



Safe, Accessible Housing for Survivors: The Low-Barrier Approach

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.

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 supports and resources including housing, provided with flexibility, patience and compassion. DASH continues to enhance their services with explicit input from survivors, and lead a safe housing movement driven by survivor's voices and founded on mutual respect.

“In many ways, DASH has surpassed my expectations. They ask my thoughts and that is therapeutic. It’s more than having my opinion count for something, it’s having ME count.” - SURVIVOR

“This is a serious lifestyle change. I’m no longer in a submissive role. I used to fear I would be hit if I was 15 minutes late from the grocery store. Now I’m responsible for myself. I feel liberated being away from all the rules at my house.” - SURVIVOR

“Feels like a safe haven, very comfortable. Feels good to have words of encouragement.” - SURVIVOR

“DASH was very accepting - they treated me like an adult. I am already formed so I didn’t need a lot of help, just a supportive place to live. And DASH came through with shining colors.” - SURVIVOR

“I was staying at a different shelter, but the staff were rude and nasty. It was very hard to parent while I was there because I felt judged about everything. All the residents felt this way. I ended up leaving but my credit is bad and I’ve had trouble finding housing. At DASH I feel respected. They’re helping me get to the next point, but not telling me what to do” - SURVIVOR

“We’re usually critical of service providers but DASH is different - they offer low barrier housing, voluntary support services, they really set the tone and culture of respect for participants and victims. And the model comes from the top down - from DASH management, which is invested in this approach.” - LEGAL SERVICES PROVIDER

“Before coming to DASH I was worried about how I would be treated. The last shelter I was at was as controlling as my abuser. Staff were mentally abusive, they seemed to be just there to get a paycheck. I had to clock in and clock out - like I was in prison but my only crime was having been abused. I was worried about this happening again, but my worries haven’t come true. The staff here [DASH] never overcrowd me.” - SURVIVOR

“The culture of DASH is supportive and respectful and that goes a long way, particularly for someone who has been pushed down, controlled and mistreated. It is essential for helping someone overcome their experience and regain independence.” - DASH STAFF

“They actualize their mission - in real practice not just rhetoric. They are thoughtful about making choices - a lot of programs say they want to empower women but DASH actually set up their program to do that.” - SERVICE PROVIDER

“I really appreciate DASH’s services, I admire them a lot and will always refer clients to them. That is a big deal and I don’t say it lightly; I would stop referring to an organization in a heartbeat if they didn’t treat the clients well.” - SERVICE PROVIDER

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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 District. However, DASH aims to provide more than a safe place for survivors and 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,



housing providers, and attorneys. During these conversations, survivors talked at length about:

- 1 Their perceived lack of safety and confidentiality in shelters not designed to specifically serve survivors of domestic and sexual violence (i.e. mainstream programs);
- 2 Challenges accessing both emergency shelter and longer-term housing, due to multiple and confusing application procedures and eligibility criteria; and
- 3 Difficulties residing in housing programs with numerous rules and regulations that make it challenging to succeed.

When asked what programs could do to mitigate these barriers, survivors expressed the need for services that are accessible and appealing. They identified minimal eligibility and acceptance criteria, respectful staff who are knowledgeable about the consequences of trauma, and individualized support that is relevant to each survivors' circumstances as key elements of program accessibility. The highlights of that feedback, and DASH's efforts to meet those needs, are included here.

WHAT SURVIVORS SAY

The negative effects of domestic violence are often complicated and impact many aspects of victims' 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 as a means of exerting power and control. However, many survivors identify the emotional consequences of abuse as the most pervasive and damaging. 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 move controlled and dictated. 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 calm 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 unconnected 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 shelter stays, while simultaneously having no other viable options.

"I have been homeless for 2 months. I don't like going to shelters - there are too many rules and you are isolated. I'd rather be outside than go to a shelter. I'd rather be on the streets. I have never had a good shelter experience." - SURVIVOR

"I would not go to a shelter. I'd rather be outside, sleeping." - SURVIVOR

"I was a victim of an assault. I can't get the pieces together in my head to heal when I don't feel safe and stable." - SURVIVOR

"We're not homeless because of the economy or because we're stupid, we've been through horrible situations. I need a program that understands the difference." - SURVIVOR

"They [housing providers] all 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

"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

"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

"Yes, I feel safe. How could I not with all the cameras around?" - SURVIVOR

"A staff person will tell us when it's time to go to bed. No exceptions. Even for a grown woman, whose already been through a lot of trauma, whose already spent years being told what to do." - SURVIVOR

"I feel like I'm being treated like a child." - SURVIVOR

"Homelessness for young women is so overwhelming, it's heartbreaking. Living pillow to post and there is no end to that type of life; they have nowhere to eat or bathe. We need better shelters - that are safe and provide families with their OWN space and privacy, and don't impose a lot of rules. A place where they can be adults, where you can feel free to be you." - SURVIVOR

"I think they [shelter programs] have to have the groups to meet their guidelines. They ask us what we want for the groups but there is no follow through. I've been here for almost three months and only four of the weekly groups have been helpful. That's a lot of wasted time." - SURVIVOR

"Staff should spend less time on rules and curfews, and more time helping me find housing." - SURVIVOR

"I'm grateful to be here because I didn't have anywhere else to go. But I'll be glad when I have a room that's bigger than the size of a closet. When I can wake up and get my own breakfast ... have visitors in my own home." - SURVIVOR

"I was approved for a unit the same day I applied! This was after a month of calling other referrals and getting nowhere. I was ready to give up and return to the violence. But DASH was on point when they heard about my situation." - SURVIVOR

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A few women actually expressed feeling safer on the street than in shelters, especially in those not equipped to address the effects of violence. Some programs demand participation in counseling or other services as a prerequisite for program acceptance, whereas others require survivors to terminate all contact with their abusers as a condition of receiving services. This creates an untenable scenario for survivors who have court orders for visitation, and/or for whom 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 said they felt safe in certain shelters, others felt that their freedom was unreasonably compromised. They compared shelter stays to prison, describing fences, gates, complicated rules and curfews, and having to sign in and out every time they entered or exited the building, even if just for a cigarette break. A number of women questioned the efficacy and relevance of these restrictions. They questioned outright how rules such as limiting when and where residents can eat and drink, or when they had to go to sleep, related to their goals of independence, emotional healing, and economic stability.

Women also discussed the challenges of being treated exactly the same, despite their unique situations and needs, and their frustration spending energy complying with rules, programmatic expectations, and service requirements that they found ineffective. Consistent with previous

research, most survivors identified practical and material support as the most helpful, such as the housing unit, household goods, clothing and financial assistance. However, most programs mandate participation in a variety of support groups and case management services as a condition of receiving those practical services. Some programs issue written warnings for non-attendance, and a certain number of warnings results in administrative hearings and/or service termination. Ultimately, these practices divert important time and resources away from addressing survivors' real needs and goals, such as finding permanent housing and employment.

THE DASH MODEL

Recognizing the need for trauma-informed care and a compassionate environment, DASH works to provide low-barrier, individualized support with minimal rules and no mandated services. This accessibility is as crucial as the actual availability of the housing. Survivors are not required to be sober for 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 a unit is available, 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 also spoke about how they felt respected. While less tangible than being safely housed, their experiences with staff and the program atmosphere directly contributed to their ability to work toward their goals.