



Developing a Flexible Funding Model for Survivors of Domestic Violence
A Concept Paper
December 2016

The Harris County Domestic Violence Coordinating Council convened a meeting of community stakeholders to begin to look at opportunities to expand the menu of services offered for families impacted by domestic violence, and to increase victims' access to services and safety. This was a collective opportunity to begin to think about innovative ways beyond how services are currently being offered. It was also an opportunity to hear from survivors about the needs and challenges being faced in the pursuit of safety. Harris County domestic violence shelters have to turn away thousands each year due to lack of available bed space. The work of the community stakeholders led to the idea of developing a flexible funding project that could prevent families who experience domestic violence from entering homelessness, and also reduce the amount of time families need emergency shelter services. This in turn could prioritize emergency shelter bed space for families in need.

The proposed flexible funding project seeks to offer a low barrier, quick response approach to helping families with financial assistance that can prevent them from entering the homeless system. Similar approaches have been adopted in other communities and a project committee has gathered this information in the development of an approach that can be adapted for Harris County.

Overview: Flexible funds are designed to be assistance that offers an opportunity for prevention of a family entering homelessness or for a family to exit homelessness as quickly as possible. This can be assistance that helps with move-in costs, or utility bills. It can also help with eviction prevention, back rent, car repair, day care, and tuition. There's no end to the possibilities as long as the need is connected to housing stability.

Background

In Harris County each year there are over 35,000 calls to law enforcement for domestic violence related incidents and over 70,000 calls to the area domestic violence hotlines for assistance. There are less than 350 emergency shelter beds for families who are fleeing domestic violence. Finding and increasing solutions to safety is imperative for families fleeing domestic violence.

- The typical homeless family is headed by a single mother, usually in her late twenties. She has with her two or three young children, typically preschoolers.
- Homelessness affects people of all geographic areas, ages, occupations, and ethnicities but occurs disproportionately among people of color.
- More than 90 percent of sheltered and low-income mothers have experienced physical and sexual assault over their lifespan (Bassuk, E. 2005).

Entering an emergency shelter is a safe and necessary solution for many women fleeing domestic violence and in Harris County, the average length of stay in domestic violence shelters ranges from 50-60 days. However, shelter is not the only avenue for families to increase safety. Most survivors turn to shelter programs only as a last resort (Grossman & Lundy, 2011). Few women look forward to entering a new environment that is often crowded with strangers, involves living collectively with many other individuals in crisis, offers little to no privacy, and includes numerous restrictions that come with such a living condition. If they can stay with friends or relatives, secure their own homes so that they feel safe living there, or afford to move either temporarily or permanently, these choices are generally deemed more



desirable and less traumatic for survivors and their children. Unfortunately, many women lack the social and economic resources to choose any of these options, and for them a shelter is their best alternative (Panchanadeswaran & McCloskey, 2007).

There is a growing menu of options that is being offered that includes rapid re-housing, permanent supportive housing, and mobile advocacy. The trauma of domestic violence requires communities to develop programs that are trauma informed and centralize safety: physical, emotional, and financial safety. When families experience domestic violence and become homeless, the trauma can intensify. Homelessness itself is associated with a host of negative outcomes that can be minimized by limiting the period of time people experience it. By helping homeless households return to permanent housing as soon as possible, communities have been able to reduce the length of time people remain in homeless shelters. This opens beds for others who need them, and reduces the public and personal costs of homelessness (National Alliance to End Homelessness).

Concept: Create a collaborative fund for participating domestic violence service providers that will provide financial assistance that exists to assist survivors with avoiding entry into homelessness, and include a program evaluation component to examine the effectiveness and impact of the program.

- Some survivors can avoid homelessness if they have access to immediate funds, coupled with housing advocacy and support
- International aid studies have shown that direct funds to those in need have immediate and long term positive impacts (Sullivan, C., 2015).

Guiding Principles in Flexible Funding Decisions:

- Process is intentional, targeted and focused on preventing entrance into homelessness (based on evidence, not just accessing emergency funding within an organization)
- This funding proposes to increase housing stability for those assisted (with research showing survivors remaining housing at 1-year post award)
- Process is survivor-centered, easily accessible, low barrier, and respectful
- Process is quick to respond to urgent situations

Proposed Project Design:

The flexible funding project will:

Create a centralized process for participating agencies to participate for example:

- Each participating agency will receive an award of \$20,000 for disbursement
- Each participating agency will enter into an MOU with HCDVCC to follow the program guidelines for project implementation
- Each agency will participate in evaluation as a requirement for the project
- Project will target eligible applicants with a focus on low barrier and quick release of funds
- Funds are used to meet the direct needs of survivors and to be as creative as necessary to prevent a family from entering the homeless system, and/or reducing the amount of time spent in the homeless system.

Intended Outcomes:



- *Increased access to services:* including, but not limited to payment for interpreter services, payment for parking expenses, payment for mental health services, medical services, and payment to cover transportation expenses such as automobile repair.
- *Meeting basic needs:* purchase or provision of items or resources that if not available might result in impaired ability to remain healthy. These items or resources include but are not limited to: groceries, hygiene products such as diapers, prescription and nonprescription medicines, and uniforms for school and work.
- *Increased economic stability:* financial assistance to pay for items such as, but not limited to, tuition and books, transportation to and from work or school, childcare fees, fees associated with obtaining legal immigration status.
- *Increased housing stability:* assistance to pay for items such as, but not limited to: moving expenses, first and last months' rent deposit, security deposits, necessary furniture or appliances.
- *Increased safety:* services that may enhance safety, such as locksmith services to change or install locks, filing fees for family law cases or other legal assistance.

Effort in Other Cities

Flexible Funding as a Promising Strategy to Prevent Homelessness for Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence (C. Sullivan, 2016)

Abstract

The complex interrelationship between intimate partner violence (IPV) victimization and housing instability has been well established. Being the victim of IPV is a leading cause of homelessness for women, and once someone is homeless, their lives often spiral downward quickly. While some IPV survivors require extensive and possibly long-term assistance to achieve safe and stable housing (especially if they are contending with multiple complex issues), others could avoid homelessness if provided with immediate, individualized, and flexible assistance. For these survivors, whose housing has been otherwise stable but who face homelessness because of a crisis related to IPV, a brief intervention that includes flexible funding can restore a family's equilibrium and prevent the devastating repercussions associated with homelessness. A longitudinal evaluation of a flexible funding program in Washington, D.C., found that this brief, relatively inexpensive intervention may increase housing stability—94% of clients were housed 6 months after funding was received. Implications for both research and practice are discussed.

Next Steps: Share this concept paper with community stakeholders including domestic violence service providers, funders and other supporters. Integrate comments and then create an operational program model.