



National Alliance to
End Sexual Violence

Exploring the Intersection of Sexual Assault and Housing: Key Listening Session Findings

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The Intersection of Sexual Assault and Housing

Survivors of sexual assault have complex housing needs. A survivor who is sexually assaulted in their home may need a safe place to stay in the immediate aftermath of the crime; a person experiencing housing insecurity might ask to stay at a friend's house where they experience unwanted sexual advances; a tenant having difficulty paying rent may be sexually harassed by a landlord; a survivor's past substance abuse may be used against them when applying for an apartment leading to housing instability; or an adult survivor of child sexual abuse may need to move abruptly after their perpetrator moves into the neighborhood. Sexual assault can happen anytime and anywhere. Wherever or whenever sexual assault occurs, the resulting trauma can create housing need immediately, intermittently, and throughout the lifespan. These needs are exacerbated for survivors in communities of color due to heightened barriers caused by systemic racism. To get to the root of the issue, the National Sexual Assault Housing Collaborative hosted a series of listening sessions in 2023 to hear directly from sexual assault advocates.

Key Themes

1. **Housing must be prioritized as a primary need of sexual assault survivors throughout the lifespan.**
2. **Organizations serving sexual assault survivors lack the funding to dedicate staff time to addressing individual survivors' housing needs and engage in housing systems advocacy.**
3. **The housing system fail survivors of sexual assault** by not considering the complexity of housing needs.
4. **Lack of affordable and safe housing** across the country has resulted in limited opportunities to secure stability.
5. **Discrimination and bias** impact survivors' experiences navigating sexual assault services and the housing system.

Summary

Housing must be prioritized as a primary need of sexual assault survivors throughout the lifespan. Services for sexual assault survivors are largely based on immediate crisis intervention; with a focus on crisis counseling, hotline operation, and medical, court and law enforcement accompaniment. Focusing on responding to immediate crises leads not only to the narrowing of service provision and the exclusion of services that are deemed long term, it disregards the fact that individuals process trauma differently.

The impact of trauma can create housing instability and chronic homelessness throughout the lifespan. Housing stability sometimes feels unachievable for survivors of sexual assault due to

heightened barriers, lack of access to housing assistance, housing protections applied inequitably, and general lack of knowledge around the housing system within sexual assault programs.

Organizations serving sexual assault survivors lack the funding to dedicate staff time to addressing individual survivors' housing needs and engage in housing systems advocacy. Funding is a significant barrier for coalitions and programs, especially culturally specific programs. A majority of participant organizations do not receive specific funding to work on housing issues, leading staff to take on extra responsibilities to adequately serve clients. There is also a lack of awareness around

which funding sources allow for housing work with survivors of sexual assault.

Additionally, most participants shared that their onboard training did not include ample information on the topic of housing. Rather advocates are encouraged to refer survivors to local housing programs. Although the survivors of sexual assault have clear housing needs, limited staff capacity due to inadequate and inequitable funding leads to gaps in services including meeting housing needs.

The housing system fails survivors of sexual assault by not considering the complexity of housing needs while implementing processes that create heightened and unnecessary barriers. Homelessness, sexual assault, and housing instability are symptoms of systemic failures yet are framed as individual failures; drastically shifting how each is addressed. Participants elevated the importance of addressing the complex nature of the housing system, from emergency/short term housing to transitional housing and long-term interactions with housing systems and assistance.

The one size fits most criteria used by current housing models centers imminent physical harm as a precursor to housing need; think shelter. This approach ignores the variety of experiences survivors have over their lifespan. It also fails to allow flexibility, a key factor in effectively addressing complex housing needs.

Unnecessary barriers created by systems prevent survivors from accessing much needed assistance. Tenant screenings unfairly impact a survivor's access to housing. For example, a survivor has a criminal record directly linked to their victimization, say they defended themselves and law enforcement misassigned them as the aggressor. A year later, the survivor applies for a housing unit and is automatically screened out by the potential landlord/public housing agency due to their criminal background. Without the opportunity to explain their circumstances and the role their victimization played, survivors often become disillusioned with the process and choose

to not “waste their time” on future applications. Another survivor shared that they struggled to access housing due to having a past eviction. They were evicted because they were deemed “a nuisance tenant” for calling law enforcement multiple times- a direct result of their victimization. Other survivors may have a record for substance use, either willingly as a tool to escape a traumatic past or coerced by a perpetrator. Systemic processes often do not ask about past or current victimization.

Participants shared that although vouchers have assisted some survivors, they are not the overarching solution. If a voucher is provided, it does not mean an individual will receive housing leaving survivors at the mercy of the housing market. Even with a voucher, most places have lengthy waitlists. Survivors also find the waitlist process to be inequitable by relying on a first come first serve process, excluding individuals who cannot apply during regular business hours.

Lack of affordable and safe housing across the country has resulted in limited opportunities to secure stability, even deterring individuals from searching. Rent is increasing beyond what survivors can afford. When a survivor finds affordable rent, the quality (livability) of the unit is often less than ideal, impacting survivor safety. Participants also shared skyrocketing application fees and administrative costs as undue burdens, especially when these fees are non-refundable, leaving the survivor out funds and a place to live.

Short term/emergency housing options are extremely limited and often unappealing for survivors of sexual assault. Survivors shared being screened out of domestic violence shelters for not meeting criteria. Survivors expressed fear to rely on community shelters or halfway houses based on elevated risk of experiencing violence and lack of staff awareness around sexual assault.

Participants also suggested reframing the way housing is viewed to be more flexible and authentically meet the needs of survivors, moving beyond shelters and intentionally crafting model interim or bridge housing. This would also

increase the avenues in which someone could connect with housing resources.

Discrimination and bias impact survivors' experiences navigating sexual assault services and the housing system. Survivors referenced discrimination by advocates, private housing, public housing, assistance programs, and more. One advocate shared their clients experience of being blatantly denied after disclosing they are a survivor of sexual assault. This sentiment was echoed throughout the series, one advocate sharing “survivors can’t win. They disclose in an attempt to explain a past eviction but it only leads to fear from the landlord that this potential tenant presents

a nuisance to the living environment.” Survivors in communities of color face elevated bias, especially in communities where culturally specific programs are nonexistent or inadequately funded.

Participants shared heightened concerns with state laws allowing for blatant discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation as well as hostile laws around Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) frameworks. These laws make it difficult for survivors to navigate services, especially when services require interaction with potentially harmful systems. Hostile state laws conflicting with federal law leave providers in a precarious situation with potential consequences.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Housing is a key priority for survivors of sexual assault and must be elevated to reflect their vast needs throughout the lifespan. The main threads identified above provide a blueprint for the future of the sexual assault movement to make the necessary recommendations to better equip both sexual assault and housing professionals to work with survivors throughout the lifespan. Here are a few recommendations moving forward:

- 1. Robust Housing Advocacy.** Sexual assault advocates must be intentionally involved in housing advocacy. Sexual assault organizations belong at all housing conversations including at the national, state, and local levels. This includes policy education and systems change work.
- 2. Funding Opportunities.** Funding is directly linked to staffing and scope of work. Programs and coalitions cannot continue down the current path and expect to adequately meet client needs. Funding directly reflects priority issues and must be widely available to complete work at the intersection of sexual assault and housing.
- 3. Dedicated Housing Staff at All Services Levels.** A majority of participants shared that their organizations do not have dedicated housing staff. Dedicated housing staff increases program capacity and ensures sexual assault professionals can invest in housing as a priority issue impacting sexual assault survivors.
- 4. Intentionally Building Infrastructure.** The infrastructure currently in place to address homeless and unhoused individuals was crafted without specific consideration towards the unique housing needs of sexual assault survivors. Moving forward with intention requires innovation beyond what already exists. As one participants said, creating a shelter system specifically for sexual assault survivors is not the answer.
- 5. Training and Cross Training.** Sexual assault and housing professionals can benefit from mutually supporting each other’s advocacy efforts and leaning into each other’s work. Additionally, participants envision a future where landlords receive training from sexual assault professionals and reach out to programs for future assistance in being more inclusive.

About the Collaborative

The National Sexual Assault & Housing Collaborative provides training and technical assistance around the intersections of sexual assault and housing to professionals in the housing and sexual assault advocacy fields. The Collaborative is comprised of the National Alliance to End Sexual Violence, the National Organizations of Sisters of Color Ending Sexual Assault, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, and the National Sexual Assault Coalition Resource Sharing Project. For more information about this project, please contact Brittni Gulotty, NAESV Housing Coordinator, at brittni@endsexualviolence.org.