Women made it clear that when they felt constricted and disrespected by programs, they avoided reaching out for assistance. Interviews with staff reinforced the idea that the relationship between staff and residents is directly linked to survivors’ outcomes and ultimate success.

DASH also works to encourage a low-barrier approach among other service providers in the City, through training and technical assistance. Many providers are responding, and the majority of those interviewed expressed gratitude for DASH’s courage to introduce and model an approach based on mutual respect between staff and residents. One provider reported that their acceptance policies are changing because of DASH’s demonstrated success. Housing women who are struggling with multiple challenges, such as currently using alcohol or drugs, can be very difficult. Ultimately, DASH is invested in creating a community and larger culture where safe housing is a right shared by everyone – regardless of their circumstances, challenges, or demeanor. While there are many common effects of domestic violence, every survivor is unique and on her own journey of healing. Helping survivors in this process requires practical and explicit input from survivors, their families to live. Founders and staff understood early on that services for survivors must be informed by the experiences of the residents themselves and take into consideration the trauma many have lived with for years. Services must be practical and fill a material need, but importantly, must be offered in a caring, respectful manner and in an environment that fosters self-determination.

DASH strives to eliminate the many barriers that prevent survivors from accessing safe housing, and works to ensure that every survivor has access to the tools and resources necessary to fulfill their goals and dreams. All of DASH’s work is based on seven integral values: Sovereignty, Integrity, Empowerment, Compassion, Professionalism, Partnership, and Centering. These values guide and influence every organizational activity, from hiring staff and recruiting Board members, to daily practices and policies.

DASH recently celebrated its fifth anniversary. In anticipation of this milestone, staff set out to understand the effectiveness of their approach and hear from survivors about their experiences trying to accessing housing in DC. Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted by an independent consultant in the Fall of 2011, with women residing in shelter and housing (both in DASH and other programs), as well as with government officials, homeless and domestic violence advocates,
WHAT SURVIVORS SAY

The negative effects of domestic violence are often complicated and impact many aspects of survivors’ lives. Women suffer physical injuries that can take years to heal, and many experience homelessness or housing instability as a direct result of the havoc their abusers have wreaked on their credit, rental and employment histories. Many survivors identify the emotional consequences of abuse as the most painful. They talk of living through years of daily degradation, being insulted and cursed at, accused of being stupid and ugly, isolated from family and other social networks, and having their every movement controlled. They also described the “crazy making”, where relentless verbal abuse becomes their reality and eventually they believe they are worthless and incompetent. Survivors escape abusive relationships seeking solace; a respectful and caring place where they can regain their sense of worth and purpose, and exercise autonomy. Unfortunately, service delivery systems often unintentionally re-victimize survivors. Mainstream programs may treat a victim as though she is incapable of making ordinary daily decisions, instead of understanding she is a resilient survivor who has been harmed by someone else’s behavior. These programs often impose unnecessary rules that restrict women’s actions and schedules and seem disconnected to safety, such as monitoring the length of time for phone calls, limiting access to the kitchen, or rationing basic supplies such as shampoo and diapers.

Survivors in DC identify these policies as obstacles for accessing housing. Many experience repeated homelessness and talk about the futile process of trying to access services that result in lasting change. They move constantly, in each for very short periods of time. And while the lack of affordable long-term housing contributes to this sequence, programmatic barriers are a significant factor as well. Survivors talked about negative shelter experiences and not feeling safe in mainstream programs. Many said they were unable to effectively work on their long-term goals because services did not address the trauma they had experienced. The irony is that women talked explicitly about avoiding future shelters, even simultaneously having no other viable options.

“People in the system become commodities or entities of paper as opposed to real people. We’re not pieces of paper; these are people’s lives - with messiness and complications. Those are life files that you’re handling.” - SURVIVOR

“I was approved for a unit the same day I applied! This was after a month of calling other referrals and turning no where. I was ready to give up and return to the violence. But DASH was on point when they heard about my situation.” - SURVIVOR

“Some of the staff act like the money for services is coming out of their own pockets. You go in and ask for help, and they act like you’re putting them out.” - SURVIVOR

“I feel like I’m being treated like a child.” - SURVIVOR

A few women actually expressed feeling safer on the street than they were in shelters, especially when homeless and equipped to address the effects of violence. Some programs demand participation in counseling or other classes as a prerequisite for program acceptance, whereas others require survivors to terminate all contact with their abusers as a condition of receiving for services. This creates an untenable scenario for survivors who have court orders for visitation, support for women maintaining some degree of contact may actually be safer than not. In general, women experienced a sense of indifference or superiority from shelter staff; at a time when they needed kindness and validation, they reported feeling nameless and judged.

Women also commented on how copious program rules and regulations made them feel controlled and victimized, much like they had with their abusers. While some shelters, or DASH programs, made people feel like they could be adults, where they can be adults, where they have their rules and they are changing them every day. You take one step forward and you have to take two steps back. Like someone is pulling you down.” - Survivor

Women also discussed the challenges of being treated exactly the same across different unique situations and needs, and their frustration spending energy on trying to meet programmatic expectations, and service requirements that they found ineffective. Consistent with previous research, most survivors identified practical and material support as the most helpful, especially help with a housing unit, household goods, clothing and financial assistance. However, most programs mandate participation in a certain number of weeks or months prior, or file for a protection order, or attend counseling sessions or groups in order to be eligible. As long as that unit isn’t a reality, a homeless survivor can be housed by DASH the same day she applies. For the women in DASH’s programs, this approach makes all the difference in their ability to maintain housing and safety. They spoke about the ease of getting into DASH and how that fact alone kept them from returning to their abuser.

The majority of women at DASH reported feeling safer than they did where they were living prior. Importantly, survivors in the DASH programs identified exactly how they felt respected. While less tangible than being safely housed, the way shelter staff treated them, and the program atmosphere directly contributed to their ability to work toward their goals.