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## Meeting Sexual Violence Survivors' Housing & Support Services Needs in Your Transitional Housing Transitional Housing Toolkit – Sexual Violence Survivors' Transitional Housing Access Initiative

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**Document Purpose:** This document outlines sexual violence survivors' unique housing and support services needs. It provides specific information and resources for how transitional housing programs can increase access for sexual violence survivors and enhance support services to meet sexual violence survivors' advocacy needs.

**Audience:** Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) Transitional Housing grantees.

**Examples of How to Use This Document:** This document can be used to train new and existing staff and community partners on the housing and service needs of sexual violence survivors. You can also use the section in this document on "Meeting Sexual Violence Survivors' Housing Needs" to review your program's internal policies and practices to see if they need to be updated in order to expand access to transitional housing and enhance support services for sexual violence survivors.

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## 1. Underlying Issue: Sexual Violence Survivors Need Housing

**Sexual violence is any type of unwanted sexual contact.** This can include words and actions of a sexual nature against a person's will and without their consent.<sup>1</sup> For more information on the importance of broadly defining sexual violence, read [It Matters! How Defining Sexual Violence Defines Advocacy Programs](#).

**Housing is a basic human right.** There is insufficient safe, decent, affordable housing.

**Sexual violence survivors have a right to safe, decent, affordable housing, and economic justice.** However, they may face barriers to housing access because their situations and needs are not understood as falling within housing programs' allowability.

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<sup>1</sup> National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC)

## 2. Intersecting Needs & Impacts: The Relationships Between Sexual Violence, Oppression, Trauma, Housing Instability & Homelessness

**Oppressions heighten sexual violence risk and compound housing barriers.** Sexual violence and lack of housing intersect with many oppressions, such as racism, classism, ableism, sexism, heterosexism, and ageism. “Oppression can both heighten risk and compound the barriers that sexual violence victims and survivors encounter in housing arenas.”<sup>2</sup> Those who perpetrate sexual violence may target people who are already systemically denied resources due to oppression. This leaves survivors with even fewer options for housing and healing within cycles of violence, trauma, and poverty. [For more information on the intersections of oppression, sexual violence, and housing instability, please see “Opening the Door: An Advocate’s Guide to Housing and Sexual Violence.”](#)

**Sexual violence can happen anytime, anywhere, and anyone can perpetrate it. Wherever or whenever sexual violence has occurred and whomever has perpetrated it, the trauma of sexual violence can last a lifetime and impact housing throughout the lifespan.**

- **Any time:** Whenever the sexual violence occurred, whether it is an assault 30 minutes ago or child sexual abuse 30 years ago, trauma can immediately impact housing stability, and/or lead to housing instability and homelessness years later.
- **Anywhere:** Sexual violence can occur anywhere – in a survivor’s housing or in any other physical and virtual space (online, school, work, streets, medical facilities, etc.). Wherever sexual violence occurs, it can lead to housing instability or homelessness. For example, a survivor can face housing instability or homelessness because of workplace sexual violence that has impacted their economic stability. Another example is a survivor fleeing sexual violence that has occurred in their

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<sup>2</sup> NSVRC, 2010

home. A survivor may be in need of housing assistance no matter where the sexual violence has occurred. Furthermore, people who are already unstably housed or experiencing homelessness before sexual violence occurs are also at risk of sexual violence.

- **Anyone:** Anyone can perpetrate sexual violence. While we know that intimate partner violence survivors are also sexual violence survivors, many sexual violence survivors experience sexual harm by those other than intimate partners like bosses, teachers, coaches, faith leaders, people in positions of authority, and family members. No matter who has perpetrated the sexual violence, the immediate and potentially lifelong trauma of that violence can impact housing stability and contribute to homelessness.

**Sexual violence and its housing impacts are a crisis for survivors. This deserves prioritization no matter how long ago the sexual violence occurred, no matter who perpetrated it, and no matter where the violence occurred.** Sexual violence survivors' housing and safety issues and crises may look different than intimate partner violence victims', but those crises and safety risks are real and important to address for any sexual violence survivor seeking housing assistance and support services. For example, an adult survivor of child sexual abuse may be experiencing the crisis of job or income instability because they cannot work due to mental or physical impacts of sexual abuse from their childhood. The traumatic effects of past sexual abuse can be a crisis for adult survivors of child sexual abuse that makes them feel as unsafe today as if the abuse had just happened. That experience of crisis, safety, and housing instability is just as urgent as that of a survivor seeking transitional housing because of a recent incident of domestic violence or sexual assault.

**Sexual violence can impact housing stability AND housing stability can impact experiences of sexual violence.** Sexual violence survivors can experience homelessness and housing instability as a result of violence and trauma. Likewise, people experiencing housing instability and homelessness may experience sexual violence related to unstable housing. Experiencing homelessness or being marginally housed can put individuals at risk of sexual violence. No matter how a survivor

presents when seeking housing and advocacy – as a victim of sexual violence in need of advocacy, as a person in need of transitional housing assistance, or as someone experiencing homelessness in need of housing – sexual violence may be the dynamic that is causing their need for housing. In other words, sexual violence can create conditions for housing instability and housing instability can create conditions where sexual violence occurs.

**Housing and voluntary services can create space for healing as defined by survivors.**

Sexual violence, in any form, can be disempowering to the survivor. It is essential that services designed to support healing for survivors are trauma-informed and rooted in the restoration of choice and empowerment. An empowering model recognizes that survivors of sexual violence may need housing in order to heal. Survivors have immense capacity for resilience if they have space for healing. While housing may not be the only resource that they need for healing – having safe, decent, affordable, stable housing can allow survivors to focus on other aspects of healing as defined by the survivor. At the very least, having housing removes the stress of dealing with homelessness or possible homelessness while coping with the other impacts of sexual violence and trauma. An empowering, trauma-informed model does not assume that as soon as a survivor has housing, they will want to access specific services (for example, support group, counseling, therapy, or other mental or physical health services, job training, etc.) or engage in other new activities. Survivors may never want to participate in services while in transitional housing. They may be healing in ways other than those supported by your services. Voluntary services are best practice, where survivors define healing and engagement in whatever way meets their individual needs. For some survivors healing may mean focusing on eating, sleeping, breathing, and being safe and alive.

### 3. Meeting Sexual Violence Survivors' Housing Needs:

#### Creating Accessible Housing & Support Services

**Transitional housing and advocacy support services should create and sustain policies, practices, and resources that align with the following best practices:**

#### **1. SEXUAL VIOLENCE SURVIVORS' ELIGIBILITY FOR HOUSING & SERVICES:**

Transitional housing and advocacy services are informed by, responsive to, and accessible for sexual violence survivors who are in need of transitional housing or experiencing homelessness as a result of a situation of sexual violence. Housing and advocacy services are accessible regardless of *when* or *where* the sexual violence occurred or *who* perpetrated it. [Sexual Assault Survivors' Access to Services under the Office on Violence Against Women Transitional Housing Grant Program](#)

#### **2. INITIAL ASSESSMENTS FOR UNDERSTANDING OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE & CAPACITY TO RESPOND TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE SURVIVORS' UNIQUE NEEDS:**

Transitional housing and victim advocacy agencies and partners assess:

- Sexual violence survivors' unique housing needs by engaging survivors and community members in conversations about those needs and how best to respond to them. [Listening to Our Communities: Assessment Toolkit](#) provides more information on this process; and
- Their own organization's ability to meet the unique housing needs of sexual violence survivors and to engage in internal and external organizational change and education to increase sexual violence survivors' access to housing. Organizational change is often required to meaningfully meet the needs of sexual violence survivors. If your agency identifies primarily as a multiservice program, a housing program, or domestic violence victim advocacy program, before you begin in-depth sexual violence assessment work, please contact your state, territorial, or tribal Sexual Assault Coalition or dual Sexual and Domestic Violence Coalition (<https://www.justice.gov/ovw/local-resources>)

for assistance in addressing your role in serving sexual violence survivors in transitional housing, in collaboration with already existing sexual violence victim advocacy programs and rape crisis centers. You can also reach out directly to local rape crisis centers and sexual assault victim advocacy programs to find out about partnering with them on housing and services. If you are not sure whether a sexual violence specific advocacy programs exist in your area, contact the coalitions above. In addition, the following resources provide more information on assessing for your capacity to provide sexual violence specific services:

- [Picturing Your Program: Planning for Organizational Growth](#)
- [Sexual Violence Services Personal Assessment Tool](#) and [Sexual Violence Services Organizational Assessment Tools](#)
- [Opening Our Doors: Building Strong Sexual Assault Services in Dual/Multiservice Advocacy Agencies](#)
- [Strengthening Our Practice: The Ten Essential Strengths of Sexual Violence Victim Advocates in Dual/Multi-Service Advocacy Agencies](#)
- [Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative documents](#)

**3. VOLUNTARY, CONFIDENTIAL, & SURVIVOR-LED SERVICES:** Survivors are the center and in the lead of their lives, housing, and support services which are voluntary, confidential, and free. Advocates support survivors' self-identified needs and honor survivors' resiliency and right to exercise control over their lives. What makes advocacy unique is the commitment to see survivors as intact human beings who have experienced a devastating, traumatic, or harmful event, but who have not lost their ability to find their way through the aftermath of trauma. More information about survivor-led, confidential, voluntary support services can be found in the following resources:

- [Listening to Survivors – Essential Steps for the Intake Process](#)
- [Throw Away the Menu: Broadening Advocacy](#)
- [Building Comprehensive Services for Survivors of Sexual Violence](#)

- 4. ACTIVELY ANTI-OPPRESSIVE, CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE, & CULTURALLY SPECIFIC SERVICES:** Housing access and support services should be grounded in anti-oppressive policies and practices that actively center the needs of survivors from un- and underserved communities. Programs should design accessible services for communities who are marginalized instead of considering them as an afterthought. Best practice is the availability of culturally specific services designed and implemented by the community itself. Transitional housing grantees who are not culturally or linguistically specific programs should ensure policies and practices are culturally appropriate and should partner and share grant resources with culturally specific programs when they are locally available. For more information on culturally appropriate and culturally specific services see [Culturally Relevant Services for Tribal Communities and Communities of Color](#) and the [Oregon Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence’s Culturally Specific Services](#).
  
- 5. ACTIVE LISTENING:** Active listening is a core, voluntary service. [The Benefits of Active Listening](#) and [Listen Up! Active Listening is Advocacy](#) provide more information on this core support service for all survivors of sexual violence.
  
- 6. INDIVIDUAL & SYSTEMS ADVOCACY:** Advocates engage survivors and multidisciplinary systems by providing information about survivors’ rights within systems so that survivors may make informed decisions. Advocates also collaborate with systems and challenge them to comply with survivors’ rights and expand survivors’ access to system resources. Multidisciplinary systems can include but are not limited to: housing systems, landlords, property management, governments, homelessness service providers, financial and credit systems, employers and labor unions, law enforcement, courts, community-based organizations, attorneys, child and adult protection services, educational systems, healthcare systems, and many more.
  
- 7. HOUSING FIRST:** Housing First is the housing placement and support services approach. If housing is the highest priority for a sexual violence survivor, gaining



and maintaining housing is the first priority without additional requirements like completing certain programming, getting sober, or participating in particular services. When possible, housing assistance is flexible and creates accessibility to housing across the housing continuum that best meets the survivor's need (be it emergency shelter, transitional housing, rapid re-housing, supportive housing, or other permanent housing).

- 8. ECONOMIC JUSTICE ADVOCACY:** Economic justice advocacy is a core support service because stable access to basic economic needs is essential to gaining and maintaining housing. For instance, a survivor without immigration status and work authorization may need assistance obtaining stable immigration status in order to gain or maintain housing. The same can be true for providing support services to survivors in order to access transportation, food, education, childcare, living wage jobs, healthcare, unpolluted environmental and natural resources, and many other basic economic needs.
- 9. HOLISTIC HEALING IN SERVICES AND ORGANIZATION:** Holistic healing is integrated into policies and practices, and it is a part of available voluntary services. Housing stability, healing, and safety throughout the lifespan require holistic responses to all the areas of a person's life impacted by sexual violence and housing instability: spiritual, mental and physical health, economic, etc. *“Sexual violence affects all aspects of a person's being: mind, body and spirit, and requires a holistic response to attend to all parts of a survivor's self. Opportunities that address the emotional, spiritual, sexual, and physical healing of survivors support holistic growth and resilience. These methods of healing are likely to vary based on community and cultural norms and should be considered within the context of appropriateness for each community and with avoidance of cultural appropriation”.*<sup>3</sup> For more on
- The impact of cultural appropriation on sexual assault services, please see [How Does Cultural Appropriation Affect Rural Sexual Assault Services](#)
  - Exploring holistic healing, please review [Holistic Healing Services for Survivors](#)

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<sup>3</sup> [Comprehensive Services for Survivors of Sexual Violence](#), from the Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative, 2019.

- Enhancing comprehensive sexual violence services, please read [Building Comprehensive Sexual Assault Services Programs](#).

**10.TRAUMA-INFORMED SERVICES AND ORGANIZATIONS:** Trauma-informed policies and practices are integrated at every level of the agency. Trauma-informed responses normalize human responses to trauma; recognize “symptoms” as survival strategies; view confidentiality, trust and relationships as a key component of safety and healing; and validate the experiences and choices of survivors. These trauma-informed responses also create space and allocate resources to sustain staff and volunteers through their vicarious trauma as a result of direct exposure to traumatic experiences of victims. Review the resource [Building Cultures of Care: A Guide for Sexual Assault Services Programs](#) and [Self Care and Trauma Work](#) for more information on individual and organizational approaches to trauma-informed advocacy. Importantly, intentional trauma-informed supervisory or mentoring practices (for example: reflective supervision, supportive mentoring) should be adopted to provide support for staff at trauma-informed agencies. It is essential that supervision and mentoring is consistent and supports staff to explore their beliefs, values, and behaviors in the workplace. Structured, consistent supervision and mentoring ensures staff are providing services in a survivor-centered manner. Staff’s access to consistent, predictable time to reflect on the challenges of this work decreases staff burn-out and contributes to longevity and overall agency stability. The resource [Change Starts Within: Strengthening Services](#) reviews supervision as key to trauma-informed advocacy services.

**11.CONTINUAL ASSESSMENT OF WHETHER HOUSING AND SUPPORT SERVICES MEET SEXUAL VIOLENCE SURVIVORS’ NEEDS:** Ongoing assessments of programs and services are a fundamental, continual practice that regularly informs whether housing and services are actually meeting sexual violence survivors’ needs. Organizational change and education are key tools to implement new policies and practices as informed by ongoing assessment of services.

Sexual violence survivors deserve access to housing and services that meet their needs. If you are interested in more information on housing and services for survivors of sexual violence, please feel free to contact Rebekah Moses [rebekah@iowacasa.org](mailto:rebekah@iowacasa.org) and visit [www.resourcesharingproject.org](http://www.resourcesharingproject.org).