



Resource Sharing Project

Rural Training & Technical Assistance

Creating Spaces of Healing: Exploring Housing Advocacy

Home is supposed to mean safety, security, and comfort. But for many of the survivors we work with, home can be a triggering space fraught with memories of violence and trauma. Our movement has prioritized housing advocacy for domestic violence survivors as a solution to escape violence at home. However, we are coming to understand the ways housing advocacy may help survivors of sexual assault as well. Housing advocacy can be a powerful tool for sexual assault survivors to create spaces of healing and comfort.

A sexual assault survivor may need to find new housing because the perpetrator is the landlord or a live-in family member, intimate partner, or roommate. “The majority of sexual assaults take place in or near victims’ homes or the homes of victims’ friends, relatives, or neighbors” (Mindlin and Vickers, 2007). Even when the perpetrator is gone, the space where the assault happened- the table, the bed, the living room- still remain. These objects and spaces can be painful everyday reminders of the violence they endured. When experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder some spaces, like parking lots, hallways, and shared community spaces like laundry rooms, can trigger anxiety and fear. Housing advocacy can help survivors reclaim their space or find a new home altogether.

Inclusive shelter services may be overlooked as important support for survivors of sexual violence. One rural study showed that sexual assault survivors struggled to benefit from the full breadth of services until safe housing was secured (Logan, 2005). Securing safe housing could mean a short stay in shelter while they paint their home, pick up a new mattress, or wait for new locks to be installed. When immediate safety isn’t a risk, sexual assault survivors may only need an adjustment to their current housing to make home feel like a safe space. When we are creative, the possibilities are endless.

A key component to rural housing advocacy is strong and innovative community partners. To help survivors build trauma informed spaces in their own homes takes resources, time, and commitment. Building strong networks of committed community members, businesses, and non-profits will help your agency build the housing services of your dreams.

The Advocate's Role

The advocate's role in housing advocacy is one of creativity, collaboration, and community building. Our role is to work together with the survivor to discuss and discover the path forward. The advocacy we provide starts with deep conversations with the survivor to explore the challenges of the current housing situation, the realities of their life, and hopes for the future.

As you and the survivor discuss and consider the steps they would like to take, be aware that this is the most important service you can provide. For example, providing information about what they can legally ask for from a landlord is an important step to inform the decisions they make. Holding space for the survivor to explore their feelings and sharing relevant options is invaluable support. In our rush to fix discomfort, it is easy to forget the importance of this work. It may be helpful to pause and reflect on the work you've done together so far before moving into action.

In addition to providing information and space to deliberate, our role as advocates is to offer options moving forward. Some options include:



- Assisting the survivor in fleshing out what changes they need from their current housing and helping them decide how they want to ask for those changes.
- Conducting mock conversations with the survivor so they can practice asking for the changes they need or responding to an anticipated conversation with a landlord or bank.
- Offering the 24-hour crisis and support line for the survivor to access after a hard conversation with a landlord, or a triggering experience at home.
- Advocating to the landlord on behalf of the survivor (with their expressed consent and a waiver of confidentiality) by providing education about sexual violence and the short and long term symptoms of trauma.
- Providing referrals to community supports that can assist the survivor in maintaining housing, such as an organization that can assist in paying utilities.

Adjustments to Current Housing

For many sexual assault survivors, a change to their home can help them successfully maintain stable housing. Some changes are simple enough that the survivor will be able to implement themselves. Other changes will require some coordination with the landlord. In some circumstances the survivor may decide to inform the landlord of the assault, but it is possible to ask for adjustments without disclosing their sexual abuse history. Explore with the survivor if this is necessary and help brainstorm ways to have the conversation while leaving out the assault. The adjustments will be influenced by the trauma experienced and the specific triggers of the survivor. Below are some of the adjustments sexual assault survivors may benefit from:

- Move to another part of an apartment building (or building owned by the landlord) so as to not be on the ground floor or to move away from current neighbors
- Add cameras to the parking lot or indoor spaces

- Negotiate a new rent price or method of payment. For example if a survivor does not use the shared laundry space negotiate for a lesser monthly rent.
- Contact the landlord about routine maintenance that needs to be done such as fixing the lock on the front of the building or putting up a sign that says “please don’t prop open front door”.
- Add more lighting to parking spaces and building areas
- Ask for a closer parking space to the building
- Research, purchase, and/or negotiate with the landlord to change locks
- Add a viewing hole to the front door
- Rearrange bedrooms or living spaces to make them feel less triggering. A room can feel dramatically different by moving furniture around, adding a coat of paint, or redecorating the space.
- Purchase or have donated new furniture, like beds, couches, and tables
- Get a support animal. Be sure to research if survivors have legal rights to do this based on your state law.
- Have a support person come and stay for an extended period of time. Depending on the lease this may need a negotiation with the landlord.



Community Partnerships

As rural agencies, we don't always have the time, skills, or funding to be creative with our housing advocacy. This is where our community partnerships come in. Below are some ways you can pull your community in to the housing advocacy you are providing:

- Utilize volunteers who can help paint, install locks, or help move furniture
- Build relationships with businesses that can donate supplies, like hardware stores
- Tap in to your relationships with faith communities. Often these communities are the first ones interested in donating supplies, household items, and time
- Connect with other nonprofits who are able to collect furniture and household items, like Goodwill

Search for Housing

For some survivors making adjustments to their current housing won't be helpful or aren't possible. Other survivors find our services only after they have already lost their housing. In these cases our advocacy can be focused on helping the survivor find new housing. Below are some ways to help sexual assault survivors search and obtain new housing.

- Proactively build relationships with and educate landlords in your rural community about sexual violence
- Assist survivors in fleshing out what they need to feel physically and emotionally safe in a new space
- Advocate on behalf of the survivor to landlords about past rental history or work history or when leaving a lease early
- Help survivors find movers, moving vehicles, and brainstorming support systems who can help with the move
- Consider applying for funding to provide transitional housing through your agency



References

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- Logan, TK, Evans, L., Stevenson, E., & Jordan C. E. (2005). Barriers to services for rural and urban survivors of rape. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 20, 591-616. doi:10.1177/0886260504272899

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