

Housing Needs of Survivors of Sexual Assault

By Terri Poore, MSW, Policy Director,
National Alliance to End Sexual Violence

HISTORY

Sexual assault can happen anywhere, anytime, to anyone. It can create immediate housing needs, and housing needs throughout the lifespan. Far too often, the “anywhere” means in a person’s home. “The majority of sexual assaults take place in or near victims’ homes or the homes of victims’ friends, relatives, or neighbors (Mindlin and Vickers as quoted by NSVRC 2010).” We also know that sexual violence that occurs outside of the home – in school; at work; in faith communities; online; in shelters; in prisons, jails and detentions centers; anywhere – can impact housing stability for survivors throughout the lifespan.

Studies have noted that:

- Living on the streets puts individuals at an increased risk of additional assaults.
- Survivors of sexual assault may need housing because a perpetrator is a threat to them in their home or because their housing is unsafe in more general ways, or because they lack psychological safety in their home.
- Survivors may not feel safe or comfortable at home right after an assault, whether or not it occurred in their home.
- Survivors of sexual assault may need a place to stay to process what to do next (forensic exam, report, etc.).
- Housing needs may arise due to non-offending parents and children losing housing; landlords not helping to make housing safe; landlords engaging in sexual violence; couch surfing; lack of training on sexual victims; or teens being kicked out of their homes after disclosing sexual violence.

- Adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse and survivors of adult sexual assault may have long term economic impacts directly resulting from the trauma of abuse that may make it difficult for them to find and keep safe housing.
- The trauma of the sexual violence, whenever it occurred, impacts a survivors mental and physical wellbeing to the point that their income and therefore housing is unstable.

While housing programs, shelters, and safe spaces have been created for survivors of domestic violence, dedicated housing options and assistance responsive to the unique needs of sexual assault survivors have not been as extensively developed. Separate and concerted attention is needed.

Questions remain about sexual assault survivors and housing:

1. What is the extent and range of survivors’ housing needs?
2. What would it look like if we were to design safe housing, shelter/spaces, housing assistance, and subsidies for survivors of sexual assault?
3. How can we better link the sexual assault advocacy community and housing communities to better meet the needs of survivors?

ISSUE SUMMARY

Housing for survivors of sexual assault is not currently being adequately addressed, both through existing victim-specific and mainstream homeless programs, and in permanent safe and private housing. Some identified areas of need are:

1. **Focused response to trauma that impacts a survivor of sexual assault’s ability to maintain and obtain safe housing.** The

impact of trauma on a survivor of sexual assault can create housing instability or chronic homelessness for survivors across the lifespan and can make achieving housing stability challenging.

2. **Housing spaces that allow for holistic healing for survivors of sexual assault.** Survivors have a variety of needs regarding housing, chief among these being healing spaces, whether short-term or long-term housing, shelter, safe space, or otherwise, which require a flexible, trauma-informed, and low-barrier response.
3. **Housing and safety needs for survivors of sexual assault need to be thought of broadly, to address the ongoing traumatic impact of victimization and respond to the many aspects of survivors' lives.** The structure and context of the housing program has to examine what does “safety” and support look like from a sexual assault lens.
4. **Cultural specificity in responding to needs for survivors of sexual assault.** Any program must be infused with strategies and responses that are responsive to Communities of Color and other marginalized communities.
5. **Safe housing programs.** Survivors of sexual assault need to access homeless shelters/ programs/spaces, and housing assistance/ subsidies without fear of further violence.
6. **Training for advocates and coalitions.** Currently, local programs and sexual assault coalitions are working to respond to the housing needs for survivors of sexual assault. However, there is a need for training tools for advocates and housing providers; and outreach tools for reaching survivors in housing settings.

A National Sexual Assault Housing Collaborative exists to provide training and technical assistance to housing professionals and sexual assault victim advocates about the intersections of sexual assault and housing. The organizations that comprise this collaborative are the National Alliance to End Sexual Violence, the National Organizations of Sisters of Color Ending Sexual

Assault, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, and the National Sexual Assault Coalition Resource Sharing Project.

WHAT TO SAY TO LEGISLATORS

Advocates should tell members of Congress why eviction prevention, flexible funding and direct cash assistance, emergency shelter, transitional housing, housing set asides for culturally specific providers, and permanent housing are essential for survivors of sexual assault. Housing providers should talk about the victims that programs serve and about the struggles that programs face in meeting survivors' unique needs for safety. Advocates should share the latest information about the pervasive scarcity of emergency and transitional housing, and of safe, affordable long-term housing in their communities.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

National Alliance to End Sexual Violence - <https://endsexualviolence.org/>.

National Organizations of Sisters of Color Ending Sexual Assault - <https://sisterslead.org/>.

National Sexual Violence Resource Center - <https://www.nsvrc.org/>.

National Sexual Assault Coalition Resource Sharing Project - <https://resourcesharingproject.org/>.