

## Best Practice: Rapid Re-housing for Survivors of Domestic Violence

### **District Alliance for Safe Housing's Empowerment Project in Washington, DC**

#### Overview

The District Alliance for Safe Housing (DASH) is a domestic violence housing and service agency in Washington, DC. Its mission is to ensure access to safe and sustainable refuge for survivors of domestic violence and their children through the development and management of safe housing and related services. It also provides capacity building assistance to community-based organizations to expand their knowledge and ability to serve survivors and their children in an effort to promote the overall safety of women and children in the District.

Between 2007 and 2008, DASH piloted the Empowerment Project, a transition-in-place program that provided families with time limited rental assistance and case management to help them quickly transition to housing in the community.

#### History

DASH was created in 2006 to address the housing needs of survivors of domestic violence. With a shortage of affordable housing in the city, more and more families impacted by violence were turning to shelter programs or being forced to return to violent homes. City leaders, homelessness advocates, and providers were advancing efforts to transform the city's response to family homelessness, but the needs of domestic violence survivors were often overlooked.

Throughout 2006 and 2007, DASH conducted 22 focus groups with survivors and providers to explore the impact of the shortage of affordable housing on survivors and their families. The report, "A Call for Safe Housing," was issued in September 2007 to educate the broader community of the housing needs of survivors. DASH found that there was a **wide array of supportive services available to survivors of violence but a dearth of assistance dedicated to helping them meet their housing needs**. This report continues to inform DASH's work to expand housing options for families by highlighting the voices of women.

DASH's Housing Resource Center provides a variety of supports to help families preserve or find new housing. The one-stop center for housing assistance provides eviction prevention assistance, education to landlords and tenants about the rights of domestic violence survivors in federal and District law, and re-housing assistance. Families can meet with Housing Specialists and receive assistance applying for housing programs in the city, including permanent housing subsidy programs as well as transitional housing and permanent supportive housing programs.

DASH developed resources on housing for survivors throughout the DC Metropolitan area, available at the Housing Resource Center and online. This includes a guide for

survivors on transitional and permanent supportive housing programs, eligibility requirements, and how to apply for assistance. It also provides survivors with practical tips on searching for housing, finding safe neighborhoods, identifying safety features in an apartment, preventing abusers from locating their new home, and reclaiming financial independence.

Women can visit the Housing Resource Center for services or be referred by local domestic violence and homelessness service providers. Many of the women are already connected with mental health counseling, job training, and other support services offered by a domestic violence shelter program or from other community-based programs. Women Empowered Against Violence (WEAVE), a social service agency located on site with the Housing Resource Center offers legal, counseling, economic and educational services to survivors. This allows DASH to focus primarily on resolving families' housing crises.

DASH is working on myriad fronts to improve the housing options of families impacted by domestic violence. They have opened an emergency shelter program that offers each household an individual apartment and are currently renovating a 51-unit apartment building that will be used to provide emergency and transitional housing for women and children.

To expand access to housing in the community, and help preserve families' housing, DASH conducts trainings for landlords, property managers, and advocates ensuring they are aware of the legal protections available to survivors. They hold quarterly summits that bring together homelessness and domestic violence service providers to address issues and move a broader housing agenda forward. To improve access to housing available in the community, DASH piloted the Empowerment Project and offers temporary rental assistance and case management services.

### Program Description

#### *Targeting/Eligibility*

For DASH, safety is paramount and safety planning is central to their work. Families who are re-housed cannot be facing an immediate crisis. This typically means working with a family for about two months before providing re-housing assistance.

Families must be able to live independently and not need assistance with everyday tasks. They also sign a program agreement that details their responsibilities as a tenant and participant in the program, including agreeing to meet with an empowerment advocate. The program agreement does not mandate participation in any of the services offered by DASH or a partner agency. The program does not require families to be employed; however, they must be willing to work toward increasing their self-sufficiency so they can pay for housing when the time-limited subsidy ends.

#### *Services*

The Empowerment Project is comprised of a Housing Advocate who works to expand housing options and address barriers to housing, and an Empowerment Advocate who works with families to provide support and advocacy on issues ranging from improving economic self-sufficiency, ongoing safety planning, and facilitating access to supportive services. A program director provides clinical supervision to the team and engages in ongoing program evaluation to ensure the program model is responsive to the needs of families.

In the initial months, the program works very intensively with families, meeting three or more times a week. The initial focus is on examining and resolving housing barriers, addressing families' credit history and determining how much they can afford for rent. The Housing Advocate will assess housing preferences, provide education on housing laws and protections and what to look for in identifying secure housing units, and accompany families when looking at rental units. The goal is to find an apartment that matches their needs and their financial capabilities. Families sign their own leases with the landlord or property management company and move in.

This first phase may last from 4 to 6 weeks. During this time, the program will conduct a psychosocial assessment and develop a plan with families to meet their service goals. The family also works on creating a budget and creating a safety plan. The program pays the entire rent for the household for the first 6 months with the amount gradually declining over the subsequent months and ending entirely after 12 months.

The Empowerment Advocate conducts home visits with families to provide tailored supportive services and advocacy assistance. Immediately following a housing placement, the Empowerment Advocate will visit with the family weekly, and visits typically taper off as the families need less intensive support. After housing placement, the Housing Advocate remains engaged to address tenant-landlord specific issues as needed.

After six months in housing, families begin to take over a portion of their rental payment as the subsidy from DASH begins to decline. In the last three months of the program, the subsidy ends and the family must meet the rental obligation independently. Telephone follow-ups are made for the next 6 to 12 months to ensure continued progress and stability.

### *Funding*

In 2009, DASH received a Violence Against Women Transitional Housing Grant from the Department of Justice that will allow them to expand transition-in-place housing opportunities for survivors.

### Outcomes

The 2007-2008 Empowerment Project pilot served six families, each of which was able to successfully retain its housing.

### Lessons Learned

The Empowerment Project, like all of DASH's programs, has been informed by the voices of women. As such there is an emphasis on providing greater power to the women's own goals and desires. The voluntary nature of the program, each person's responsibility for self-protection, and acceptance of an empowerment paradigm shapes how they deliver services.

Home-visiting is seen as being critical to the success of the pilot program. Home visiting and building connections with community-based organizations prevented isolation for the families, an issue that had initially concerned providers. The home visits also allowed the Empowerment Advocate to continue to get to know the family and understand their needs on a deeper level as they transitioned into their new housing. It provided the families with a comfortable space of their own in which to be themselves without feeling monitored or constrained by program rules. This resulted in more honest and open relationships with the families' Empowerment Advocates. This also alleviated concerns that the program model did not allow for ongoing engagement with the family or achievement of goals.

One of the biggest lessons to emerge from the Empowerment Project pilot is that families can transition more rapidly out of housing and into the community with housing search assistance, time-limited rental support, and supportive services.

For those families that may have longer term needs, DASH would like to have the flexibility to offer families longer-term rental assistance to allow for a more relaxed transition to non-supported living. DASH would also like to increase the number of housing options that families in the program can choose from. DASH found that families were more likely to be successful in housing if they picked a place they liked from a variety of choices.

Providing services to families in the community as opposed to offering site-based services represents a challenging transition for many domestic violence providers. DASH set up specific guidelines for home visits to protect staff. All staff visiting the home of a family are to have a cell phone with them at all times. Visits are planned in advance so that the family knows a staff member will be visiting and other DASH staff know where staff members are and at what time to expect them back. Additionally, staff are instructed to be aware of their surroundings and, if they hear noises or see strange activity, they are to call the police immediately.