

The Impact of Housing Instability on Children Who Experience Domestic Violence: *Promising Approaches that offer Resiliency*

Introduction

Domestic violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and children.¹ More than 1.6 million children experience homelessness annually in the United States equating to 1 in 45 children.² Most of these children are a part of single-parent, female-headed households³ and in the sheltered population, two-thirds of mothers have histories of domestic violence.⁴

Here in Connecticut, 1,207 adults and 972 children were sheltered in FY 2017 with domestic violence shelters operating at 122% capacity throughout the year.⁵ Additionally, during that same time period, a total of 101 women and children were living in domestic violence transitional housing in the state.⁶ This data does not take into consideration the countless number of children whose exposure to domestic violence has displaced them from their home, but whose non-offending parent has sought safety through other supports such as family or friends. Emergency, safe housing in the form of domestic violence shelter is often the first step that survivors take to flee the abuse in their lives. In just one day, more than 41,000 survivors and their children found safety and refuge through a domestic violence shelter or transitional housing program across the country.⁷

Having a stable home benefits children for a lifetime, improving their overall well-being, health, education, and future employment opportunities. When families, including those displaced by domestic violence, experience homelessness and housing instability, children suffer. They face a significantly higher risk of chronic or unaddressed health and developmental issues than their peers. When compared to children in stable homes, children experiencing homelessness have four times the rate of developmental delays, three times the rate of emotional or behavioral problems, and twice the rate of learning disabilities.⁸ Those issues can affect their education and employment opportunities and, ultimately, their success as adults. Children and youth experiencing homelessness and housing instability are also less likely to be academically successful, and less likely to graduate from high school and make it to and through college.⁹

Children who experience homelessness and housing instability suffer compared to children in stable homes:

- **4x rate the rate of developmental delays**
- **3x the rate of emotional or behavioral problems**
- **2x the rate of learning disabilities**

We know that domestic violence is a pattern of coercive, controlling behavior that can include many types of abuse, such as physical, emotional or psychological, sexual, and financial. Because abusers often control so many aspects of the victim's life, when the victim attempts to leave she or he has many needs that extend far beyond ending the physical abuse. Domestic violence often leads to mental health issues such as PTSD and depression, which can lead to job and housing instability. Many women leave their homes to protect their children, but then cannot afford to support them.¹⁰ Money is often a tool that abusers use to establish absolute control in their relationships. An abusive partner might take all measures to ensure that a survivor is entirely financially dependent on him or her.¹¹ This, in turn may prevent the survivor from leaving or feeling like s/he has any power, and may cause the survivor to remain in the relationship.

To achieve true safety and stability, victims often require assistance with such things as obtaining basic human needs, securing affordable housing, financial empowerment, getting a bank account, and job training and employment.¹² In these situations, domestic violence advocates support victims and survivors to obtain these and other forms of help to keep these persons safer.¹³ A 2017 Connecticut snapshot documenting the advocacy needs of survivors of domestic violence showed that housing (15%) was the second most frequent need behind basic needs (17%).¹⁴

Promising Approaches to Achieving Housing Stability

The good news is that there are some innovative and promising approaches which are working well in communities across the country to offer hope to women and children whose housing stability has been adversely affected by domestic violence. “Domestic Violence Housing First,” is a model using intensive, mobile advocacy and flexible funding to help survivors obtain safe and stable housing.¹⁵ In addition, “flexible funding” with an element of advocacy is being examined as a way to prevent homelessness from occurring in the first place. Some survivors and their children can actually avoid homelessness if they have access to funds immediately. This approach should be coupled with housing advocacy and support as well as domestic violence advocacy. A recent study of the District Alliance for Safe Housing in Washington, DC shows that this tactic is working.¹⁶ Through small grants ranging from \$275 to \$8,508 for such things as moving expenses, utilities, car repair and back rent or credit card debt, 94% of those 53 women and 2 men surveyed – to include 85% of these with children –were stably housed six months later.¹⁷

There is also attention being paid to the opportunity that exists for domestic violence and housing providers to work more collaboratively to house survivors. For more than five years, the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV) and the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness (CCEH) have worked in collaboration, together with state and federal funders, to safely and confidentially provide survivors of domestic violence access to housing resources in Connecticut, and to collectively advance the work of housing and domestic violence policy and practice in our state. This partnership stems from years of work between the two systems to improve communication, cooperation, policy, and practice with an aim to increase housing opportunities and access to supportive services for Connecticut families.

Creating a means to systematize equitable access to homeless housing resources for domestic violence survivors presented a specific challenge. Consistent with best practices and HUD guidance, Connecticut’s homelessness response system is increasingly data-driven, using the federally mandated Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) database as a tool to help increase the efficiency and effectiveness of programs and allocation of resources in the homelessness response system. Entering survivor information into this database could create problems for confidentiality and safety. To address this challenge, in December of 2016, CCADV and CCEH, with support from state funding partners and in consultation with federal funders, developed a protocol that allows domestic violence survivors to be added anonymously to the housing registries maintained in HMIS. In developing this protocol, CCADV and CCEH sought technical assistance and guidance from The Confidentiality Institute, National Resource Center on Domestic Violence and The National Network to End Domestic Violence as well as HUD and the Family Violence Services and Prevention Program (FVPSA). Though this process has many moving parts to protect a domestic violence survivor’s identity while at the same time ensuring that the survivor has access to the type of housing and community of choice, it has been successful in connecting domestic violence survivors to homeless housing resources. From the launch of this system in January of 2017, domestic violence providers have referred 73 households to the homeless system for housing resources, including 31 single adults and 42 families. To date, 29 households, including 8 single adults and 21 families, have been housed or matched to a housing resource (and are in the process of securing housing).¹⁸

Approaches That Work

- “Domestic Violence Housing First” model
- “Flexible funding” + advocacy
- MOUs between domestic violence providers and homelessness/housing providers to systematize equitable access to resources in a manner that protects victim safety

Conclusion

We know that many children who are exposed to domestic violence are at high risk of developing emotional, learning, and behavioral problems, and that housing instability or homelessness compounds these problems; efforts to identify housing options for domestic violence survivors with children are therefore essential.¹⁹ Promising approaches are emerging and early results are encouraging. Continued collaboration across service sectors is necessary during this time of increasing service demands and reduced financial resources. Organizations are urged to establish cross-sector collaboration with MOUs which outline each agency’s role in working toward the common goal. It is also important to provide cross training between systems to ensure that families are provided all needed services regardless of the system to which they first present. Lastly, organizations are encouraged to form cross-site teams, as these can create stronger supports for families accessing services from both agencies.²⁰

Endnotes

1. https://nnedv.org/latest_update/16-things-may-not-know-housing-survivors/
2. Closing the Gap: Integrating Services for Survivors of Domestic Violence Experiencing Homelessness. A Toolkit for Transitional Housing Programs.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence, www.ctcadv.org.
6. Ibid.
7. https://nnedv.org/latest_update/16-things-may-not-know-housing-survivors/
8. University of Pittsburgh, Unstable Living Situations and Early Childhood Mental Health
9. https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Impact_of_Family_Homelessness_on_Children_2016.pdf
10. <https://safehousingpartnerships.org/sites/default/files/2017-01/Flex%20funding%20presentation%20Spokane%202016%5B1%5D%20%28Kris%20Billhardt%29.pdf>
11. Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence, www.ctcadv.org
12. Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence, www.ctcadv.org.
13. Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence, www.ctcadv.org.
14. Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence, www.ctcadv.org.
15. <https://safehousingpartnerships.org/sites/default/files/2017-01/Flex%20funding%20presentation%20Spokane%202016%5B1%5D%20%28Kris%20Billhardt%29.pdf>
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence. "Creating Equal Access to Homeless System Housing Resources for DV Survivors" November 2017
19. Closing the Gap: Integrating Services for Survivors of Domestic Violence Experiencing Homelessness. A Toolkit for Transitional Housing Programs.
20. Ibid.

LEARN MORE AT www.ctccfv.org

NEED HELP?

Professionals or parents looking for help can call the statewide domestic violence hotline. Counselors are available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. All services are confidential, safe and free.

888.774.2900
ENGLISH

844.831.9200
ESPAÑOL

The Children's Center on Family Violence is a partnership between Connecticut Children's Medical Center and Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence. It was established in 2016 to respond to and reduce the number of children impacted by family violence through a trauma-informed, multidisciplinary, multiagency approach. Learn more about The Center and our work at www.ctccfv.org.