

*Mainstream DV  
Programs  
Funders  
Policymakers  
Researchers*

*LGBTQ Domestic Violence  
Targeted Recommendation:*

Improve privacy as a strategy to increase LGBTQ access to existing domestic violence (DV) shelter programs



National  
LGBTQ DV Capacity Building  
Learning Center

## Recommendation: Improve Privacy to Increase Access

### Rationale

Emergency domestic violence shelter can be an important and potentially life-saving resource for DV survivors. Both the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA) affirm the importance of making DV shelter and advocacy accessible to LGBTQ people. The mainstream DV field has agreed in principle but is continuing to learn how to put these principles into practice.

In our conversations with providers and survivors, increasing privacy emerged as a strategy for reducing barriers faced by diverse LGBTQ (and other) survivors.

Healing from trauma is promoted when survivor self-determination is increased and isolation is decreased. Private rooms/units paired with voluntary access to collective space advances both of these goals.

Increasing privacy for LGBTQ DV survivors and their children can provide substantial benefits for all DV survivors and will increase access for diverse LGBTQ survivors.

- *Private rooms/units* can increase survivors' control over their environment. Privacy is a fundamental antidote to the demand for constant emotional/physical/sexual access that many survivors have faced from abusive partners and intrusive institutions and systems.
- *Privacy gives survivors more control over when they are able and available to interact with other residents and program staff.* Privacy allows the opportunity to retreat when needed from secondary exposure to trauma, taxing microaggressions, and the emotional and physical demands of public social interaction.
- *Private rooms/units substantially reduce barriers to serving diverse populations of survivors.* It allows survivors to practice their traditions and culture, parent their children, cook familiar foods, adhere to religious obligations, choose which TV shows to watch, and otherwise feel at home, free of excessive scrutiny, questions, and judgment.
- *Private rooms/units increase time available for advocacy* by substantially reducing the time advocates spend resolving conflicts between residents.
- *Private rooms/units can support survivors' parenting* by making it easier for them to follow routines, help their children with homework, and bond with them. A strong parent-child bond is one of the most important resiliency factors for children exposed to domestic violence; privacy helps survivors reclaim this bond and their family lives.
- *An emerging evidence base indicates the benefits of housing models that enhance privacy.* Programs moving to housing models that allow greater privacy have reported positive housing outcomes. For example, one study revealed that 90% of DV survivors assisted using a Housing First models were successfully in permanent housing at the end of the 18-month study.<sup>1</sup>

## Recommendations for Mainstream DV Programs

1. Engage in short- and long-term planning to improve privacy. In the short term, examine the existing shelter facility with privacy in mind: How can privacy be improved? For example, can a room currently being used to house multiple single women be subdivided? For long-term planning, consider how the emergency housing facility and practices align with survivors' privacy needs and the program's aspirations to empower survivors, support parenting, and serve diverse populations with minimal barriers; then plan to ensure alignment between program values and housing design.
2. In communal shelters, make sure bedrooms feel like nurturing retreats. Each bedroom should contain a comfortable chair and a good reading light so that a person may rest without lying down and parents and small children can cuddle, read, and connect.
3. End the practice of asking strangers to share bedrooms: Commit to putting only one family or one survivor in each room.
4. If funding exists for remodeling, consider:
  - a. Adding bathrooms. Bathroom designs can increase access and privacy by separating function (i.e., bathing vs. toilet use) and prioritizing single users or parent-child dyads—as opposed to group use. Ideally each bedroom would have its own bathroom.
  - b. Dividing a many-roomed single-family house into smaller apartments.
5. Consult the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WSCADV) Building Dignity website for additional ideas on how the built environment can support program values and increase accessibility.
6. Leverage the evidence base being built by programs evaluating alternative (and more LGBTQ accessible) ways of housing DV survivors.<sup>ii</sup>
7. Call your [state coalition against domestic violence](#) to identify DV programs in your area that have made the shift to private rooms or private dwellings.

## Recommendations for Funders, State Administrators, and Policymakers

1. Note that FVPSA and most state laws provide considerable flexibility regarding the form that “safe refuge” takes; communal shelter is not required. Allow and encourage programs to innovate the form in which they offer shelter, and support their efforts to evaluate improvements in access and outcomes for survivors.
2. State administrators: Consider how discretionary funds can be used to provide incentives for programs to move toward best practices regarding privacy, with the

understanding that this increases access for LGBTQ and other marginalized survivors. For example, programs offering individual apartments might receive an “access bonus.”

3. Help programs engage in conversations about quality versus quantity of services.

## Recommendations for Researchers and Evaluators

1. Partner with DV and LGBTQ organizations to study accessibility and effectiveness of multiple DV emergency-housing models for diverse groups of survivors, including LGBTQ survivors.
2. Partner with DV organizations to continue examining the efficacy of alternative housing models, including Housing First, flexible funding, and mobile advocacy.

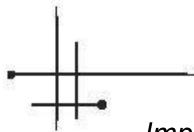
## Resources

- [Building Dignity: Design Strategies for Domestic Violence Shelter](#)
- [1+](#) (a resource for pro bono design services)
- [WSCADV's Housing First Toolkit](#)
- [WSCADV's evaluation results on DV Housing First](#)
- [The DASH \(District Alliance for Safe Housing\) Model](#)
- [“DASH's Empowerment Project: Rapid Re-Housing for Survivors of Domestic Violence”](#)
- [“How Do Survivors Define Success?”](#)

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<sup>i</sup> Mbilinyi, L. & Krieter, A. (2013). *The Washington State Domestic Violence Housing First Program Evaluation Summary: Cohort 2 Agencies*. Seattle: Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid



*Improve Privacy to Increase Access*

One in a series of targeted recommendations from the LGBTQ Domestic Violence Capacity Building Learning Center intended to improve policy, research, intervention and prevention efforts regarding LGBTQ DV.

The LGBTQ DV CBLC is a project of the Northwest Network for Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian and Gay Survivors of Abuse with foundational partner the National Coalition of Anti Violence Programs

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