National Resource Center on Domestic Violence

SAFE HOUSING PARTNERSHIPS

Beyond Barriers: Community-Driven Solutions for Black Immigrant Survivors with Housing Needs

Author: Oyesola Oluwafunmilayo Ayeni, PhD

Suggested Citation: *Ayeni, O.O. (2025). Beyond Barriers: Community-Driven Solutions for Black Immigrant Survivors with Housing Needs. National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (NRCDV). Harrisburg, PA. Retrieved month/day year, from: [website link]*

Distribution Rights: *This Brief Report may be reprinted in its entirety or excerpted with proper acknowledgements to the author(s) and the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence but may not be altered or sold for profit.*

Acknowledgements

NRCDV extends our sincere gratitude to the individuals and organizations whose invaluable contributions made this report possible. Special thanks to Lavon Morris-Grant, Julia LeFrancois, and Sydney Scarpelli for their dedicated support during the conceptualization, data collection, and analysis phases of the project. Their insights and efforts laid a strong foundation for the work presented here.

We are also deeply appreciative of the thoughtful peer review provided by members of the Policy and Research Team including Brittany Eltringham, Drew Bowling, Shenna Morris, and Yeliani Flores. Their careful and constructive feedback greatly enhanced the clarity, rigor, and relevance of the final report.

Finally, we acknowledge our organizational community partners Amani Women Center, Sauti Yetu, and The Person Center whose participation in the evaluation process, as well as their generous sharing of data and lived experiences, enriched the findings and narrative of this report in meaningful ways.

PROJECT SUMMARY

The Housing Resource Center at the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (NRCDV) conducted a multi-year needs assessment project focused on bringing together experts from the community who work in the fields of domestic violence to expand upon our thinking about what responsive programming, training and technical assistance could look like at the intersection of housing instability and domestic violence. Through this project, NRCDV worked closely with our community partners to:

- Explore the nature and extent of homelessness and housing insecurity among Black immigrant and refugee survivors of domestic violence.
- Document the experiences of advocates and direct service providers working with this population to better understand the intersection between housing instability and domestic violence and identify emerging solutions to addressing survivors' needs.
- Develop policy and practical recommendations for technical assistance, resources, and other support for increasing the availability of safe, affordable, accessible, and sustainable housing for Black immigrant survivors of domestic violence.

To accomplish the outlined purpose, this project involved:

- Documenting the experiences of advocates/direct service providers who support Black immigrant and refugee survivors of domestic violence.
- Documenting the needs and experiences of Black immigrant and refugee survivors related to safe, affordable, and accessible housing and their experiences navigating housing systems.
- Documenting the emerging practices and innovative solutions that community agencies are implementing to address survivors' needs.

OVERVIEW OF THE BRIEF REPORT

This brief report highlights key findings from a qualitative evaluation examining the experiences of domestic violence advocates and service providers who support Black immigrant and refugee survivors. The evaluation focused on identifying innovative and emerging practices that community-based organizations are using to address survivors' housing-related needs.

From August 30, 2022, to September 2023, evaluators conducted focus groups, listening sessions, and semi-structured interviews with advocates from three culturally specific community organizations. These activities included both agency-specific and cross-agency discussions to capture a wide range of perspectives. included both agency-specific and cross-agency conversations to capture a range of perspectives and insights.

This report centers the voices of service providers to showcase promising strategies tailored to the unique needs of Black immigrant and refugee survivors. These include economic empowerment programs, engaging men and boys in prevention and education, expanding and training first responders in culturally specific and trauma-informed care, building partnerships with landlords, and launching community wellness initiatives.

The findings are intended to support more responsive service delivery and inform policy and systems-level improvements that reflect the lived realities of Black immigrant and refugee survivors.

Descriptions of the community organizations that participated in this evaluation can be found in a previously published brief from this project (Ayeni, 2025).

EVALUATION FINDINGS

Organizations engaged in this needs assessment evaluation identified promising strategies that are either in place or in development to more holistically address the unique and diverse needs of Black immigrant and refugee survivors. Innovative strategies identified by service providers included: holistic approaches to economic empowerment, culturally specific and trauma-informed training for first responders, developing partnerships with community landlords, community wellness initiatives, and the inclusion of men and boys in prevention and education services. Emerging themes from this qualitative evaluation are discussed below.

1) **Holistic Approaches to Economic Empowerment:** Service providers highlighted the importance of holistic, culturally grounded approaches to economic empowerment as a key strategy in supporting Black immigrant and refugee survivors. These models go beyond job placement and income generation by addressing the intersecting economic, emotional, and social needs of survivors as they work toward autonomy and long-term stability.

   One example shared by providers was a Sewing Program designed and implemented by a culturally specific organization. This program incorporates multiple layers of support, including work opportunities, skills development, financial literacy training, and access to community mentors. Participants are able to learn a trade, build essential knowledge around saving, budgeting, and credit. As part of the program, participants also take a field trip to a bank to open accounts and begin to establish formal financial identities, which many had not previously had the opportunity to do.

   What makes this approach particularly impactful is its integration of trauma-informed and culturally responsive principles. Survivors engage in the program within safe and supportive environments, allowing them to experience fair labor conditions, often for the first time. Providers noted that this exposure builds confidence and a sense of dignity, helping participants begin to envision a life beyond dependency on their abuser or exploitative work environments. One provider shared that a client expressed immense relief at being able to afford her own menstruation products for the first time, no longer needing to rely on her husband and abuser for such basic necessities. This shift, while seemingly small, marked a powerful step toward reclaiming autonomy and self-worth.

   In addition to economic programming, organizations also help survivors access social services that support their participation. This includes assistance in applying for Medicaid, childcare, and transportation, which are often necessary

to remove barriers to engagement. The program also includes a matching savings component that incentivizes long-term financial planning and allows survivors to see tangible growth in their resources.

Ultimately, this holistic model shows that economic empowerment must be multidimensional. It involves more than earning income; it requires building confidence, gaining control over one's financial future, and connecting with a support network. Providers emphasized that when survivors have access to these types of integrated programs, they are better equipped to make informed decisions and build sustainable paths to safety and independence.

2) **Culturally Specific, Trauma-Informed Practices for First Responders:** A key theme that emerged across listening sessions was the need to broaden the definition of "first responders" and reimagine the kinds of training and support they receive. Traditionally, first responders are understood to include police officers, paramedics, and identified ways in which their organizations have adopted an expanded view that also includes advocates, teachers, neighbors, fellow congregants, and other individuals who may be the first to recognize signs of harm or distress in a survivor's life.

   This expanded definition acknowledges that community members often serve as the true first point of contact for survivors, especially those who are hesitant to approach formal systems. Participants stressed that building the capacity of these informal responders through culturally specific and trauma-informed education can be a powerful strategy for bridging the gap between survivors and the services they need. It creates opportunities for intervention that are rooted in trust, shared experience, and community care. One provider explained,

   > *"So, we've expanded the term first responder to include the teachers, to include neighbors, to include fellow congregants, to include people who are just interacting with other people and may see certain things. We want to make sure people feel like they have the ability to respond."*

   Equipping these trusted community members with culturally responsive tools allows for earlier, more meaningful engagement with survivors often before a crisis escalates. It also reflects a more holistic and sustainable approach to safety and healing, one that is not solely dependent on systems that may be distrusted or inaccessible to Black immigrant and refugee communities. One powerful statement shared by a provider emphasized the need to keep this work human-centered and adaptable:

"An institution does not bend, it does not breathe, does not change, does not move. The domestic violence response section should never become an institution. It should remain a living representation of the people who are working and moving within it."

This perspective underscores the importance of maintaining flexibility, responsiveness, and community leadership in all aspects of survivor support. Expanding and reimagining the role of first responders is one step toward a more inclusive, empowering, and culturally grounded system of care.

3) **Developing Partnerships with Community Landlords:** Service providers identified the development of partnerships with local community landlords as a promising strategy for addressing the housing challenges faced by Black immigrant and refugee survivors of domestic violence. Rather than relying solely on restrictive federal and state housing programs, many of which impose rigid eligibility criteria, providers suggested the creation of a network of trusted landlords who are willing to work empathetically and safely with survivors.

   These partnerships would offer an alternative pathway to stable housing that is more responsive to the realities of survivors who may not have formal income documentation, legal status, or credit history. Providers envisioned engaging landlords who are aligned with the mission of supporting survivors, and who are open to receiving training in cultural competence, trauma-informed practices, domestic violence response, and confidentiality protocols.

   A critical element of this model involves training staff within organizations to identify safe and appropriate housing opportunities, and to cultivate relationships with landlords who demonstrate understanding and flexibility. By building this network from the ground up, organizations can help ensure survivors have access to housing that not only meets their physical needs but also honors their cultural backgrounds and trauma histories.

   This approach reflects a shift away from institutional rigidity and toward community-based, survivor-centered solutions. By collaborating with local landlords who are trained and invested in supporting survivors, providers hope to create a more flexible, compassionate, and accessible housing landscape.

4) **Community Wellness Initiatives:** Preventative services and community wellness initiatives emerged as vital strategies in the work of culturally specific organizations serving Black immigrant and refugee survivors. Service providers emphasized the importance of meeting community members where they are,

offering support through education, outreach, and connection long before a crisis occurs.

Many organizations have implemented community workshops that focus on topics such as healthy relationships, reproductive health, family planning, navigating privilege and power dynamics, and building peaceful homes for youth. These workshops are intentionally designed to be safe, nonjudgmental spaces where community members can access reliable information, ask questions, and engage in dialogue. The immediate goal is education, but the long-term aim is harm reduction and community healing.

By delivering services in familiar and accessible formats, providers are able to reach individuals who may not actively seek support through traditional social service channels. One of the strengths of this model is that it does not require survivors to formally seek help to receive it. When survivors or community members attend a workshop, they often have the opportunity to speak directly with providers who can offer resources or referrals in real time. This proactive approach expands access and helps build trust in communities where fear, stigma, or systemic exclusion may deter individuals from engaging with formal institutions.

Providers also highlighted the value of these initiatives for youth and young adults. Through multimedia and age-appropriate education on reproductive health, emotional well-being, and conflict resolution, organizations are investing in the long-term health and safety of future generations. These efforts help to interrupt cycles of violence and misinformation by equipping young people with knowledge and language that may not be available in other settings.

In addition to education, providers underscored the importance of offering practical support to community members during times of need. This includes providing basic necessities such as food, clothing, and hygiene products to individuals who may be ineligible for government assistance due to immigration status. These services help fill critical gaps and ensure that community wellness efforts are not only educational but materially supportive.

Ultimately, community wellness initiatives represent a holistic, preventative approach that centers dignity, empowerment, and access. By leveraging existing community networks and offering culturally relevant services outside of crisis settings, providers are creating more resilient and informed communities capable of supporting survivors before harm escalates.

5) **Inclusion of Men and Boys in Prevention and Education Services:** Providers consistently emphasized the importance of expanding prevention and education services to include men and boys as a critical step toward community-wide change. Engaging male community members not only promotes awareness but also positions them as active partners in addressing domestic violence and supporting survivors.

   Several organizations have begun recruiting male family members to participate in educational programs. Having men on staff and involving male leaders helps bridge cultural gaps and makes participants more receptive to the messages being shared. This peer-led approach can reduce resistance and open pathways for honest dialogue within communities where gender dynamics may otherwise limit communication.

   Providers noted that some men have taken on leadership roles as program ambassadors, actively recruiting other men from their communities and serving as advocates for healthy relationships and violence prevention. This peer-to-peer model leverages existing social networks and cultural understandings, making education more accessible and culturally relevant. A provider highlighted an important but often overlooked point: men can also be survivors of abuse, yet many are unaware of the resources available to them.

   > *"Men are also being abused, but we have few clients, and they don't know that they are eligible for government assistance, housing support, or even for legal aid, pro bono attorneys."*

   This underscores the need for inclusive outreach that addresses the needs of all survivors, regardless of gender. By intentionally including men and boys in prevention efforts, organizations are fostering more comprehensive, community-centered solutions that challenge harmful norms and support healing for everyone affected by domestic violence.

CONCLUSION

This report highlights several promising and innovative strategies developed by culturally specific organizations to support Black immigrant and refugee survivors facing housing instability. The strategies documented in this report demonstrate the importance of culturally grounded, flexible, and survivor-centered approaches that address complex barriers and promote long-term safety and stability. Intentional and meaningful investments are needed to implement these strategies and evaluate their outcomes and impacts. Moving forward, sustained investment in these models, coupled with policy reforms and continued research, will be critical to expanding their reach and impact.

PUBLICATION NOTE

This publication is supported by Grant Number #90EV0536-01-01 to the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence from the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

This piloted effort and corresponding TA product is in completion of deliverables associated with the funding announcement opportunity described and approved under the previous administration.