



THE ADVOCACY STATION

Housing and Collaboration

WCSAP has compiled a collection of information and resources to help sexual assault advocates provide effective housing advocacy and support. This information will be most useful to newer advocates or advocates that have had limited experience providing housing support. If you would like any additional information, have questions, or would like to provide feedback on future topics related to housing, please contact advocacy@wcsap.org

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948, addresses the fact that having a “standard of living adequate for the health and well-being” is an inalienable right for all people. Having a safe place to call home is something all people deserve, yet for many sexual assault survivors this feels out of reach.

The Complexity of Housing Needs

Support and advocacy around housing is complex due to the fact that the connections between housing and sexual violence are multi-faceted. Survivors will reach out to advocates with a range of needs because their housing can be affected by so many different factors. A survivor may come to an advocate for help gathering money to pay next month’s rent. Money could be an issue because of an inability to work due to the impact of trauma, or perhaps the work environment was no longer a safe place. Someone may come forward seeking assistance in moving in to a new place, or relocating to a new town. In this situation not only is money a barrier, but the landlord has refused to let the survivor out of his or her lease agreement. Maybe the person you are working with is homeless and is looking for ways to find safe, stable housing. This is just

a very small example of the different housing situations that advocates can help survivors navigate.

While there are state and national laws, community resources, and housing programs crafted to help people overcome housing barriers, creative advocacy and community partnerships are necessary to insure that these are viable options for the people we work with. Many misconceptions about sexual violence persist and may impact the type of help a survivor receives when reaching out for assistance. This is why addressing the housing needs of sexual violence survivors, as well as providing education and awareness on the connections between homelessness and sexual violence, is a critical component of both our intervention and prevention work. As one program manager stated:

“I think there is a common misperception that if the perpetrator isn't in the home, the survivor must be safe. I think it is essential to ask the survivor if they feel safe, because for many it may not be a physical danger, but [a feeling of being unsafe] as a result of the trauma.”

The scope of the problem can be difficult to pinpoint, but the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) has compiled some very telling numbers.

- 92% of homeless mothers report severe physical or sexual violence during their lives, with 43% reporting childhood sexual abuse (Browne & Bassuk, 1997).
- 61% of homeless girls and 19% of homeless boys report sexual abuse as the reason for leaving their homes (Estes & Weiner, 2001).
- In a national study of sexual assault advocates, 58% of the respondents reported incidents of tenants being sexually assaulted by landlords (Keeley, 2006).

- In a study of African American women, 76% attributed their rape to the riskiness of their living situations (West, 2006).
- 20% of homeless adolescents sell sexual favors for food and shelter (Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Johnson, 2002).

NSVRC's paper *Overview of National Survey: January 2010* share's qualitative stories collected from advocates across the country that participated in a 2008 survey. Respondents shared stories with themes of:

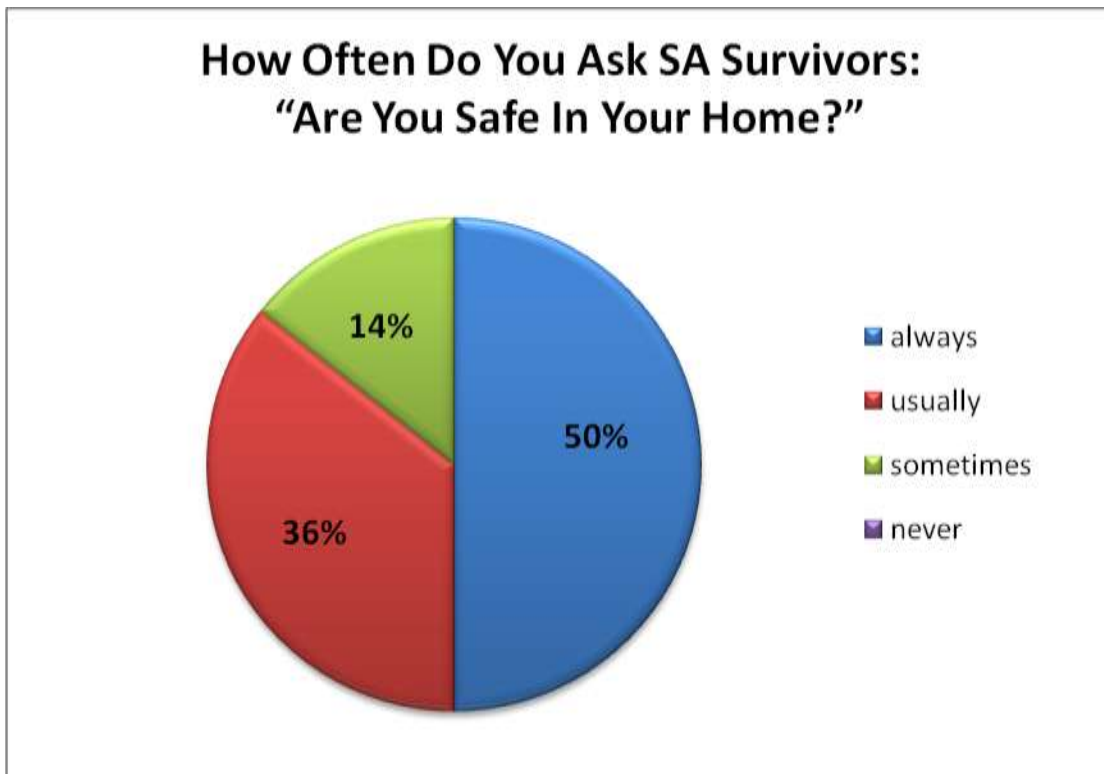
- Nonoffending parents and children losing their homes after perpetrators of child sexual abuse – who were the main breadwinners – leave the home or are incarcerated;
- Lack of awareness and sensitivity about sexual violence among property owners and landlords;
- Victims/ survivors having inadequate funds to break leases and secure alternate housing; and
- Victims/ survivors couch surfing and living in cars because of inability to secure safe housing. (p. 3)

The numbers, as well as our experiences, validate the need for sexual assault advocates to have housing information and resources in their toolbox. It also reminds us that developing partnerships with our housing communities can result in a number of powerful allies.

Developing Partnerships - Where to Start

Assessing your knowledge about housing resources, issues, and barriers is a great start. Next, chat with your colleagues and assess your agency's knowledge of the issue. For example, how does your agency ask survivors about their housing situation, needs, and goals? If this is not happening, it would be helpful to talk with your colleagues about how to initiate these conversations.

In a recent survey of Washington State program managers, WCSAP asked “In your program’s regular practices do you ask sexual assault survivors ‘Are you safe in your home?’ or some similar question about housing safety?” The results found that 50% of programs always, 36% of programs usually, and 14% of programs sometimes ask sexual assault survivors about feeling safe in their home.



It is great to see that 50% of the respondents are always asking survivors questions about safety in their home. It would be wonderful to see more advocacy agencies consistently addressing this issue. When advocates initiate conversations about housing it can create more opportunities for survivors to ask for housing assistance. These conversations could also lead to the “aha” moment one might need to recognize an unsafe situation that has become the norm. Here are some example questions you can ask a survivor:

- Do you have a safe, comfortable place to stay right now?
- Would you like help finding a new place to stay?
- Is there anything about your living situation that is causing you stress?
- Is there any information about housing resources that you may be interested in, for now or later?

It is also important to make sure advocates are trained on this issue, are knowledgeable about available resources, and feel prepared to problem solve barriers. Here are some questions to consider within your program that may enhance your housing advocacy support:

- When and how do we ask about survivors about their housing situation?
- Do survivors come to us for housing support?
- Does staff feel prepared to help safety plan and problem solve if a survivor tells me they do not have a safe place to stay?
- What resources do we have internally or within the community to help pay for application fees?
- What resources do we have internally or within the community for rental assistance?
- What resources do we have internally or within the community to help survivors with landlord tenant issues?
- What are the legal protections and legal remedies available? Who does this work in our community? For what kind of situations?
- How long is the Section 8 waiting list in our community? Do sexual violence survivors have any priority?
- What is the process for getting subsidized or transitional housing in our community? How long is the wait list? Do sexual violence survivors have any priority?
- Is this a topic addressed in support groups?
- What are some creative ways to help survivors that can not relocate or immediately change their housing situation?

Working on this Together

While it is important that advocates stay in tune to the resources that are out there, becoming an expert in each and every one is an impossible feat, not to mention exhausting! Housing, in particular, is a resource that can be difficult to maintain expertise in. Laws are often changing, landlords and property managers evolve, and funding cuts can have devastating effects on overall housing availability. And there are a lot of gray areas, as there are numerous ways in which landlords and housing programs can prevent someone from securing housing, or fail to provide safe housing, without ever breaking any laws. For example:

- If the survivor is on a month to month contract, the landlord can increase rent, change the rules, or ask them to move out at any time, as long as there is written notice 30 days prior to end of rental period (Northwest Justice Project, 2009).
- Rental properties provided to migrant or seasonal farm workers by their employers are not governed by the Washington State Landlord-Tenant Act (RCW 59.18.040).
- Landlords can avoid accepting Section 8 vouchers by charging rent that is higher than the cap set by HUD or by intentionally not meeting the habitability requirements set forth by HUD.
- While tenants have rights, there are often no city agencies that enforce them. Therefore the process of getting rights upheld can be tedious and out of reach.

These are all good reasons why collaborating with your local housing advocates and providers can improve your advocacy efforts. In order to build these partnerships, you will first need to identify the people in your community who are experts in housing rights, have connections to financial resources, or provide housing to your community. Here are some examples:

- Local tenant's union
- Landlord associations
- Fair housing advocates
- Housing and homeless advocacy programs
- Subsidized housing programs
- Property management companies
- Housing Authority (Section 8 and subsidized housing provider)
- Local churches
- Fair housing law attorneys

Once you have identified key partners, finding a common goal you share will greatly improve your ability to work together. This will look different for each partner and it may be something you can identify together. If you are partnering with a housing or homeless advocacy program you can offer to provide education to their staff and clients about the dynamics of sexual violence, share information on resources for support, and work together to ensure the housing they provide is safe; in return they could offer to provide housing specific advocacy and resources to the people that you are working with. Landlords in your community may not be aware of the provisions of the Resident Landlord Tenant Act (more information is included below). You could provide education on the Act, as well as offer context as to why it is such a valuable resource. In the future those landlords may be more willing to work with survivors who are facing housing barriers.

Collaboration is an ongoing process that requires buy-in from all of the people involved. It takes work and definitely requires dedication, but the pay off is worth it. Effective collaboration results in a more comprehensive response to the multiple needs of survivors and is one way to facilitate a community-wide response to the issue of sexual violence.

In Closing

The information provided within this document is a brief introduction to the world of housing advocacy for victims and survivors of sexual violence. As we continue to look at the different ways to meet the needs of survivors and prevent sexual violence, it is important to build bridges with the housing community. The more we can work together, the more effective we can all be. Please help us continue this dialogue by sharing your experiences. Feel free to request any additional information and let us know what other resources would be helpful at advocacy@wcsap.org.

Recommended Reading and Additional Resources

There is a wide array of information available on this topic from many different schools of thought. Here is a short list of recommended materials.

Advocacy Perspectives (Framing the Issue)

- The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) has a collection of documents that address the connections between housing and sexual violence. They also address implications for advocacy and policy efforts.
 - [Opening the Door: an Advocate's Guide to Housing and Sexual Violence](#)
 - [Housing and Sexual Violence: Overview of National Survey](#)
 - [Housing and Sexual Violence: Fact Sheet](#)
- The [VAWnet website](#) has compiled a list of resource documents on the topic.

Legal Information

- The Washington State Resident Landlord Tenant Act, found in [RCW 59.18](#), can help survivors and their families terminate their lease, without penalty, if they meet certain conditions. It can also prevent discrimination because someone is a victim of sexual assault, and provides increased protections for tenants whose landlords (or their employees) have sexually assaulted them.

[Resident Landlord Issues for Survivors of Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, and/or Stalking](#), published by the Northwest Justice Project in 2009, provides an easy-to-understand explanation of the provisions of the Act as well as conditions one must meet, problem solving tips, and examples of necessary forms and documentation.

- An overview of general tenant's rights is detailed in the Northwest Justice Project's 2009 paper [Your Rights as a Tenant in Washington State](#).
- [Washington Law Help](#) is an online legal resource that has a collection of information relating to various housing issues.
- [The Tenants Union of Washington State](#) has also put together a number of resources addressing tenant's rights.
- Additional information on federal laws:
 - [Advocacy Manual from the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty](#)
 - [National Alliance to End Homelessness Advocacy Tools](#)
 - [Title IX and Sexual Assault \(regarding College Campuses\)](#)
 - [Compiled List of Federal Housing Laws](#)

Programming

- Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) has a [Transitional Housing Grant Program](#) that can be used to support survivors of sexual violence.

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