



# OPENING THE DOOR

AN ADVOCATE'S GUIDE TO HOUSING AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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# OPENING THE DOOR

## AN ADVOCATE'S GUIDE TO HOUSING AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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**T**he occurrence of sexual violence is related to one's access to safe and affordable housing. This is true for both sexual violence perpetration and victimization. People who have a history of committing sexual offenses are more likely to be repeat offenders when they lack stable housing resources (Levenson & Cotter, 2005).

Additionally, homeless women experience higher rates of violent victimization than women who have access to housing (Kushel, Evans, Perry, Robertson, & Moss, 2003). Therefore, housing can be understood as a critical protective factor in the prevention of sexual violence and an area warranting increased advocacy, particularly during difficult economic climates.

Sexual violence often acts as a precursor to homelessness, and once a person becomes homeless their risk for sexual victimization is heightened. Oppression can both heighten risk and compound the barriers that sexual violence

victims and survivors encounter in housing arenas. Women, people of color, runaway/throwaway youth, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) populations, people with disabilities, and residents in rural areas face heightened risks for sexual victimization due to the array of social and economic barriers they often face.

This guide is intended to equip advocates with information and resources to support their housing advocacy efforts. To these ends, information on housing as both a sexual violence prevention and intervention advocacy area is explored.

# THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN HOUSING AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE



## SEXUAL VIOLENCE CLOSE TO HOME

**A**ccording to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, “approximately 40% of all sexual assaults occur in a victim’s home (with an additional nearly 20% occurring at the home of the victim’s friend, relative, or neighbor)” (Victim Rights Law Center [VRLC], 2007, p. 279).

Given this, many sexual violence victims and survivors find it necessary to relocate following sexual violence. For many, to remain in their homes where the attacks occurred can be re-traumatizing and unsafe. Unfortunately, safer and more affordable housing options are often out of reach.

Without adequate housing, a person faces a greater risk of sexual victimization. Many victims/survivors must continue to live in homes

where violence has taken place. Some victims/survivors want to move after the assault, but are unable to do so because of financial limitations. Many victims/survivors lose their housing as a result of the assault. Still others are denied housing because of their status as a victim/survivor. Homelessness can be the result of such barriers to housing for some sexual violence victims/survivors.



## SEXUAL VIOLENCE, HOUSING, AND PEOPLE OF COLOR

Because poverty disproportionately affects people of color, safe and affordable housing can be less accessible for Native American, African American, Latin@\* and other traditionally oppressed communities of color.

Native American victims/survivors also face distinct problems when securing appropriate housing. Curtiss and St. George (n.d.) indicate that “Native women are 50% more likely to be victimized by violent crime than any other ethnic group” (p. 8). Therefore it is imperative to examine the impact of housing and access to resources among Native women. Hamby explains that “American Indian communities often experience high rates of poverty and geographical isolation without adequate transportation or access to services. If sexually assaulted in or near their homes, Native victims/survivors’ isolation and lack of confidentiality within communities can exacerbate their victimization” (Hamby, 2004, p. 4). This is yet another area in need of examination and increased protections and services.

African American women also face unique challenges related to sexual violence, poverty, and housing. A study of African American survivors of sexual violence concludes that “the majority (76%) attributed their rape to the riskiness of their living situations” (West, 2006, p. 3). For African American women, the security of their housing is connected to their personal safety. The Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Resident Characteristics Report revealed that Black/African Americans



\*The NSVRC has adopted the “@” symbol as a way to foster a non-sexist inclusive language. Adding the “@” symbol, which has both an “a” (feminine) and an “o” (masculine) reflects a more gender-neutral description of this population.



comprise 45% of residents currently residing in public housing (HUD, 2010). However, African Americans make up only 12.8% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). This statistic highlights the disproportionate representation of African Americans living within public housing facilities.

## SEXUAL VIOLENCE, HOUSING AND LGBTQ POPULATIONS

People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) also face problems obtaining safe housing because of sexual violence, and may experience

poverty at a greater rate than do people who identify as heterosexual. Albelda, Lee Badgett, Schneebaum, and Gates (2009) indicate that: "Poverty rates for LGB adults are as high or higher than rates for heterosexual adults. Using national data for people ages 18-44, we find that 24% of lesbians and bisexual women are poor, compared with only 19% of heterosexual women. At 15%, gay men and bisexual men have poverty rates equal to those of heterosexual men (13%)" (p.ii).

Discrimination and oppression tend to predispose victimized populations towards poverty and potential homelessness.

Once homeless, people who identify as LGBTQ face an increased risk of victimization. Members of the LGBTQ community are often victims of hate crimes. Therefore, homeless people who identify as LGBTQ are less protected from criminal victimization motivated by hatred and discrimination. These types of crimes may take the form of physical or sexual violence and could potentially result in death.

The rates of sexual and physical assault among people who identify as transgendered and homeless are higher than the corresponding rates for women (Kushel et al., 2003). Mottet and Ohle (2003) indicate that, "one in 5 [people who identify as] transgender[ed] are in need or at risk of needing homeless shelter assistance" (p. 6). While people who identify as transgendered must contend with the great likelihood of victimization, they are also likely to be rejected from homeless shelters requiring adherence to strict gender identities. Sex segregation and dress codes within shelters

act as barriers for people who identify as transgendered in need of housing. “As a result, transgender youth and adults, who identify as or express a gender that is different from their birth sex, can experience extreme difficulties in obtaining adequate and safe shelter”(Mottet & Ohle, 2003, p. 1).

LGBTQ youth also experience oppression and discrimination due to their sexual orientation. The National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce estimates that the amount of LGBTQ homeless youth in the U.S. ranges from 35% to 50% of all homeless youth (Ray, 2006). According to the Center for American Progress (2010), the estimated amount of homeless youth in the U.S. is between 1.6 million to 2.8 million. LGBTQ youth are likely to contend with negative reactions to their sexual orientation from family members. These reactions might include physical, sexual, or emotional abuse and the possibility of being kicked out of their homes.

Whether LGBTQ youth run away or are thrown out, the streets hold another set of dangers. According to the National Runaway Switchboard, “LGBT homeless youth are seven times more likely than their heterosexual peers to be victims of a crime” (Ray, 2006, p. 3).

As mentioned in the previous section, homeless youth are exposed to a variety of detrimental behaviors once on the street and may turn to substance abuse, survival sex, and prostitution as a means for survival. Homeless youth who identify as LGBTQ deal with the same dangers as homeless youth who identify as heterosexual, but their risk for sexual violence is much higher.

## SEXUAL VIOLENCE, HOUSING AND DISABILITIES

Housing and sexual violence are intricately connected for people with disabilities. According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (2010) Resident Characteristics Report, 34% of residents living in public housing have a disability.

People with disabilities are at an increased risk of sexual violence. “Women reporting severe disability impairments were four times more likely to be sexually assaulted than women reporting no disabilities” (Casteel, Martin, Smith, Gurka, & Kupper, 2008, p. 90).

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34% OF RESIDENTS LIVING  
IN PUBLIC HOUSING  
HAVE A DISABILITY.

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Many people with disabilities, whether physical, developmental, or psychological, rely on the assistance of family or paid caretakers. People with disabilities often depend on their caretakers to help secure housing and basic necessities. According to Elman (2005), “The overwhelming majority of perpetrators are male caregivers, a significant portion of whom are paid service providers who commit their crimes in disability service settings” (p. 4).

If a caretaker sexually assaults a person with a disability, the survivor might not be believed if they choose to disclose the abuse. If the perpetrator is a family member, the survivor



could potentially lose their housing if they report the abuse.

People with disabilities are vulnerable to those in closest proximity. Keeley's (2006) study revealed that "of the women reporting rape or sexual assault by a landlord, 30 percent had one or more physical or mental disabilities" (p. 444). A person with a disability rarely has the opportunity to disclose the abuse because caretakers are with them most, if not all, of the time. If accessible housing were widely available for people with disabilities they would likely to experience a lower risk for victimization.

## SEXUAL VIOLENCE, HOUSING AND OPPRESSION

Sexual violence as it relates to housing is a clear example of systemic oppression. Low-income and public housing often serve as safety nets for the most oppressed citizens in U.S. society. Women, people of color, people in poverty, people who identify as LGBTQ, runaway youth, and persons with disabilities experience diminished access to basic resources. This predisposes marginalized groups to reduced opportunities for housing. Therefore, marginalized groups often reside in public or



low-income housing and as a result, experience greater risk for sexual victimization.

While the connections between oppression, housing, and sexual violence are undeniable, there is much that advocates can do to ensure the safety of victims/survivors. Advocates can explore legal protections and an array of strategies from the individual to the societal levels.

## SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND HOMELESSNESS

The importance of adequate shelter is demonstrated in overwhelming statistics about hate crimes directed towards homeless people. The National Coalition for the Homeless (2009) points out that between 1999 and 2009 there have been 990 violent acts committed against homeless people and as a result, 244 deaths. These acts are often motivated by an array of factors including racism, sexism, heterosexism, ethnocentrism, and discrimination based on religion (NCH, 2009). Once a person becomes homeless their vulnerability to crime and victimization skyrockets. Homeless people do not have basic protections that housing would provide. Instead they must contend with the possibility of becoming a target of a hate crime, or other victimization, due to their increased vulnerability.

Sexual violence can be both a precursor to and a potential result of homelessness. People lose their homes due to the traumatization of sexual assault, which is often then compounded by systemic oppression such as racism, classism, sexism, ageism, ableism, and heterosexism.

Once a person becomes homeless, he/she faces a heightened risk of sexual assault. Inadequate housing, or a complete lack thereof, can reduce a person's safety, reinforce trauma, and create a sense of helplessness.

According to a study of homeless and marginally housed people, "32% of women, 27% of men, and 38% of transgendered persons reported either physical or sexual victimization in the previous year" (Kushel et al., 2003, p. 2495). Goodman, Fels, and Glen (2006) indicate that in one large and in-depth study, "92% of a racially diverse sample of homeless mothers had experienced severe physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lives and 43% reported sexual abuse in childhood" (p. 2).

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### SEXUAL VIOLENCE IS BOTH A PRECURSOR TO AND A POTENTIAL RESULT OF HOMELESSNESS.

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"The lifetime risk for violent victimization for homeless women with mental illness is 97%, making sexual violence a normative experience for this population" (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 12). In another study, "13% of homeless women reported having been raped in the past 12 months and half of these were raped at least twice" (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 2).

Men are also affected by the link between homelessness and sexual violence. In a 2002 study of homeless and marginally housed



## RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH

The connections between homelessness and sexual violence are especially pronounced among runaway youth. The National Runaway Switchboard estimates that approximately 1.3 million homeless youth live unsupervised on the streets in abandoned buildings, shelters, transitional housing, with friends or with strangers” (Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs [WCSAP], 2004, p. 1).

Many report leaving home due to sexual abuse. Estes and Weiner (2001) indicate that “61% of homeless girls and 19% of homeless boys report sexual abuse as the reason for leaving home” (p. 52). Homeless youth are five times as likely as youth living in stable homes to report instances of child sexual abuse (Ray, 2006, p. 18).

While sexual violence is often a cause for young people to leave home, it is also a potential consequence of living on the streets. Runaway youth face a heightened risk for multiple victimizations after they leave home. Dr. Ana Mari Cauce explains, “study after study supports two things: that a high percentage of homeless youth have been sexually abused prior to their becoming homeless, and once on the street, they become vulnerable to further sexual exploitation, rape and sexual assault” (WCSAP, 2004, p. 2).

One study of homeless youth found that 32% of those interviewed had been sexually assaulted and 15% of those assaults occurred while living on the streets (WCSAP, 2004). There is also a strong correlation between the age that a youth leaves home and the likelihood of

people, it was discovered that “27.1% of homeless men were sexually or physically assaulted while on the street” (Kushel et al., 2003, p. 2495). Of the 2,577 homeless persons studied, “9.4% of women, 1.4% of men, and 11.9% of transgendered persons” experienced sexual violence within the last year (Kushel et al., 2003, p. 2495). Further, “the rates of sexual assault among men were higher than most estimates among women in the general population” (Kushel et al., 2003, p. 2496). Overall, this study revealed that “marginally housed men and women reported significantly less victimization than those who were homeless” (Kushel et al., 2003, p. 2,495).

experiencing sexual violence, “those who left at younger ages, say 13, 14, or 15 [year olds,] were more likely to be sexually victimized than those who left at [age] 17” (WCSAP, 2004, p. 2).

Many homeless youth are forced to engage in survival sex in exchange for basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. Survival sex becomes more necessary for youth living on the streets when compared to youth living in shelter: one study found that “27.5% of street youth had engaged in survival sex compared to 9.5% of shelter youth” (WCSAP, 2004, p. 7).

Runaway and homeless youth also face an increased risk for entering the world of trafficking and prostitution. Estes and Weiner

(2001) conducted a study of homeless youth engaged in prostitution and found that 162,000 homeless youth are victims of commercial sexual exploitation in the U.S. each year (as cited in WCSAP, 2004, p. 14).

Additionally, “thirty percent of shelter youth and 70% of street youth are victims of commercial sexual exploitation” (WCSAP, 2004, p. 14). Lacking the basic structure and protection that housing provides, Estes and Weiner explain that “these children often see themselves as their only supporter. Under such circumstances, some fall into prostitution as a way to survive or as a way to get the things they want or need” (2001, p. 3).





## SUBSIDIZED HOUSING PROGRAMS

There is great variability in housing programs for people who are experiencing economic insecurity or poverty. Due to the links between sexual violence and housing/homelessness, it is helpful for advocates to understand the various types of subsidized housing available, as well as their strengths and limitations. Single black and Latina women and children, people with disabilities, and older adults are disproportionately represented in subsidized housing; therefore, advocacy can be most effective when informed by the links between sexual violence, housing/homelessness, and oppressions such as racism, classism, sexism, ageism, and ableism.

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD], “public housing was established to provide decent and safe rental housing for eligible low-income families, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.” (n.d., para. 1). Types of public housing include single family homes, housing for multiple families, and apartments for people with disabilities and for people in later life. There are approximately 1.2 million households living in public housing units, managed by some 3,300 housing authorities (HUD, n.d., para. 1)

On a national level, residents of public housing tend to be predominantly white (51%) or Black/African American (45%) (U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD], 2010). In terms of annual income, the majority of residents (55%) are considered extremely low income. Their average annual income is below 30% of the national median



income. The largest percentages of families living in public housing (36%) are comprised of female headed households with children. Thirty-four percent of public housing households include a resident with a disability. Thirty-nine percent of public housing residents are under the age of 18, while 32% are older adults.

Residents of the Section 8 program can access housing in two different ways. The **Section 8 tenant-based voucher program** gives the tenant a voucher that they can use to secure housing in the private market. Participants of the Section 8 tenant-based voucher program identify as



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## THERE ARE APPROXIMATELY 1.2 MILLION HOUSEHOLDS LIVING IN PUBLIC HOUSING UNITS.

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primarily white (51%) or Black/African American (45%) (HUD, 2010). Sixty-three percent of tenants are considered extremely low income. Almost half of the participants (49%) within the tenant-based voucher program are female-headed households with children. Almost half of residents in this program are under the age of 18 while 19% are older adults. Thirty-nine percent of these households include a family member with a disability (HUD, 2010).

The **Section 8 project-based voucher program** provides a subsidy to the property owner, as opposed to the tenant. Therefore, the subsidy stays with the property, not with the tenant, should the tenant move. Participants in this program are mainly white (57%) or Black/African American (37%) (HUD, 2010). Sixty-three percent of tenants are considered extremely low income. Their average annual income is below 30% of the national median income. Female-headed families with children comprise 29% of these households while 27% are composed of non-elderly residents with children. Thirty-six percent of project-based voucher program residents are under the age of 18 and 36% are older adults. Forty-one percent of households in the program include a family member with a disability (HUD, 2010).

### SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND SUBSIDIZED HOUSING

DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2002) explain that “demographic, economic, and geographic factors associated with high incidence of violent victimization of women appear to find a nexus in public housing” (p. 27). Further, they explain “women in North American urban public housing projects, living under conditions of poverty, seem to suffer from intimate violence at a greater rate than many other women, even though relatively few of them live in traditional marital relationships” (p. 27). Victims/survivors of sexual violence who live in subsidized housing are often forced to remain in that housing, regardless of threats to their personal safety.

One advocate from a national housing survey described a typical situation for victims/survivors of sexual violence: “One survivor who was assaulted in her apartment was unable to move because her Section 8 was connected to that landlord and that building. If she tried to move, she would lose her Section 8 benefits” (National Sexual Violence Resource Center [NSVRC], 2009, p. 40). The type of housing assistance that a person receives can force them to live in an unsafe area, sometimes placing them at a greater risk of sexual violence and revictimization.

## SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND PRIVATE HOUSING

Challenges with safe and affordable housing are not limited to victims/survivors who live in traditional public and low-income housing. Victims/survivors in private housing also face difficulties with absentee landlords, unsafe buildings, and financial strain as barriers to moving. Or, their housing may be contingent upon their relationships with the individuals perpetrating sexual violence against them. This can be especially true for victims of sexual violence in intimate partners relationships, child and adolescent sexual abuse victims, people with disabilities, and people later in life.

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58% OF RESPONDENTS  
REPORTED INCIDENTS OF  
TENANTS BEING SEXUALLY  
ASSAULTED BY LANDLORDS.

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One advocate from a national survey explains: “Some victims decide to end relationships with their roommate, significant other, sibling, etc., and are unable to do so if they are on the lease. Other times, they are unable to move because they are not able to afford rent on their own. If the sexual assault occurred in [the] victim’s [residence] roommates may decide to move out and [leaving the] victim unable to afford rent” (NSVRC, 2009, p. 38). Even within the private housing realm, financial strain and policies can prevent survivors from obtaining safe housing.

## SEXUAL ASSAULTS PERPETRATED BY LANDLORDS

Tenants in both private and subsidized housing are subject to sexual violence at the hands of landlords and property managers. In a national study, Keeley (2006) interviewed sexual assault advocates to learn about victims/survivors’ experiences with housing. This study found that “58% of respondents reported incidents of tenants being sexually assaulted by landlords” (p. 443). Of those, 79% of women reported a range of behaviors by landlords preceding the sexual assaults, including “failing, such as by refusing to repair locks or to supply heat or hot water, to make the living place safe despite the tenant’s request; sexually propositioning the tenant; stalking the tenant; or engaging in unwanted sexual contact with the tenant” (Keeley, 2006, p. 443).

After the assaults many tenants are unable to move and must continue to live in an unsafe environment. Keeley (2006) indicates that “71% of women who were sexually assaulted or raped wanted to move after the incident but could not either because they had nowhere else to go or because they could not leave without financial penalty” (p. 444). This poses immense problems for people in poverty and those living in subsidized housing. “According to the survey, 45% of women who were sexually assaulted or raped lived in some kind of subsidized housing, such as public housing, Section 8 voucher-subsidized housing, or project-based Section 8” (Keeley, 2006, p. 444). These tenants face more pronounced consequences if they resist the advances of landlords or property managers



because of economic disadvantages. “For low-income single women facing loss of housing or homelessness, there is more pressure to accede to landlord demands or not to report a sexual assault or rape” (Keeley, 2006, p. 445).

## SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN RURAL HOUSING

Housing problems are heightened within rural communities, due in part to the scarcity of housing stock and homeless shelter options. “According to the 2003 American Housing Survey indicators of housing adequacy, 1.5 million or 6.6% of rural homes are considered substandard” (Housing Assistance Council, 2006, p. 3). Rural residents typically have

greater problems obtaining employment, finding transportation, and accessing social services. Therefore, the likelihood of obtaining safe and adequate housing is diminished due to lower incomes and the low population density of the area.

The Housing Assistance Council explains that, “because the rural housing stock is generally of lower quality, rural renters are twice as likely to live in substandard housing, and alternative housing may be too far or inaccessible because of transportation obstacles” (p. 444). These factors heighten the risk for sexual victimization within rural communities.

Homelessness in rural communities is a very real problem, but often hidden, with individuals





staying in abandoned farm buildings, fields, vehicles or camping or couch surfing with family or friends. Therefore, the data available on homelessness is somewhat limited and most likely underestimates the actual prevalence. According to Robertson, Harris, Fritz, Noftsinger, and Fischer (2007), “at least 67,000 adults may have been homeless in rural areas of the U.S. on any given night in 2005” (p. 5). An estimated 7% of the nation’s homeless population live in rural areas (National Alliance to End Homelessness [NAEH], 2010).

Victims of sexual violence in rural communities must contend with scarcity of social services as well as housing options. “The availability of services for women and children in rural communities is affected by issues such as high poverty rates and unemployment, which contribute to family stress, isolation, limited access, lack of transportation and communication resources, and family and cultural barriers” (Openshaw & Halvorson, 2005, p. 212).

Even if services are available for survivors in rural areas, the lack of basic needs, such as housing, acts a barrier to the healing process. According to Logan (2005) “rural women indicated that without housing, using other services to cope with the violence was not likely to be helpful” (p. 600). Poverty is more pronounced in rural areas. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness [NAEH] (2010), “the national poverty rate is 12.9% whereas the poverty rate in rural areas is 15.1 percent [sic], and 189 of the 200 poorest counties are rural” (para. 5).





## HOUSING AND PERPETRATION

Another area for concern in rural areas relates to the housing regulations for perpetrators of sexual violence. According to Zandbergen and Hart (2006), “policy makers have passed residency restriction legislation that precludes sex offenders from living within certain distances of places where children gather in hopes of decreasing the likelihood that they will become victims of future sex crimes” (p. 2). These residency restrictions require perpetrators to live at least 1000 to 2000 feet away from places such as bus stops, schools, and day care centers.

This pushes sex offenders out of more urban areas and into more rural communities. “When considering all the residency restrictions, housing choices for sexual offenders are very limited, and what limited options remain mostly consist of rural/agricultural areas” (Zandbergen

& Hart, 2006, p. 15).

The influx of sex offenders has drastic consequences for rural communities, especially those lacking basic resources such as transportation systems, human service organizations, employment and housing resources, and a responsive police presence. The research also indicates that recidivism is more likely to occur when a sexual offender is socially isolated and lacking access to basic support systems. Zandbergen and Hart (2006) indicate, “isolation, financial and emotional hardships, and a decrease in stability have been linked to recidivism.” “Limiting housing options for sex offenders to a few locations in low-density rural areas may produce such outcomes” (p. 20). Therefore, rural communities, whom are already lacking the resources to deal with sexual violence, might be faced with an increase in crimes of a sexual nature.

# LEGAL PROTECTIONS FOR HOUSING AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL



**I**t is important that advocates be aware and knowledgeable about the laws that protect victims/survivors and the housing resources that are available to communities. It is equally vital that advocates refer victims/survivors to attorneys who can give them legal advice and litigate their rights.

Advocates can better assist victims/survivors and work towards leveraging housing as a protective factor against sexual violence by building relationships with local attorneys and legal aid organizations. The information in this section provides a brief overview of housing protections available for sexual violence victims and survivors. Advocates can seek more in

depth information and support about legal issues from local legal aid attorneys, the Victim Rights Law Center, Legal Momentum, the National Women’s Law Center, National Crime Victim Law Institute, and other legal authorities at the local, state, and national levels.

The Victims Rights Law Center (2007) indicates:

***There are various potential bases for avoiding or contesting a victim's eviction, including housing provisions contained in the Violence Against Women Act 2005 Reauthorization, as well as disparate impact arguments under the Fair Housing Act and discrimination claims under the Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, among others (p. 291).***

This allows for different combinations of federal and state legislation to be used depending on the circumstances and location of a specific case. This section will briefly highlight key legislation that may protect sexual violence victims'/survivors' housing rights. For more information about these laws, see the National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women's (VAWnet) special collection on housing and sexual violence at [http://new.vawnet.org/category/index\\_pages.php?category\\_id=1121#1132](http://new.vawnet.org/category/index_pages.php?category_id=1121#1132).

The Violence Against Women Act is federal legislation that addresses the complex needs of women affected by domestic violence, sexual violence, stalking, and dating violence. While housing protections are currently limited to victims/survivors of domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking, attorneys may argue that sexual violence victims/survivors should be included due to the comprehensiveness of VAWA's Purpose.

The Fair Housing Act, also known as Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act, "prohibits discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of dwellings, and in other housing-related transactions, based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status, and handicap [disability]" (HUD,



2009, para. 1). The Fair Housing Act may be used to protect victims/survivors in the housing arena on the basis of discrimination.

Another legal option to ensure access to housing for sexual violence victims/survivors is Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Section 504 "is a national law that protects qualified individuals from discrimination based on their disability" (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2006, para. 1). This particular act is only useful within the public housing arena, as it applies only to programs that are funded through the federal government.

If a victim/survivor experiences any type of disability as a result of their victimization, the Rehabilitation Act can be employed to protect their access to safe public housing. Survivors with physical and mental disabilities can find much needed protection with this piece of legislation.



## WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO — HOUSING AS A PREVENTION TOOL

Advocates can employ a variety of strategies to address the housing needs of sexual violence victims and survivors and to advocate for access to housing as a key prevention strategy. The resource *Sexual violence and the spectrum of prevention: Towards a community solution* (the *Spectrum*), offers advocates a blueprint to engage in change across systems (Davis, Fujie Parks, & Cohen, 2006).

The *Spectrum* is a tool that can be used to develop a comprehensive approach to preventing sexual violence. The Spectrum incorporates six levels of prevention activities starting with individual knowledge and skills up through influencing public policies and legislation. The basic philosophy of the

Spectrum is that when each level is used in concert with the others to reach an overarching prevention goal, social transformation can occur. “The synergy between the levels also contributes to changes in norms because activities are focused not only on individuals but also on their environments, such as





through organizational practice and policy change” (Davis et al., 2006, p. 6). Through the **Spectrum** advocates can utilize housing as a tool of prevention and address system breakdowns that preclude safety and victimization. “By working at all six levels, communities can design an overall strategy that results in a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts” (Davis et al., 2006, p. 5).

## LEVEL 1: STRENGTHENING INDIVIDUAL KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

The first level of the **Spectrum** focuses on “Strengthening Individual Knowledge and Skills” (Davis et al., 2006, p. 7). Advocates can use this level of prevention in the housing realm in a variety of ways. Advocates can help victims/survivors understand how sexual violence and housing are connected. In addition, advocates can help victims/survivors identify their specific housing needs and resources, evaluate their options, and identify those that are most stable and free from violence.

Advocates can also provide information and educational materials to victims/survivors about their housing rights and legal resources, connecting them with attorneys who can further help. Knowledge of specific housing legislation and protections and relationships with legal aid attorneys in their areas will help advocates become most effective in helping victims/survivors with housing challenges.

Advocates can also collaborate with sex offender treatment providers and other community members to bridge gaps in housing for individuals who have committed past sexual

offenses, as research shows that stable housing can help to prevent recidivism.

Screening and assessing victims’/survivors’ housing resources is the first step of advocacy. Questions might include the following:

- Do you have a safe place to live right now free from violence and abuse?
- Did the sexual violence that you experienced occur in or near your home? (If yes, it is common for people to experience ongoing stress and want to relocate as a result.)
- Are you in need of relocating right now?

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### ADVOCATES CAN HELP VICTIMS/SURVIVORS UNDERSTAND HOW SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND HOUSING ARE CONNECTED.

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The Victim Rights Law Center (2007) explains, “as a preliminary matter, determine if she has a place to live or was homeless [sic], lives in a private or government facility, military base, residential care facilities, specialized treatment programs, private unsubsidized housing, or in one of the various forms of publicly subsidized housing” (p. 282).

Next, the advocate can help the victim/survivor figure out what type of housing will best meet his/her needs (VRLC, 2007). Then the advocate can help the survivor obtain appropriate housing whether by terminating his/her current lease, seeking to transfer the

survivor to a new housing unit, or through seeking assistance for shelter through alliances with local social service providers. Advocates can also help victims/survivors by linking them with legal services.

Any intervention chosen should reflect the victim/survivor's particular cultural context. Advocates should be knowledgeable about the victim/survivor's culture and specific cultural needs. For example, Native Americans require room for the spirit which can affect their housing needs (Curtiss & St. George, n.d.). Cultural accessibility is just as important as the physical safety of the housing.

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ANY INTERVENTION CHOSEN  
SHOULD REFLECT THE  
VICTIM/SURVIVOR'S PARTICULAR  
CULTURAL CONTEXT.

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When advocates understand the particular cultural contexts of the communities they serve, they can more effectively advocate on their behalf. Developing cultural awareness and knowledge is an ongoing and ever-evolving process. However, there are some steps that advocates may find helpful in this journey, including recognizing and being aware of one's biases and prejudices, listening to survivors and learning about their cultures, collaborating with diverse communities in meaningful and sustained ways, and others (Warrier, 2005).

## LEVEL 2: PROMOTING COMMUNITY EDUCATION

The second tier of prevention is "Promoting Community Education" (Davis et al., 2006, p. 7). Advocates can provide information to community members about safe housing and sexual violence. According to one sexual violence advocate, "in the instance of one client, she chose not to report being raped because of the dangerous conditions in her subsidized housing apartment complex. After some counseling, she decided to report the incident to police. Many people that live there have harassed her since finding out, leaving notes under her door and accusing her of being at fault. She has been scared to leave her apartment at all" (NSVRC, 2009, p. 38). There is a great need to educate community members about sexual violence so as not to blame victims/survivors or create further victimization.

Advocates can help spread awareness and teach communities healthy ways of dealing with and preventing sexual violence. Advocates can help community members more clearly see their responsibilities and roles in the prevention of sexual violence. Community-wide education and awareness are vital to improving housing conditions for victims/survivors. These efforts might include public service announcements, speeches by experts in the field, trainings and events hosted by local service providers and coalitions, and public awareness campaigns that engage local citizens and key stakeholders.

Advocates can also incorporate cultural awareness within their work to educate local communities. When approaching prevention

work at the community level it is imperative to understand the cultural context of community members and to integrate that knowledge within any training or outreach efforts. The National Center on Cultural Competence has outlined key components that a culturally competent organization should possess and provides tools and checklists for assessment on their website at <http://nccc.georgetown.edu/foundations/frameworks.html>.

### LEVEL 3: EDUCATING PROVIDERS

The third level of prevention focuses on “Educating Providers” (Davis et al., 2006, p. 7). Housing can also be used as a prevention tool through the education of low-income/public housing providers, funders, housing advocates, advocates for homeless populations, landlords, and other service providers who might work with victims/survivors of sexual violence.

Advocates can work to raise awareness among public housing and landlord communities about their legal obligations to tenants, as well as ways they can contribute to the fight against sexual violence.

Advocates can also reach out to other organizations and inform them of the vital roles they play in the prevention of sexual violence. Advocates can hold training sessions, presentations, and open conversations with rape crisis centers and other human service providers about the intersections between sexual violence, housing, and other oppressions and social struggles. Service providers might include homeless shelter staff, legal aid attorneys, welfare-to-work program







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## ADVOCATES CAN ALSO HELP BUILD AND STRENGTHEN ALLIANCES WITH LOCAL HOMELESS SERVICE PROVIDERS.

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coordinators, child protective service personnel, law enforcement officers, medical providers, and unemployment service agency personnel, among many others.

Education for these providers could include providing trauma-informed services, identifying at-risk populations, facilitating services, and generating new programs to address housing shortages and to prevent sexual violence. Advocates might conduct “cross-training [with] housing and shelter advocates about sexual violence and its link to homelessness and substandard housing to ensure that their residents and clients are linked to rape crisis services and that housing/shelter policies and practices promote a healthy and safe environment, free from sexual violence” (Greco & Dawgert, 2007, p. 49).

Education for service providers could also foster advocacy groups' intent on addressing legislative housing protections for survivors of sexual violence. Through this outreach it is also likely that advocates can form collaborations, which leads into the fourth level of the *Spectrum*.

### LEVEL 4: FOSTERING COALITIONS AND NETWORKS

The fourth tier of prevention includes “Fostering Coalitions and Networks” (Davis

et al., 2006, p. 7). Advocates can use their outreach and education to develop networks, coalitions, and wraparound services to address the housing needs of victims/survivors. Oftentimes, it is most effective to begin with existing relationships and coalitions.

For example, many advocates participate in child welfare, medical, legal, and prevention collaborative groups; bringing housing to the discussion may help expand current coalitions and points of collective advocacy. Coalitions and networks “increase the ‘critical mass’ behind a community effort, help groups to trust one another, and reduce the likelihood of resource squandering through unnecessary competition among groups” (Davis et al., 2006, p. 11). Through the establishment of a supportive network, advocates can bring about change at a faster pace and with more stakeholders.

Advocates can also help build and strengthen with local homeless service providers. Goodman et al. (2006) explain, “Collaborations between homeless providers and rape crisis advocates is critical to meet the needs of homeless victims of sexual violence” (p. 8).

Through collaboration, services can be tailored to more effectively meet the needs of sexual violence victims/survivors who are struggling with access to housing. “Organizations must examine and reframe their practices

and protocols based on an understanding that most homeless women are survivors of trauma, and are likely to be revictimized if not given emotional support, the ability to have some control over their daily lives, and a safe and calm place to stay 24 hours a day” (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 8).

Advocates can clearly facilitate the needs of homeless victims/survivors and support the systemic changes necessary to enhance homeless services for victims/survivors.

## LEVEL 5: CHANGING ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES

The fifth tier of the *Spectrum* focuses on “Changing Organizational Practices” to prevent sexual violence (Davis et al., 2006, p. 7). Given that housing can be a protective factor against sexual violence perpetration and victimization, public policy provides a critical platform for advocates to engage in the primary prevention of sexual violence. By advocating for policies and resources that expand affordable housing,

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

The following questions may help administrators when examining their agency policies and finding ways to integrate housing advocacy into their agencies.

1. What assumptions are behind agency policies with regard to access to services, the client population's needs and experiences, etc?
2. Is the client population reflective of the actual population in the community? Are there groups going underserved?
3. What barriers might obstruct a person's ability to access services? How does location impact access? The physical building? Attitudes and competencies of staff? Are centers accessible via public transportation? Are bus tokens and petty funds available for buses and taxis? Are services offered at various times and in accessible locations? Is childcare provided?
4. What referrals and services are available to meet the complex needs of victims/survivors struggling with housing? What

- agreements exist or can be made with allied organizations and agencies to ensure that the needs of victims/survivors are met?
5. What partnerships need to be forged in the community to bridge gaps and maximize strengths?
6. Are staff prepared to address the housing needs of victims/survivors and communities? What training and technical assistance is available?
7. How can housing advocacy competence and services be measured and evaluated? Can housing advocacy be added to work plans and performance reviews?
8. How are the voices of victims/survivors and communities involved in shaping intervention and prevention around housing advocacy? (Greco & Dawgert, 2007, p. 40)



advocates can work to prevent sexual violence from occurring in the first place and also to address the immediate needs of victims.

Once advocates spread knowledge and awareness and create coalitions, it is possible to implement cross-systems changes to address the needs of victims/survivors of sexual violence and to prevent sexual violence. Advocates can help foster policy and programmatic practice change within public housing arenas and social service agencies to help create more responsive and informed responses to sexual violence and strategies to prevent its occurrence.

Advocates can also evaluate the policies and practices of their specific organization. When rape crisis centers examine their internal policies and procedures, they are better able to maximize services and ensure such services are accessible to all victims/survivors. Advocates can also evaluate their agencies level of cultural competence to aid in the prevention of sexual violence.

Advocates can compare their agency's service provision with current research on best practices within the field. Consultations and brainstorming sessions can enable systems to evaluate their current approaches to sexual violence prevention and housing accessibility within the scope of their work.

Once these approaches and strategies have been evaluated for efficacy, advocates can help incorporate more inclusive and prevention-focused organizational practices. Davis, Fujie Parks, and Cohen (2006) indicate that an organization can "set expectations for, incentivize, and model behavior; serve as an



example for other organizations; inform related policy; build awareness and buy-in; and affect norms" (p. 12).

Advocates can help catalyze these system changes by establishing relationships with organizations and educating them about their important role within the anti-sexual violence movement.



## LEVEL 6: INFLUENCING POLICIES AND LEGISLATION

As stated previously, advocates can engage in policy advocacy at local, state, and national levels as a way to increase access to safe housing, but also to prevent sexual violence. The final level of the *Spectrum* includes “Influencing Policies and Legislation” (Davis et al., 2006, p. 7).

Advocates can help to prevent sexual violence by influencing key pieces of legislation that address the needs of victims/survivors and increase access to safe, affordable housing.

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EDUCATION, AWARENESS, AND  
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Advocates can also develop relationships with concerned legislators and educate them about the needs of sexual violence victims/survivors and how housing can serve as a protection against such violence.

By engaging the previous six levels of the *Spectrum*, the stage will be set to advocate for greater housing protections and resources for individuals and communities, including victims/survivors and to expand prevention efforts. Education, awareness, and the formation of coalitions will serve to bring about much needed change within the legislative arena and in the lives of those affected by sexual violence.



**T**he connections between sexual violence and housing are overwhelmingly clear. Complex relationships exist between housing, sexual assault, power, and oppression. Homelessness and sexual violence often affect the most vulnerable members of society – those targeted by racism , sexism, classism, ageism, ableism, and heterosexism.

When access to basic needs such as housing and safety are compromised, individuals can experience heightened risks of violence. The disproportionate representation of marginalized groups within subsidized housing and the homeless population emphasizes the important role that advocates can play as social change agents.

Access to safe, affordable housing can be a critical protective factor from sexual violence. Advocates can be instrumental in preventing sexual violence by engaging the *Spectrum* and partnering with local housing providers, attorneys, and allied groups and in engaging in cross-training, community education, and other collaborative efforts.

Through knowledge of current protective legislation, alliances with local attorneys and human service providers, and a focus on prevention, advocates can help victims/survivors to overcome the constraints of inadequate or nonexistent housing resources and do much to advocate for the expansion of safe, affordable housing stock as a way to prevent sexual violence from occurring in the first place. The rape crisis movement has fought against oppression and abuses of power from its inception. Through effective advocacy and empowerment, advocates can affect change from the individual level up through the political realm.



## PUBLICATION INFORMATION

In 2008, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center partnered with the Victim Rights Law Center, the National Sexual Assault Coalition Resource Sharing Project, the Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault, the University of New Hampshire, and the Pennsylvania Community Legal Services to develop and conduct a national survey on housing and sexual violence. For more details, see *Housing and Sexual Violence: Findings from National Survey* at [www.nsvrc.org/publications/housing-and-sexual-violence-overview-national-survey](http://www.nsvrc.org/publications/housing-and-sexual-violence-overview-national-survey)

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**National Sexual Violence Resource Center**

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC), founded by the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape in July 2000, is the nation's principle source for information regarding all aspects of sexual violence. We are committed to assisting the field through Collaboration, Prevention and Resources.

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