

# What We've Learned: Domestic Violence Housing First

Domestic Violence is a leading cause of homelessness for women and children. The Domestic Violence Housing First Approach (DVHF) focuses on getting survivors of domestic violence into stable housing quickly and then providing the necessary support as they rebuild their lives. Key components of DVHF include: survivor-driven, trauma-informed mobile advocacy; flexible financial assistance; and community engagement.



In 2015, eight domestic violence organizations in two Washington State regions were selected to integrate the DVHF approach into their organization and advocacy structures. A series of focus groups with survivors of domestic violence and domestic violence advocates were conducted in English and Spanish and flexible financial assistance data were analyzed. This report highlights our learnings on how these domestic violence organizations have been implementing DVHF, the impact it has had on survivors, and what they have learned along the way.

## Survivor-Driven, Trauma-Informed Mobile Advocacy

A main component of the DVHF approach is that survivors drive their own process toward safety and stability. Advocates provide support by listening, validating, offering options, providing systems advocacy and supporting survivors to rebuild control over their lives.

“The experience survivors are having isn’t one size fits all, it’s not linear. [...] That’s just not how people’s lives look. For us it’s about being really **flexible and responsive** to what’s coming up but also, as the advocate, trying to hold the long-term and the short-term goals.” –Domestic Violence Advocate

“**Meeting people where they’re at** is most important. I could have all these assessments and in-takes I want to do for that day, but if the only thing on their mind is a terrible appointment or experience, they’re not going to want to be even thinking about their finances or applying for housing. Always giving them that space to express what’s on their mind and what they want to work on and **knowing that their needs come first.**” –Domestic Violence Advocate

Advocates are seeing survivors as whole people and aren’t just focusing on the violence they have experienced, but working with them on a variety of needs.

“You consider the **whole person**, not just this one wound that they’re suffering from. The entire situation.” –Domestic Violence Advocate

“We stress a lot about self-care and self-love and taking care of ourselves. That’s important to everyone. When we understand that, we help them [survivors] on their process, on their **journey towards healing.**” - Domestic Violence Advocate

Advocates are literally going out into the community to meet with survivors, search for housing, provide transportation, and get survivors the help they need where it is most convenient and safe for them.

“I would go and meet [the survivor] at her job because he [the abuser] would check her timecard to make sure she was at work. Our meetings never showed on her timecard because her employers were understanding - **mobile advocacy allowed me to do that.**” – Domestic Violence Advocate



“You consider the whole person, not just this one wound that they're suffering from.”

"Driving to turn in applications. I took the client in multiple directions. She had physical disabilities, so I took her to make sure she actually **access what was available** and talk to landlord(s)." –Domestic Violence Advocate

## The Impact

Advocates make a big impact on survivors' lives. Survivors stated that it was particularly helpful when advocates frequently touched base with them, considered all of the factors in their lives, and supported them on their self-identified goals in moving toward safety and stability.

"They [advocates] are touching base with you on all the aspects of what's going on in your life. Going **the extra mile** of informing themselves of different and new things, then they bring it back. Then you're more motivated to move forward because you're seeing the effort that is being given to you. It makes you feel like you're **actually important** and you can progress because there's this plan you both have set up **together.**"

–Survivor of Domestic Violence

"**They don't ever doubt you.** They don't ever make you feel less. Or you're a liar or your story doesn't matter [...]. **It's the first time anybody has ever listened to me. Ever.**" –Survivor of Domestic Violence

## Key Learnings

The biggest take-away expressed by advocates was that the DVHF approach often requires spending more time with survivors. Advocates reported struggling with having to make the decision between supporting a lot of people with only a little or supporting a few people but in a meaningful way.



"It's the first time  
anybody has ever  
listened to me.  
Ever."

"The need in the world outweighs the staff capacity that we have and the financial capacity. DVHF is most successful with the financial piece mixed with that advocacy piece. **There are a lot of times when there isn't capacity.**" –Domestic Violence Advocate

It's also hard to adapt to a new way of providing advocacy. Advocates highlighted the challenge of trying to do something new and different from old structures or approaches. For example, trying to do mobile advocacy while still required to be at the office most hours of the day. Or taking a more nuanced approach to defining what safety looks like and recognizing it may look very different for each person.

"One thing that's challenging [...] is that we've always been trained to get the survivor out of the situation. Now we're talking about keeping the survivor in the current home and working around the safety of that. **It's just so different** from what we're used to or what we have done before" –Domestic Violence Advocate

"**Retraining yourself** from what you knew before and that what you knew before wasn't the best way to do something, but it's the way that we had done it for a long time" –Domestic Violence Advocate

## Flexible Financial Assistance

The DVHF approach utilizes unrestricted funds to support survivors to become more safe and stable in housing. Between February 2016 and December 2019, 1452 individuals and families received flexible financial assistance. 2566 disbursements were made, totaling \$873,728.80. Disbursements ranged from fifty-six cents for renters insurance to \$5,450 to cover move-in costs plus 6 months of rent.



**1452 Survivors,  
2566 Disbursements**



**\$340.33 Average  
Disbursement**



**27% Identified as an  
Immigrant or Refugee**

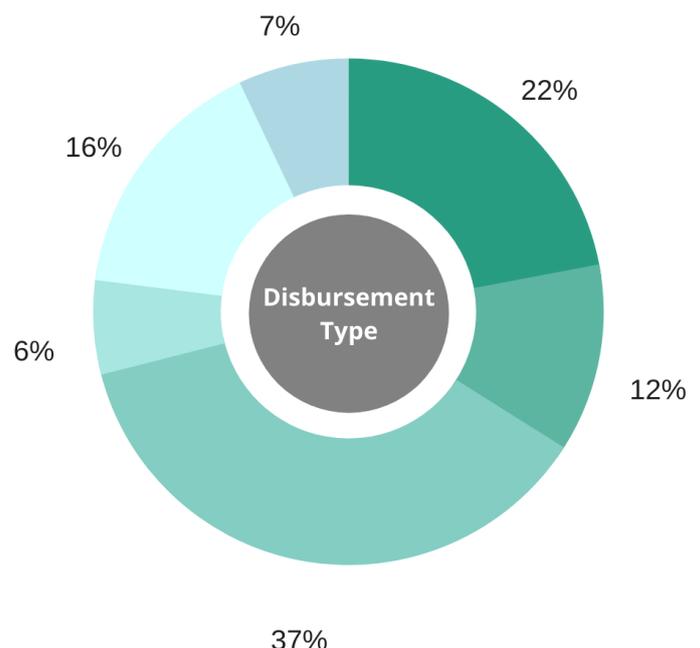
\$340.33 was the average amount disbursed and 93% of unique disbursements were equal to or less than \$1,000. The heads of household were primarily female identified (95%), with the largest subsets falling between the ages of 25-34 and 35-44 (38% and 32%, respectively). Twenty-seven percent of participants identified as an immigrant or refugee. 39% identified as White/ European-American, 30% as Hispanic or Latino/a, and 24% as Black/African American/African Descent.

Flexible financial assistance is utilized by advocates to assist with any needs related to housing safety and stability. Over half (57%) of survivors received financial assistance a single time.

Examples of these one-time payments came in the form of court fees (as little as \$9.25), changing a doorknob and lock (\$18.94), or the cost to change a phone number and cell carrier because a survivor's phone had been hacked (\$145). Forty-three percent of survivors needed financial assistance multiple times to work towards stability.

**"We love the support to be able to do really flexible advocacy. It's added some more substantial resources to work that we have been trying to do without that resource for a long time. –Domestic Violence Advocate**

Over a third (37%) of the flexible financial assistance went towards Rental Assistance, 16% to Move-In Costs, 12% to Transportation Assistance, 7% to Basic Needs, 6% to Utility Bills, and 22% to the remaining categories. These include Children's Needs, Debt Assistance, Education and Training, Employment Assistance, Essential Furnishings, Moving Costs, Security Assistance, Mortgage, Physical/Mental Health Needs, Legal Assistance, and Family Activities.



One survivor received five separate disbursements over a 10-month period, totaling \$5,067. These payments covered housing application fees, first and last month's rent to move into a home. The final payment was \$11 for a fish tank filter. Along with advocacy, the flexibility of this funding supported the family in moving from shelter into a house, and then with that final payment, turning the house into a home for the child.

## The Impact

Almost half (45%) of survivors were able to stay in their own home with the support of receiving flexible financial assistance. The second highest result was to help in housing preparation (33%), followed by moving from shelter to housed (7%), moving from one home to another (7%), and moving from homelessness to housed (6%).

"When the flexibility is available it can **help so many** people in **such amazing ways**, then as things get more restrictive and more structured, the flexibility just diminishes and then it's limited in terms of who you can help and how you can help." –Domestic Violence Advocate

"When the flexibility is available it can help so many people in such amazing ways"



The more rules in place around how funds can be used, the harder it is to provide the support that is needed



## Key Learnings

Total flexibility of funds was highlighted as the most important piece of flexible financial assistance. Challenges were identified around restricting financial assistance. The more rules in place around how funds can be used, the harder it is to provide the support that survivors need.

No matter how much advocacy and flexible financial assistance is provided, there is a **lack of affordable housing** and some survivors need longer-term support.

"Just generally, there is a huge **housing crisis**. There's been **skyrocketing rental prices**. The vested priorities of landlords in this community **do not necessarily align** with our priorities and our mission and vision"  
Domestic Violence Advocate

The most important takeaway related to flexible funds was the need for a high level of communication between advocates, management, and finance teams related to the flex funds available and establishing processes that result in timely disbursements.

"Having that **knowledge in place** for advocates and supervisors as much in advance as possible. Then structures or systems around what does it look like or somewhat **concrete goals**." –Domestic Violence Advocate

## Community Engagement

Domestic violence advocates are going out into the community to leverage the strengths and resources of the community to support survivors. They are spending time out of the office talking with landlords, business owners, and other community members to create connections that will benefit survivors' ability to be safer and more stable.

"We **partner and collaborate** a lot with the homeless organizations and try and support people. We can partner and collaborate to ensure that folks are getting on the right list and getting access to diversion funding and all these other resources that are available to them" –Domestic Violence Advocate

"We are helping with hooking them [survivors] up with community resources. Really working with the places that we know. So there's different community organizations that come in to help them **remove those barriers**, too. It's not just all on us." – Domestic Violence Advocate

Often advocates and survivors go together to search for housing and connect with community resources. Survivors find it helpful and more manageable when there is an advocate there to help them navigate complex systems.

"We will take them [survivors] and get the applications. We **encourage** them to see how much they can fill out, and we guide them through that as well." –Domestic Violence Advocate

"While I was aware of a lot of the resources, I was so overwhelmed by everything that was going on. They stood by me, and ultimately, we landed right [where] we wanted to be.

The [advocate] wouldn't let me give up during the times that I wanted to." –Survivor of Domestic Violence

In addition to developing partnerships with service providers, advocates are talking with survivors about their support networks and how to re-connect with those they have lost touch with as a result of abuse or build a new community of support. This can help reduce isolation and increase the support networks when advocacy phases out.

"We talk to people about meet ups and stuff all the time. There's probably a meet up for people who like dogs and Pokémon. We see building connection as a robust and rich area for support that's totally legitimate and needs our attention."

–Domestic Violence Advocate

"We spend a lot of time talking to participants about how to strengthen their relationships with friends, [...] encourage them to hold on to the friends that they have, and figure out how to strengthen those connections."–Domestic Violence Advocate



## The Impact

When survivors are connected to the right resources and supports they feel safer, more stable, and more equipped to move forward with their lives. This has a tremendous impact on children as well. Safety and stability means that kids are able to be kids again.

“When my kids feel like I’m safe, they’re okay. For us to be [housing] stable, it matters a lot—it gives my kids safety, **they feel secure.**” -  
Survivor of Domestic Violence

## Key Learnings

There continues to be a general misunderstanding of domestic violence among landlords, and other systems, making it difficult for survivors to access housing and resources.

“We realized that landlords **don’t really know what the laws are.** We have a participant who was in last week who has a voucher. I called the landlord and mentioned Section 8. The landlord was like, ‘Oh, I don’t take Section 8.’ I said, ‘Well, you have to.’”  
-Domestic Violence Advocate

“People don’t understand. It’s horrible to walk in and **have to prove yourself** to somebody. Nobody knows what you’re dealing with already.” –Survivor of Domestic Violence

Partnerships that come with restrictions limit advocates ability to provide survivor-driven advocacy and flexible financial assistance.

“Our partnerships that are the most difficult are the ones that come tied to contracts. Those are difficult because they have numbers that [we] need to meet. They have certain requirements that they want to follow. [...] Navigating that to make sure that **we’re still advocating for our survivors** and going to bat for them, but at the same time **not losing this resource** that is so valuable and helpful to so many people.” –Domestic Violence Advocate

“**People forget** about what success means to survivors and it loses focus on **what survivor-driven advocacy** actually looks like. When you’re reporting the contracts, all they care about at the end of the day is how many people you house with the money that they gave you [...]. They don’t want to hear about the survivors that are taking longer.”  
-Domestic Violence Advocate



## Summary

Findings from focus groups highlight both what is going well and what can get in the way of implementing the DVHF approach. These findings reinforce that the DVHF approach can be adapted by any organization. The model is inherently flexible, giving programs the ability to implement the approach to meet the needs of their community. It takes skilled advocates, strong leadership, and organizational structures that support survivor-driven, trauma-informed mobile advocacy along with truly flexible financial assistance. Even when all these things are in place, larger systems, funder restrictions, and limited advocacy time and capacity can make it challenging to provide the support survivors need to become safe and stable.