Fundamental to all humans is the concept of home. Home is a place that we call our own, the place where we can be our true and authentic selves. It is supposed to be the safe haven at the end of every day.

For victims of domestic violence and their children, “home” can be something more sinister. When violence is imminent or present in a home, it is anything but a safe haven. When victims feel so unsafe that they decide they must leave their homes, many of them find themselves homeless, which creates an entirely different level of fear and anxiety for them and their children.

For the past three years, End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin, in partnership with the Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault (WCASA), offered directors of domestic and sexual violence programs the opportunity to discuss the most pressing issues facing victims through a project called “The Future of Services”. Through that process, access to housing surfaced as a critical issue that a high number of victims faced. As a result, we have been collectively working to increase safe housing options for victims in Wisconsin. We are working to develop funding streams that can support short term rent assistance and looking to replicate advocacy models with high success rates for helping victims to live in their homes free from violence.

This Coalition Chronicles examines the issue of housing for victims, the lack of safe and affordable housing, and the strategies that domestic violence programs are developing to ensure that all families get the kind of home they deserve and need to thrive. Every home should be a safe home.
There’s No Place Like Home: Measuring the Effectiveness of the Housing System for Domestic Abuse Survivors
Adrienne Roach, Policy and Systems Manager

For decades, the movement to end domestic violence (DV) has focused on the provision of emergency shelter and other immediate and long-term housing options for domestic violence survivors. Today, survivors have more housing options than ever, but the system that surrounds those options is often cumbersome, unclear, and difficult to navigate. Numerous government agencies, all with their own priorities, provide a myriad of options, but those options come with restrictions and requirements that leave some survivors out. After years of hearing stories from survivors who’ve had difficulty accessing housing resources, and advocates who are continually frustrated by housing system restrictions, End Abuse decided to conduct research to support our work on housing. Evidence-based practice is the standard for service provision. Why shouldn’t the same be true for advocacy and systems change?

Therefore, End Abuse has set out to ask a simple question: Is the housing system working for domestic abuse survivors? To answer this question, End Abuse will be gathering contextual data and narratives from in-person interviews with survivors from a random sample of 21 counties across the state of Wisconsin. To compliment this data, End Abuse will also conduct an online survey of advocates and service providers across the state who have recently served DV survivors with their housing needs. This information and data will be used to measure the impact local, state, and federal policies have on housing access, how often survivors use specific housing resources and their personal experiences accessing those resources, and where there are service gaps throughout Wisconsin.

End Abuse aims to complete this research by the summer of 2019 and release a formal report to the public. With this research, we hope to support programs and communities in enhancing relationships and building stronger partnerships across agencies. We also hope this research will inform our future policy agenda to ensure government-funded programs that include housing components are responsive to the unique needs of each survivor.

In connection with this issue of the Chronicles, we recorded a podcast exploring the topic of housing and domestic violence. Look for a link to this podcast in January 2019. You will hear Renee Greenland telling her story, poetry exploring themes of shelter and safety, and an interview with Adrienne Roach and Chase Tarrier on the Wisconsin policy landscape surrounding housing. We hope this is an engaging way to continue learning!
Selected Resources:

**Safe Housing Partnerships** is a national technical assistance provider that sits at the intersection of domestic violence and homelessness. Check out their site for detailed information regarding housing program types, unique housing considerations for survivors, and incisive research and statistics related to domestic violence and homelessness. [https://safehousingpartnerships.org/](https://safehousingpartnerships.org/)

**WI Balance of State Continuum of Care (BOSCOC)** is a non-profit organization that serves housing providers in all Wisconsin counties, except Milwaukee, Dane, and Racine. The WI BOSCOC’s mission is to end homelessness by supporting local coalitions throughout Wisconsin. End Abuse supports the domestic violence programs who are often represented in those local coalitions. For more information about the WI BOSCOC, please visit: [https://www.wiboscoc.org/](https://www.wiboscoc.org/)

In the 2017-2018 legislative session, the Interagency Council on Homelessness was created. End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin attends public Council meetings and has a representative on the Council’s Implementation team to ensure the housing needs of survivors are accounted for when implementing any new policies or processes. The Council recently released their plan to address homelessness in Wisconsin, “A Hand and a Home.” To read the plan and learn more about Wisconsin’s Interagency Council on Homelessness, please visit: [https://doa.wi.gov/Pages/AboutDOA/ICH.aspx](https://doa.wi.gov/Pages/AboutDOA/ICH.aspx)

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**Finding a Way**

The National Latin@ Network recently published [this report](#) of their research findings, in order to expand knowledge and tools for advocates, survivors and policy makers who work to guarantee access to housing for Latin@ survivors of domestic violence and their families, especially immigrant survivors.

The report highlights the diversity of the large Latin@ population in the United States, almost half of whom live in suburban or rural areas, and more than a third of whom are foreign-born. It discusses the variety of experiences within the Latin@ population that affect gaining access to safe, affordable, and stable housing, such as immigration status (including mixed status families), English language proficiency, and family size and composition.

Recommendations for informing legislative policies and community-based program practices are included in the report, and strategies that advocates and survivors may use to fulfill housing needs are also identified. For example, one idea for alternative housing options is to provide safe opportunities for survivors to rent rooms within a larger house, particularly for immigrant survivors. Recognize that the combination of lack of documentation and limited resources leaves immigrant survivors especially vulnerable. It is important to close the gaps by increasing access to dignified, safe options for survivors in ways that make sense to the survivors. As a reputable organization, it is possible to provide smaller affordable spaces—like a room rather than an apartment—that also have access to trauma-informed supports, and are connected to advocates and a community of other women and their families.

Domestic Violence and Housing in the Post Great Recession Era

Chase Tarrier, Public Policy Coordinator

When surveyed, Wisconsin advocates for victims of domestic violence report housing as their top concern when it comes to survivor safety. In the past, issues like law enforcement responsiveness or restraining order access may have been their main priority, but that is no longer the case. As stable housing became increasingly difficult to access over the last decade, the length of shelter stays increased in tandem with the waiting lists for families trying to enter shelter. Even as the economy recovered post-2008 recession, housing became increasingly unaffordable in urban areas and entirely inaccessible in rural areas, culminating in the current housing crisis that faces survivors today (Davis, 2018).

Organizations like End Domestic Abuse WI, in response to the ongoing struggle of local programs to safely house victims, have begun to explore new ways to increase housing access for survivors. Strategies like rapid rehousing, transitional housing, housing first, and others have all been developed with the express purpose of finding innovative ways to help victims of domestic violence land safely in a stable home after leaving an abuser. But while it is important to invest in immediate solutions to the problem of limited housing for survivors of domestic abuse, it is just as important to look back at recent history to determine what factors led to the overwhelming precarity that so many victims face today. In order to get a clearer picture of the housing situation in the United States in 2018, we must look back several decades at a financial system that underwent rapid structural changes that were eventually paid for with the economic and social dislocation of millions of working-class people, including numerous victims of domestic violence.

Coming out of the so-called ‘Reagan era’ of the 1980s, the Democratic party under Bill Clinton rebranded itself as ‘the New Democrats’ and embraced free markets, deregulation, free trade and other policies that were supported by Wall Street and big business in general (Hale, 1995). As a new consensus formed around the idea of cutting regulations put in place to protect consumers, rapid technological development allowed for the creation of financial products that were sold as a revolutionary approach to generating profit and modernizing the market (CFPB, 2017). In a sense, the creators of these new financial services were right; credit default swaps, derivatives, bundled securities, and other similar products did generate new levels of market growth and profit for bankers and financiers. What was masked in their approach, however, was that the true cost of this new world of big finance would not be felt for years to come. While the details of these products and their functions are complex, they can essentially be viewed as tools that allow the financial sector to gamble with average people’s money based on speculations about what they expect markets to do in the future. And because the wealth of
most middle to low-income people is linked to their homes, a key part of this process became tied to mortgages, and to the housing market in general.

In the early 2000s, as the number of people who both needed a home but also had the necessary assets to successfully pay for a mortgage dwindled, the new, deregulated market increasingly turned to those in less stable situations. People with few assets or credit history were targeted and manipulated into taking out high interest loans to pay for mortgages they could not afford (Benjamin J. Keys, 2010). Additionally, because of the legacy of racial discrimination in finance and elsewhere, families targeted by predatory lenders in the run-up to the Great Recession were disproportionately Black and Latino. (Thielman, 2015) What was presented as a rare opportunity to become a homeowner was, in reality, the first step in a dangerous and racially disparate system that would use high risk loans provided to unsuspecting citizens as goods to be traded and sold. These high-risk loans would in turn be sold to banks who would repackage them with other risky loans forming ‘securities’ which the bank would then sell again. Securities, and other financial products like them, became the shoddy basis for years of wild speculation that raised profits dramatically for bankers and traders. However, while profits soared, the stability of the housing market, which served as the backbone of the American—and therefore global—economy was slowly eroding. This process, intentionally designed to be confusing, hid the fact that banks and financial firms were taking advantage of ordinary people’s precarious financial situations to make huge sums of money (Zoltan Pozsar, 2010). While the housing market boomed in the late 90s and early 2000s, a hidden bubble was forming that would eventually collapse under its own weight, dragging the wealth and economic stability of millions of people down with it. Few would feel the effects of this collapse more than middle- and low-income survivors of domestic violence.

As more and more people were coerced into taking out high risk loans to pay for mortgages they could not afford, banks used complex formulas to hide the new risk they were infusing into the market (White, 2009). The investors and rating agencies took the banks at their word and the risky processes continued until 2006, when the debt bubble began to burst as more and more people defaulted on their loans simultaneously. As major firms like AIG lost huge amounts of wealth (since their profit was based on selling these risky financial products that were quickly becoming worthless), people began pulling their money out of the financial system they now saw as a sinking ship (Davidson, 2008). The ensuing

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**The Intersection of Domestic Violence and Homelessness**

Battered women have long been among the hidden homeless in the United States. Efforts to find protection in safe and confidential locations have resulted in limited visibility for this population in the burgeoning numbers of homeless people. Because domestic violence (DV) survivors are affected by many of the same social forces that affect anyone struggling to find and keep housing, the battered women’s movement and the homeless movement have followed parallel paths. Federal cuts in subsidized housing have greatly limited access to affordable housing for low-income people, among them millions of DV survivors and their children struggling with housing instability and compromised safety. This 2013 paper from the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence outlines the parallel paths of the battered women’s movement and the homeless movement, and highlights where they intersect.
snowball effect that spread to every facet of the economy, leading to massive government bailouts and in some cases the loss of as much as 40% of people’s wealth, is now known as The Great Recession, and we are still living in its wake over a decade later (Barry Eichengreen, 2012).

While the effects of The Great Recession on most people are obvious (financial instability, loss of home or home value, loss of employment, etc.), it is worth asking how the last ten years of recession and subsequent recovery have affected victims of domestic violence specifically. Although low wages, unemployment, and economic recession are not causes of domestic violence per se, these types of factors may increase the risk of domestic abuse and compound its most severe effects. For example, according to the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), women living in disadvantaged neighborhoods are more than twice as likely to be the victims of intimate violence compared with women in more advantaged neighborhoods (Michael L. Benson, 2004). In the 2011 “Mary Kay Truth About Abuse” survey, 56% of shelters reported that domestic violence was more violent at the time of the survey than it was before the economic downturn. In that same survey, more than three-fourths of shelters indicated that their clients stayed longer in their relationships due to the state of the economy (Mary Kay, Inc., 2011). A 2016 study found that “the uncertainty and anticipatory anxiety that go along with sudden macroeconomic downturns have negative effects on relationship quality, above and beyond the effects of job loss and material hardship” (Daniel Schneider, 2016). In 2004, a similar study asserted that unemployment may lead to new instances of, or more severe, abuse by undermining an abuser’s feelings of control and economic security, creating an urge to exert greater control over their partner (Melzer, 2004).

What this research shows is that major economic downturns, such as the one that occurred in 2008, put victims of domestic violence at increased risk in two distinct ways. First, the economic insecurity caused by such a recession makes it even more difficult for survivors to access the resources necessary to successfully leave an abusive partner, particularly given that nearly every case of domestic violence involves some sort of financial control. Second, because abusers are also put in a more precarious situation financially within the context of broad economic changes, they are more likely to control their partners or control them in more extreme ways in response. Consequently, when thinking about how to address the housing crisis that faces survivors of domestic violence today, it is critical that we not view individual cases or localized housing markets as distinct problems with distinct solutions. Instead, we must understand the broad historical trends that have made the housing market and all its related factors so unstable and difficult to navigate for people who have the most to lose from economic changes. In addition to critical solutions like rapid rehousing and transitional housing,

A Case For Reparations

"Two hundred fifty years of slavery. Ninety years of Jim Crow. Sixty years of separate but equal. Thirty-five years of racist housing policy. Until we reckon with our compounding moral debts, America will never be whole.” — Ta Nehisi-Coates

In this 2014 article for the Atlantic, Ta Nehisi-Coates focuses on the Chicago area, tracing the history of discriminatory policies and practices that systematically stripped African Americans of property and locked them out of the housing market.
we must implement fundamental, systemic changes to our financial and housing sectors based not in maximizing profit but ensuring safety and dignity for all. Without these structural changes to protect consumers from the dangerous and predatory financial practices that are still ongoing today, survivors will never be truly safe from the economic insecurity and social isolation that the next major economic recession will create and exacerbate in the context of abusive relationships.

In hindsight, we can see how economic changes on the macro level have direct, sustained impacts on the ability of survivors to stay safer after fleeing abuse. As the housing market fluctuates downward, it impacts rental markets as well, making both mortgages and apartments impossible to access even years after the fact. For victims who are often already economically limited, these changes pose a very real threat. Advocates will always be there to support victims, but there is a limit on survivors’ ability to heal when they have no way to access a stable home. In this way we can see that when major recessions happen, it is survivors who pay the price in economic precarity and increased risk of harm. Given that bankers and traders are engaging in all the same irresponsible behavior today, can we really afford to take the risk that they won’t go too far again?

References


Diverse & Resilient

“The current climate in this country continues to grow in aggression toward LGBTQ people. Things that happen at a national level trickle down into each of our communities and programs. At Diverse & Resilient, we are seeing an increase in the need for shelter, especially for transgender and gender nonconforming individuals. We are also seeing an increase in depression and anxiety due to the hostile political climate. Survivors are expressing feelings of hopelessness as they sift through the oppression of violence and the lack of services for their identities. LGBTQ survivors may require longer shelter stays at this time due to the backlash of harmful policies and political rhetoric. We are so grateful to the programs who are working with us to brainstorm solutions regarding housing, shelter, mental health, and increasing the resiliency of survivors. The difference this support makes in an LGBTQ survivor’s life is life and death.”

— Kathy Flores, LGBTQ Anti-Violence Program Manager, Diverse & Resilient

According to the National Center for Transgender Equality, one in five transgender people in the United States has experienced discrimination when seeking a home, and more than one in ten have been evicted from their homes, because of their gender identity. Read Skyler’s Story in the National Center for Transgender Equality’s blogpost, about transitioning while homeless in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

PATHFINDERS in Milwaukee provides the only LGBTQ homeless/runaway youth shelter in Wisconsin. In addition, their Q-BLOK supportive housing program serves LGBTQ folks 18-25.

Q-BLOK: LGBTQ SUPPORTIVE HOUSING

Q-BLOK is designed to assist young adults, aged 18-25, who are LGBT-identified, at imminent risk of becoming homeless, and entering adulthood ill-equipped to achieve successful independence and self-sufficiency due to their histories of running away, homelessness, and family rejection. The program provides critical services that include supportive housing, financial assistance, and case management support, in addition to education, employment, and independent living skills development. Since its initiation in 2009, over 70 young adults have received services through Q-BLOK.

Becoming Extraordinary

Appleton high school student Travis Thor talks about finding internal acceptance and joy in coming to terms with his many identities.

“My name is Travis, and I am a senior at Appleton West High School and Renaissance School for the Arts. I was the disappointment that sullied my family name.

It was an hour into the argument with my mom, and all I wanted was for it to end. I did not care how; I just wanted it to end. At the age of 13, I was kicked out—out of the place I called home, out of the only place that made me feel safe and secure.”

Landlord-Tenant Law in Wisconsin
Megan Sprecher, Immigration and Poverty Law Attorney

Landlord-tenant law is complex and has changed multiple times in Wisconsin over the past several years. This article is designed to be an overview of issues of particular interest to domestic abuse survivors. At the end of the article, there is a list of resources to consult for more information on the topic.

Prevention
While not always possible to predict or prevent a landlord-tenant issue, there are some proactive steps a renter can take to attempt to avoid problems, including:

- Research your prospective landlord. Ask their current or former tenants how the landlord treated them. Call the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture Trade and Consumer Protection (1-800-422-7128) and/or your local office of the housing inspector or health inspector and ask if they have received any complaints against the landlord by former tenants.
- Read your lease or rental agreement before signing it. Do not sign a lease or rental agreement if you are unable/unwilling to abide by all provisions and are comfortable with all the rights it gives the landlord. Get a copy of the lease and any other paperwork the landlord asks you to sign. Keep copies of all documents.
- Take pictures of your rental unit, storage space, parking space, etc. immediately upon taking possession of the rental unit. Use a check-in form such as the one from the Tenant Resource Center to document the condition of the rental unit when you take possession. Keep copies of the photos and checklist.

If possible, consider purchasing renters insurance. Policies average about $190 a year and can cover renters for loss/damage to their possessions, liability for incidents that happen at the rental property, and cost of staying in a hotel if their rental unit is uninhabitable.

Emergency Assistance may be available for a tenant for a security deposit or to prevent an eviction.

Poor Conditions
If there are conditions that need repair in your rental unit, request that the landlord make the repairs in writing and keep a copy off the letter. If your landlord refuses to make the repairs, make a report to your local housing inspector or County Health Nurse or Zoning Department and ask them to do an inspection and issue a written report. See the Tenant Sourcebook for more information on when a rental unit is “unfit to live in” and is a violation of the rental agreement and the possibility of withholding part of your rent.

Resources
For additional information on housing law in Wisconsin, the following resources are available. Several are available in Spanish, Hmong, and other languages via Google Translate or a similar service:

- Tenant Sourcebook—general information for low-income tenants in Wisconsin written by Legal Action of Wisconsin;
- Legal Action of Wisconsin, Judicare, The Legal Aid Society of Milwaukee, the University of Wisconsin Neighborhood Law Clinic, and Community Justice, Inc.—nonprofit legal service providers that take some landlord-tenant cases;
- Tenant Resource Center—information on housing laws in Wisconsin, template letters and checklists for tenants to use;
- Disability Rights Wisconsin—information for tenants with disabilities;
- Wisconsin State Law Library - Housing—clearinghouse of documents, guides, and forms.
Termination of Lease: Imminent Threat

Under Wis. Stat. §704.16, a residential tenant may terminate his or her tenancy and remove from the premises if both of the following apply:

(a) The tenant or a child of the tenant faces an imminent threat of serious physical harm from another person if the tenant remains on the premises; AND

(b) The tenant provides the landlord with written notice and a certified copy of any of the following:
   1. domestic abuse injunction against the person who poses serious physical harm;
   2. child abuse injunction protecting tenant’s child from the person who poses serious physical harm;
   3. harassment injunction based on a sexual assault or stalking allegation against the person who poses serious physical harm;
   4. bail condition ordering person who poses serious physical harm not to contact tenant;
   5. criminal complaint alleging the person who poses serious physical harm has sexually assaulted or stalked tenant or tenant’s child; OR
   6. criminal complaint alleging the person who poses serious physical harm has been arrested for committing domestic violence.

A tenant in this situation should provide his or her landlord with written notice of their intent to terminate the lease early and a certified copy of one of the above documents. If the tenant provides proper notice to the landlord, the tenant should only have to pay rent for the month the tenant gives the landlord notice and the following month.

Discrimination

Under Wis. Stat. §106.50, landlords may not discriminate in renting or selling property on the basis of sex, marital status, sexual orientation, color, race, disability, religion, national origin, ancestry, lawful source of income, family status, age, or status as a victim of domestic abuse, sexual assault, or stalking. A tenant or prospective tenant who has experienced discrimination on one of these bases may file a complaint with the state.

Terminations and Eviction: Protocol and Defenses

If a landlord wants to evict a tenant, the landlord must do so through the courts and provide proper notice. Unlawful evictions (i.e., changing the locks on the rental unit, shutting off the utilities, etc.) are not valid in the state of Wisconsin. The requirements for notice differ based on the type of lease you have. Some communities have additional protections for tenants.

There are several defenses against an eviction. One specific to domestic abuse victims is under Wis. Stat. §106.50(5m)(dm) and provides that domestic abuse victims have a defense to an eviction action if the tenant can prove that the landlord knew or should have known the tenant is a victim of domestic abuse, sexual assault, or stalking and that the eviction action is based on conduct related to domestic abuse, sexual assault, or stalking committed by either of the following:

(a) a person who was not the tenant’s invited guest; or

(b) a person who was the tenant’s invited guest, but the tenant has done either of the following:
   1. Sought an injunction barring the person from the premises; or
   2. Provided a written statement to the landlord stating that the person will no longer be an invited guest of the tenant and the tenant has not subsequently invited the person to be the tenant’s guest.

See resources listed on the previous page for additional information on housing law in Wisconsin.
Denise’s Story

Denise Johnson, American Indians Against Abuse Project Coordinator, who is from Lac Courte Oreilles, Wisconsin, shared some of her experiences with homelessness.

I was one of those runaway/missing girls. Off and on from the age of 12, and even into adulthood, I have lived on the streets (and non-streets in rural Wisconsin), mostly in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota. It’s easier to live on the streets in the cities, especially for youth. At different times my children were also part of the equation. I was a victim of sexual assault by a stranger at 16, but I had already been abused as a small child. I see now how vulnerable I was due to abuse when I was very young, and how some of that abuse was tied to generational trauma/historical trauma. I had been in foster homes as well, but I was lucky that there was no abuse in those settings. I know for many kids, that is not their truth.

I did go to certain shelters that were available to youth. “Project Offstreets” was a haven for me and many others in the Twin Cities. Sometimes I would stay until time was up, sometimes I stayed with friends, and we also squatted a lot. Squatting is still common, utilizing abandoned/unused homes or businesses as long as possible until discovered and then moving on to another. Squats were often lived in by many people at once, and not necessarily only youth, but adults as well. I have friends who are on the streets now. As a street youth (or adult) you learn where you can go for food, for shelter and other necessities. 211 is a big help. The camps like the one in Minneapolis may be new only because they are so visible, but camps have always existed, usually hidden from sight. Other cities have had more visible homeless camps for many years now.

My family has a lot of historical trauma in our background. All Natives have some sort of reality that is rooted in colonization, cultural suppression, and oppression of Native Americans. Violence, abuse, addiction, and suicide have impacted me and my family in so many ways. Homelessness for Native Youth is a big issue. No doubt there were many before me, and right now there are still more out there who are living what I had to live through.

One thing that strikes me now that I am older is how heavily I was impacted by trauma from abuse. I didn’t know what trauma was when I was younger, much less historical or generational trauma. How are youth who can’t give a name to the problems, or to the causes or the roots of these issues, going to move beyond them and learn to overcome and to heal? The violence, the despair and the struggle become normal when you don’t know anything different.

Really, I consider myself still homeless. I don’t own a home or land, my family sold the land that had belonged to my grandmother, so there was nothing left for me and my generation. I have been looking for permanent housing or a real home for a while. So really, I am still on that journey to find somewhere to call home.
The Heart of Shelter

On November 13, advocates got together for a day of sharing, reflection, and peer-to-peer learning on trauma-sensitive shelter policies and practices. We focused on the policies and practices of shelter operations.

Participants learned from one another as they considered how to best use shelter rules and guidelines to support trauma-sensitive, empowering practices related to shelter intake, survivor and staff input, safety, supporting family relationships, AODA issues and other topics. We asked some of the following critical questions about shelter rules, adapted from the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence: Does a rule mirror the abuser’s control? Are the concerns the rule reflects still relevant? Is it possible to enforce the rule, and if not, what purpose does it serve? Does the rule actually create safety or does it just create an illusion of safety? Does the rule undermine a mothers’ authority in the eyes of their children? Is the rule burdensome to a particular group of residents? Does the rule foster mutual accountability between staff and residents? Does the rule interfere with or support survivors’ independent decision making?

Presenters included Christy Coenen and Tracy Plamann (Harbor House), Shannon Jarecki (The Women’s Community), Kathleen Junion and Daryl Woods (CAP Services), Sherri Larsen and Jen Scaccio (New Horizons), Sara Meier (inCourage), Monique Minkens (Domestic Abuse Intervention Services), Sue Sippel (The Family Center), Jessi Trauth (Waukesha Women’s Center), and Diane Wolff (End Abuse).
A Safe Place to Heal: Addressing the Emergency Shelter and Transitional Housing Needs of Older Survivors of Abuse

Bonnie Brandl, Cailin Crockett, and Juanita Davis

Look at the housing options available in your community through the lens of an older victim of abuse, who is in a life-threatening or dangerous situation and needs a temporary place to live or new permanent housing. In 2016, the National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life (NCALL) convened a Roundtable to better understand and address the needs of such older adults in crises. A Safe Place to Heal shares highlights from this discussion and the resulting recommendations.

Roundtable participants were a select group of experts in the elder abuse and domestic violence fields, including: older survivors who had used emergency shelters and transitional housing; local victim service providers; representatives from state domestic violence coalitions; national OVW funded technical assistance providers; and, policy and program specialists representing federal agencies responsible for administering victim services. Each of these perspectives revealed critical insights on how older survivors perceive and receive various types of victim services, and how advocates at local, state, and national levels can improve the available options. This article summarizes the overarching themes from the discussions and offers recommendations for programmatic responses to better serve older adults experiencing abuse, so they may find a safe place to heal, and ultimately, to thrive.

A Safe Place to Heal offers a framework and strategies victim service providers can use to enhance programming and policies along seven key themes:

RESPECT: Responsive, Victim-Defined Advocacy · Elder-Informed · Services, Safety Planning and Outreach · Policy · Equity and Access · Collaboration · Training and Awareness

The Rural and Tribal Elder Justice Resource Guide includes federal resources and community outreach materials. Housing information is on page 10.
PDC Orenda Center
Marshfield
Renee Schulz, Executive Director

How did you assess the need for this expansion project?

Personal Development Center, Inc. (PDC) recently celebrated 41 years as a private, non-profit, non-shelter victim services agency serving the greater Marshfield area and Clark County. Although PDC was successful in building safety measures for victims through collaborative partnerships, our community continued to face challenges in ensuring immediate and short-term local shelter while legal and long-term housing options could be explored.

What was your timeline for the different phases of the project?

Approximately 5 years ago, community members from the greater Marshfield area came together to support the building of a Transitional Family (Homeless) Shelter for Saint Vincent De Paul (SVDP). Over the years, it became increasingly difficult to sustain services; the Shelter closed on December 5, 2017. PDC was able to secure the facility and transitioned its established programs to the new location on May 1, 2018. Modifications to the interior and exterior of the building were necessary for added security including secured internal access points, fencing, secured parking areas, and an expanded security system. Non-residential advocacy and outreach services continued throughout the construction process; PDC Orenda Center opened for residential services October 1, 2018.

How did you secure funding?

The shelter was originally built with community donations and in-kind services through an extensive capital campaign. PDC was able to purchase the facility for the nominal cost of the assessed land value. PDC received in-kind donations of building materials and services. We received local foundation and community contributions, we had support from the Marshfield Area United Way, and we received a generous VOCA grant for one-time funding.

What has been your feedback from residents of the shelter?

Feedback from residents has been amazing. One resident who recently moved into her own apartment wrote: “To all of You, I thank each & every one of you for taking time out of your lives to help me with mine. If you weren’t here only God knows where I would of ended up at, I’m thinking probably dead. All of you have a special place in my heart. You’re all very special, DON’T EVER FORGET THAT!”

How has the expansion allowed you to better meet the needs of residents?

Residents have greater access to several services: scheduled group events and activities focusing on individual wellness and support; comprehensive, wrap-around care to promote personal growth, healing and independence; and, meetings with staff to identify and take steps to reach their individual/family goals and address barriers to future success. The facility also includes a space for community partners who provide assistance with housing, employment, financial, counseling, and legal needs to meet privately with participants—residential and non-residential. Residents have the ability to choose their level of interaction with others.

Several Wisconsin domestic violence organizations have recently added or expanded their shelter programs. Others have developed innovative programming with community partners to support survivors and their families as they build more stable housing and economic foundations for themselves.

We asked them to share their experiences for this issue of the Chronicles.

Here and on the following pages are their responses to our questions.
Can you tell us about your expansion project?
Naomi: We moved into our new facility one year ago. Our previous building was over one hundred years old and needed a lot of attention. (I called plumbers and electricians on a regular basis.) It had a very small parking lot and the shelter was a small three-bedroom apartment on the upper floor. Our new facility has nine bedrooms, five bathrooms, and an office wing. As a former AODA treatment facility, it was perfect for us. The parking lot is enormous! We are ideally located behind a hospital and close to the judicial center.

How did you assess the need for this program?
Naomi: We turned away 90 women and their children in 2017 because our shelter was always full. What really motivated our board of directors to get serious about a new building was when I started giving them the monthly count of exactly how many we were not serving. That was also a useful figure to use when talking to community groups. I also talked about how the shelter residents were all sharing just one bathroom. (And I would ask the audience, “How many bathrooms do you have at your home?”) It made them realize that we weren’t really fulfilling our mission. For those that we were able to squeeze into shelter, we were hardly providing a healing environment; it was more like a hot-house for further stress and trauma.

Our building was also very old, and not handicap accessible. That was another “selling” point to the community. I think there had been an “it’s good enough” mentality for so long, it was hard to do a paradigm shift that it was really our responsibility to offer a more healing environment.

Ashlee: The need to expand was based on our former building and the realization that the number of survivors that needed emergency shelter was growing. Our number of turnaways each month was growing, and we were helping all we could by putting several families in one room. This led to a shelter environment that at times became toxic. We desperately needed a space that was more uplifting and provided more privacy and space to heal than the one we had.

What were the different phases of the project and what was your timeline like?
Naomi: The Board hired a local consultant to conduct a feasibility study regarding funding; the outcome was that we would only be able to raise $750,000. I was discouraged because I knew we couldn’t build new for less than a million. Then we got really lucky: we were offered a former AODA treatment facility for $600,000. It needed some minor upgrades, mostly around security concerns, so we set a capital campaign goal of $750,000 and took a leap of faith.

It all happened rather quickly: The total campaign was set for three years, but happened in about one year. A large donation from a board member was key to our success. After that (during the silent phase) we met
with potential donors for personal “asks,” created a beautiful campaign brochure, met with area businesses and organizations, and obtained funding from several foundations and large businesses. Once we had secured approximately 80% of the funds, we went public. We did mass mailings of brochures and held a very well-attended open house for the public right before moving into our new space.

I will say that we had been talking about a new building for a number of years. We almost started a campaign several years before that, but realized we weren’t quite ready; I think it would have failed if we had proceeded at that point. The consultant we hired for the feasibility study also worked with us on strengthening our board, committees, and marketing. By the time we actually started the capital campaign, we had laid a lot of strong foundational stones.

**How were survivors involved in the decision making and planning for the space?**

Naomi: The building we purchased was already set up to offer both privacy and communal space, including two “pods” with kitchen/living room areas so that families and individuals could be spread out more optimally. We used online tools that focused on what an optimal space would be. We also got feedback from clients during our quarterly Advisory Council meetings.

Because victims are reluctant to leave an abusive home if they can’t take their pets with them, we have gradually been replacing bedroom carpeting with vinyl flooring to make rooms more pet-friendly. In the past year we have provided safe space to five dogs, one guinea pig, two new-born kittens, one goldfish, and five cats. Clients have repeatedly expressed their gratitude to us for welcoming their pets.

**What has been your feedback from residents of the shelter?**

Ashlee: Those who have stayed in our shelter before and needed shelter again, have told us it’s a night and day difference. We no longer have to put more than one family in a room, and the building has more space for kids to run and let out their energy. The overall energy of the shelter is dramatically different.

**How has access changed, for different populations or needs, as a result of the expansion?**

Ashlee: Our former shelter was not handicap accessible and victims had to be able to walk up a flight of stairs in order to get to the shelter. Our new building has a ramp and several accessible bathrooms to meet the needs of those clients. We also have bigger rooms with more beds to serve bigger families without them being cramped.

Naomi: We can provide emergency shelter to men in our new shelter, though we have not had a request as of yet. We didn’t feel like it was doable in our old location since it was so small and usually packed. We are happy that we are now able to provide equal access to all victims.

**Has the average length of stay changed?**

Ashlee: Yes. This may be due to several reasons, but mainly the housing shortage in our area.

Naomi: Our average stay has increased by several days overall. We still have some families that are here for three months, and some that just stay one night.

**Were there any surprises? With the benefit of hindsight, what would you do differently?**

Ashlee: The main surprise for me is that we are still turning away survivors because we are constantly full. I also think that maybe we didn’t fully think through the number of people we would have in shelter and how our staff would need to change and adapt. It’s hard to give people the amount of attention they need when there are so many of them. This may result in longer stays as they don’t always get the resources they need in a timely manner.

Naomi: We are hoping to add more staff positions with the upcoming increase in VOCA funding.
Golden House
Green Bay
Holli Fisher, Program Manager

Golden House engaged community partners to connect survivors to resources for building financial and housing security. Can you tell us more about these partnerships and about the program? How did you involve survivors in creating the program?

Golden House operates using a continuum of housing services and interventions, as opposed to the traditional shelter model. Given the lack of capacity in emergency shelter, Golden House has shifted our response into looking at housing diversion options, increased our collaboration with community partners, and secured new funding streams for longer-term housing assistance. In 2016, Golden House piloted our Safe Home model, which focuses on helping survivors maintain their housing, or obtain new housing that is safe and sustainable through flexible financial assistance, mobile advocacy, and community engagement. Ninety-six percent of survivors assisted through Safe Home have retained their housing.

While our Safe Home model has been effective in helping survivors with a short-term boost, we identified that the model has shortcomings when it is clear that a survivor may need support for six months or more. Earlier in 2018, HUD sent out a Notice of Funding Availability, which included bonus funding for domestic violence rapid rehousing projects. Golden House consulted with housing providers in our community and throughout the state, keeping in mind the complex needs of survivors and our current inability to meet those needs, and decided that this funding would be a great asset to our community. The rapid rehousing project will provide rental assistance for up to twelve months to victims of domestic abuse, sexual assault, and human trafficking. Golden House plans to implement this project in 2019 and hire a full-time case manager and half-time community engagement coordinator.

Golden House has spent considerable energy improving our infrastructure so that we can implement viable solutions to the overwhelming problem of housing. Three things help inform new programming: survivor input, visionary leadership that promotes a culture of innovation, and occupying key leadership positions within the local homeless and housing coalition. With these three things, those affected by our programming are driving solutions, we are researching best practices across the country to make informed decisions, and we are knowledgeable about the housing-related needs of the community and the associated barriers.

Common ground, complementary approaches:

**adapting the Housing First model for domestic violence survivors**

In this report, read about how Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence adapted the Housing First model to achieve safe and stable housing for survivors and their children. Preliminary evidence for the adapted model – termed Domestic Violence Housing First – is provided, and policy implications are discussed.
Can you tell us about the DAIS expansion project?

The old DAIS facility was purchased in 1984 and was meant to be a 10-year stop-gap solution until the organization could launch a capital campaign for a much larger facility to meet the needs of Dane County. A capital campaign was attempted a few times over the years, but various challenges emerged which circumvented those campaigns. We were able to finally realize our dream 30 years later, when we opened the doors to our greatly expanded facility at 2102 Fordem Avenue in 2014.

The former facility consisted of two single family homes which had been connected. One side housed the 25-bed shelter and the other side housed the administrative offices and program space. The shelter had six bedrooms and two bathrooms for twenty-five residents. Every bedroom had bunk beds which made it extremely difficult for victims with injuries, elderly victims, or victims with physical limitations or disabilities. Additionally, families often had to share rooms with other families. There was approximately 5,000 square feet for 25 shelter residents and 25 staff members. All spaces had to be multipurpose spaces: One meeting room was used for staff meetings, interviews, support groups, and our staff break room.

The new facility is 35,000 square feet (17,000 of it devoted to the residential services wing) and can house up to 56 residents. Additionally, we have spaces which are designated for specific purposes. Our staff team has expanded to approximately 60 members, and over 200 volunteers work with us.

How did you assess the need for this program?

For years, DAIS had dealt with long waitlists for our shelter services, but we had experienced increasing demands for every other program, too. We could not expand our services to meet the needs of our community without addressing our space issues. Additionally, our overused facility was falling into disrepair. It was next to impossible to keep up with the maintenance needs, because the building was always in use. Many departing staff noted on their exit interviews that the facility was one of the reasons they left employment with DAIS. Ultimately, the facility did not reflect the intended experience DAIS wished our clients to have when seeking services and did not honor them in the way we believed they should be honored and valued.

What were the different phases of the project and what was your timeline like?

The entire project from pre-development and planning to opening the doors was a five year endeavor. We did an extensive location analysis to find the ideal site. We then did extensive outreach to the
neighborhood and applied for a conditional use permit before we even finalized the purchase of the land. We documented the timeline of the steps we took, and what we would have done differently, and we have shared that information with eleven different organizations representing six different states who have reached out to us to consult on their projects.

**How did you secure funding?**

We raised $10 million total for the project. (Some of those funds went to an operating reserve to support increased operations during the first few years in the building. We have drawn down on those reserves as we have ramped up our annual fundraising for operations.) Approximately $2.4 million came from Dane County. Another $560,000 came through the State Building Commission. The remaining funds were raised through our capital campaign.

**How were survivors involved in the decision making and planning for the space?**

We consulted with survivors at multiple points along the way – specifically our advisory group (SUN, which stands for Survivors United for Non-violence). They met with our architects, provided input early in the process, and later looked at site plans and architectural renderings to provide feedback. Read more about survivors’ involvement in this article.

**What has been your feedback from residents of the shelter?**

Overall, it has been very positive. I think it is different for those who knew the previous shelter and know what we came from. People appreciate not having to share rooms with other families. We have had some residents ask us why they can’t just live with us permanently.

**How has access changed, for different populations or needs, as a result of the expansion? (For example, more families with children, persons with disabilities, men, older victims)**

The entire facility is wheelchair accessible, including some of the suites that have roll-in showers. We also have single rooms for clients who may need more privacy. The way we designed the suites gives us more opportunity to have flexible spaces that meet the needs of our ever-changing client population. For example, a standard suite has four bedrooms with two twin beds. Doors in between the rooms can be unlocked by staff so that if we have a larger family, they can inhabit more of the suite.

**Were there any surprises? With the benefit of hindsight, what would you do differently?**

We underestimated how having a high-profile capital campaign and a publicly known facility would increase the number of people seeking services. We have seen a 117% increase in the number of calls to our 24-hour Help Line between 2013 (the last year we were in a confidential facility) and 2017. The demand for all services has continued to go up as more people know who we are and what we offer. Our shelter is now full again 100% of the time with waitlists of up to 100 people a night. We continue to evaluate how we can do things differently to connect people to our other community-based services earlier so that we can help them avoid the types of crisis situations wherein they might need shelter. We are also re-evaluating the ways in which we provide advocacy services in shelter to connect people to life-sustaining, life-changing options that help them live their best lives (“The Liberation Model”), which we hope will help them avoid the need for shelter in the future.

**What are your suggestions for other communities who might take on a similar project?**

Don’t cut corners on planning. Part of the reason I think our capital campaign was so successful was because we demonstrated to the community that we had done our due diligence and people felt confident making an investment in DAIS.
JumpStart is a full-service auto repair shop co-owned by Christine Ann Domestic Abuse Services of Oshkosh and Harbor House Domestic Abuse Programs of Appleton. JumpStart services are available to the general public at a full market rate. 25% of profits from full rate services support low and no cost repairs to survivors referred by Harbor House (HHDAP) and Christine Ann (CADASI). The idea for JumpStart is directly inspired by survivors of domestic abuse, who struggled as they worked to achieve self-sufficiency because their vehicles needed repairs. Securing safe, reliable transportation means access to opportunity—jobs, school, child care, community resources, and safety from an abuser.

JumpStart is a true social innovation—a profitable business addressing a need in the marketplace that pours profits into ensuring access to opportunity for survivors of domestic abuse. Women make up more than 65% of customers who take their vehicles to auto repair shops, but one of the top reasons women don’t return to a shop is because they didn’t like how they were treated. JumpStart is committed to empowering women with knowledge and confidence as they care for their vehicles. Best of all, proceeds provide low- and no-cost auto repairs to survivors of domestic violence. JumpStart is also proving to be a new point of entry for survivors in need of support. A number of survivors who reached out directly to JumpStart have been referred to CADASI and HHDAP.

In 2015, the Basic Needs Giving Partnership awarded JumpStart $100,000 to launch its pilot at Fox Valley Technical College. Jumpstart hired a general manager in October 2016 and opened in January 2017, operating two days a week out of Fox Valley Technical College’s Auto Lab. The pilot was successful, and the current business plan shows that it will be self-sustaining in three years. In June of 2018 Jumpstart secured a permanent, stand-alone location and expanded their hours and services. Transportation can be a profound barrier to economic independence. JumpStart helps survivors meet their transportation needs and navigate the road to financial stability: Reliable transportation enhances the likelihood that survivors will obtain employment or further their education, ultimately leading to financial security and long-term safety for themselves and their families. Jumpstart’s female-focused service model not only provides auto repair for survivors, but also funds other programs at CADASI and HHDAP with its profits.
Laurel’s Story

“Unfortunately, a shelter isn’t a long-term solution. I needed to get a job because I was a homemaker. I didn’t have an education to get a good enough job, so I needed to go back to school, but that meant I would have no means to get good affordable housing for some time. That’s when I heard about Bethany Apartments, a transitional housing unit for women and children of domestic violence. I received a three bedroom apartment for me and my children...

I was supplied with furniture, bedding, houseware items, and clothing. But, the help didn’t stop there. We were given financial aid for gas, school expenses, and other emergencies. They offered us a place to live, heal, and grow in a supportive, safe, and secure environment. They helped us set goals for ourselves and helped us to meet those goals through referrals and encouragement. They had classes for financial wellness, parenting, self-care and whatever else we needed. Without them, I would have fallen apart.

Shelter is a temporary solution to leaving a domestic violence situation. Most programs allow for 30 - 90 days – not even getting to the root of the problem. Transitional housing is a longer-term solution (up to two years) to overcoming domestic violence.”

Bethany Apartments, located in Racine County, “offers women and children who have experienced abuse or violence a place to live, heal, and grow in a supportive, safe, and secure environment.” For more information, please visit: https://www.bethanyapartments.org/”

Transitional Housing

Transitional housing is an option many survivors rely upon as a bridge between crisis (emergency shelter) and their new life (a permanent home, safely away from their abuser). Transitional housing allows survivors both independence and safety during this critical period. Numerous transitional housing programs exist throughout Wisconsin. However, new funding for this program type is often difficult to find in our current policy landscape. To illustrate the importance of transitional housing options, Laurel Blackstone, a survivor from Southeastern Wisconsin, shared her experience.
I awoke into this world a homeless orphan. Many are not aware that the average age of a person experiencing homelessness is about 9 years old, due to the number of children who are born and raised in such dire circumstances. In the first years of my life, I bounced from institution to foster home and back several times—I was removed from one home for neglect and abuse. My prayers were answered when a loving family adopted me at the age of three. By that tender age, numerous experiences with adult situations had forced me to grow up very quickly.

I was, in essence, my own nurturer and protector in those early years, which as we know are such important years of childhood development. Through the lens of Trauma Informed Care, we now have a better understanding of how significant early trauma actually changes the way a child’s brain develops and can cause damage. It’s fascinating for me to identify how this has affected me personally. But it’s also heartbreaking, watching very young children being separated from their families, and knowing intimately how it will profoundly affect them for the rest of their lives.

I am so very grateful to be one of the lucky ones who was adopted. Working with young people aging out of the foster care system, I realize what a true blessing I was given. Throughout the years, my Mom and Dad provided me with many wonderful opportunities for education and travel—exploring the world and learning about different cultures while traveling throughout the United States, Mexico, Europe, Russia, China, and many other countries.

I lived a very happy life until the tragic death of my adopted brother Johnny tore my family apart when I was 10 years old. As my parents struggled to cope with the shock and pain of losing a child, I was mostly left alone to fend for myself, without much adult support to guide and protect me.

I struggled to find my footing throughout my teens and twenties, feeling very lost and disconnected from the rest of the world. I continued to experience various traumatic situations, including a date rape in high school that had lasting repercussions on my young life. I somehow managed to get through those difficult years without professional help, but many years later, when I was fleeing domestic violence and living in my car, every painful memory from my past would come flooding back at once and nearly drown me.

When I met him I had a successful career at a foreign language translation agency in Madison, and I was finally beginning to thrive and find my place in the world. I started a membership at the Princeton Club and became involved in a relationship with a body builder who was helping me reach my fitness goals.

He initially presented as a kind, gentle, loving and attentive partner. It all seemed quite innocent and fun...in some ways like a dream come true. Many months later he tore his bicep at the gym, took a medical leave from his job, and stopped taking his medication. That’s when I met a very different version of this person for the first time.
I was locked into a year lease with him by the time those rippling red flags and warning signs began to manifest. The manipulation and threats began in earnest, and financial abuse was swiftly sneaking in while he was off work on medical leave. He reconnected with brothers who were criminally dangerous and invited them to our apartment. His bipolar mania and hallucinations began a dangerous cycle of sleep deprivation that was turning my life upside down.

Then he went back on his medication, back to work, and it all just seemed like a bad dream. But unfortunately the real nightmare was yet to come. The next time he went off his meds and I was attempting to leave him, he began to physically harm me with the intention of making it impossible for me to leave.

This led to two trips to the ER, where he made sure he was there so I would stick to the story that I had injured my back at the gym and my knee at the waterpark. In reality, my back injury was due to sexual assault, and I sustained nerve damage in my knee from him grabbing me by my hair and throwing me across the room into a wall.

I fled for good soon thereafter, but by that time, he had emptied my small savings account and wrecked my credit, caused significant damage to my vehicle, isolated me from friends and family, and abused an aging pet who did not survive. He even stole my identity and committed fraud, all while deliberately chipping away at my fragile self-esteem and confidence. When I suggested he might be a sociopath, a narcissist, he was not familiar with those terms, so he Googled them. And then, with an evil grin, said, “Yeah Baby, Karma’s gonna get me, real talk.”

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It’s still very difficult to look back on that time in my life and remember how lost and broken I had become, how afraid I was. When I finally gathered the courage, the only way I could afford to leave was to quit my job so I could access a meager 401(k). The latest data show that 83 percent of domestic abuse survivors report that their abusive partners disrupted their ability to work or get an education, with more than half losing a job because of the abusive situation.

Had I known there were resources available to help me, I could have avoided losing everything I’d worked so hard for. But I had no idea that what I was experiencing even had a name—Domestic Violence—and there were agencies with services that could have helped me avoid becoming homeless. Without that knowledge, a clear mind to make good decisions, and a strong support network, my life quickly spiraled out of control, and I found myself living in my car. That’s where I “celebrated” my 40th birthday—homeless and feeling desperately hopeless.

It’s truly a miracle that I survived to tell the tale, as I came very close to taking my own life during that time. I had literally lost EVERYTHING, even the car I had been living in, and I could no longer see any potential for a positive outcome in my life. I was suffering from the debilitating effects of PTSD which had yet to be diagnosed, and I truly believed that my life was over.

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After living in my car for several months, I was couch surfing at a house in Sauk City during the fall and winter of 2011 and was suffering from severe PTSD symptoms and depression. When my car was repossessed, I began to experience extreme agoraphobia and was afraid to leave the house, except for an occasional trip to buy groceries...and a few trips to the library to check out books and research hypothermia online. In early 2012 I decided that during the next snowstorm, I would plunge myself into the icy waters of the Wisconsin River.

But that snowstorm never came. If you recall, in very early spring of 2012, Wisconsin and a large portion of North America experienced one of the greatest heat waves in recorded history for that time of year, with temperatures well into the 80s for days on end. I have to laugh now, remembering that at the time, I was actually angry that the weather was foiling my plans to take my life. I had finally made peace with my decision, but by that time, the river had melted and so had my resolve.

A random phone call from a dear friend revealed to her that I desperately needed help in recovering my life. She contacted Hope House of South Central Wisconsin, a domestic violence shelter located in Baraboo, and arranged for me to seek emergency shelter and services there. Moving there was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do. I felt like a complete failure. I felt helpless and extremely vulnerable.

But as I continued to reach out and receive guidance and support from caring advocates at Hope House and my homeless case manager at Central Wisconsin Community Action Council, and as I began to welcome the support of
other women on a similar journey, I slowly started to come out of my shell and believe I was a human being again. I had completely lost myself in the experience and didn’t think I would ever be “me” again.

If you could go back in time, you wouldn’t likely recognize me as the same person, as I was so emotionally damaged that I could hardly make eye contact or speak a coherent sentence. It’s something I want people to think about when they see a homeless person...that what they see on the surface—the utter despair, the vacant stare, the disheveled appearance—may bear little resemblance to that person’s true self and hidden potential. It took a lot of time and patience for me to start to regain my confidence and abilities, and I am very thankful for all the support I received from so many people along the way.

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It’s so important that the public be aware of the resources available to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. People need to know how they can find help for themselves, their friends, their family members—even to help an acquaintance or stranger in need who is experiencing any kind of abuse or violence and may not have access to a supportive person who can be there for them.

It’s the reason why I so openly share my painful journey, so I can bring hope to survivors that there is a better life out there waiting for them. One of the most helpful things for my healing and recovery has been hearing other survivors’ courageous stories and witnessing their success. In turn, I share my story so others feel less alone as they reach out for help and dive into an unknown world of infinite uncertainties when they leave an abusive situation.

Had these resources not been there to help me, I’m not sure what would have become of me. It’s very unlikely I would be advocating on a statewide level for people experiencing homelessness and abuse. We need to keep a close eye on any legislation that would restrict, reduce or eliminate funding and other services, and make sure those resources stay in place to allow victims and their families to have a safe place to start healing and puzzling back together the scattered pieces of their lives to begin to feel like a whole picture once again.

Because of my own experience with domestic violence and homelessness, I know firsthand that it can happen to anyone, oftentimes quite abruptly and unexpectedly. Many people have preconceived notions and prejudices about the people who experience these issues, but you can never really know how a person got where they are until you speak with them in a caring, respectful, and non-judgmental way.

We have so much wealth and so many resources in this country. There’s no good reason that people have to live on the streets, or in their cars, or in other places not safe for human habitation. It will take significant restructuring of our current system to recreate our society into the more compassionate and equitable place that we all deserve to live in. That is my lofty life goal, and I have dedicated my life to helping empower survivors of abuse and homelessness to lead safe, successful, happy, fulfilling lives.

The day I die will be the day my Spirit flies
Back into the Universal Mind

If I could strum my life like a guitar
The music would impress me

If I could paint clouds in the heavens
Maybe Great Spirit would bless me

If I could carve the months I’ve lived
Into a marble statue, great and tall

It would hold out open arms
So I could catch you if you fall

If I could grow a rose for every memory in my mind
I would have the most amazing rose garden I could find.

While learning to live with PTSD, Renee Greenland has found her passion of helping to end homelessness in Wisconsin and beyond. For the last five years, Renee has represented the voice of homelessness throughout the state, as the Formerly Homeless Representative on the Board of Directors for the Wisconsin Balance of State Continuum of Care, the nonprofit organization tasked with ending homelessness in 69 counties across our state.

Renee lovingly dedicates her story to the memory of her late father Allen Greenland, always and forever her Guardian Angel. The first half of Renee’s poem written in her early twenties was her dad’s favorite; the second half she wrote after experiencing homelessness.
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