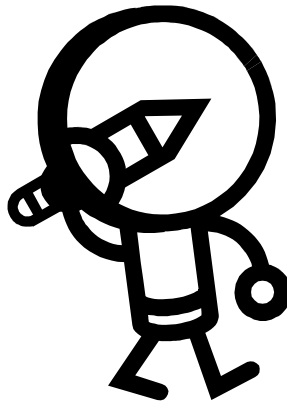


# **Battered Women's Shelters: Reflections**

**By Linda Olson for  
The Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
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**Inside Scoop**

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Does this **respect** the survivor's decisions?

Does this advance the **accountability** of individuals and groups to stop domestic violence?

Does this **change** the conditions that allow domestic violence to happen in our communities?

## ABC

Advocacy-based counseling means the involvement of a client with an advocate counselor in an individual, family, or group session with the primary focus on **safety planning** and on **empowerment** of the client through reinforcing the client's **autonomy** and **self-determination**. Advocacy-based counseling uses **non-victim-blaming problem-solving methods** that include: (1) Identifying the barriers to safety; (2) Developing safety checking and planning skills; (3) Clarifying issues; (4) Providing options; (5) Solving problems; (6) Increasing self-esteem and self-awareness; and (7) Improving and implementing skills in decision making, parenting, self-help, and self-care.

-Washington Administrative Code 388-61A-0145

The smell of bacon frying. Children playing tag. Coffee around the kitchen table. The tears and the laughter of women in groups. These are some of my treasured memories from my days of working in battered women's shelters. There is nothing more rewarding than watching a woman reclaim her power or seeing a child smile. I know that battered women's shelters historically have been a place of safety and healing. And I know that battered women's shelters have saved lives. But even after reflecting on years of successful shelter stories, I find myself asking, Are there ways we can be even more responsive to the needs of battered women and their children?

## Why shelter?

Shelters for battered women developed in the early 1970s in response to the cries of women isolated and imprisoned in abusive relationships. Many survivors, recognizing the danger faced by others like them, began opening their homes to those seeking safety. Groups of women purchased or rented both large and small homes, sought non-profit status, and began sheltering women and children from abusers. Their actions were noth-

ing short of revolutionary. At the time, laws against physical abuse in intimate partner relationships did not exist, and a man was the unquestioned head of the household. If a woman hoped to gain safety, it was *she* who was expected to leave her own home. Even after laws were in place and protection orders available, few really expected the batterer to leave his home. And even if he did leave, a woman's safety at home was often questionable; protection orders, after all, were only pieces of paper.

My first shelter experiences took place in the heart of Appalachia. Residents were white, most were poor, more than half were from very rural areas, and almost all were evangelical Christians. Shelter rules existed to safeguard confidentiality (even though everyone seemed to know the shelter's location) and to maintain household cleanliness. There was little diversity in the population. There was no limit on the shelter stay. Affordable housing was hard to come by, so women stayed at the shelter until a housing opportunity arose or until the pressure to return home became too great. One woman stayed nine months waiting for a place to live, only to return home when her abuser was awarded custody of her newborn child.

## **Realities of shelter**

Shelter advocates often receive dual messages from survivors. In one breath, shelter residents may say, "Thank you for saving my life," and in the next, "Why am I the one who has to leave my home?" Advocates also hear words of praise for many of the services provided *and* words of irritation if the services are not wanted.

This grateful ambivalence stems in part from the contradictions inherent in shelter (*Why does a woman have to leave her home to be safe?*) and in part from the ways the shelter movement has evolved. As shelters have proliferated across the country, they have in many ways become the cornerstone of the battered women's movement. Advocates have been successful in securing government and foundation grants. With the grants have come both the blessing of money and the hurdle of (sometimes arduous) rules and regulations to assure standards of health, safety, and services. (In Washington State, we have been fortunate that the Department of Social and Health Services has imposed few such rules and regulations.) Shelters have also instituted rules to provide guidance for those living communally and to support staff in efforts to mediate conflicts. In the midst of this assortment of rules and regulations, the grassroots nature of shelter has sometimes been lost.

Yet, shelter remains a safe, confidential place to heal. It is a place to learn about resources and explore options. It is a place to break free from the isolation created by the batterer. Communal living environments can help build new community when an old community was not safe or was too fractured to be supportive. Shelter can be a safe place for children to be children. Communal living options vary - some have few places for personal privacy; others are more



spacious and offer private bedrooms. And there never seems to be enough shelter space. Shelters throughout Washington are always full and turn away hundreds of women and children every year.

Considering this need and the positive aspects of traditional shelter, it would make sense, perhaps, to build more such shelters. But I still have to ask why so many battered women with whom I've talked are ambivalent about shelter. Over the years, it seems to me that the ambivalence has increased as the shelter population has grown more diverse and has developed more intensive needs that often go beyond domestic violence.

## Challenges of communal shelter

I have come to see that in many ways women's ambivalence about shelter has much to do with the realities of communal shelters. Since we do need every shelter space that we currently have (and possibly more), we need to ask ourselves what lessons we can learn as we listen to battered women. Why should we move beyond our current communal living environments, or how could we improve them? Some of the issues that I have heard many times follow:

- **Rules, rules, rules!** Most shelter rules are important for safety, confidentiality, and community living. However, there are often far too many to remember and the consequences when a woman forgets a rule may include losing her shelter space (and having to choose between homelessness and a return to the abuser). Sometimes the very rules intended to provide safety and confidentiality make access to community support difficult. It has always been painful for me to hear a woman say that the expectation to comply with so many rules at shelter felt just like being with her abuser.
- **Everyone is so different.** Shelters are filled with women from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds, with different languages and different faith traditions. While diversity is a gift, women in crisis may have limited patience and tolerance. If a woman does not understand English, she may find household dynamics to be a confusing mystery. When a woman feels that her culture is not respected or understood, she may feel alienated. Communal living can often heighten differences and cause more stress. On the flip side, communal living can help all women learn about new cultures and it can help women from other countries learn English.
- **Relapse and recovery.** Substance use and abuse are very real issues for many battered women, and appropriate interventions are not always available on-site. It is not fair to ask women who do not want anything to do with drugs or alcohol to tolerate the behavior of those who are using or relapsing. Communal living makes it nearly impossible to support women who are using as well as women who are not.



- **Parenting in a fishbowl.** Communication style and discipline may vary from woman to woman. One mother may be seen as too permissive; another as too harsh. Either may feel judged by other residents and/or shelter staff. Children often act out at shelter since they are in an environment that is both safe and very busy and stimulating. I could not begin to count the times I've heard mothers say, "They've never acted that way before!" Communal living heightens the sense that people are being "watched" rather than "seen."
- **Children with severe behavioral problems.** Sometimes the behavior of a few children may jeopardize the safety of other children. For women fleeing abusive relationships, it is overwhelming to feel that they must watch and protect their children (or other children) every minute of the day and night. Communal living can add to the stress of children coping with histories of abuse.
- **Women are human.** I have yet to meet a perfect person, and while many of us might fantasize about perfect victims, we all know that they do not exist. Tempers can flare in shelter environments, and verbal and/or body language normal for one person may be experienced as threatening by another. A communal living environment is also ripe for theft and hoarding. These behaviors are challenging for shelter advocates, who know how hard it is to get those donations (and want them distributed fairly), and for residents who find that their prized possessions are missing in an environment that should be safe.
- **Limited shelter stay.** House dynamics, limited capacity, and the requirements of funders may limit a shelter stay to one month. Even when affordable housing is an option (and we all know it is becoming increasingly difficult to attain), it is unrealistic to believe that a survivor of domestic violence can sort through feelings, explore legal options, become economically stable, and find a safe, suitable place to live all in one month (or even three). Because of time limits, too many families move from shelter to shelter, which is traumatizing for everyone involved and often results in a return to the abuser. The traditional model of a limited stay is common in communal shelters.

Given these issues, the battered women's movement can benefit from looking at other housing models to supplement communal housing as a way to provide a strong base from which survivors can find safe, permanent housing.



## The transitional housing model

The concept of transitional housing has a long history in the fields of mental health and corrections, which predates its application to homelessness. Community-based transitional programs were originally developed to help people being released into the community from correctional facilities and mental institutions to establish themselves independently in mainstream housing. Later, those working in emergency shelters recognized that this approach could also help some people leave homelessness for good. According to researcher Martha Burt, “Most transitional housing programs for homeless people that exist today specialize in serving households with serious enough barriers to getting or keeping housing that a period of stabilization, learning, and planning appear needed if they are ultimately to leave homelessness and stay housed.”<sup>1</sup> Federal legislation implemented through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) initially focused on demonstration programs for people with chronic disabilities.

The lack of low-income, subsidized housing started overloading the nation’s shelter system in the early 1980s. From 1978 to 1983, HUD’s budget decreased from more than \$83 billion to just \$18 billion.<sup>2</sup> Family shelters began opening in 1983 throughout the nation in response to homelessness. In 1987, Congress passed the Stewart B. McKinney Act to help with homeless assistance funding. Since 1987, McKinney homeless assistance funding has never exceeded \$1.4 billion annually.<sup>3</sup> Between 1995 and 1998, Congress denied funding for any new rental subsidies.<sup>4</sup> Whether or not there were barriers in addition to a lack of living-wage jobs, transitional housing became a necessary part of the housing continuum of care while an individual or family waited for subsidized housing and/or worked to increase their income level.

Women leaving abusive relationships often face extremely limited access to living-wage jobs. As a result, many domestic violence agencies have taken advantage of McKinney funding opportunities to support survivors as they try to find housing, so that they do not have to choose between homelessness and an abusive home.

## How do transitional housing programs work for domestic violence survivors?

During my years working in shelters in Kentucky, it was apparent that many women coming to shelter struggled with substance abuse. Alcoholism and addiction to prescription medication were extremely common, and drug and alcohol use were grounds for immediate eviction. It

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1 Burt, Martha R., “Characteristics of Transitional Housing for Homeless Families,” Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2006, p. 2.

2 “Without Housing: Decades of Federal Housing Cutbacks, Massive Homelessness, and Policy Failures,” San Francisco: Western Regional Advocacy Project, 2006, p. i.

3 Ibid.

4 Friedman, Donna Haig, *Parenting in Public: Family Shelter and Public Assistance*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, p. 1.



broke my heart to watch women and their children return to abusive partners, with little hope of a supportive intervention for the chemical dependency or for their children.

These same issues became equally apparent at the Eastside Domestic Violence Program shelter that opened in 1992. There I watched women not only return to abusive partners but also lose custody of their children as they struggled with substance abuse problems. Transitional housing seemed to be the perfect answer for these families, but there were no transitional housing options for those who had not been clean and sober for at least three to six months.

With a lot of community support, I developed a transitional housing program for chemically dependent battered women and their children. The facility offered both a confidential domestic violence program and on-site chemical dependency services provided by a licensed treatment agency. The program was tailored to support safety and sobriety. Because it was supported by HUD-McKinney funding, self-sufficiency (or economic stability) became the third leg of the stool. The families in the program faced multiple barriers, and seemed to benefit from the services and support during this transitional period.

As always, I question whether there might be other, even better ways to support women with multiple issues in their quest for housing stability. Research done by Cris Sullivan in 2003 points out that most transitional housing programs for domestic violence survivors have been created without the input of survivors.<sup>5</sup> These same programs, however, are also credited with saving lives, preventing further abuse, and averting homelessness. Sullivan's research project reviewed a sample of domestic violence transitional housing programs with the goal of providing consumer feedback to service providers. The study offers helpful recommendations and highlights the value of transitional housing programs for domestic violence survivors. Sullivan concludes that the greatest strength of transitional supportive housing is its potential to meet the individual needs of women over an extended period of time, maximizing the likelihood that women will successfully meet their own goals. The combination of a safe home and supportive services (offered, not mandated) provided by staff in the context of a respectful and flexible relationship results in women feeling that they have the ability to get back on their feet. At the same time, current research by the Corporation for Supportive Housing suggests that housing models that include housing subsidies in one's own home and supportive services as a choice are also very helpful for long-term housing stability.<sup>6</sup>

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5 Sullivan, Cris M., "Transitional Housing Policy and Practices: Battered Women's and Service Providers' Perspectives," National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women, 2003, [http://new.vawnet.org/Assoc\\_Files\\_VAWnet/TransHousPolicy.pdf](http://new.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/TransHousPolicy.pdf).

6 Bassuk, Ellen L., Nicholas Huntington, Cheryl H. Amey, and Kim Lampereur, "Family Permanent Supportive Housing: Preliminary Research on Family Characteristics, Program Models, and Outcomes," Corporation for Supportive Housing, 2006; Durham, Kate, "Home Works: Solving Family Homelessness Through Permanent Supportive Housing," Corporation for Supportive Housing, 2006.



## Are there other options?

What might happen if we think outside the box? Could we change the shelter/housing models? Or could we even look at completely different strategies? Since survivors of domestic violence have highly individualized needs, how can we provide an array of choices?

- **Changing the shelter model.**
  - Many agencies throughout the country are using apartment buildings to provide shelter. Individual units provide privacy. Renovation efforts can create community space and children's space. Staff may have on-site office space. Large homes are costly to build, purchase, or rent and challenging to maintain. In the world of maximizing assets, it is a drawback that the resale value of a home specifically tailored for group living may not be high. A disadvantage for both models - large homes and apartment buildings - is that if confidentiality is compromised, moving to a new location is not an easy option. Other disadvantages of the apartment model include concerns that families might be further isolated in individual units, that families may have very little interaction with staff, and that units can be trashed and hard to clean and repair.
  - Individual apartments scattered either throughout a complex or within a neighborhood also have advantages. Apartments may be added or subtracted as funding comes and goes. One unit is easier to relinquish than an entire building if confidentiality is compromised. Anonymity is easily preserved in a large complex with program apartments spread throughout the buildings and on all floors. Building maintenance is not an issue, though apartment maintenance would still be necessary. Money invested in property might instead be utilized for services and potentially for rental assistance. While the agency might initially hold the lease on a unit, the lease could potentially later be turned over to the resident. Disadvantages include a tight housing market and high rental rates. It can also be difficult to find property managers willing to rent to an agency for the purpose of confidential housing for tenants who will not go through the usual background checks. A strong, trusting relationship needs to be in place between the agency and the landlord.
- **Developing new strategies.** Could a survivor of domestic violence avoid temporary housing measures altogether? While immediate safety will always be a necessity for many, there are others who could stay in their own homes or move quickly to permanent housing. Sometimes the only barrier to these options is money.





- Why does she have to leave? An Australian study has identified provisions that may enable survivors and their children to stay in their homes.<sup>7</sup> Safety measures, financial assistance, and services can prevent homelessness after the end of an abusive relationship.
- If the current residence is not an option, arrangements may be made to move to a new location - again with safety measures, financial assistance, and services. There may or may not be a need for temporary housing depending upon the family's circumstances.
- A transitions-in-place model could also be used. In these models, a family may live in a unit with subsidies and supportive services provided for a flexible period of time.
- **Increasing the availability of safe and affordable housing.** What if a survivor could access safe and affordable housing when she needed to? Perhaps she could either bypass or limit her time in emergency or transitional housing options (interim housing is a new term used for time-limited housing), and receive help in her own home. Wouldn't it be wonderful if she could choose among traditional shelter or transitional options and services provided in the context of permanent housing? In order for affordable housing to become an option, we need to work to make it happen. Here's what you can do:
  - Work with local developers to increase the number of affordable housing units in your community.
  - Pressure the federal government to put more money into affordable housing.

## Conclusion

The network of battered women's shelter homes has made a vital contribution to the safety and healing of thousands of women and children. With shelter space at a premium, it is important that we value every option currently available to women as they flee violent relationships. Transitional housing has also been a life-saving response in the face of limited affordable housing options and a lack of living-wage jobs.

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<sup>7</sup> Edwards, Robyn, "Staying Home/Leaving Violence: Promoting Choices for Women Leaving Abusive Partners," Sydney, Australia: Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse, 2004.



During the process of program evaluation and planning, I would encourage each agency to reflect on the questions posed in this article as well as these big-picture questions:

- Does this program respect the survivor's decision?
- Does this program advance the accountability of individuals and groups to stop domestic violence?
- Does this program change the conditions that allow domestic violence to happen in our communities?

Offering survivors a variety of options - including confidential temporary housing in a model that respects the needs and privacy of the individual, financial assistance for survivors to stay in their own homes if they prefer, and affordable housing when a family needs to move - respects survivors' decisions. A community expectation that the perpetrator of violence leave the home holds batterers accountable and may eventually change the conditions that allow domestic violence in our communities. And ultimately, domestic violence advocates should join with housing and poverty action advocates to demand a greater investment in low-income housing and a national commitment to living wages.

We in the battered women's shelter movement are part of an incredible, revolutionary idea. It is time to reflect back on all that we have accomplished and come together to learn from our dynamic past. We can create a future that truly addresses the needs of survivors and their children and ultimately leads to an end to domestic violence in our communities.

*Linda Olsen has been a staunch advocate for battered women and their children for over 20 years. Linda began her advocacy in the mid-1980s at domestic violence shelters in Kentucky. Since being in Washington State, Linda spent 8 years as Shelter Director and 6 years as Executive Director at the Eastside Domestic Violence Program and currently works with the City of Seattle Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Prevention Division. Opinions expressed in this article are the author's and do not represent the City of Seattle's Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Prevention Division.*

