



Why Domestic Violence Survivors Need Long-Term Housing Adapted to their Special Needs

Andrea Hetling, Rutgers University

Hilary Botein, CUNY Bernard M Baruch College

Housing matters for everyone – to provide shelter, security, privacy, and stability. For survivors of intimate partner violence, housing is often the key to establishing a new life, free from abuse. However, survivors usually face inadequate housing options, forcing them to choose between cycling through temporary shelters, becoming homeless, or returning to an abusive partner. Recently, advocates at the state and local level have begun to design and expand appropriate, effective, and feasible long-term housing solutions for survivors of intimate partner violence.

Our use of the term “long-term housing” is deliberate. “Emergency,” “transitional,” and “permanent” are the terms typically used to describe shelter and housing for survivors of intimate partner violence and other vulnerable populations. But the word permanent is problematic for survivors, as it may be for everyone. Most people do not think of their housing as permanent; they simply hope to find a home that will work well for them until life changes in income, family composition, or employment, make them want to move. Choice and flexibility are important to everyone. The key point is that survivors of domestic violence should have access to long-term housing, defined as housing that they can stay in for as long as they want, as long as it works for their families. Such housing gives a sense of security, but residents can choose to leave when it no longer works for them.

Matching Housing with the Needs of Survivors

Until recently, U.S. programs and policies did not address the need for long-term housing that provides survivors of intimate partner violence with support that is enduring and comprehensive. Agencies serving this group viewed housing as an emergency and temporary intervention to get survivors out of abusive situations. Because most U.S. housing policies do not meet their special needs, many survivors of domestic violence face inadequate housing options that compromise their chances to maintain violence-free lives and avoid poverty.

Nevertheless, over the past decade housing models designed specifically for survivors have emerged across the nation and continue to spread; and various agencies are attempting to modify existing programs to facilitate access and establish a better match with public and private housing. Many domestic violence organizations have adapted the permanent supportive housing model, which originated in the 1980s to combine housing with supportive services, as a strategy to serve single adults facing multiple challenges. However, there is no dedicated funding source to support permanent supportive housing for survivors of intimate partner violence, so providers must be creative and cost-conscious. Programs may draw from a range of public and private funding sources that support the development of affordable housing, but they often struggle to balance on-site and off-site services to meet diverse resident needs, particularly for employment and mental health care. Despite such challenges, research indicates good results from client-centered approaches to providing decent, affordable, and stable housing adapted to the needs of people who have been traumatized.

What More Do We Need to Know?

Although awareness of the problem of inadequate long-term housing for survivors is growing, no clear, evidence-based proposal has gained unanimous or majority support in the political system. Questions remain unanswered as survivors, researchers, policymakers, advocates, and program administrators work collaboratively to craft housing policies and programs that are appropriately supportive and flexible. The following issues are front and center in ongoing debates.

- Under U.S. law, disability status leads to eligibility for a broader range of federal housing funds. **Should a background of intimate partner violence be considered a disability?** If so, should the survivor be considered disabled forever, or should there be an end point to the disability status? Could labeling survivors as disabled jeopardize child custody rights?
- **How should authorities define and measure outcomes to assess the effectiveness of housing options for survivors of intimate partner violence?** A criterion of “self-sufficiency” is probably not workable, because in the current economic climate, few people, including those with middling incomes, are truly self-sufficient. Many receive some sort of support from the government, private institutions, or family. A better standard is to aim for “stability” for survivors in housing, mental health, physical health, family well-being, and income. It remains to be determined exactly how stability should be measured, to set reasonable goals for helping people who have experienced intimate partner violence.
- **How can understandings of the impact of trauma better inform services for particular vulnerable populations?** Our research suggests that many existing housing models can be adapted to work with survivors if providers learn more about the ways various kinds of traumatic experiences affect residents’ needs and behavior.
- Survivors vary by location, race, class, ethnicity, immigration status, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Housing and service providers who themselves look and live very differently than the people they are trying to help need to understand and meet the needs of diverse survivors with appropriately adapted services. **Can research do a better job of identifying diverse needs – and can survivors themselves participate meaningfully in the development and delivery of appropriately adapted services?**

Moving Forward

Improvements in long-term housing require the support from national advocates. But with good reason many such advocates are currently preoccupied with efforts to maintain funding and federal support. In the absence of federal leadership, state domestic violence coalitions and local organizations become more important. They can be the engines of a “progressive federalism” to enhance appropriate forms of long-term housing for survivors and other vulnerable groups. State coalitions can link local organizations, note regional trends, and advocate for state legislation and funding, while local organizations can explore new partnerships and develop fresh approaches to serve individuals and families in need.

Read more in Hilary Botein and Andrea Hetling, *Home Safe Home: Housing Solutions for Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence* (Rutgers University Press, 2016).