

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Los Angeles County, the number of women experiencing homelessness increased by a staggering 55% between 2013 and 2016. Research shows that domestic violence is a primary driver into homelessness for women and that gender-based violence is the most significant difference between men and women experiencing homelessness.

Domestic violence and homeless/housing services no longer run on parallel paths. While the identification of the connection between these two social problems has engendered change, more work is needed to formulate strategies that are client-centered and survivor-driven. Thus, the Downtown Women's Center, along with co-lead Rainbow Services, with the support of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, is building and leading a cross-sector Domestic Violence and Homeless Services Coalition (DVHSC) to create a client-centered system that increases access to safe housing and supportive services for survivors of domestic violence and their families. Leading partners in the coalition include the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), the City Attorney's office, Neighborhood Legal Services, and County Supervisor Sheila Kuehl's office.

In looking at housing instability and chronic homelessness through the lens of domestic violence, survivors face a host of barriers to secure safe and sustainable housing. While there is recognition that changes in systems and service delivery will create stronger channels to housing stability and prevent the experience of chronic homelessness for survivors of domestic violence, the changes need to be driven by the needs of those with lived experience.

The purpose of this report is to give voice to the opinions and perspectives of those with lived experience to guide client-centered systems change and develop coordinated community responses that meet the direct needs of this population. **This report examines and incorporates understandings from survivors to:**

- Decrease the number of women entering homelessness from domestic violence situations in Los Angeles
- Decrease the number of women entering chronic homelessness in Los Angeles as a result of past experiences of domestic violence and other forms of violence

- Increase the number of women moving into permanent housing in Los Angeles
- Create a model for replication and scale for dissemination across the U.S.

DVHSC conducted 12 county-wide focus groups in 2017. The findings from these focus groups were stark. Participants in all groups consistently described challenging service experiences, which not only interfered with their ability to obtain support and housing, but very often reinforced their lack of power/choice, and re-traumatized them in the process. Participants recounted feeling judged and dismissed when interacting with providers. Many felt as though they had no recourse and a few expressed a conscious decision not to engage with supportive services systems any further. **Key findings from the focus groups are:**

- A myriad of barriers exist to accessing services, leading to survivors' feelings of hopelessness, re-traumatization, and disconnection.
- Survivors need support and advocacy in navigating the complex housing continuum and service system.
- Survivors have a deep desire to stay connected to their communities and social networks, especially those with children.
- When survivors do receive trauma-informed services and safe housing, they report increased trust in themselves and the system.

It is clear when listening to survivors of domestic violence that service delivery in both the homeless services and domestic violence sectors is, at best, inadequate, and in many cases harmful. As providers and leaders in both sectors, we are in a position to change how we do business by listening to the experiences of survivors and acting on their recommendations with intention. This report gives us solutions directly from survivors to guide our systems change work ahead.

METHODOLOGY

This section explains our approach used to gather the experiences of women with lived experiences of domestic violence and housing instability/homelessness.

Participants and Procedures

With the support of organizations across Los Angeles County, DVHSC solicited the help of several domestic violence and homeless service agencies to conduct focus groups to better understand the unique needs of women's experiences at the intersection of homelessness and domestic violence. **From September to December of 2017, 12 focus groups were conducted in all eight service planning areas (SPAs) of Los Angeles with 81 participants.**

The women participated in a group session that lasted one and a half hours and then filled out a survey on basic demographic information (Appendix A) during the last 15 minutes. The women's participation in the focus group was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. After the focus group, the women were provided a gift card to thank them for their time and feedback.

Each group was homogenous in that it represented anyone who: 1) identified as a woman 2) had experienced domestic violence, and 3) has been or is at risk of homelessness. Given some of the cultural complexities and barriers women face in terms of accessing services, groups were also held in Spanish, Asian Pacific Islander (API) Languages, and American Sign Language.

Informed-consent procedures were explained at the beginning of each focus group and after distributing the consent forms (see Appendix B). Some focus group discussions were tape-recorded with the permission of the participants. The anonymity of participants in the focus groups is protected in this report.

Facilitators

Using open-ended interview protocol, members of the DVHSC Client-Centered Workgroup facilitated the focus groups with the assistance of graduate level interns and community partners with the capacity to facilitate in a specific language. Interview questions (see Appendix C) were developed with the direction and input from the Client-Centered Workgroup and National Alliance for Safe Housing (NASH), and were designed to cover a range of survivor-related issues and address specific questions and concerns raised during our preliminary research. NASH, a project of the District Alliance for Safe Housing, is a national technical assistance and training

provider. They provide programs and communities with the tools, strategies, and support necessary to improve coordination between domestic and sexual violence services and homeless and housing providers, so that survivors and their children can ultimately avoid homelessness as the only means of living free from abuse.

Data Analysis

To begin the data analysis process, facilitators debriefed after each focus group to discuss session content, what was learned, what was surprising, and to process any emotions evoked throughout. Next, facilitators conducted a preliminary analysis to get a general understanding of the data and reflect on its meaning. An individual summary report was drafted for each focus group that analyzed major themes. Once individual reports for each group were completed, the data was further analyzed across all focus groups and organized into themes. These themes or key findings helped determine the interconnectedness of issues and conditions domestic violence has in relation to homelessness and housing instability. The themes were then turned into recommendations for program and system changes to improve service delivery to this population.