

# **NEWS:**

## **AN EXEMPLAR OF THE DV HOUSING FIRST MODEL**

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## BACKGROUND

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In 2017, the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES) funded 33 non-profit agencies to implement the Domestic Violence Housing First (DVHF) model. The DVHF model focuses on helping survivors get into safe and stable housing as quickly as possible and providing ongoing supportive services to help them move forward with their lives.

As part of a statewide evaluation of the DVHF model, NEWS is being highlighted as an exemplar of their outstanding work in the three pillars of the model. NEWS, located in Napa Valley, California, is dedicated to providing safety, hope, healing, and empowerment for survivors of domestic and sexual abuse. NEWS is equally committed to promoting safe communities and social change through prevention, intervention, education, and advocacy.

## EVALUATION PROCESS

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The NEWS leadership and staff graciously agreed to provide the evaluation team with more in-depth information of how the DVHF model works in their agency in order to help us offer guidelines to other organizations. The evaluation team initially visited NEWS to better understand the organization's implementation of the model. After developing an initial understanding of the practices that support the success of the DVHF model through informal meetings with leadership and staff, we met with a local landlord and a property manager who have close partnerships with NEWS.

On a follow up visit, we gathered more in-depth information about the organizational structures that support the model and obtained survivor testimonials. We interviewed the NEWS' Housing Team (two advocates and one supervisor), Program Director, and Executive Director. Further, we interviewed five survivors, three of whom were Spanish speaking. Interviews were conducted in either English or Spanish, depending on survivor preference.

What became evident, after reviewing all of this information, is that NEWS' leadership not only provides the resources and flexibility to allow for the model to work well, but they also promote the pillars of the model throughout all of their programs.

## EXEMPLARY IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DVHF MODEL

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*Pillars of the Domestic Violence Housing First Model*

### *Survivor-driven, Trauma-informed, Mobile Advocacy*

A central component of the DVHF model is a focus on addressing the needs identified by survivors rather than on pre-determined needs promoted by agencies. Advocates are mobile, working with survivors in the community, rather than solely working in their offices. Another critical component is that advocacy continues as long as survivors need support. Advocates work with survivors on a myriad of issues (e.g., employment, legal support, immigration, health, children's needs) while also working with them to obtain housing stability.

Mobile advocacy is a particularly important aspect of the DVHF approach. Advocates work out in the community, meeting survivors in the locations of their choice. This can be at the park, in a coffee shop, or at the survivor's home. When meeting in the community and having informal conversations, advocates are better able to understand survivors' contexts and even notice some needs that survivors might not have mentioned yet. Mobile advocacy also includes accompanying survivors as they obtain community resources, whether that means searching together in the community for housing, employment, or going together to appointments. These flexible meetings allow advocates to demonstrate to survivors that they intend to walk their journey with them and build a trusting relationship.

## EXAMPLE OF ADVOCACY IN ACTION

A NEWS advocate began working with Maria (not her real name), a Spanish-speaking immigrant who was a mother of two and also pregnant. Because of language barriers and experiencing a high-risk pregnancy, Maria needed a great deal of support, and her advocate went with her to apply for housing in the community. The advocate also helped finding her a bed, lamps, clothes, counseling services, help with her child's school, and transportation. After they found her a home, NEWS helped with rent until Maria was able to support her family on her own. Throughout their time together the advocate was proactive and emotionally supportive, leading Maria to note:

*"No tengo familia aquí pero no me siento sola. Me siento apoyada."  
(I don't have any family here, but I don't feel alone. I feel supported.)*



### *How NEWS supports this pillar*

NEWS' organizational climate is structured to support this pillar in clear and important ways. The leadership offers **ongoing training** to all staff, and **weekly supervision meetings**. In these weekly meetings, they provide consistent supervision and support, offering suggestions without micromanaging direct service staff.

A common occurrence related by multiple advocates across the nation is the experience of feeling frustrated when survivors make decisions that advocates might consider unsafe or unwise. The leadership at NEWS recognizes that this is an all-too-common experience and so they encourage staff to openly discuss these concerns in safe and supportive supervision meetings where they reinforce the importance of survivor-driven advocacy. Through this flexible approach, the leadership conveys an important message of trust, support, and flexibility to their staff.

As a result, direct service providers and supervisors alike are unbounded in their thinking about the supportive services they offer their clients. They do not think only in terms of housing and safety; they also consider survivors' **overall wellbeing and wholeness**. Further, they recognize how difficult it can be to go through all of these processes alone. Advocates maintain **flexible work schedules**, working evenings and weekends when necessary. The leadership fully supports advocates' flexible schedules and trusts that they are doing what needs to be done to provide effective advocacy.

**A NEWS advocate shared this example:** “Client comes here, and we’re already driving to [neighboring city]. I said, ‘Do you have everything that they asked you for?’ She said, ‘Well, they said I needed the \$100 and then the \$30 for the credit fee, and it had to be in a money order.’ I said, ‘Did you bring it?’ She’s like, ‘No, I don’t have any money.’ She’s like, ‘I barely have any gas.’ I was just like, ‘Oh, my gosh, this is something I needed to know before we left the office.’ We came back to the office. I ran over to Nicole and said, ‘Hey, Nicole, this is what happened.’ I said, ‘Do you have petty cash, or can I pay for this money order and then get reimbursed because it’s an emergency. We’re already late for her appointment.’ She’s like, ‘Yeah, I have petty cash.’ She gave me \$40 and then I dropped off the client for her appointment, ran over to Walmart, got a money order, ran back, and here’s the money order.”

**A survivor shared:** “[Advocate’s name] is like, ‘Let me know the next time you go into court? I’m going to go with you and give you emotional support.’ I honestly, I’m tearing up. They’re so good. They’re . . . I have an incredible amount of family and friend support. Even with that, I don’t know how anybody could get through this kind of situation without this kind of help. They’ve helped with everything. They’re just so kind the whole time that they do it. [Advocate]’s been helping me with my housing a lot lately. Like I said, they were like, ‘Okay, you have kind of affordable housing right now. You just need help paying for it, so you can stay there.’ We kind of identified a plan for me workwise to get on my feet financially over a course of six months or a year.”

Advocates at NEWS walk **side by side** with survivors, often assisting them with navigating systems. They give rides to appointments and walk them through court procedures, how to get a driver’s license or car registration, how to open a bank account, or how to get their children registered in school. One survivor explained she did not know what to do when she moved into her new apartment because she had never lived on her own before. She described how important it was that her advocate helped her navigate the process:

*“We went around to each thing. I had no idea, like, ‘Oh, what is it that you do when you move in to a place?’ She came with me to the signing. We went to the PG&E and gas. It turns out that the apartment pays water and garbage. All I have to pay is electricity. She came with me. It made it easier.”*

*-NEWS survivor*

NEWS advocates described the collaborative nature of their work, expressing the importance of feeling supported by their supervisor and the organization’s leadership. They also have the freedom and authority to make decisions when they are out in the community without being micromanaged. For instance, if an advocate is out all day

with a family, they might stop to get something to eat for lunch and pay for the family. NEWS trusts that advocates are making thoughtful decisions to provide the services families need, and **reimburses them for their mileage and expenses.**

The Housing Team at NEWS is in **close and regular contact**, sharing one office among the three team members. Although sharing an office might have a downside (e.g., not enough private space to meet with clients), advocates expressed their satisfaction with having opportunities to brainstorm and bounce ideas off each other. Further, advocates can discuss their caseloads and consult with their supervisor when needed. Advocates also mentioned that sharing an office led to them getting to know each other better on a personal level, which has led to greater feelings of support.

Advocates implementing the DVHF model at NEWS have relatively **small caseloads**. The Housing Team supervisor, who provided direct services for many years, understands that having a high caseload does not allow enough time for an advocate to provide the services that a family might need. Therefore, she monitors each advocate's caseload, not allowing it to exceed 10 families (with some flexibility depending on the complexity of services provided). This decision is not made lightly and is emotionally difficult for the team, as this means they often have a waitlist. However, they believe it is critical to provide clients with the level of services they actually need in order to see **long-term improvements** in their lives.

## AN ADVOCATE'S STORY

*"I have my client that came in the other day. I've been trying to tell her that, you know, make her see that the custody agreement that she agreed on in mediation is not working, and the guy is still taking advantage of her. She needs to fix the mediation agreement to something better. She's just, 'I'm just worried, I'm scared.' She doesn't have status, he does. He always threatened to take the kids away. When we meet, you know, 'How are you doing? How are the kids doing?' 'Well, they're not doing good. They're not happy with Dad.' 'What are you going to do about it?' 'Yeah, I know, but . . . ' those types of things. Just working through it, until she's ready. A couple of weeks ago when we met, she's like, 'Well, where do I have to file?' because her original case is in Napa, but she lives in [nearby city] now. I said, 'Okay, let me find out for you.' I went down to the court and I said, 'This is the situation. Where does she need to file?' They're like, 'Okay, well, the case is out of Napa. It stays in Napa until she asks for it to be relocated.' I said, 'Okay, if we want to change it, what do I need?' They gave me a template, and 'Just fill it out with the declaration, then return. We can get the process started of another court case.' So, brought that information to her. I said, 'All I need from you to start off, if you're serious about it, is write me a declaration in Spanish, what's been going on since this agreement came to light. What are all the issues that have been going on and why do you want to change your agreement? Once you have that in writing, then we'll make another appointment. I'll translate it to English. We'll fill out this document, but then you're going to have to take a morning off from work so that we can go down to the courthouse and file this paperwork.' She's just like, 'Okay.'"*



## *Flexible Financial Assistance*

Another pillar of the DVHF model involves providing flexible financial assistance to survivors. As each survivor is unique in their needs, supports, experiences, and concerns, having funds designated to meeting diverse needs is critically important. Survivors may need assistance with issues directly related to housing such as security deposits, rental assistance, and help clearing rental or utility arrears. They may also need financial assistance with issues that are seemingly not as directly related to housing but that can have a profound impact on housing stability, for example: help repairing their cars so that they do not lose their job, childcare costs, work uniforms and permits, or help repairing bad credit (often destroyed by abuser).

NEWS' homelessness prevention efforts are critical to helping survivors obtain housing stability. These efforts focus on helping survivors remain in their homes whenever possible. Napa, like many other communities in California, is characterized by low rental supply, with extremely high prices. The leadership team and advocates at NEWS are therefore very creative in their use of flexible funds to help survivors stay in their own homes, if that is what survivors prefer, which can prevent them from becoming homeless.



## *How NEWS supports this pillar*

NEWS dedicated approximately \$425,000 in flexible funding to the DVHF program over 21 months. NEWS organized their budget into four main categories of financial assistance:

1. **Prevention/low-touch:** clients needing financial support for 0 – 3 months
2. **Short-term:** clients needing financial support for 4 – 6 months
3. **Mid-term:** clients needing financial support for 7 – 12 months
4. **Long-term:** clients needing financial support from more than 12 months

It is important to note that NEWS uses these categories as a general guide and organizational tool, making changes to the amounts allocated to each category as needed. This flexibility allows them to monitor their use of funding while also ensuring that they provide the financial assistance their clients need.

The Housing Team at NEWS also makes concerted efforts to **braid multiple funding sources** in order to provide survivors with the financial support they need. They use the “less flexible” funds first (e.g., governmental funding that may only pay for rent) and collaborate with community partners to help cover or reduce costs in order to save the

DVHF flexible funding for the remaining costs. Advocates have used the DVHF flexible financial assistance to help survivors with a wide range of issues that can help them stay in their own home and avoid further housing instability and/or homelessness, such as: temporary rental and utility assistance, debt assistance, and help changing locks in the home. In the last year, NEWS has helped 49 families stay in their own homes and 44 families obtain new safe and stable housing.

### EXAMPLE OF FLEXIBLE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE IN ACTION

Angela (not her real name) and her teenage daughter had been living in a tent since arriving in Napa after fleeing an extremely violent husband from another state. When she had gone to apply for welfare and food assistance, Angela disclosed the domestic violence and they referred her to NEWS. They had also denied her assistance because she lacked a piece of documentation she had needed. A NEWS advocate took her back to the office and got her the assistance she had requested.

The NEWS shelter was full when they first met Angela, so they helped her and her daughter get into the nearby family shelter but continued providing services to them and working on finding permanent housing. In talking with Angela, NEWS staff asked what her dreams and hopes were for the future, and she mentioned that she loved cooking. A culinary class was being offered locally, and they helped Angela get into that course. While she was taking that course, they continued helping her find housing. Angela had been evicted from her home in the other state, but NEWS managed to find them an apartment after about three months. NEWS paid all of the rent for the first few months and then paid less and less over the next few months as Angela finished culinary school and got employment. Angela not only completed the program but graduated top of her class. Her daughter began doing well in school and actually was excelling on a sports team and making friends.

Also, during this time, NEWS helped Angela and her daughter with a number of other issues. For example, Angela needed a California driver's license, so she could drive to her school and new job. However, she had outstanding tickets from her prior state that needed to be paid in order to get the driver's license. NEWS braided funds from a variety of sources to pay off her fines and fees; an advocate called the court in the other state and also did what was necessary to get her bench warrant dismissed. Then she immediately got her license. NEWS staff estimated that taking care of all of these expenses cost approximately \$3,000 but as one noted, "it changed the trajectory of two people's lives forever."



It became clear through many conversations with advocates and clients that NEWS advocates are extremely creative and resourceful in their work. They have multiple conversations with survivors, attentively listening to their needs in order to offer help before survivors have to ask. As one survivor described:

*"They kind of assessed what I needed. They were like, 'Okay, we can see that housing is going to be a big deal.' They also gave me a lot of emotional support. They've helped with everything, I mean, stuff I didn't even know I needed help with. They were like, 'You're probably going to need help with this.' They are so good at what they do. When my kids went back to school this year, they called me a month before school started and said, 'Okay, we have backpacks filled with supplies for your kids. We've thought about this also. Do they need haircuts? Do they need shoes?'... I honestly, I'm tearing up. They're so good."*

*-NEWS survivor*



## Community Engagement

The final pillar of the DVHF model includes **proactive engagement** between advocates and people in the community who can support the safety, stability, and well-being of survivors. With regard to housing, it is critical to forge **mutually beneficial relationships** with landlords and property managers. NEWS has successfully engaged landlords and property managers to house survivors that might not meet traditional rental requirements (e.g., high credit scores, income that is at least three times the rent, clear background checks).



### *How NEWS supports this pillar*

The leadership at NEWS fully supports their staff in their community engagement efforts. NEWS encourages staff to go out and meet with community partners, including other service providers, private landlords, and property managers to create and maintain strong community partnerships.

NEWS collaborates and partners with several private landlords and property managers in the area. A landlord and a property manager with whom NEWS has a longstanding partnership agreed that it is beneficial to prioritize NEWS clients for four overarching reasons. They are confident that NEWS staff will:

1. Be diligent about referring clients that are likely to succeed in a unit,
2. Ensure that rent is paid on time,
3. Openly and honestly communicate with them when issues arise, and
4. Provide ongoing support to survivors in their units, which decreases turnover.

These characteristics are fundamental to successfully engaging property managers who might be concerned with vacancies but who are also risk-averse. NEWS' commitment to the ongoing support of their clients sets them apart from many other agencies and was noted by both a landlord and a property manager as the key reason they collaborate with them.

Advocates are also active in **establishing and maintaining relationships with community partners**. For example, one advocate recently noticed that many survivors have issues with their cars breaking down because they do not have experience in automobile maintenance. She proactively contacted a local mechanic to see if they would be willing to do a periodic workshop for survivors on how to check a vehicle's oil, tire pressure, etc. The mechanic agreed and the interest in this has been high.

## EXAMPLE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN ACTION

Leticia, an immigrant mother of 4, was connected with NEWS after her abuser's arrest. At the time, Leticia was not employed. Her partner had not been paying the rent, so after a few months, Leticia and her children lost their housing. The family then sought shelter at NEWS. During their time at shelter, Leticia obtained employment. The Housing Team then helped her find a house that would be big enough for her family through an engaged landlord committed to providing support to families in need. Leticia received support filling out the applications and visiting the house prior to move-in. The Housing Team helped her move, provided rental assistance, and helped pay her bills for a few months while Leticia got back on her feet.

As is often the case, the impact of severe and ongoing trauma resurfaced for the family, and one of Leticia's children began struggling with depression. The Housing Team offered their support, often checking in with Leticia and the children. They identified activities that would help the child feel better (at the child's direction), and then facilitated her access to them.

Leticia was employed at a company with a flexible schedule, but still struggled to make ends meet. Her supervisor mentioned that if she obtained her own equipment for her job, she could increase her hourly wage from \$15 to \$25 per hour. Leticia was sure she could not afford the \$500 piece of equipment but mentioned it to her advocate in passing. Soon after, Leticia received a call from her advocate saying that NEWS would be able to provide her with the equipment she needed. This allowed Leticia to fully get back on her feet and cover all her bills.

*Note: minor details edited to protect the survivor's anonymity.*

Beyond the three pillars of the DVHF model, **NEWS has created a culture where every survivor is treated with care and respect**, from the front desk staff to the executive director. The evaluation team noticed this when they visited the program, and all survivors that the evaluation team interviewed reflected on how they felt from the moment they entered the offices. Survivors receive the message that they are welcomed and appreciated, always greeted warmly with big smiles.

*"Sometimes I feel bad asking for help,  
but they always tell me **they are here to help.**"*

*"Just when you walk in, even the way they greet you...they'll offer you a beverage...It's just like, I don't know, you just feel like they're happy that you're here, and that you're not bothering them, and everyone the way that they speak is very . . . I don't know what it is. It's just a demeanor, I guess. I feel, especially contrasted with places like the welfare office or court where you really are on the defense. Like, 'What do you want? Prove it. Where's your documents?' They're never like that here. They're like, 'Okay, we can work with that. Don't worry about it.' I guess it's a little thing, but it is...it's just **the way that they talk is like you're a real person. They're happy that you're here.***

*Every single person that I've met here had that same [warmth]. Yeah, **they're so respectful**, too. Especially coming out of situation like that. You're so used to being disrespected, and you go in the court process and they're very disrespectful. You know, you come here, **they just give you such dignity and just care.** It's really amazing."*

*-NEWS survivor*

## CONCLUSION

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NEWS has been highlighted here because they are excelling at providing the three pillars of the DVHF model:



*Survivor-driven, trauma-informed mobile advocacy*



*Flexible financial assistance*



*Community engagement*

Providing these model components takes more than a knowledgeable and skilled staff, although that is critical to its success. Beyond this, though, organizations must have the **structure, culture and protocols** in place for this model to work. This brief document was created to detail some of the important elements that we believe are critical for the DVHF model to succeed.

*"They are like angels. They have given me so much. I don't know what I would do without them. They have helped me so much. They even call me and ask, 'how are the kids, do you need anything?'...They are like angels."*

*-NEWS survivor*

*\*\*The authors are deeply grateful to the staff and clients of NEWS who contributed their time and expertise to this project.*