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# WHAT WE'VE LEARNED: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOUSING FIRST

EXTENDED REPORT

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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 supports as they rebuild their lives. Key components of DVHF include: survivor-driven, trauma-informed mobile advocacy; flexible financial assistance; and community engagement.

## The Domestic Violence Housing First Approach



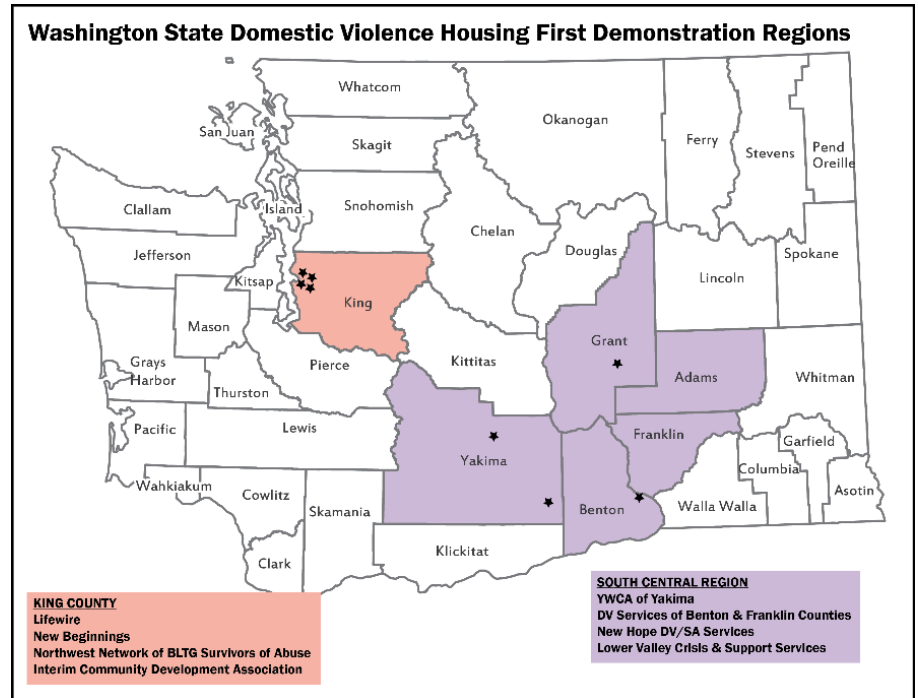
In 2015, eight domestic violence organizations in two Washington State regions were selected to integrate the DVHF approach into their organization and advocacy structures. A series of focus groups with survivors of domestic violence and domestic violence advocates were conducted in English and Spanish 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.

## Overview:

The [Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence \(WSCADV\)](#) is working with [eight agencies](#) across Washington State to implement the Domestic Violence Housing First (DVHF) approach. These programs are providing survivor-driven, trauma-informed mobile advocacy, utilizing flexible financial assistance, and engaging with the community to support survivors in their housing stability.

This report highlights how domestic violence organizations in Washington State are implementing the DVHF approach, the challenges and successes, and the impact it has on survivors and their children.

Sections are broken down by pillar to provide a more in-depth overview of how each component individually contributes to the model. Data and information presented in this report were gathered from a series of survivor and advocate focus groups, conducted in English and Spanish, and flexible financial assistance data from participating DVHF programs (see appendix for more information).



Go [here](#) for a shortened version

## 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 work collaboratively with survivors and support them in choosing their own goals and defining what is going to be more safe for themselves.

“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 provide support by listening, validating, offering options, providing systems advocacy, and supporting survivors to rebuild control within their lives.

“Giving them [survivors] someone to listen to and believe them. A lot of times survivors feel unheard. They feel like people don’t believe them or that people are against them. So being that person sitting there to hear all that and that they can confide in and that they can trust is such an important role.”- Domestic Violence Advocate

“It’s just being there while they find their own voice. They learn to advocate for themselves. We are with them for that journey.”- Domestic Violence Advocate

“I keep saying, ‘I believe in you. You can do this. I know you can do this, but while you’re learning, let me come with. Let me be there for you.’” - Domestic Violence Advocate

Advocates see survivors as whole people. Advocates aren’t just focusing on the violence survivors have experienced but are 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 understand the impacts of trauma, are aware of potential triggers, and engage in trauma-informed practices.

“Trauma can make it hard for people to remember to come to appointments, to show up, to be able to even focus on things when their life is in complete disarray. When someone’s

been traumatized, it's very hard for people to do tough, concrete things, which makes a ton of sense."- Domestic Violence Advocate

Advocates are mobile. They 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

"It [mobile advocacy] allows me to get up at three in the morning to pick her [survivor] up to take her to work. She had to get to work and I had to get her there, because work is important. If she didn't have work, there's no house."– Domestic Violence Advocate

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

"I was able to meet a survivor who needed to fill out an application for housing. It was a time-sensitive thing. I drove out to where she was working. She came out and we filled out the whole application in the car."- Domestic Violence Advocate

## The Impact:

Advocates make a big impact on survivors' lives. Survivors stated that they felt supported and listened to which built trust, motivated them, and gave them confidence that they would get their needs met.

"From the moment I first talked to [advocate], she was like, 'How are you dear? I'm going to be your new advocate.' She was lovely and I thought to myself, 'She's really going to be able to help me'" . – Survivor of Domestic Violence

"It's that attitude that promotes trust. Sometimes you feel bad telling your story, but [advocate] says, 'No, it's ok; we are not here to judge you, we are here to help you.'" - Survivor of Domestic Violence

"They don't ever doubt you. They don't ever make you feel less. It's the first time anybody's ever listened to me. Ever." – Survivor of Domestic Violence

Survivors stated that it was particularly helpful when advocates frequently touched base with them, considered all 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

“The advocates make all the difference. They are very helpful. They’re very informed. They are very attentive to the individual’s needs. “ – Survivor of Domestic Violence

The practical pieces of advocacy like going to appointments, searching for housing, and providing knowledge on complex systems, was also noted as extremely helpful for survivors as they worked toward stability.

"For housing, the advocate gave me a list to call for apartments. She said, ‘I’ll follow up with these and you follow up with those. We can figure it out.’" – Survivor of Domestic Violence

“Having an advocate go with you to see places and negotiate for you. If you have an advocate there it’s really a blessing. Honestly, I wouldn’t have been able to apply for as many places without their help.” – Survivor of Domestic Violence

“She [the advocate] gave me the knowledge to find out what I need to do and who I needed to get ahold of and what processes we needed to do to be able to get everything squared away.” – Survivor of Domestic Violence

For immigrant survivors, systems navigation and housing search support was highlighted as even more important as they often do not qualify for governmental assistance.

“My advocate told me she would help me. She helps moving, with everything. I’m an immigrant. I don’t get the permanent housing or the other housing. I’m not eligible for that. It’s really a blessing. They pay my rent. I live independently.”- Survivor of Domestic Violence

## Key Learnings:

**Advocates may not have the time and capacity to meet all survivors' needs.** 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 in a meaningful way.

“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

“At the end of the day, we always need more advocates.” – Domestic Violence Advocate

**Limited time and capacity coupled with a lack of resources** in the community meant that some survivors didn’t receive the support they needed.

“It was not easy to get into this agency. I had to call multiple days. I would call the office and they would send me to a voicemail. I would leave a message and I wouldn’t get a call back. It was until I went to my child’s school in this area and they were able to connect me [with an advocate].” – Survivor of Domestic Violence

"This is very important, but if you call somewhere and say, 'Hi, how are you? My name is Mrs. X and I am in need of an apartment, or of housing support, or any other resources.' They say, 'Yes, we will call you back.' But they don't call you back." – Survivor of Domestic Violence

“I’m going through a divorce. He’s trying to take my kid away. But he has a lawyer and I don’t. I asked for legal help here and they told me there wasn’t anything available. I’m looking for legal help in town, but I can’t find anything. I’m afraid for my son’s safety... .” – Survivor of Domestic Violence

**Some survivors need help longer.** Even though survivors found their advocate supportive and helpful, many longed for more time and access to their advocate.

“My advocate was really wonderful. It would be helpful if they continue for some time until you can do it yourself. We need it [advocacy] longer.” – Survivor of Domestic Violence

"Some of the people that work for the agency do not have the capacity to be able to help you. You interview with the advocate that is assigned to you and it's dependent on your needs and I don't know if they will be able to do something for me."- Survivor of Domestic Violence

**It takes time to adapt to a new way of providing advocacy.** Advocates also 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 being required to be at the office most hours of the day was difficult. Some advocates also discussed need to take a more nuanced approach to defining what safety looks like and recognizing it may look very different for each person.

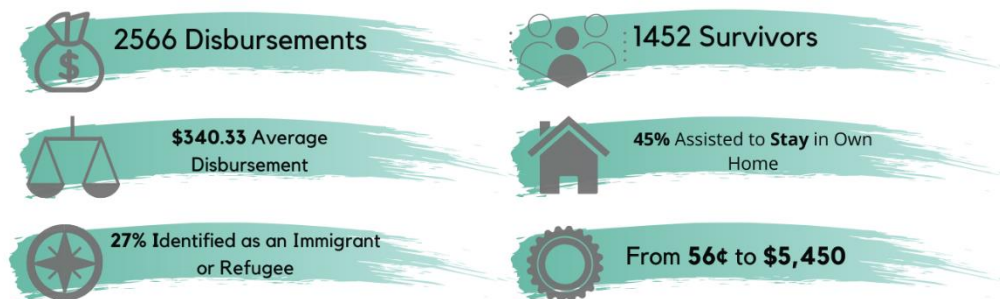
“Retraining yourself from what you knew before and that what you knew before wasn’t the best way to do something, but it’s the way that we had done it for a long time” –Domestic Violence Advocate

“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

## Flexible Financial Assistance:

The DVHF approach utilizes unrestricted funds to support survivors to become more safe and stable in housing. While payments that go directly to housing, such as rental assistance, are often necessary, the flexibility within this allows support for other needs as well. Support with children’s needs, debt repayment, or assistance with groceries, can all make a dramatic difference in working towards or maintaining stable housing.

Between February 2016 and December 2019, the eight agencies have used Flexible Financial Assistance (FFA) to support 1452 individuals and families, totaling \$873,728.80. For these participants, a total of 2566 disbursements were made. Fund disbursements ranged from fifty-six cents (renters’ insurance) to \$5,450 (lump sum for move in costs and 6 months of rent). \$340.33 was the average amount disbursed, and the average per survivor was \$602.27. Almost half (45%) of survivors were supported in staying in their own home with the help of flexible financial assistance and advocacy.



## Demographics:

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). Forty-Nine percent of heads of household were parenting. The largest subset (39%) of survivors identified as White/European-American, 30% as Hispanic or Latino/a, and 14% as Black/African American/African Descent. 24% of participants identified as an immigrant or refugee, while 11% chose not to answer.

## Disbursements:

Flexible financial assistance is a tool that advocates use when supporting survivors to increase housing stability. Forty-three percent of survivors received multiple disbursements, for instance: assistance in the form of transportation to look for housing, housing application fees, and help with move-in costs.

One survivor received five payments, totaling \$5,067 over a period of 10 months. Disbursements covered housing application fees as well as first and last month's rent to move into a new home. Once housing was secured for the survivor and their child, the final payment was \$11 for a fish tank filter.

Along with advocacy, the flexibility of this funding supported this family in moving from shelter into a house, and then with that final payment, turning the house into a home for the child.

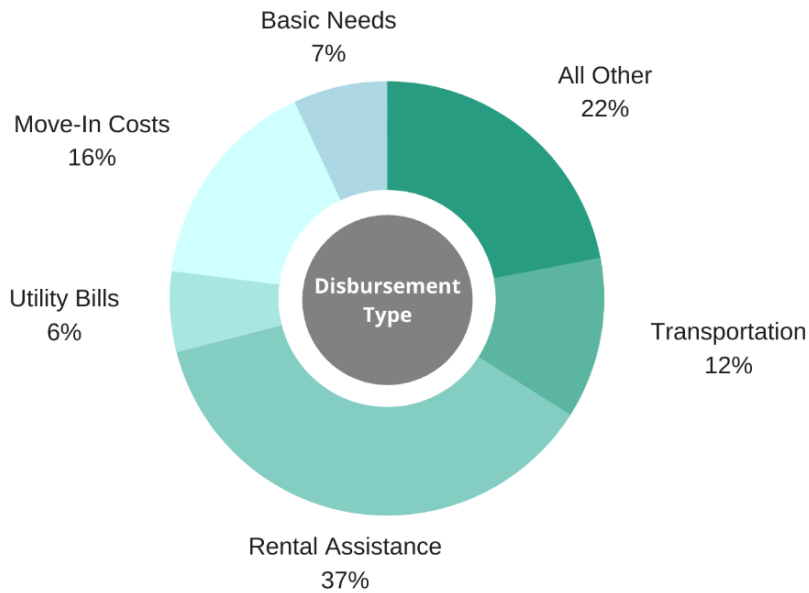
Many survivors (57%) received support just once which enabled some of them to remain in their home. Examples of these one-time payments came in the form of court fees (as little as \$9.25), changing a doorknob and lock (\$18.94), or the cost to change a phone number and cell carrier since the survivor's phone had been hacked (\$145).



Ninety-three percent of **unique disbursements** made by agencies were equal to or less than \$1,000, and 78% of payments made were for \$500 or less. The most common type of assistance provided was for Transportation (22%) followed by Rental Assistance (18%), Basic Needs (11%), and Utility Bills (8%). Housing Readiness and Move-In Costs made up 7% and 6%, respectively. The remaining 28% were distributed between Children’s Needs, Debt Assistance, Education/Training, Employment Assistance, Essential Furnishings, Moving Costs, Security Assistance, Mortgage, Physical/Mental Health Needs, Legal Assistance, and Family Activities.

Over a third (37%) of the **grant funding** dollars went toward Rental Assistance while the second highest dollar amount went towards Move-In Costs (16%). These are followed by Transportation Assistance (12%), Basic Needs (7%), and Utility Bills (6%). The remaining 22% of funds was divided between Children’s Needs, Debt Assistance, Education/Training, Employment Assistance, Essential Furnishings, Moving Costs, Security Assistance, Mortgage, Physical/Mental Health Needs, Legal Assistance, and Family Activities.

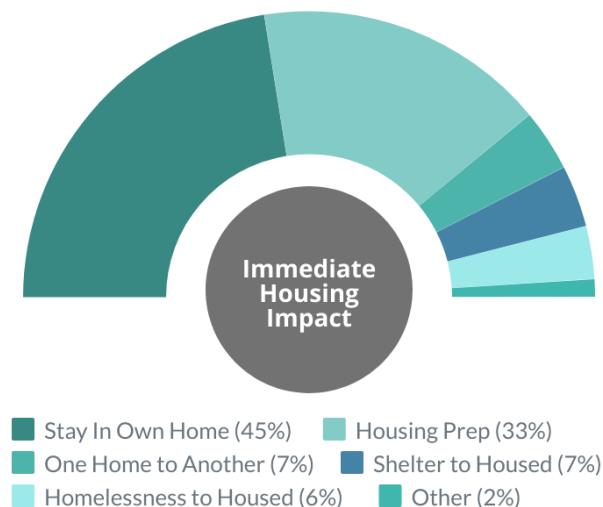
## Funds are being used to meet the needs of survivors



## Immediate Housing Impact:

Almost half (45%) of survivors stayed in their own home with the support of flexible financial assistance. This included disbursements for rental assistance, help paying for groceries, or utility payments. In situations where funding did not go directly to rent, it enabled survivors to maintain security while still meeting other needs.

The second highest result was to help in housing preparation (33%). These disbursements were for things such as transportation to seek employment or housing, paying off debts that were negatively impacting rental history, or procuring identification documents that were required for rental applications. Removing these barriers for survivors can often be the difference between successfully finding housing and not.



## Key learnings:

**Total flexibility of funds is the most important part of flexible financial assistance.** Advocates stated that the more rules and restrictions in place around how funds can be used, the harder it is to provide the support survivors need to become safer and more stable.

*“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*

**Flexible financial assistance is most successful when paired with robust advocacy.** Advocates reported that flexible financial assistance changes the relationship they have with survivors in positive ways but does not replace advocacy. Flexible financial assistance may also be the door to advocacy. Since federal and state contracts for domestic violence programs require that services be voluntary, financial assistance can build relationships and engage survivors in services when they have the capacity.

“What [we] are offering is advocacy. Financial assistance supplements that in amazing ways.” – Domestic Violence Advocate

“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 and have done without that resource for a long time.” – Domestic Violence Advocate

“It really affects the relationship you can build with someone. It is being able to give that tangible help, not just someone to talk to. It’s a way for you to get a solution to bits and pieces that are amounting to barriers.”- Domestic Violence Advocate

**Lack of affordable housing and low wages makes it hard for survivors to become stable.**

Advocates identified that for some survivors, no matter how much advocacy and flexible financial assistance was provided, they would 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

“We are not especially successful helping people find housing in a housing crisis. It’s really difficult. A lot of the time it’s supporting people and making plans for how they’re going to navigate homelessness or navigating it. Supporting people with family and friends. That’s our first go-to.” – Domestic Violence Advocate

**The most important takeaway related to flexible funds was the need for a high level of communication** among advocates, management, and finance teams so that information about the flex funds was available and the request process could 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

"A lot of survivors haven't applied anywhere in a really long time or have never even been on a lease. They don't know what that looks like. Obtaining that credit report and screening report, and then tackling things from there. If it's an eviction or debt, we can sometimes help with paying off debts, we are building partnerships now with the Legal Action Center and the Housing Justice Project to hopefully be able to talk about some of those things." - 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

Advocates are finding creative ways to build relationships with community partners.

“It's the communications and the connections that you make with the landlords. Stay connected to them, we go by and see if we can leave our brochures in the laundry room. Every now and then they will call us to go do presentations for the parents.” – Domestic Violence Advocate

“I deliver trays of apple bread {to police officers}. I deliver trays of cookies. If I have a bar-b-que at home, I'll call the night shift in the evening and I'll tell them, "Hey guys, how many of you are working, you know, come and pick up." – Domestic Violence Advocate

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

“Getting people connected to LGBTQ specific stuff that might be happening in the area they are in. We talk about and send out stuff that's happening [...] events that might be of interest to people, especially free and low-cost things that we hope people will try out. ” – Domestic Violence Advocate

“We identify people's strengths and people's unique passions. That sense of self and autonomy [...] that get so destroyed and deteriorated by domestic violence.” – 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 mean 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

“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.”  
– 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

“It’s shocking how much landlords don’t know about what is legal and what isn’t legal.” – 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

**Developing relationships with landlords, business owners, and community members** is important in getting survivors hooked up with the right resources and supports.

“It [relationships] helped us grow closer and understand their perspective and understand that if we work together as a team even with them, it helps the case or the situation better for the client.” – Domestic Violence Advocate

“It’s having those connections with the people that open the door.” – Domestic Violence Advocate

**Programs and funders need to more flexible.** Advocates highlighted the challenge of partnerships that come with restrictions that limit their ability to provide survivor-driven advocacy and flexible 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 and 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.

Though information is presented in aggregate in this report, findings from focus groups and flexible financial assistance data are creating an opportunity for WSCADV to provide individualized feedback to the DVHF demonstration project partners, and suggestions to funders on the importance of maintaining program flexibility to meet the needs of survivors.

## Appendix:

### Flexible Financial Assistance Data:

Over the three years of this available funding, the eight participating agencies have recorded details of every transaction at the time of disbursement. This information has been shared with WSCADV staff on a quarterly basis, using a web-based tracking sheet. Details that are recorded include:

- Date of transaction
- Survivor age, gender, ethnicity, and race
- Immigrant or refugee status
- Family or individual survivor
- Amount of flexible funds disbursed
- Purpose of flexible funds
- Other services the survivor or family had received
- Immediate housing outcome

For the purposes of this report, all trackers were combined and analyzed collectively. Edits were made to categories on a limited basis, and only if contradictory information was provided.

### Focus Groups:

Between March of 2018 and October 2018, eight focus groups with advocates, and a total of nine focus groups (four of which were conducted in Spanish) and five individual interviews were conducted with survivors of domestic violence, with the purpose of understanding how the DVHF approach was being implemented into agency structures and the impact on survivors and their children. Focus groups were conducted with all eight agencies participating in the DVHF Demonstration Project. Focus group were recorded and transcribed and then analyzed to find patterns. These patterns are represented in the above report. For more information on these focus groups, including procedures, please reach out to [wscadv@wscadv.org](mailto:wscadv@wscadv.org)



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The original report was prepared in 2019 by Kendra Gritsch with data analyzed by Deva Bluemoon and it was edited and updated in 2020 by Deva Bluemoon.

