



The Herstory of the Domestic Violence Homeless Services Coalition

The Landscape

Before the Domestic Violence Homeless Services Coalition (DVHSC) began, the domestic violence system operated independently and separate from the homeless service system.

For too long, this meant that survivors who were homeless were being pushed between systems, being told by domestic violence agencies that, because they were not in immediate danger from their abuser, that they should seek homeless services. When these individuals sought that assistance, homeless service agencies would counter, arguing that because of their experience with domestic violence, they should reach out to domestic violence agencies due to potential safety issues. The result was too many individuals falling through the cracks, unable to receive services from either field.

Although both systems have occasionally collaborated when working with individual clients, the effort to address the intersection of domestic violence and homelessness is relatively recent.

Working with LAHSA

While some domestic violence organizations received funding from the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) department, their work with the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority was indirect, and typically limited to submissions of annual performance measures as part of the greater Continuum of Care system.

In 2009, the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act was signed into law, prompting LAHSA to implement a point-based award system for domestic violence transitional housing funding. With this shift, many agencies offering transitional housing that catered to general populations, including those focused on families in general, lost the ability to access this funding. In 2015, funding for transitional housing programs were reallocated and many organizations lost their funding.

Within the city of Los Angeles, Councilmember Ryu advocated on behalf of domestic violence agencies, arguing that the city should increase funding for transitional housing programs serving domestic violence survivors in order to ensure their ongoing existence.

This was later expanded by the council's Homeless and Poverty Committee to include additional agencies who lost funding during LAHSA's reallocation. This helped increase countywide recognition that domestic violence affects a significant portion of the population.

City and County initiatives to address homelessness

During the fall of 2015, the county coordinated listening and planning sessions to develop their homeless initiatives. Despite the presence of 19 domestic violence agencies within the county of Los Angeles, few domestic violence agency representatives were invited to attend, demonstrating the extent to which the homeless service field was siloed from the domestic violence field.

In January 2016, the city and county of Los Angeles released their homeless initiative strategies. With over 300 pages of strategies between both documents, domestic violence was mentioned three times. Further, no strategies were found that focused on homelessness as experienced by women or survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, or human trafficking.

That same month, the leadership of Downtown Women's Center reached out to the City of Los Angeles Domestic Violence Taskforce (now the DV Alliance) to create a coordinated strategy for advocacy aimed at both the city and county of Los Angeles. Because of letters written to the mayor, city council, and the Board of Supervisors, the city created a strategy to address homelessness among women and survivors of domestic violence, simultaneously seeking ways to create economic opportunities for these groups.

These efforts also prompted the Board of Supervisors to create a motion on domestic violence and homelessness that directed the homeless initiatives office to convene a workgroup to identify how to address the unique needs of women and survivors of domestic violence, including strategies to strengthen the collaboration between domestic violence services and homeless service agencies.

By spring 2016, the workgroup, consisting of several agency representatives that would go on to become core members of the Domestic Violence Homeless Services Coalition, collaborated with the federal funded Domestic Violence and Housing Technical Assistance Consortium to review the relevant barriers, challenges, and opportunities facing agencies and individuals in Los Angeles county.

Creating DVHSC

In fall 2016, with funding from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the Downtown Women's Center approached Rainbow Services to co-lead a newly created coalition focusing on the intersection of domestic violence and homelessness, calling it the Domestic Violence Homeless Services Coalition.

Alongside representatives from the city attorney's office, LAHSA, and Supervisor Kuehl's office, the coalition met in January 2017 and narrowed their scope of work to focus on how to bring the domestic violence and homeless service fields together.

In February 2017, the core team invited homeless service and domestic violence agencies to meet. There, they discussed the results of the community scan conducted by the technical assistance team and shared what individuals experience when seeking services from either field.

The results indicated that the process of finding permanent housing for a person experiencing domestic violence or homelessness was arduous, lengthy, and was riddled with requirements and barriers that often proved difficult to overcome.

From this, coalition members committed themselves to prioritize the needs of survivors in the community and to work together to create a more ideal system of care that supports an individual's ability to navigate between services offered in Los Angeles county.

DVHSC members help promote the message that an individual is not "my client" or "your client". Rather than push survivors between systems, DVHSC aims to build a safe and supportive system that addresses the needs of women and others who have experienced homelessness and domestic violence, understanding that we are all a part of the Los Angeles community doing our best to help our community members.

DVHSC today

From the initial meeting, the coalition created four workgroups to focus on different issues:

A client-centered workgroup ensures the needs of survivors are at the core of the work.

A training and education workgroup prioritizes the development of training sessions focused on both systems to increase knowledge and understanding of the respective systems of care.

The systems workgroup was created separately from the funding workgroup, but these were later combined into the systems and funding workgroup, which aims to support the efforts to effect change at a systemic level. The systems and funding workgroup focuses on policy advocacy, data & confidentiality, and partnerships.

In October 2017, DVHSC held its first symposium on domestic violence and homelessness, the first of its kind in Los Angeles. Over 200 people attended, including Mayor Eric Garcetti, Supervisor Sheila Kuehl, city attorney Mike Feurer, and others.

That fall, the client-centered workgroup conducted a series of county-wide focus groups that looked at the needs of survivors who had experienced homelessness. There, participants recalled frustrations when trying to get help from both systems. The coalition met soon after to discuss ways to address these concerns in a way that centered survivors' voices. In order to create survivor-centered solutions, the coalition

formed the Advocates Program to support women with lived experience invested in ensuring that we make system improvements together.

DVHSC Results

Since 2016, the Coalition has identified a sizeable and diverse stakeholder group of 450 individuals representing 80 community-based organizations, government officials, philanthropic circles, and individuals with lived experience of homelessness and domestic violence. We have become the largest Coalition of its kind across the nation, undergoing formal evaluation with our partners at the National Alliance for Safe Housing. Together we have:

- Focused on how to transform the Coordinated Entry System to make it easier for both fields to communicate, while still maintaining client confidentiality.
- Helped policymakers reconsider the requirements for funding and access to housing to better support the needs of survivors who have experienced homelessness.
- Increased transparency about how domestic violence and homeless service agencies provide assistance, with the goal of increasing the use of best practices within both fields, including promoting Trauma Informed Care and Housing First.
- Identified and assessed the training needs/gaps within and between domestic violence and homeless systems and increased the training capacity within the LAHSA Centralized Training Academy.
- Determined the role and scope of new DV regional coordination efforts.
- Provided technical assistance to multiple communities within California, including: Alameda County, Fresno, Orange County, and San Francisco; and across the nation, including: Washington D.C., New York City, and Indianapolis, IN; to assist them in their leadership and policy change efforts in bringing together homeless and domestic violence organizations.
- Ensured that leadership in the Coalition includes those with lived experience in all efforts.