survivors and their children;
2. Build the capacity of all existing housing

programs for women in the District, to be safe housing programs for survivors; and

**3.** Provide domestic violence training to staff at nonresidential programs serving diverse and specific populations.

Over the last five years, DASH has worked to meet these goals through advocacy, training, housing development and service delivery. To fully understand the impact of this work and what gaps remain, in 2011 DASH set out to once again talk with survivors residing in shelter and housing (both in DASH and other programs), as well as government officials, homeless and domestic violence advocates and housing providers. The highlights of that feedback, with specific regard to the goals outlined in 2007, are included here.

**Goal 1: Increase the supply of safe emergency, transitional, and supportive permanent housing for all domestic violence survivors and their children.**

DASH created sixty-three new affordable housing units in DC, more than doubling the long-term housing stock for survivors of domestic and sexual violence and their families. DASH operates two housing programs, the Cornerstone Residence and the Empowerment Project. Both offer low-barrier housing, with voluntary support services and very few eligibility requirements, for up to two years.

· The Cornerstone Residence houses 43 families in a multi-use building that DASH bought and renovated, where staff offices and community rooms are interspersed with individual, self-contained apartments of varying sizes, including wheelchair accessible units.

· The Empowerment Project uses formal partnerships with landlords to provide 20 families rent assistance in transitional-to-permanent apartments geographically scattered throughout the District. Survivors sign their own lease and are guaranteed housing regardless of their credit or rental histories, and landlords are guaranteed a portion of the rent paid by DASH.

· Since opening their doors, DASH has provided approximately 38,000 safe nights to domestic violence survivors and their families.

DASH also operates a Housing Resource Center (HRC), offering comprehensive information about legal housing protections for survivors, affordable rental units, eligibility criteria and application processes for shelter and long-term housing services, and

general housing advocacy services aimed at increasing survivor safety and stability.

· More than 1,500 individuals access the HRC each year, either in-person or online.

· Staff build relationships with landlords in the city, and educate them on the dynamics of domestic violence to increase their willingness to rent to survivors. They also advocate on behalf of survivors with private and government-funded housing providers, to make sure survivors do not lose their housing due to domestic or sexual violence, or stalking.

**GOAL 2: Build the capacity of all existing housing programs for women in the District, to be safe housing programs for survivors.**

Historically, survivors have experienced discrimination due their victim status. Some are denied housing because of their victimization and others are evicted because of their batterer's behavior. DASH provides training and technical assistance to all types of housing providers, to increase the availability and quality of housing through policies and procedures that are informed by the safety needs of survivors.

· DASH provides housing counseling sessions and workshops for approximately 800 women annually and has trained more than 60 housing providers interested in adapting and/or adopting the DASH program model. Topics include safety planning, intake procedures, promising practices for service delivery, trauma-informed advocacy and counseling, and economic empowerment.

· DASH has expanded housing providers' understanding of their own legal responsibilities and rights, through relationship building, attending and hosting meetings, and training. Landlords are more aware of the legal housing protections afforded to survivors, such as the right to have locks or names on leases changed due to safety concerns.

· In collaboration with the DC Housing Authority (DCHA), DASH provides information and training about the complex legal provisions protecting survivors in subsidized housing. This enables DCHA to be more adaptable to a survivor's situation, such as assisting with unit transfers when necessary for safety.

· Housing providers and attorneys use DASH's Housing Resource Center materials to improve their own capacity to serve survivors, including sample letters to landlords, and to educate other providers about federal and local housing protections for survivors.

**“Some nights I stayed at the police station, when the shelter didn't have space for me. It was real cold - I asked the police ‘can I just get locked up? so I can be warm?’ They said I could only stay a short time and they made me go back outside in the cold. All you think about is surviving.”**

**– SURVIVOR**

**“I thought when I came here [30-day shelter] I could relax a little bit. But what I am relaxing for? You can't get comfortable until you know where you're going to go after the 30 days.”**

**– SURVIVOR**

**“DASH has single handedly doubled the housing beds for survivors in the District. That is huge.”**

**– HOUSING ADVOCATE**

**“Without DASH I would be staying with family or friends, or I would have gone back to my abuser - that would be the only option I had. That is why it is so important that DASH is taking my situation as seriously as I am. That they responded promptly. I didn't have other options.”**

**SURVIVOR  
(DASH CORNERSTONE RESIDENCE)**

**“I wasn't allowed to have a key when I lived with my husband. When DASH gave me a key to my own apartment I felt like Nelson Mandela in South Africa - free!”**

**– SURVIVOR  
(DASH CORNERSTONE RESIDENCE)**

**“Being with the Empowerment Project is so stable and peaceful. My son's behavior has improved. Getting to work isn't stressful anymore because I can focus, my life isn't chaotic anymore. I love my home now. It's not just a place where I lay my head. It's my home.”**

**– SURVIVOR  
(DASH EMPOWERMENT PROJECT)**

**“There has been a definite impact on us as a landlord and property management company. Because of the guaranteed rent we can waive certain background checks and as a result we are housing families that wouldn't otherwise be housed.”**

**– LANDLORD/PROPERTY MANAGER**

**“DASH's HRC is hugely helpful. There are a dizzying array of steps to apply for housing in the District. Women are told - go here, go there, speak to this person and that person. DASH staff help women walk through this process and navigate the various systems. That's a critical service.”**

**– HOUSING ADVOCATE**

**Goal 3: Provide domestic violence training to staff at nonresidential programs serving diverse and specific populations.**

DASH works to change the status quo by bringing the housing needs of survivors to the forefront of various systems, including non-residential programs.

· In 2009, DASH convened the Domestic Violence and Housing Taskforce to alleviate systemic barriers posed to victims of domestic violence in housing and shelter. The Taskforce is a partnership with local and federal government agencies and non-profit advocacy groups. Taskforce members provide training and expertise to government officials and city agencies, and advocate for policy initiatives to increase survivors' access to services.

· DASH formalized partnerships with community-based mental health, addiction recovery, and job development programs to provide training on the intersections with domestic violence and to enhance DASH's capacity to serve survivors with diverse needs.

### THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

DASH's fifth anniversary is an opportunity to celebrate our progress toward ensuring access to safe, sustainable housing for victims of domestic and sexual violence. However, while much has been accomplished, significant work lies ahead. In DC in the last decade, rental rates have risen approximately 70%, faster than in most major cities across the country, and the number of low-cost homes for sale and rent has shrunk by more than 25% (Nowhere To Go: As DC Housing Costs Rise, Residents Are Left With Fewer Affordable Housing Options; DC Fiscal Policy Institute; February 2010). Approximately 6,000 individuals are homeless in DC annually (Homelessness in the District of Columbia; DC Women's Agenda), and one in five families in DC report having severe housing affordability problems, while funding for all of DC's major housing subsidy programs has been reduced over the past ten years. In December 2011, there were more than 37,000 households collectively on the waitlists for DC Housing Authority's public housing and Housing Choice Vouchers programs (Wait-Listed; Lydia DePillis; Washington City Paper; February 22, 2012).

For survivors of domestic violence there are additional barriers. In focus groups and interviews conducted in the Fall 2011, survivors talked at length about:

- 1 Their perceived lack of safety and confidentiality in mainstream programs;
- 2 Difficulties residing in housing with numerous rules and regulations that make it challenging to succeed; and,
- 3 The intense and confusing experience of applying for long-term housing due to multiple and varying processes and eligibility criteria. Programmatic administrative procedures, such as those dictating how long a woman must be sober or separated from her abuser, or requiring her to participate in counseling or file for a protection order before she is eligible for housing, serve to keep many survivors in DC from stability.

When asked what they needed to overcome these barriers, survivors said clearly: a safe, affordable, permanent housing unit in a situation that addresses their unique needs resulting from the dynamics of domestic violence.

In response, DASH has identified the following goals to work towards in the effort to develop more safe housing opportunities for survivors:

**Goal 1: Expand the number of safe, affordable permanent housing units for survivors of domestic violence and their families.**

The scarcity of long-term, supportive housing options in DC creates a bottleneck, keeping survivors and their children moving from one untenable short-term situation to another; whether couch-surfing, staying in motels, or moving through a succession of shelter programs. With increased options for permanent, affordable housing, survivors can gain the stability they need to heal from the abuse and establish independent lives on their own terms. DASH will strive to create additional long-term housing options for survivors with diverse situations and issues. All of DASH's housing services will continue to be low-barrier, voluntary services, to ensure the greatest possible access to all survivors.

**Goal 2: Provide additional access to economic empowerment services to increase survivors' stability.**

Access to stable housing is dependent upon both the availability of units and long-term affordability. Affordability is defined by household income relative to housing costs; when income is stable,

