



Brief: Human Trafficking and Access to Housing

Individuals who experience human trafficking often struggle to find safe and secure housing.¹ Providing individuals who experience trafficking immediate access to emergency, transitional, and long-term housing is critical² because homelessness and lack of stable housing put individuals at risk of being trafficked³ or experiencing other forms of interpersonal violence. The following challenges and potential solutions are associated with increasing access to housing for individuals who experience or are at risk of trafficking.



Challenges

Lack of Affordable Housing

- Affordable housing options are limited, and there is typically more demand than supply.⁴ Individuals and families are often limited to 30–60 days in an emergency shelter but wait at least 6 months to obtain safe permanent housing.⁵
- Even with a housing choice voucher, many survivors cannot afford security deposits, application fees, and first/last month's rent.^{6,7}



Lack of Safe Shelter Options for Survivors

- There is limited space at emergency shelters for survivors of crime (e.g., domestic violence, trafficking).¹¹
- Funding greatly impacts who can be admitted to shelters and how long survivors can stay.¹¹
- It is difficult for survivors to find housing that is safe and within their budget, especially while they are also in crisis. The process is complicated and time consuming.¹²



Highly Individualized Needs

- Some survivors of crime need emergency shelter to escape their abusive situation.¹⁰ Others prefer to avoid emergency shelter because shelters are unfamiliar; far from their support networks, work, and schools; restrictive; and overwhelming.¹⁰
- It is difficult to apply survivor-centered practices that empower the individual to choose options that best meet their needs; goals and priorities are often impeded by threats to safety and stability (e.g., finding great housing but it is far from their support network).^{6,14,15}
- Advocates often work with survivors several hours per week for several weeks or even years.¹²



Potential Solutions

Provide More Affordable Housing and Flexible Financial Assistance

- Although not easily or quickly attainable, the key is to make more affordable housing available. Current housing models will always be limited in their success until the supply can meet the demand.^{8,9}
- Provide flexible financial funding to meet housing needs in addition to rental assistance.¹⁰

Collaborate With Other Service Providers and Provide Mobile Advocacy

- Develop more initiatives like the [Safe Shelter Collaborative](#), where providers work together and share resources.¹³
- Engage in more mobile advocacy, which allows survivors to meet with service providers at a place they choose and be accompanied when looking for housing or going to appointments. Mobile advocacy helps survivors obtain housing and other supports, as well as improve their quality of life and safety.¹²

Conduct Screenings and Carry Lower Case Loads

- Screen and triage needs of individuals to determine level of assistance (e.g., short-term or occasional assistance versus long-term intensive assistance).⁶
- Listen to the survivor. Explore multiple housing interventions rather than apply a one-size-fits-all approach.⁶
- Given the major time commitment to each individual, advocates should work with fewer individuals to be successful in meeting their short- and long-term needs.¹²



Challenges

Working With Landlords

Some landlords:

- Do not rent to survivors with a history of eviction, substance use,^{4,11} bad credit, and criminal activity and/or who require Violence Against Women Act lease addendums.¹⁶
- Evict or threaten to evict individuals for incidents associated with their victimization (e.g., police activity, property damage) or if the victim reports concerns about the habitability of their housing.¹⁶
- Delay or do not respond to emergency transfer requests for survivors.¹⁶
- Will not accept housing vouchers.¹⁷
- Require additional background and credit checks, which sometimes cause creditors to ask the survivor about their abusive partner. This threatens the safety of the survivor.^{6,7}



Lack of Understanding and Implementation of Protections Under the Violence Against Women Act of 1994 (VAWA)

- Many providers are not aware of or do not understand VAWA housing protections. As a result, survivors may be asked for documentation that violates their VAWA protections and threatens their safety (e.g., requiring survivors to apply for a formal separation from their partner or obtain a signed letter from their abusive partner stating they were separated).⁷
- VAWA is not being implemented in the Low Income Housing Tax Credit, which leads to “uneven implementation” of VAWA housing protections at the state level.¹⁶ Many landlords are not aware that VAWA housing protections are in effect.¹⁶



Flexible Funding

- There is a lack of clarity about which funds are allowable under specific funding streams. Federal funding is more restrictive than private funding and has more unallowable expenses.^{8,19} There is confusion over whether to give funds directly to survivors or landlords. Giving funds to landlords requires a tax form, which many landlords are unwilling to fill out. Providers are often unsure if they will be reimbursed if they give funds directly to survivors, and whether the funds would count against other benefits the individual receives (e.g., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families).⁸



Potential Solutions

Build Strong Relationships With Landlords

- Educate and develop strong collaborations with landlords.¹⁸ This could include:
 - Communicating directly with landlords.⁸ Consider describing the program, providing information about human trafficking, and dispelling myths.¹⁵
 - Hosting community events to foster relationships with new and existing landlords.⁸
 - Negotiating on individuals’ behalf.⁸
 - Exploring a trial rental period while the survivor receives financial assistance and other services, like a 9-month lease.¹⁵
 - Sharing success stories from previous landlords who have agreed to rent to survivors.¹⁵
- Develop policies that provide incentives to and protect the interests of landlords who rent to survivors.⁹

Provide More Training, Technical Assistance, and Resources

- Provide training and technical assistance on how to (1) best assist individuals who experience victimization, (2) collaborate with victim-serving and housing organizations, and (3) enforce VAWA and other housing protections.^{7,16}
- Develop new toolkits and resources (e.g., on specific housing issues, for specific jurisdictions).
- Raise awareness of and continuously update existing toolkits and resources.
- Provide stronger oversight of housing providers to ensure compliance with VAWA and ensure consistent enforcement of VAWA protections.¹⁶

Develop Detailed Resources and Diversify Funding Streams

- Give service providers detailed resources explaining which expenses are allowable and unallowable under different funding streams.²⁰
- Seek more private funding, which allows agencies to support expenses that are frequently unallowable under federal funding streams but still contribute to housing stability for survivors.^{10,19}



Challenges

Restrictive Eligibility and Screening Requirements

- Strict eligibility requirements make it difficult to access housing programs, including citizenship or legal status documentation; history of substance use, criminal history, evictions, bad credit, or past due bills; residency restrictions; family composition (e.g., number, age, gender); mandatory participation in support services; and income and employment thresholds.⁴
- Housing screening tools like the Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) often fail to accurately assess vulnerability of and risk factors specific to survivors of crime. Inaccurate assessments can lead to survivors of crime not being prioritized for housing.²¹
- Survivors often struggle to collect necessary documentation for housing programs because they fled abusive situations (e.g., birth certificate, social security card).^{6,7}
- The application process takes so long that some survivors have to move frequently, and then service providers lose track of them and they do not complete the application.^{6,7}



Definition of Success for Survivors

- Service providers often define success differently than the program and the individuals they serve.⁹
 - For example, survivors may define success as improved social connection and achievement of goals, while service providers may define success as improved survivor agency.²²
 - Some definitions of success may not be attainable in the projected timeframe (e.g., becoming self-sufficient).⁹



Potential Solutions

Screen, Advocate, and Brainstorm

- Assess survivors' needs carefully to find the best housing program fit.
- Advocate for survivors' VAWA protections.
- Collaborate with and educate public housing authorities and landlords to lessen the burden of restrictive eligibility criteria.
- Use flexible financial assistance to address needs that are not covered under programs with restrictive eligibility requirements. Flexible financial assistance allows advocates to provide additional assistance to survivors that is typically restricted through normal funding streams and individualized services tailored to meet the needs of survivors. The survivor-driven advocacy of the Domestic Violence Housing First model allows advocates to assist survivors but gives them choice and personal agency which fosters self-sufficiency and empowerment to focus on other non-housing goals.¹⁸

Develop Survivor-Informed Definitions of Success

- Use survivor-driven trauma-informed advocacy. This shows respect to and empowers survivors to choose options that best meet their needs and definitions of success.¹⁹
- Provide clear definitions of success based on the organizational philosophy and program, as well as how the individual defines their personal success.^{9,23}
- Include the milestones that help survivors maintain housing and stability in the long-term (e.g., meeting goals, achieving financial self-sufficiency, building strong interpersonal connections, increased awareness of victimization, safety planning, employment), as success is not limited to finding housing.⁹



Resources

- » See [NHTTAC's Housing Programs for Individuals Experiencing Housing Instability or Homelessness Environmental Scan: Outline of Findings](#) for more information.
- » [HHS Office on Trafficking in Person's Housing and Economic Mobility Toolkit](#)
- » [HHS Office on Trafficking in Persons Innovative Solutions to Expand Housing Options for Survivors of Human Trafficking](#)
- » [Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence: Addressing Discriminatory Housing Barriers For Victims of Domestic Violence: A Toolkit for Advocates.](#)



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