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## **Domestic Violence and Housing: Key Policy and Program Challenges**

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## Recommendations

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# *Domestic Violence and Housing*

## *Key Policy and Program Challenges*

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*This article identifies key policy and program recommendations that have emerged from recent analysis and national discussions on housing and domestic violence, and urges continued attention by policy makers, community leaders, and housing and domestic violence advocates to battered women's short- and long-term safety and housing needs. Three primary courses of action are highlighted: reviewing, and modifying as necessary, existing housing policy and programs to increase their responsiveness to women with abusive partners or ex-partners; promoting policies and programs that increase all women's access to safe, affordable, and stable housing as well as housing assistance and support services, when necessary; and widely publicizing information on available subsidized and unsubsidized housing and housing assistance programs as well as services and protections available to domestic violence victims.*

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*The availability of safe, affordable, and stable housing can make a critical difference in a woman's ability to escape an abusive partner and remain safe and independent. Without viable housing options, many battered women, particularly those already living in poverty, are forced to remain in abusive relationships, accept inadequate or unsafe housing conditions, or become homeless and perhaps increase their risk of sexual and physical violence.*

For some women, threats to their current housing will come from the partner's continued interference and control. Battered women may face eviction as a result of a partner or ex-partner's

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property damage, his threats against a landlord or other tenants, his theft of rent money, or other abusive behavior. When battered women's housing becomes unsafe or unstable, some will also face the loss of their employment, their support system, or even their children through child protective services intervention.

For years, women have used welfare and other government benefits, including subsidized housing programs, as a bridge out of abusive relationships. Changes in welfare and housing laws at the federal, state, and local levels, including the steady erosion of funding for many housing programs, threaten this safety net. As a result, there are increasing calls from both domestic violence and housing advocates for government agencies and community leaders to consider the safety needs of domestic violence victims in housing policy and program development. Never has it seemed more urgent—or more possible—to forge collaborative partnerships at every level to ensure that housing policies and programs are responsive to women who have experienced violence or are at risk.

This article describes what we know of the connections between domestic violence and housing issues, identifies three key policy and program recommendations that have emerged from recent analysis and national discussions, and urges continued attention by policy makers, community leaders, and housing and domestic violence advocates to battered women's short- and long-term safety and housing needs.

## **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND HOUSING: DRAWING THE CONNECTIONS**

Research and practice have shown that domestic violence occurs in all demographic and social groups, cutting across age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and economic circumstances. However, the intersection of poverty, welfare, and domestic violence and its relationship to homelessness and other housing-related problems is a particularly important one.

Studies of welfare caseloads indicate that between 8.5% and 41% of current welfare recipients have experienced domestic violence in the past 12 months, with upward of 60% reporting abuse in their lifetimes (Raphael, 2001; Tolman, 1999). A growing body

of national, state, and local research documents domestic violence as one of the leading causes of homelessness among women (Douglass, 1995; Hagen, 1987; Roofless Women's Action Research Mobilization, 1997; U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2000; Zorza, 1991). Also contributing to women's homelessness were poverty and unemployment or underemployment as well as the scarcity of affordable housing (Roofless Women's Action Research Mobilization, 1997). Research indicates that women and their children make up the fastest growing group of poor and homeless people (Browne & Bassuk, 1997). Bassuk et al. (1996) compared the lives of low-income housed and homeless mothers and found that twice as many of the homeless mothers lost housing due to a male partner's abuse or his loss of a job. Sixty-three percent of these homeless mothers had experienced physical or sexual assaults by an intimate partner.

The United States is currently experiencing record low vacancy rates and rents that are rising at a pace far exceeding inflation (Grunwald, 1999). A recent examination of state, metropolitan, and local data by the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) determined that a substantial number of renters cannot afford housing in their community. "In 46% of states, 54% of all metropolitan areas, and 49% of all local jurisdictions, 40% or more of renters cannot afford the fair market rent for a 2 bedroom unit" (Twombly, Pitcoff, Dolbeare, & Crowley, 2000). Federal resources for subsidized low-income and affordable housing have decreased significantly. In inflation-adjusted dollars, budget authority for assisted housing dropped from \$64.5 billion in 1977 to \$11.1 billion in 1997—a decline of 83% (Dolbeare, 2000). According to the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD),

The number of households with worst case housing needs—those who pay more than 50% of their income for housing or live in sub-standard housing—has grown to a record 5.4 million households. Waiting lists for housing assistance are longer than ever. And there are still too many who are without shelter—an estimated 600,000 homeless persons on any given night. (Cuomo, 2000)

Almost 60% of single-parent households rent rather than own their own homes, and 44% of these families are poor (NLIHC,

2000). Women head 75% of the households currently residing in public housing (McAuley Institute, 1996). Recent research shows that women living in public housing face high rates of violence, particularly from intimate partners or ex-partners and acquaintances (Renzetti & Maier, 1999).

However, for battered women the housing issues they face go beyond the ability to locate emergency or affordable permanent housing or to secure a housing voucher or a public housing unit. The limited availability of affordable, permanent housing affects all battered women, whether they are exiting from an emergency shelter or a transitional housing program or weighing whether to leave an abusive partner. Battered women face both short- and long-term housing needs. Many are forced to flee from abusive partners and rely on emergency shelter provided by domestic violence or homeless programs. Requests for emergency shelter by homeless mothers with children increased in 72% of U.S. cities surveyed in 1999, and 68% of cities surveyed were unable to meet the current demand for emergency shelter (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2000, p. ii). Other victims of abuse are forced to return to their abusers because of inadequate shelter or lack of resources (Davies, Lyon, & Monti-Catania, 1998).

A battered woman may be forced to leave her job or find herself facing sanctions from her welfare-to-work program as a result of workplace stalking by her abuser, losing income and the ability to pay rent. She may face eviction based on disturbances caused by her abuser or be seen as an undesirable tenant by both public and private landlords. If she attempts to have her abuser evicted from a shared dwelling under a protection order or through other legal means, she will not only be dependent on the effectiveness of police intervention, she may also face retaliation from her abusive partner for taking these steps toward independence. She may find herself struggling to afford her current housing without the financial contributions of her abuser, particularly if he is failing to provide child support.

The nature of her struggle with domestic violence often leaves women without the basics to set up and sustain permanent housing: no credit history, no landlord references, little or no income/money, often no papers at all, not even an address if they are doubling up illegally or living in a shelter. (Pearce, 1999, p. 117).

Clearly, responding to the complex housing issues that domestic violence raises for victims requires collaborative, sustained, and multidisciplinary effort at the federal, state, and local community levels.

### **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND HOUSING: KEY POLICY AND PROGRAM CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Over the past 2 years there have been several important calls for policy makers and community leaders to respond to the housing needs of battered women. The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, the McAuley Institute, the National Coalition for the Homeless, and other advocacy groups have disseminated papers and fact sheets designed to bring attention to battered women's safety and housing issues. Workshops on domestic violence and housing have been offered at national domestic violence conferences and national housing conferences. Researchers have begun to explore the incidence and prevalence of domestic violence and other forms of violence against women within public housing settings (DeKeseredy, Alvi, Schwartz, & Perry, 1999; Renzetti & Maier, 1999) and the impact of federal housing policies on battered women's safety and well-being (Renzetti, 2001 [this issue]).

As part of the Violence Against Women Act of 2000, Congress authorized the Department of Health and Human Services to establish a Transitional Housing Assistance for Victims of Domestic Violence Program to provide short-term housing assistance and support services to individuals and their dependents who are homeless or in need of transitional housing as a result of fleeing domestic violence. Unfortunately, no funds were appropriated in fiscal year 2001 to support the program.

Two recent national forums have also produced detailed recommendations for the country related to domestic violence and housing. A National Discussion on Housing and Domestic Violence in 1999 brought together experts from the domestic violence and housing communities, federal policy makers, and researchers to craft recommendations for improving housing options for low-income, battered women, particularly those living in public housing. More recently, the National Advisory Council on

Violence Against Women (NACVAW), established over 5 years ago to provide guidance to the U.S. Attorney General and the Secretary of Health and Human Services, calls on federal, tribal, and local governments; private institutions; communities; and individuals to enhance all women's access to safe and affordable housing in its recently released *Ending Violence Against Women—An Agenda for the Nation* (NACVAW, 2000).

The key messages emerging from these initiatives are remarkably similar. Three consistent themes emerge and provide a clear framework for responding to the housing-related risks facing battered women and their children:

- (a) Review, and modify as necessary, existing housing policy and programs to increase their responsiveness to women with abusive partners or ex-partners.
- (b) Promote policies and programs that increase all women's access to safe, affordable, and stable housing, as well as housing assistance and support services when necessary.
- (c) Publicize more widely information on available subsidized and nonsubsidized housing and housing assistance programs, as well as services and protections available to domestic violence victims.

Undergirding each of these is a recognition of the importance of multidisciplinary partnerships to ensure appropriate cross-training on housing and domestic violence issues and the development of policies and programs that increase battered women's housing options and, minimally, do not increase their danger.

#### **REVIEW, AND MODIFY WHERE NECESSARY, EXISTING HOUSING POLICY AND PROGRAMS**

There are several important trends in housing policy that affect how domestic violence-related policies and programs might be framed or implemented (Hammeal-Urban & Davies, 1999). The first of these is the shift of authority to design and implement federal housing programs from the federal government to the local level. This creates both the opportunity to design housing programs that are more responsive to community needs and the challenge to ensure that local flexibility does not result in programs with harmful effects. There is also a shift away from "bricks and mortar" projects to those that provide housing vouchers to help tenants pay rent in the private rental market. Under this

approach, some tenants may face increased problems finding apartments to rent and affording those that are available. Some tenants will also face discrimination from landlords who do not want to accept vouchers.

Under changes in federal law, the income eligibility standards and priorities for some housing programs have changed and public housing authorities (PHAs) are now permitted greater flexibility to establish their own preferences and priority systems. Preferences are no longer required to be based solely on income or an individual's need for housing but can respond to broader local interests, such as building mixed-income neighborhoods or maintaining community stability. This broader eligibility may affect the access that the most needy renters have to subsidized housing.

Finally, there has been an increased emphasis placed on crime prevention in federal housing programs, especially public housing. "One strike and you're out" rules instituted in 1996 require that a family be evicted from public housing the first time any family member participates in "prohibited drug-related or other criminal activities" (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD], n.d., p. 8). These rules empower PHAs to screen applicants more closely for past or current behavior and to evict tenants whose behavior threatens the safety or well-being of other tenants. One Strike policies hold the entire household responsible for the behavior of each individual member as well as his or her guests (Renzetti, 2001).

These trends in housing policy individually and collectively raise concerns when examined through the lens of domestic violence. Strict crime prevention policies raise issues for battered women living in public housing who might be penalized for their violent partners' behavior (Hammeal-Urban & Davies, 1999; Renzetti, 2001). Local discretion to set preferences may mean that battered women fleeing a violent relationship no longer have preference for housing vouchers or scarce subsidized or affordable housing units. Local discretion may also make it more difficult to ensure that women can relocate within the public housing system when they need to do so for safety reasons.

Emerging from an exploration of these issues during the National Discussion on Housing and Domestic Violence and the deliberations of NACVAW are a set of recommendations for HUD, local PHAs, public and private housing programs, housing



advocates and community groups, and domestic violence advocates. An overarching recommendation is that these groups work collaboratively to identify how public housing authority crime prevention policies enhance or compromise the safety of domestic violence victims. "Of particular concern are crime reduction policies that expose a victim to the risk of eviction because of her partner's or ex-partner's violence, his property damage, his threat to other tenants, or his violation of family one-strike policies" (NACVAW, 2000, p. 13). Hammeal-Urban and Davies (1999) have raised a related set of questions:

How can crime reduction efforts be supported without forcing battered women to suffer the consequences of their abusive partner's behavior? How can crime reduction efforts include enhanced safety for battered women and their children? How can policy assure that the needs and circumstances of battered women are considered when public housing authorities decide whether to pursue eviction? If only the abuser is subjected to the eviction, what procedures are necessary to ensure he does not retaliate and hurt his partner or her children? (p. 18)

Renzetti (2001) proposed that PHAs be required to screen for domestic violence when addressing One Strike violations, exempting battered women and referring them to domestic violence services for assistance.

NACVAW (2000) also called for the design and implementation of procedures

to ensure that victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking who need to transfer between public housing units for safety can do so in a timely fashion, whether within the same housing authority's jurisdiction, or to another jurisdiction, including to another state. ("Promoting Women's Economic Security," Recommendation 12)

Domestic violence victims who hold joint housing certificates or vouchers with an abusive family or household member should also be entitled to keep the certificate or voucher if they choose to vacate the apartment for safety reasons. During the National Discussion on Housing and Domestic Violence, key federal agencies, and particularly HUD, the Departments of Justice, Health and Human Services, and Education, were urged to convene a

working group to examine the impact of existing policies on domestic violence victims, develop strategies to use funding and regulatory authority to enhance responsiveness to the safety and housing needs of domestic violence victims, and coordinate ongoing housing and domestic violence initiatives.

In another section of NACVAW's (2000) agenda to end violence against women, HUD is urged to encourage state and local housing authorities to support the meaningful involvement of local domestic violence programs and domestic violence victims in the development of housing authority plans, including the required PHA annual and 5-year consolidated plans. HUD is further urged to "use financial incentives, guidelines, and training materials to encourage the adoption of displacement of violence as an admissions preference for Section 8 and other subsidized housing programs, and the broader participation by private landlords in these programs" ("Challenge to Congress and the Executive Branch," Recommendation 42); highlight domestic violence intervention and response in its current programming; and undertake new initiatives. Given the complexity of the issues facing individual battered women, it is essential that tenants' groups, including domestic violence victims, be included as key informants during the process of policy and program development, implementation, and evaluation.

Finally, NACVAW (2000) recognized the importance of emergency intervention as a strategy for helping women hold onto their current housing in the aftermath of victimization. A wide range of community agencies—social service agencies, welfare and child support agencies, state victim compensation programs, sexual assault and domestic violence programs—is urged to work together to

eliminate the economic crisis facing many victims . . . by designing and implementing programs to provide stability to victims and their families immediately following victimization; [and to] create or expand emergency assistance programs to provide funds for up to three months mortgage, security, or rent payments for victims forced to relocate, repairs and maintenance of property damaged during an attack (including the replacement of phones, and clothes or equipment required for work), the installation of security systems, and other expenses associated with their recent victimization. ("Promoting Women's Economic Security," Recommendation 1)

They further recommended widely publicizing the availability of these funds and ensuring that they are easily and quickly obtained through multiple access points.

**PROMOTE POLICIES AND PROGRAMS  
THAT INCREASE ALL WOMEN'S ACCESS  
TO SAFE, AFFORDABLE, AND STABLE HOUSING**

NACVAW and participants in the National Discussion on Housing and Domestic Violence are in agreement about the importance of Congress and key federal agencies providing funding and technical assistance to "support the development of comprehensive, short- and long-term housing-based social service networks for women survivors of sexual and domestic violence and stalking (NACVAW, 2000, "Challenge to Congress and the Executive Branch," Recommendation 40). State and local policy makers are urged to

use economic incentives, including federal loan requirements, tax policies, and subsidies, to encourage private housing management companies and PHAs to develop emergency, short-term, transitional, and long-term housing for women survivors of sexual and domestic violence" and to adopt and enforce housing codes and regulations that enhance tenant safety. ("Promoting Women's Economic Security," Recommendation 12).

An important strategy for addressing the housing needs of battered women is to increase the availability of safe, affordable housing for all people and particularly poor families and those at risk. Many domestic violence victims will not have access to domestic-violence-specific housing programs either because their isolation prevents them from finding out about them, because such programs are full, or because they do not meet the eligibility requirements. It is important, therefore, to increase affordable housing options generally to benefit the greatest number of battered women (Hammeal-Urban & Davies, 1999). NACVAW and participants in the National Discussion on Housing both recognized this reality when developing recommendations to federal, state, tribal, and local governments and community leaders to maintain and expand the number of available, affordable housing units when upgrading existing public

housing stock. These policy leaders are further urged to implement fair housing laws and regulations to specifically protect housing subsidy recipients from discrimination based on income (NACVAW, 2000, "Promoting Women's Economic Security," Recommendation 13).

**MORE WIDELY PUBLICIZE INFORMATION  
ON HOUSING ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS AS  
WELL AS SERVICES AND PROTECTIONS  
AVAILABLE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS**

The key to any reform or policy change is informing, educating, and training all those who will be in contact with battered women and their children or responsible for implementing policies or programs affecting them. This includes training and technical assistance to expand the capacity of domestic violence advocates to provide more comprehensive housing advocacy and services to battered women. It also involves the development of cross-training programs on violence against women for national, tribal, state, and local housing organizations and domestic violence programs. An inventory of federal and local housing programs, regularly updated and distributed widely through domestic violence programs, tenant organizations, and housing agencies will be an invaluable tool for increasing women's access to existing programs. Domestic violence awareness campaigns targeting public housing tenants, participants in housing voucher programs, and the general public can help raise awareness of and responsiveness to domestic violence and housing issues. NACVAW (2000) recommended that HUD and the departments of Health and Human Services and Justice initiate an "inter-agency technical assistance program to provide information, training, and technical assistance to support community collaborations addressing housing and violence against women issues" ("Challenge to Congress and the Executive Branch," Recommendation 43). This will ensure the continuation of attention and resources to the challenges associated with domestic violence and housing at the federal level and would provide encouragement and support to state- and local-level initiatives.

Of particular note as a resource for housing and domestic violence agencies interested in developing specialized programs to

respond to the housing needs of battered women are two papers prepared by Amy Correia through the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence. *Housing and Battered Women: A Case Study of Domestic Violence Programs in Iowa* (1999a) and *Innovative Strategies to Provide Housing for Battered Women* (1999b) both provide detailed descriptions of approaches taken by domestic violence programs, states, and local communities, including multidisciplinary partnerships.

## CONCLUSION

Addressing domestic violence and housing, both complex and multifaceted issues in themselves, can be daunting. The recent attention paid to housing and domestic violence issues by federal agencies, domestic violence advocacy organizations, and housing groups is encouraging. A concrete and comprehensive set of recommendations, both wide-ranging and specific, have been developed by several groups that provide a blueprint for future action on the part of governmental and community leaders as well as domestic violence and housing activists. Critical issues have been identified, including potential harms resulting from existing policies and approaches. What is required now is continued commitment and action.

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