

DV HOUSING FIRST: AN EXAMINATION OF THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PILLAR

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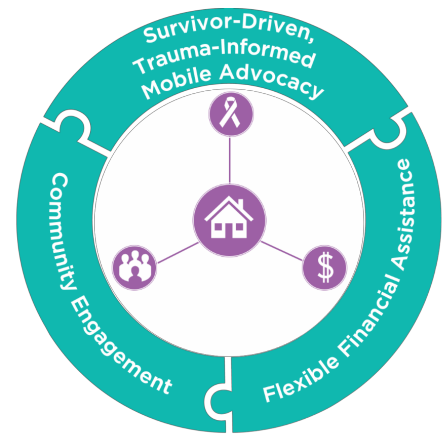
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BACKGROUND

The Domestic Violence (DV) Housing First model is designed to promote housing stability, safety, and well-being for survivors and their families. The three main pillars of the model include:

- (1) survivor-driven, trauma-informed, mobile advocacy
- (2) flexible financial assistance
- (3) community engagement



The DV Housing First community engagement pillar includes proactive engagement between advocates and community members who can support the safety, stability, and wellbeing of survivors. Successful community outreach is critical to the model's success; however, there is limited information regarding engagement and maintenance strategies that promote mutual beneficial relationships between agencies and community members.

As part of the evaluation of the DV Housing First model in California, in-depth interviews were conducted with key community members in one community to better understand the implementation of the community engagement pillar. The central aim of these interviews was to explore innovative practices related to the successful engagement of community partners and how community partners view their relationship with a DV agency.

Rainbow Services, based in Los Angeles, California, agreed to participate in an in-depth longitudinal evaluation to examine the potential impact of the DV Housing First model on domestic violence survivors' safety, housing stability, and well-being. Rainbow Services collaborates with local business owners, landlords, and property managers who share a commitment to supporting the safety, stability, and well-being of people in need in their community. Therefore, their innovative and successful outreach and engagement practices may provide a useful guide to organizations interested in developing similar partnerships.

EVALUATION PROCESS

Rainbow Services' leadership and staff compiled a list of property managers, private landlords, and business owners they currently partner with, as well as their contact information. The evaluation team contacted each community partner and invited them to participate in an interview at a location convenient to them, to share their experiences working with Rainbow Services.

Prior to interviews with community partners, the evaluation team met with Rainbow Services' housing team to gather more information regarding their implementation of the DV Housing First model, particularly as it relates to the community engagement pillar. These conversations provided the evaluation team with critical background information that informed the interview questions for community partners.

The evaluation team met with five community partners for individual face-to-face interviews. Two partners were private landlords, two were property managers, and one was an auto repair shop owner. Interviews ranged from 24 - 54 minutes and were all conducted in English.

During this process, it became evident that Rainbow Services' leadership and staff prioritize forming strong relationships with their community partners. They promote a sense of community that honors the unique characteristics of their community. Overall, community partners all shared that they strongly believe that everyone at Rainbow Services cares deeply about their clients and aims to provide immediate financial support and quality services.

"I never remind them [about the rent], they actually call me and say, 'We're working on it,' they update me. I do have somebody's name, the ladies, and their response is so good. I call them, and they pick up right away. I don't have to wait a day or 4 days."

– Private Landlord

Given some of the challenges associated with forming and maintaining community partnerships, it is important to highlight some of Rainbow Services' successful relationship building and maintenance strategies, as well as their recommendations for those pursuing similar partnerships.

FINDINGS



Relationship-Building Strategies

Rainbow Services' housing team is active in the outreach and engagement of community partners, while also being aware that in small communities, it is important to **respect and protect survivors' privacy**. The housing team is extremely careful when navigating their relationships with community partners and avoid disclosing that they are working with survivors of domestic violence up front. They want their clients to be able to build substantive relationships with their landlord or property manager based on their good tenancy. Therefore, the housing team only discloses that they work with survivors to potential community partners if necessary, and then only discloses certain information with the client's permission. One private landlord reflected on his experience getting connected with Rainbow Services' housing team:

"When they explained who they are, I did my research and found out that they're a pretty good group that helps women that have been abused. I told them, 'yeah, no problem.'"

– Private Landlord

This echoes the experience of most of the community partners, who searched online or visited the agency to gather more information about the organization's mission and services. However, the housing team advocates for participants' safety needs directly with landlords when needed. For example, one landlord shared that he was approached by a housing advocate shortly after one of his tenants moved in. The advocate shared some of the survivor's current safety concerns. Because of his research on the values of the organization and his sense of community, he changed the locks and installed new blinds free of charge. Despite not leading with survivors'

stories, Rainbow Services' community partners valued knowing that the organization was **committed to improving the lives of people in need** in their community.

The housing team described the following key relationship-building strategies they use when forming relationships with community partners:

1. **Allow a genuine, trusting collaboration to develop organically**
2. **Be creative and proactive**
3. **Inform partners of timely payment processes**

Rainbow Services' overarching approach to forging strong partnerships is centered around establishing a trusting relationship grounded in **shared values**. For example, when the housing team reached out to an auto repair and maintenance shop owner, they bonded over their shared value to make a positive difference in their community. The shop owner came up with several specific services they could offer at a discounted rate and has since asked other auto shop owners in the area to also honor their arrangement if they are unable to complete the repair needed at their location.

Further, it became clear that these engagement efforts are **thoughtful, intentional, and organized**. One member of the housing team described the process she created to ensure they could track and meet their community partners' needs:

"I created this little log of who I'm calling every month, what the notes were, if they have vacancies, if they have friends who had vacancies...just asking a bunch of questions [like] if they got the rent on time, if they had any complaints about the tenant, or communication with each other, if they wanted more from Rainbow or if they wanted less."

– Housing Team Advocate

These detailed records have strengthened Rainbow Services' network of community partners. Not only do they have strong, long-lasting community partnerships with local landlords, property managers, and businesses, but they also continue to **develop community partnerships because of existing relationships**. In fact, landlords and business owners frequently tell their colleagues about the benefits of partnering with Rainbow Services. For example, one landlord shared

that he had recently told his friend, another landlord, about the organization: *"I told him too and I think they're working together now or trying to work together."*

The housing team also underscored the importance of allowing the relationship to form organically, and clearly communicates their intention to be **collaborative, honest, and available** when community partners reach out.

"Just wanted to make sure that they understood that we were a service that could support this individual buying this product. And whatever you need – let us know.... There's an intention to collaborate [with partners], but never like this is what we want or how we want it."

– Housing Team Advocate

One of the housing advocates described how they forged a strong partnership with a nearby refurbished appliances store to illustrate just how **proactive and creative** their outreach efforts are:

"Being able to tell them [participants], 'just go here' because it was literally down the street. That's why that happened and then [the store] was flexible. They provided delivery with different payment, they don't charge for delivery, they let us pay whenever we're ready."

Rainbow Services' Trauma-Informed Approach

"The trauma-informed approach, I think, is appropriate even when interacting with these entities because we don't know, right? We don't know what has happened in the past so we're building from scratch a relationship. ...They could be successful and have access to things but that doesn't mean that they didn't have their own experiences. So, I'm aware of that. That was kind of exciting too, to be able to practice and sort of implement [a trauma-informed approach] and help my advocates implement it too because I definitely know it takes practice and awareness."

– Housing Team Advocate

Rainbow Services' housing team understands that community partners may be wary of third-party payers due to their experiences with time-consuming mandatory inspections that may delay payments for lengthy periods of time or result in unpredictable inspection reports. Anticipating these concerns, the housing team overtly emphasizes that they do not require inspections and that payments are streamlined to ensure they are made on time. Further, they reassure community partners that they will be available if they need to reach out for any reason. These efforts promote a trusting relationship with landlords and property managers alike, as one housing team advocate described:

"Knowing we're going to be the holders of providing payments, providing resources to get to [the] location, being available to them, mediating things if things went wrong...so being available to the survivor, but also being available for them if things come up with survivors."

– Housing Team Advocate

Additionally, the leadership at Rainbow Services has created a culture that promotes the use of a **respectful, caring, and trauma-informed approach** in all interactions, including when forging relationships with community members. For example, the sidebar box on page 5 details how a housing team supervisor described her use of a trauma-informed approach when reaching out and establishing relationships with people in the community.

Relationship building strategies that include **detailed tracking of the needs and concerns of community partners** are critical in establishing strong partnerships. As described by Rainbow's staff and their partners, creating and maintaining open and proactive communication systems strengthened the network of current and potential partners. Throughout the process of building relationships, the housing team aims to understand the values that they share with community partners and organically build a sense of community.



Relationship Maintenance Strategies

Rainbow Services' leadership and staff also implement thoughtful and intentional strategies to maintain strong partnerships with community members. Their commitment to developing an infrastructure that supports the needs of their community partners is clear. To that end, Rainbow Services' housing team highlighted their main strategies for maintaining positive relationships with community partners:

1. **Respect preferred communication styles of community partners**
2. **Engage with partners on a personal level**
3. **Share gestures of appreciation**

For example, the housing team created and distributed an **online survey** intended for landlords and property managers to provide feedback and suggestions regarding their partnership with Rainbow Services. In addition, the housing team calls landlords monthly to ensure the payments were successful. These **regular check-ins** have revealed that landlords need clarity regarding the breakdown and timeline of payments. In response, the housing team has implemented a new system to clarify payments:

*"When I would make monthly calls, they would say, 'Oh, well, I do have a question' and they would ask their question. Back then I was calling every single month making sure they were getting the checks and the participants were giving them their checks, and the landlord said he wished we would have told him when the assistance would be done because he was expecting a check [from us]. **So, we created rental breakdowns that we would send the landlords and we would give to the participant.** So, we have those now because I was like, 'Oh, you're right, you should know when it's going to end or if we change the amount or what's going on.'"*

– Housing Team Advocate

The housing team also underscored that it was important to understand that different community partners may have **different communication preferences**. For example, private landlords tend to prioritize rental transactions and are focused on making sure their mortgage payments were made on time. On the other hand, property managers are typically more interested in building community connections and maintaining tenancy, so they are more likely to be interested in maintaining ongoing communication with the housing team. Understanding these different perspectives is key to ensuring a trusting and open relationship with a variety of housing providers. Respecting and honoring different communication preferences demonstrates **flexibility and empathy**, which encourages all parties to maintain the relationship. In other words, the housing team partners with community members who may prefer limited communication, but who remain committed to supporting the stability and wellbeing of survivors.

"Landlords that would house one or two [survivors] would also just continue to provide us with their vacancies, and that's how we kept in touch with them."

– Housing Team Advocate

It is also evident that Rainbow's housing team fosters **personal relationships** with partners that promotes a strong sense of community and trust. For example, one of the housing advocates described a recent interaction with a community partner in which he reached out to ask for guidance on an issue unrelated to his tenant.

Rainbow Services also engages in **thoughtful gestures of appreciation** as

"I got a landlord who asked me about potential job openings for his daughter that was moving back out to California. Interesting ask, but I said, 'Okay, I'll take it on,' there was something specific he wanted. So, I said, 'I have access to something like that, so let me send that to you.' I knew 'that's not your role,' I knew he could ask someone else, but [I thought], 'you have him on the phone and he has you on the phone and there's a reason why he's asking you.' I felt not sure he has access to someone else he can ask. ... So those things are important when we are responsive to what they're saying or asking of us."

– Housing Team Advocate

another strategy for maintaining positive partnerships. For example, in February, the housing team sent a poem of appreciation to landlords that included quotes from survivors about the impact of safer, more stable housing on their lives. The housing team intends to continue holiday mailings that express their ongoing appreciation for the landlords and property managers in the community.

Rainbow's strategies that were developed to build relationships with community partners translated easily into strategies to maintain those relationships. During the relationship building phase, the housing team develops empathy for community partners' priorities and preferences and adapts their communication styles accordingly. The housing team allowed themselves to relate on a personal level to community partners, which strengthens their professional partnership. Finally, lighthearted, fun notes of appreciation that include survivors' voices let community partners know they are valued and appreciated.



Recommendations

To assist other agencies in developing and maintaining community relationships, the housing team and their community partners offered some recommendations based on their experience navigating challenges. These recommendations aim to best support the needs of survivors when identifying and maintaining safe and stable housing.

Rainbow Services' housing team's recommendations include:

1. **Be consistent, approachable, and honest**
2. **Respond quickly if a community partner reaches out**
3. **Ensure that community partners' needs are met**

Rainbow's housing team emphasized the importance of **being kind and approachable** when reaching out to potential community partners to establish a genuine connection. One of the housing advocates shared:

"Be really friendly. Find any little thing that you can connect with them on. ... You just have to be understanding that they're people too."

– Housing Team Advocate

"We did all this stuff, but just being really unique on how to reach them. There was this community homeless thing, like a meeting and I e-mail blasted all of our landlords seeing if they wanted to go."

– Housing Team Advocate

Additionally, the housing team recognized the importance of **being available** to their community partners. To ensure community partners never have problems reaching someone from Rainbow Services, they provide the contact information of several staff members. The housing team also periodically shares local community events they plan to attend so that partners have the option to meet them around the community as well.

The housing team also reflected on the importance of understanding the perspectives and needs of their community partners and ensuring that those were met. For example, landlords are typically focused on making sure payments are made on time so that they can make their mortgages. Local businesses need to promote a constant flow of customers to make a profit. The housing team credits their success to acknowledging different perspectives and priorities and being able to tailor their approach to reassure each partner that they can streamline processes to meet their individual needs.

Community partners' recommendations include:

- 1. Create an advisory role for landlords and property managers**
- 2. Highlight the impact of the organizations' services on survivors, their families and their community**
- 3. Prioritize flexible, responsive, and honest communication**

Community partners suggested the implementation of an **advisory role for partnering landlords and property managers** so that organizations can understand the needs of local housing providers better. An advisory group could offer insight into property management priorities and increase the effectiveness of community housing supports. Further, it may prevent miscommunication and delays in tenancy. As one community partner explained:

"Maybe to run their operations a little smoother, so they could get the knowledge. I'm not sure if those individuals own units or property, they might not know all the ends of the contracts or why landlords are requiring this or why are they asking for this. But they do need somebody like that. It would make their organization a step above the rest."

– Private Landlord

Community partners all shared that it was important to them to partner with Rainbow Services and other organizations that share a **commitment to their community**. This common value was particularly evident when some landlords chose to lower the rent for Rainbow tenants to help them become more stable. One landlord explained:

"I decided to do that because of her situation and what Rainbow represents. I took a loss. So, trying to help the community more."

Another landlord described his choice to charge less rent as fairly straightforward:

"I take [a] risk if I can help somebody."

Highlighting **shared community building values** may promote strong partnerships with people in the community who can support the stability and wellbeing of survivors and their families. For example, a local business partner with a background in social services offered her unique perspective:

"Be proactive, go to those businesses and say - cold call them - and say, 'Hey, this is who we are, this is what we do, would you be interested in partnering with us?' And ask for that discount. And I think that's hard for a lot of people in social services because they're not salespeople. And that's been a hard transition for me in this business, being a salesperson."

– Local Business Partner

Partners' backgrounds and experiences impact their values in unanticipated ways, contributing to an overall sense of community. A local landlord illustrated just how **deeply personal** his commitment to community building and housing stability is:

"I came to this country too with only \$8. \$24 total, \$8 apiece, my wife and two kids. So, I remember my days. I've got a very soft heart for people, a very soft heart. It's not that I say that, it's that I do it. I don't tell anybody what I do, it's from my heart."

CONCLUSION

The housing team at Rainbow Services and the landlords, property managers, and businesses they partner with share similar values and goals. To promote housing stability in their community, they have **developed and maintained relationships that support community building** and highlight the valuable contributions that everyone can make towards supporting survivors and their families. Promoting relationships grounded on these shared values offers an entry to building **flexible communication and empathetic relationships**. As the housing team demonstrated responsiveness in meeting the needs of community partners, those community partners developed responsiveness to the needs of survivors. By nurturing the community engagement pillar of the DV Housing First model, survivors and their children may receive the support they need for their housing stability, safety, and well-being.

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