

The Creative and Multifaceted Efforts Needed to Help
Immigrant and Refugee Domestic Violence Survivors Obtain Safe and Stable Housing:
Spotlight on InterIm CDA

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Abstract

Domestic violence (DV) is one of the most common and devastating forms of violence occurring worldwide, and it is a leading cause of family homelessness in the US. Immigrant and refugee survivors who are homeless or experiencing housing instability have even more complex issues that need to be addressed in order to help them obtain safe and stable housing. The purpose of this study was to better understand the complexities involved in helping immigrant and refugee DV survivors obtain safe and stable housing, and to highlight the unique and critical services being provided by InterIm CDA.

Between the fact that affordable housing is becoming increasingly scarce (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2016), and having to address the multiple housing barriers that many DV survivors have -- many of which were caused by the abuser (e.g., prior bad credit, poor rental history, criminal record), stably housing DV survivors can be extremely challenging. To make this situation even more difficult, the federal funder that often pays for such housing efforts (U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development [HUD], 2013) prioritizes working as quickly as possible to house as many clients as possible (Albanese, 2010). Although a laudable goal in the abstract, this focus may leave survivors with complex issues, such as immigrant and refugee survivors, without the assistance they need.

To date, there is almost no evidence about the complexities of housing work with immigrant and refugee DV survivors. The point of the current study, then, was to better understand how long it takes to safely house an immigrant or refugee domestic violence survivor, and what it entails to be successful.

InterIm CDA

InterIm CDA is a nonprofit, affordable housing and community development organization located in Seattle's International District. The agency provides multi-lingual, culturally competent housing-related and community building services to Asian, Pacific Islander, and immigrant and refugee communities in Seattle. One of the programs within InterIm CDA involves providing housing advocacy to DV survivors. This program is partially funded by the Seattle Housing Authority, which mandates eligibility requirements around residency and legal documentation. To comply with funding requirements from the City of Seattle, families must be income-eligible for TANF, and priority must be given to City of Seattle residents.

Method

Between October, 2016, and January, 2017, we interviewed two advocates from InterIm CDA who provide housing advocacy to domestic violence survivors. Interviews were private, in-person, one-on-one, and advocates were asked to talk about cases in which they were successful in helping the survivor obtain safe and stable housing. We asked them to avoid telling us about outlier or incredibly unique cases, but instead to focus on the types of situations that other DV Housing Advocates would be likely to encounter with immigrant or refugee survivors. One advocate has been working with InterIm CDA (starting as a volunteer) since 2009, and is now the Transitional Housing Coordinator. The other advocate is the DV Housing Coordinator who began interning with InterIm CDA in 2008. Both are Filipina, who speak both English and numerous Filipino dialects including Tagalog.

Interviews covered the following topics: how they first came to work with the survivor, what the survivor's needs were as well as their obstacles to obtaining housing, what specifically they did to obtain safe and affordable housing, how community context and local systems helped or hindered their efforts, and how long it took to obtain housing. Each interview was between 60-90 minutes in length, and all were audio recorded. The university IRB approved the study before data collection began.

Data analyses. The interviews were transcribed, and data were content analyzed following the guidelines of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). The author carefully read each interview, engaging in open-coding, the “analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 101). This led to the process of axial coding, or examining patterns and relationships, and conceptually linking categories (Hawker & Kerr, 2007; Miles et al., 2014).

Results

Advocates noted that once they begin working with clients in their transitional housing program, it can take months or even the full two years to help survivors obtain safe and permanent housing. Advocates work on a range of issues with survivors, addressing their current housing barriers, helping them become more economically stable, and focusing on a myriad of other issues unique to each family. It is not uncommon for an advocate to spend 8 hours per week with one client over an extended period of time, applying for housing and working on these interrelated concerns. Although we asked advocates how many hours a week on average they had put into working with each survivor, they had difficulty answering this question, as the amount of time fluctuated based on what was being addressed:

Doing things together like housing applications takes a lot of time. Like for one time filling out the application form could take like 1-2 hours or more than 2 hours, because you need to explain to her what it is, cause it's something that she's not familiar with. Housing applications-- I applied her to 8-10 housing applications, each of which could be for conservative estimation like one and a half to two hours each housing application. And then calling the housing apartments before she was able to go, because we did not hear from any of these housing providers that we have applied to -- calling the apartments with the client there, because they want to talk to the client it's just about -- I should say average in a week is about 8 hours and that was like for the last four months. Like every week because I want her to be very active in looking for housing so I want her to be involved. I could just do it by myself, but I want her to be involved in whatever plan of action she has made. [#2]

Taking a Holistic Approach with Survivors

What came through clearly across all interviews is that Interim advocates do not “assess” their clients, judge them, or focus solely on their needs as either domestic violence survivors or homeless individuals. Instead, they treat each client as a whole person, and focus on each person’s individual needs, strengths, circumstances, and goals. They do need to complete intake forms into the TH program because of their funders’ requirements, but they manage this as

conversationally and respectfully as they can, especially given how difficult it is to complete these forms when the client does not speak English or does not understand particular words or concepts:

The intake process we have-- it lasted like 2 hours. And sometimes it could be longer depending on how much information the client gives, because when I do an intake it's not something I ask the questions -- it's a free flowing conversation. It's like getting to know the client. I don't probe on things that I know that is very sensitive to the survivor, because sometimes, especially if it's only the first meeting, some survivors -- well, all-- ninety to ninety-nine percent during the first meeting they do not tell you everything because it's something that they hold onto their private stories. It's their private life. [#1]

While the advocates work in a housing program and their ultimate goal is to help clients achieve safe and stable housing, they clearly understand how other factors in clients' lives need to be addressed in order for stable housing to be achieved long-term. As one advocate noted:

If their car broke down-- what is going to happen? They are not able to go to job-- if they don't go to job they are not able to have income-- if they don't have income then they will not be able to pay rent-- if they don't pay rent they'll be evicted and they'll end up being homeless. So it's like a domino effect. [#1]

In response to this, advocates assisted survivors with transportation, food, educational training, and other issues as needed, either directly or through their community partnerships. Advocates also spoke of doing things with clients that are not always the focus of other housing or domestic violence agencies. One activity that came up repeatedly was spending time with clients getting to know their new neighborhoods once they obtained permanent housing. Advocates would take the bus with their clients, explaining the system, and then show them neighborhood grocery stores, community centers, laundromats, and other resources they might need. This helped survivors and their children feel more comfortable in their new settings while also demonstrating that advocates care about each person and family holistically.

For someone who is new in our community taking the bus is kind of scary. And so I basically had her come in here with all of her kids and I give her bus tickets and show them how to use the bus tickets. You're really starting from scratch and then showing her how to get from point A to point B so at that time that was really from here going to the school and get everybody enrolled - so we did that. That was a whole day thing, too, because there was a long line. And then after that just kind of showing her places that she can go. Like where can she go grocery shopping, library or what the kids could do or if there were any events that they could do as a family. [#3]

A strong cultural value of many of InterIm's clients relates to the importance of children's education. In response, advocates spent time helping children enroll in school and ensured they had the resources they needed to succeed (e.g., school supplies, uniforms). While this may sound straightforward, in reality it often takes hours of an advocate's time, accompanying the entire family – often by bus – to find each school for each child (when some are in middle school, others in high school, etc.) and to enroll each.

Researching online takes about an hour. And selecting and giving her instructions took an hour. And then going to Seattle Public School is about 2 hours to get that information and then enrolling is another thing. So that takes another 2 hours. [#1]

If the advocate does not speak the client's language they also have to coordinate with an interpreter to accompany them. They then have to figure out the school bus system and obtain any supplies the children need. One advocate even helped one family obtain a free computer so that the children could do their homework.

She really wanted to invest so much in their education and for them to do well, and from the looks of it, I know they are doing well. I know they've got a scholarship — two of them already have a scholarship for college, two out of three. The third one is still young, she's not college bound yet. [#4]

Another cultural factor that was a strength in their country of origin but a housing barrier in the United States has to do with the idea of credit and debt. In many other countries, societies value being debt-free and only paying for what you can afford. The idea of having a bank account or

credit card, paying off debt in installments, and having a credit 'history' is very foreign to many of InterIm's clients.

Back in her country, it's different. When you have debts, it's difficult to get access to resources. Over here, you need to have credit in order for you to be able to have some kind of resources. To get into permanent housing, they will check if you have credit, but for her, she doesn't have any credit. [#5]

Advocates take a considerable amount of time helping clients understand this American cultural value related to debt and how their credit history (or lack thereof) can hurt their chances of obtaining permanent housing. At the same time, advocates take care to warn their clients not to over-use credit cards and to manage their debt loads.

It was not uncommon for survivors to deeply miss their families from their home countries, and to want to visit there for support or so that their parents can see their grandchildren grow up. It was incredibly painful for survivors to be so far away from their extended family and friends, and the InterIm advocates were familiar with this feeling and addressed it head-on. As one client shared with her advocate about her elderly mother: *"I would want my mom before she dies to see her grandkids."* In another case, the survivor's abusive husband had intentionally kept one of her children's passports, and:

she wanted to get that passport back, because one of her goals is eventually when she's fine, she wanted to go back home, back to her country of origin with her three kids, so she can prove to everybody that she's doing okay. What she told me is she's hearing that she's not doing well in this country, and that puts a lot of shame on her. So one of her goals is to eventually go there and say I'm okay. I may not be rich or anything like that, but my kids are okay, they are very respectful, they go to school, and that's what matters most.

Themes Across Interviews

Six major themes were identified from the interviews that contributed to advocates being able to take a holistic approach with survivors: (1) having strong community connections; (2)

providing community-based, mobile advocacy; (3) addressing the multi-faceted issues related to language barriers; (4) avoiding re-traumatization; (5) being creative; and (6) having flexible boundaries with survivors.

Providing Community-based, Mobile Advocacy

Working closely with survivors, within the community rather than in an office setting, was woven throughout all of the examples shared by the advocates. Whether applying together for housing (in person, online, or over the telephone), enrolling children in school, looking for employment, or any of the other forms of assistance the advocates provided, they walked side by side with their clients on this journey.

I think that's the uniqueness of our advocacy because we accompany the client. Some others, I'm not going to mention, but the other agencies don't do that. I mean some of them do -- you see case workers or case managers going with clients for their appointments...but I have heard a lot of clients that have said they were just given a number and they were just asked to call, but if you are somebody who is not confident you might just get traumatized being turned down a couple of times. And also, we went -- I even had to take the bus -- put her into the unit I have to ask the DV advocate to stay in the unit for a while and look after the two kids and I would go with the client, take the bus with her to downtown to show her the vicinity and how she can take the bus from downtown to the office and then from the office to downtown. So it's like one whole day that we spent navigating the resources that she could go when she moved into the unit. Afterwards she was good.

Accompanying clients in the community sends a strong message of empathy and support, and allows the advocate to see where each survivor's strengths and concerns are. This is even more important when working with immigrant and refugee survivors, who face language issues, different cultural norms, and discrimination. One of the advocates expounded upon this based on what her client had shared with her as well as her own prior experiences:

when they were in the public transport bus – train – wherever, and you would see Caucasians -- there is an available seat right beside you – and they feel so slighted when there is a vacant seat beside them and they would prefer to go and squish themselves somewhere else and not beside her, and she would say,

"is something wrong with me? Do I look different? Do I look okay?" And they feel slighted with that and then also when they talk -- it's just like me -- I'm not the very good eloquent speaker. I stumble about what I try to convey. For them that's the reason why they don't want to call directly, because they get embarrassed when people say, "Say that again."

Importance of Strong Community Connections

The advocates frequently spoke of needing other community partners to help them effectively address the myriad needs of their clients. Collaborating with DV agencies that have years of expertise in working with immigrant and refugee families were deemed to be critical partners not only because they can assist with specific issues related to DV but because they have advocates who collectively speak over 50 languages and dialects.

I've worked with that advocate for many, many years, I know the kind of work she does, it's amazing. That's why I've enjoyed getting clients from her, because I know the client will be well supported, especially when it comes to safety, and then if there's going to be any issues with the immigration, child support, divorce, protection order, she takes care of all that.

When other agencies could help clients with safety issues as well as legal, financial and mental health concerns, the InterIm advocates could focus more attention on housing.

I appreciate about the partnerships we have that-- those are the advocates that's been in the field for years. They know what's it like to assist a client from the start-- from the beginning. It's wonderful to work with them. I feel that the success of the program really is because of the great partnerships we have with DV advocates, that's one, and then the landlords around the area and other services.

Advocates had built strong relationships with landlords, property managers, housing authorities, and other housing-related partners over the years which helped them effectively advocate for clients who would have otherwise been turned down for housing.

I was working with rental management here in the Seattle area, and I've been working with the rental management for a long time so they know me. The client had all the necessary paperwork but zero income, so I really had to vouch for that household so they would even consider her. (#7)

We are also lucky that we have this network of landlords that we are working with and who have been valuing-- continually valuing the relationship that we have. It's just like a give and take. They help us put our clients there and then if they have issues with regard to our clients or even other clients they would refer to us. [#1]

Multi-faceted Issues Related to Language Barriers

InterIm works with clients from many different countries, who speak many different languages, and it is not uncommon for advocates to work with clients for whom they need an interpreter. When agencies have the funds they try to locate professional interpreters, and when funds are not available they rely on volunteers (often through the Red Cross). This is time consuming, and involves ensuring that the client either does not know the interpreter (especially in very small cultural communities) or trusts the person with their private information. One client, for example, spoke a very specific regional Arabic and did not understand other Arabic. She had been living in friends' garages and bus terminals with her small children, but InterIm could not place her into one of their transitional housing units until they found an interpreter who could help with the intake paperwork. It took 2-3 weeks just to find someone to have the first phone interaction with this client. Then for the in-person intake it was another 2-3 weeks.

In addition to needing to coordinate with interpreters for some clients, which adds more time and complexity to this already difficult work, language barriers often resulted in new problems that advocates needed to address. Advocates spoke of clients getting parking tickets, for example, for parking in areas they did not understand were off limits. If these tickets did not get paid it would hurt their credit and could even get them arrested. Some clients could not understand governmental paperwork being sent to them, and missed appointments or failed to provide information needed to keep their benefits from being discontinued. Some cannot understand automated phone systems that are not in their language: *"They don't even know,*

"press 2". And when they press there was English instruction and they couldn't understand."

Advocates spoke of contacting the state welfare agency and requesting that paperwork be sent in the client's first language – not something other advocates may think of doing, but that can mean the difference between a client staying housed or becoming homeless.

Another client had poor rental history because a landlord had accused her of not taking care of the property. Upon probing from her advocate, the client explained that she had bought bleach to clean a spot on her carpet, not knowing it would turn the spot white. The landlord had to replace the entire carpet, which the client could not pay for, and this was now on her credit report and resulting in her being denied entry into the transitional housing programs. It took coaching from the advocate in how to rectify this with the prior landlord, getting a statement in writing from the prior landlord that the debt was now cleared, and intensive advocating with the local housing authority before the advocate could get the client into the transitional housing program.

Finally, having an advocate with whom they can speak in their first language brings a sense of comfort, familiarity and ease to the DV survivor that cannot be overestimated. Even when the survivor and advocate both also speak English, they will often choose to speak in their first language together, as it is easier to express more complex feelings and thoughts in one's first language. One advocate spoke of a client who traveled to work with her from another city, in part because of their shared language and culture.

Avoiding Re-traumatization

Advocates were well aware of the many traumas their clients had experienced over time, and took care not to re-traumatize them through their services. This was accomplished in a number of ways: avoiding asking too many questions or asking about prior traumas directly,

minimizing the number of times clients had to “tell their stories” or talk about painful parts of their lives, being culturally sensitive and competent, and building a trusting relationship across time.

I would say that if we have programs that our clients are able to access-- I don't refer them out anymore to other agencies, because it's like-- if we want to help our clients forget about the bad experiences in their lives and we know that in every resources that we provide them they would always ask that and it's going to bring them trauma again. [#1]

One advocate spoke about following the client’s lead with regard to what they talked about and when, and the need to be open to changing your agenda if the survivor is having a hard time emotionally.

Sometimes dealing with them you just have to give your time and listen to them and give them the time that they needed. A session could be just crying. Sometimes I would meet a client I have a different agenda-- I'd have them come here because I needed them to fill out a housing application, but when they come here they talk about what has happened in their life before so I didn't finish my agenda but that's okay we can always reschedule and at least after they shared with me some very sensitive part of themselves at least they now have somebody that they could rely on. So I know for a lot of my clients, especially at the beginning I don't ask them what happened with the DV, because it is so super sensitive and it just feels weird saying that to this person you just met. So usually I wait until we start building that relationship with them and when they are ready-- even though I don't ask them-- they'll just come up and be willing to share and I think that's better than me asking-- not me asking them but them just sharing. [#3]

Being Creative

Clients’ immigration status directly impacted the types of assistance they were eligible for and the types of protections they could obtain. For example, those who were undocumented were not eligible for subsidized housing and had to look for market rate housing – where landlords often required an income three times higher than the rent. InterIm is fortunate to have community partners with many DV agencies as well as the Northwest Justice Project and Northwest Immigrant Rights to help clients with immigration, divorce and other legal concerns,

but these issues often take a long time to resolve. In the meantime, they and other issues unique to each survivor's situation impact what help is needed and what can be provided. The myriad of issues that immigrant and refugee survivors are grappling with requires advocates to be creative in their thinking. One advocate was talking about a fairly new client that she had just begun working with, who was not in the agency's transitional housing program:

She's couch surfing, one friend, two friend, one friend, two friend, but when I was telling her, can you tell me more about your friends, because I just needed to get a sense of her support, one of the friends is renting rooms to students, like international students. I go, do you know how much is the going rate for that? and I had to explain to her why I'm asking. I wasn't so sure if it was going to work, because her friend is in [city outside of Seattle], and she kind of wanted to stay in the Seattle area because of the services. So what we've agreed upon is that once a student moves out, she can take over one of the rooms, and the friend was willing to create like a lease for her. So that's what we did, so now, one of the students actually moved out, and now she's in one of the rooms. It's good that she's on a month to month basis, because I'm trying to connect her with this other rental management that's willing to give her a chance. So now, she's housed in that room in [city outside of Seattle], but eventually —her application is pre approved, but they're just doing other things, paper work wise. I don't see any reason why she would be denied, because I've already pledged — I had to help her, three month's rent, I had to really advocate for this client. I'm going to help her with rent and utilities, whatever it is, and then I told the rental management that the client is really actively looking for employment, and she doesn't have any eviction, that's good, no rental issues, nothing. She's 62, so she stands a great chance that she will get this housing. (#7)

Flexible Boundaries

Many domestic violence and/or housing advocates have social work degrees or work within agencies that follow social work ethical guidelines. While many of these policies are vital when engaging in human service work (e.g., policies around transparency, confidentiality, treating clients with dignity), others can actually inhibit relationship-building if followed too rigidly. For example, in many human service agencies, staff are told not to accept any gifts from clients, not to touch or hug clients, and to avoid self-disclosure. While these policies are rooted

in the idea of creating clear boundaries with clients, they also promote a distancing that is not culturally sensitive or appropriate. InterIm advocates spoke of hugging their clients and forming such a strong relationship with them that, even after the client no longer needed services or financial assistance, they stayed in touch and updated staff on their accomplishments. One woman drops off food for staff at every holiday as a way to thank them for all they did for her.

For this client, she invited me when she was in transitional housing and she made all this really good food and then once she was settled into her permanent housing she invited us again and she cooked everything from scratch and it was just amazing-- like a feast. This is amazing-- not that they have to cook or anything for us, it's just that they wanted to. [#3]

Staff also engaged in limited self-disclosure, when appropriate, about their own experiences with having to learn English as a second language or learning bus routes and American customs. Being flexible with boundaries requires skill and experience on the part of the advocate, but is critical in building relationships that are so important to survivors, many of whom have few or no family or friends in the U.S.

They consider us part of the family, because of the engagement that we have-- the long time that we have been working with them. They consider us to be a part of the family and that's a nice feeling. For them to be able to be like you are our family and whenever we come to your office we feel like it's home. [#1]

Discussion

The work of helping immigrant and refugee survivors find and sustain safe and stable housing is clearly complex, time-consuming, and requires diverse skills, knowledge and connections. Finding a secure housing unit, within a survivor's budget, that will also be safe, while also dealing with the survivor's (and often their children's) immigration concerns, trauma symptoms, language barriers, and cultural needs, is not a straightforward nor rapid process. As the advocates in this study noted, their work with each survivor involved multiple hours per

week and could last from several weeks to more than two years. This suggests that each advocate can only successfully work with a fairly small number of individuals at a time if they are to effectively address the myriad issues jeopardizing each survivor's safety, housing stability, and long-term well-being.

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