

Toward Greater Integration of Services Related to Domestic Violence and Homelessness: An Intersystem Effort

The Context for This Project

The extent to which domestic violence and homelessness are interconnected in the lives of low-income women is well documented. Historically, however, public and private efforts to respond to domestic violence and to homelessness have been fragmented, evolving without awareness of interconnection. As a result, programs intended to serve adults and children affected by both domestic violence and homelessness too often leave them at risk of continued or increased harm.

In an effort to begin to address this problem, the Systems Change and Integration Committee of the Governor's Council to Address Sexual and Domestic Violence began the process of documenting examples of this fragmentation and of identifying opportunities for changing course. In August 2009 the Committee issued a report, "Blueprint Report, Domestic Violence" (the Blueprint Report), in which the following observations were made:

- "In general, services require people to take on a particular 'problem' identity or label before the option of assistance is explored. Furthermore, neither the homelessness nor domestic violence system was created with full awareness of how closely linked these two issues are." (Blueprint Report at p.7)
- "Survivors who choose or are required to receive help from state systems/agencies often find themselves with multiple service plans, which at best are not well-coordinated and at worst sometimes conflict in their requirements." When they are at odds, such conflicts necessitate a survivor's prioritizing one plan over another, which may...decrease the survivor's and/or children's safety." (Blueprint Report at p.4)

The Committee noted that the "Executive Office and state agencies...recognize the need for community-specific, cross organization/agency coordination," and recommended that this "continue, and [that] such coordination should be incentivized, whether through public recognition, championing or provision of additional resources." (Blueprint Report at p.6)

Project Overview

The Department of Children and Families (DCF), along with the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) and the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), have joined forces to respond to this recommendation. With Northnode, Inc. as facilitator, these agencies are engaging with front-line providers of domestic violence services and services related to housing and homelessness to develop and implement on-the-ground strategies for a more integrated response to survivors of domestic violence who are homeless. Success in this effort will be indicated by increased interagency collaboration and by improved and more cost-effective services for families.

The first specific piece of work under this project is a coordinated effort involving key stakeholders in the city of Springfield. There are two interrelated parts to this project. Part One calls for the creation of a pilot project for expedited referral and assessment services for women and children who are homeless (or are at risk of homelessness) due to domestic violence. Working together, the YWCA of Western Massachusetts, DCF, DHCD, DTA domestic violence specialists, and the Western Massachusetts Regional Network to End Homelessness are

developing an integrated response that includes emergency shelter for families experiencing both domestic violence and homelessness. As the methodology is developed and tested, it will be offered to communities across the Commonwealth. This part of the project includes:

- Development of a standardized referral to be used by domestic violence specialists in referring homeless families to the YWCA of Western Massachusetts.
- Development of an indepth assessment, to be used to determine the specific needs of families referred.
- Offering and providing integrated services at the YWCA, a local shelter for the homeless, or a community setting, depending on the family's needs.
- Collection of data on the cost (and cost saving) of the effort; the benefits of the effort, in terms of overall services received and in terms of the family's increased sense of safety and stability; and the effect of this effort on community-based services.

Part Two of this project is intended to create an environment in which community providers see themselves as part of a single, integrated system that embraces a trauma-informed response to those who experience domestic violence and homelessness. Given the historic fragmentation of our system, creating such an environment will not be easy. It asks front-line workers to shift long-held beliefs about people who are homeless and people who experience intimate partner violence. It invites supervisors to find ways to enable front-line staff to engage in a level of interagency communication that has historically not been possible. It calls upon all stakeholders to reflect honestly on the achievements and the shortcomings of systems in which they work, and it supports them to work together creatively to overcome these shortcomings.

This part of the project will bring key community providers together to do the following:

- Educate one another about essential aspects of their work.
- Explore perceptions of families experiencing both intimate partner violence and homelessness, which can hinder the provision of fully-integrated and trauma-informed responses.
- Learn about proven strategies for developing strong and sustainable collaboration.
- Identify existing systemic impediments to a more integrated response to domestic violence and homelessness, and begin to craft solutions to that can be recommended to policy makers.
- Jointly develop strategies to ensure this kind of collaboration over time.

Expanding the Effort

As noted, the Springfield project was explicitly begun with the intention of replicating its achievements in other parts of the Commonwealth. The project has already developed a standardized methodology that domestic violence specialists will use in referring families for immediate shelter and indepth assessment. A standardized indepth assessment methodology is now being developed. Discussions are underway regarding the possibility of initiating a project in Framingham, where conditions make such an undertaking likely to succeed, and where differences between Framingham and Springfield can provide policy makers and community leaders with important insight into how to more fully integrate services for those who are struggling with both domestic violence and homelessness. By expanding the effort to Framingham at this time, project partners hope to speed the learning process and increase the Commonwealth's capacity to provide a more integrated response to domestic violence and homelessness.