

# Learning from Lived Experiences

Policy Solutions from Culturally Specific Communities to Increase Survivor Access to and Retention of Safe Housing

Shenna Morris, Vice President of Policy & Systems Change



National Resource Center  
on Domestic Violence



SAFE HOUSING  
PARTNERSHIPS

---



For over 50 years, survivors' voices and realities have shaped responses to domestic and sexual violence. From emergency shelter to sheltering solutions beyond imminent threats of harm, housing has always been a critical part of conversations connected to survivor safety and well-being.

Despite advocacy from survivors and the gender-based violence movement, domestic violence continues to be one of the key contributing factors to homelessness. Additionally, the reality remains that the voices and understanding the specific needs of survivors most impacted--such as Black immigrant, LGBTQ+, and survivors with disabilities--continues to exist as an afterthought in conversations regarding actions and solutions geared towards addressing survivor homelessness and housing insecurity.



## THE INTERSECTIONS OF IDENTITY, ECONOMIC INSECURITY, AND HOUSING INSECURITY: BUILDING THE EVIDENCE



Human identity is multi-layered and always changing. The reality of an individual's identity cuts across several life aspects such as race, ethnicity, ability, location, familial make-up, and a host of other factors. Each day, the layers and ways in which these identities intersect can impact the safety and wellness of people. For survivors of intimate partner violence, the interplay of layers can play a significant role in their safety, economic well-being, and housing security. This is particularly true when looking at intimate partner violence through the lens of survivors from historically marginalized communities such as Black immigrant and LGBTQ+ survivors.

Comprehensive research to better understand intimate partner violence experiences of Black immigrants in the United States remains limited. Relocating from various continents and countries with different cultural dynamics, Black immigrants in the U.S. face experiences ranging from adjusting to new sociocultural environments to navigating family dynamics and new gender role experiences. As immigrant families navigate these new lives, studies have found that there is often a shift in the dynamics of their intimate partner relationships. Like experiences of other survivor communities, Black immigrant women may find themselves in unhealthy relationships fueled by dynamics rooted in power, oppression, and control. Their ability to resolve these matters or remove themselves can be complex because of their cultural and community values as well as legal factors such as their immigration status. This includes complexities related to help-seeking behaviors, language barriers, documentation status, and the likelihood of their community representation being limited to a microcosm within the areas of the U.S. to which they have migrated. Thus, when seeking assistance and resource solutions such as safe housing, Black immigrant survivors can experience great difficulty in accessing this type of resource in ways that align with their cultural needs.[1]

[1] Akinsulure-Smith, A. M., Chu, T., Keatley, E., & Rasmussen, A. (2013). Intimate Partner Violence among West African Immigrants. *J Aggress Maltreat Trauma*, 22(1): 109-129. <https://doi.org/10.1080%2F10926771.2013.719592>.

Similar elements impact LGBTQ+ survivors. Often socially stigmatized and targeted, LGBTQ+ survivors face barriers such as navigating complex family dynamics, deeply rooted social oppressions, and culturally inadequate resources which impact their ability to access or maintain safe housing. For LGBTQ+ youth and young adults, these factors can contribute to experiencing harm across their lifetime. Such issues can also contribute to entering or remaining in unhealthy intimate partner relationships, seeking help through networks that lack understanding of intimate partner violence dynamics and resources, and launching individuals into repeated cycles of homelessness or housing instability.

The 2019 collaborative report of True Colors United and the National LGBTQ Taskforce entitled, [“At the Intersections: A Collaborative Resource on LGBTQ Youth Homelessness 2019”](#) notes LGBTQ youth experience high rates of violence, in the home, from family members. The report further points out that the combination of experiencing family violence and housing insecurity can lead LGBTQ youth to become reliant on unhealthy or violent relationships to survive. This report confirms established findings on the intersections of intimate partner violence and economic justice. It acknowledges that dependence on and remaining in unhealthy relationships is strongly associated with how survivors see their economic mobility in association with their ability to survive.

Research has continued to show that survivors of intimate partner violence experience greater financial and housing instability in comparison to those who have not experienced intimate partner violence. Housing access and/or sustainability for survivors can be significantly impacted by financial insecurity when decisions have to be made on which needs must be met in the moment. For example, a survivor choosing between using their economic resources for food to nurture themselves or their family, putting gas in their car, or purchasing a metro card to attend to personal matters or go to work all impact their ability to have enough of what they need to pay housing costs and remain safely housed. This constant decision tug can be life-altering and disruptive to survivors’ thriving after getting out of an abusive relationship. Coupled with identity, economic flux is a layer that significantly contributes to survivor homelessness and housing insecurity.

The social habit to lead with narrowed thoughtfulness in solution development stops social mindfulness from using a comprehensive lens that considers impacting factors and seeking solutions that are considerate of the individuality, diversity, and humanity of everyone. These habits contribute to a continued lack of U.S. policy solutions that are flexible and amenable to cultural experiences such as those across Black immigrant ethnic populations, LGBTQ+ communities, and other historically marginalized communities.

Beginning in 2022, the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (NRC DV) conducted research efforts within Black immigrant and LGBTQ+ communities. In the first effort, listening sessions were conducted with three culturally specific advocacy organizations, [Amani Women's Center](#), [The Person Center](#), and [Sauti Yetu](#). Each of these organizations focuses on providing services to Black immigrant survivors of domestic and sexual violence. In addition to these listening sessions, NRC DV also conducted a flexible funding study with the [LGBT Center of Central PA](#). The outcomes of the complete study can be found in the [Process Evaluation of a Flexible Funding Pilot Program to Prevent Homelessness among BIPOC and LGBTQ+ Survivors](#) publication. Both efforts provided critical insights into the nuanced needs, solution gaps, and lack of policy diversity that exist in assisting Black immigrant and LGBTQ+ survivors across race and ethnicity. Information gleaned from both efforts was used to develop the policy recommendations noted in this policy brief.

## **THE DYNAMICS OF IDENTITY AND HOUSING INSECURITY: COMMON BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES**

The foundation of fair housing rights and remedies is rooted deeply in civil rights advocacy. Despite this foundation, proposed policy solutions have fallen short in capturing cultural nuances and have continued to sustain cycles of inequitable housing access for survivors from historically marginalized communities such as Black immigrants and LGBTQ+ survivors.

For example, policies to address housing and homelessness can be very general and one-dimensional. This approach often contributes to systemic responses that lump survivor communities together and view their experiences from one angle. In doing so, the diversity of survivors' experiences of violence and how it connects to their origin or diaspora story is missed. The results of taking this approach manifest as language accessibility standards that do not meet the specific language dialect needs of survivors, or housing provider relationships which lack understanding of the connection between survivor safety and honoring survivor-defined configurations of their family networks. These solutions also result in policy loopholes that impose rigorous requirements, such as little to no flexibility in landlord requirements around employment and housing access.



Racism and oppression, in various forms, continue to contribute to housing inequity for survivors, generations of families, and communities. Housing access barriers driven by oppression, dominant cultural norms, and discrimination are common experiences of Black immigrant and LGBTQ+ survivors. Together, biases associated with an individual's documentation status, economic power, gender identity, and sexual orientation layered with cultural nuances and experiences of gender-based violence have created a wide range of barriers in these survivors' efforts to seek, access, and sustain safe housing. For example, as highlighted in the LGBT Center report, documentation requirements of housing systems and providers can unintentionally become a means of discrimination against trans survivors and hinder their ability to access safe housing.[2]

To overcome barriers and challenges such as the ones highlighted, it is imperative that diverse and flexible policies are part of the solutions.

[2] Ayeni, O. O. & Hampton, C. (2023). Evolution of a Flexible Funding Pilot to Prevent Homelessness among BIPOC and LGBTQ+ Survivors. National Resource Center on Domestic Violence.

# **PUBLIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: INCREASING SURVIVOR HOUSING ACCESS AND SUSTAINABILITY**

## **LEGISLATIVE**

- **Create a legislative task force or conduct research that identifies, analyzes, and reports on existing services and programs which have been most effective at supporting survivors from historically marginalized communities in exiting homelessness and maintaining housing.**

A wide range of programs and services have been created to address the housing and homelessness needs of survivors. However, gaps remain in these programs addressing survivors' nuanced and diverse needs that honor their culture and identity. Focused government efforts to research and identify existing services and programs that have been most effective at supporting survivors from marginalized communities in exiting homelessness and maintaining housing will encourage buy-in and strengthen community equity practices when replicating and tailoring evidence-based approaches. Additionally, this recommendation provides an opportunity to review the regulatory use of housing funding supports to assess the spectrum of diversity within the allowable uses of funds as it relates to meeting survivors' needs.

- **Develop policy tools, such as housing eligibility waivers, that can relax permanent housing eligibility requirements for trauma survivors such as victims of domestic and sexual violence.**

Securing accessible and affordable housing can be further challenging when co-experiencing navigating trauma and producing the evidence associated with the numerous eligibility requirements that may exist in public and private markets. Survivors' experiences with housing eligibility requirements look different across the country and across the many identities that they bring. For example, eligibility requirements connected to documentation status, credit history, and family size can present barriers that have greater levels of complexity for immigrant and LGBTQ+ survivors. This can include being unable to access housing because of current citizenship status or discrepancies between documents and gender identity. Policy tools, such as housing eligibility waivers, would prevent survivors' access to housing from being measured against eligibility requirements in the same ways as individuals who are not experiencing trauma. Additionally, such policy provides a more trauma-informed approach to honoring survivors' needs and realities.

- **Broaden definitions of “family” used to determine eligibility for services and access to housing and social programs.**

Survivors of domestic and sexual violence may often have family networks that are beyond their biological family. Their ability to remain housed with these members can significantly impact their decision to seek out safe housing and other supports. This is especially true for survivors from small cultural or close-knit communities. Broadening definitions of eligible family members acknowledges the diversity of family configurations that survivors of violence may have and recognizes the support networks that may be instrumental in maintaining or supporting their outreach for assistance. For example, language that is inclusive of cultural or geographical kinship can minimize barriers created by the use of rigid definitions of family.

- **Increase designated funding supports for culturally-specific programs that have deep expertise in responding to the needs of marginalized and underserved survivors.**

Culturally-specific programs have deep knowledge and understanding regarding methods of outreach, service needs and models, and barriers or challenges that the communities they work with face. Additionally, they are best positioned, despite often being under-resourced, to respond to survivors’ needs. Increasing support for culturally-specific programs enhance housing options that are culturally responsive, diverse, and innovative.

- **Enact policies that allow federal non-defense discretionary resources, such as those provided through the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act and Housing and Urban Development Special Needs Assistance Programs, to be administered and used flexibly.**

Research has shown that access to flexible funding resources aids in the prevention of survivor homelessness. Legislative policies that would allow service funding to be used flexibly support survivor-led advocacy as well as the maximum and best use of public resources.



## **Administrative**

- **Disseminate legislative and research findings as well as information on best practice housing programs and service models that have increased survivor housing access and sustainability.**

Informing funding recipients and communities of existing and emerging housing programs, and service models, supports awareness raising of the diversity in available approaches and solutions for survivors. Additionally, doing so encourages continuously strengthening equity practices in the replication and tailoring of programming.

- **Require applicant and grantee submission of accessibility and equity plans that demonstrate population inclusivity across program and service designs. Include opportunities for qualitative capturing of progress on plan implementation during reporting periods.**

Requiring applicants and recipients to detail their course of access and equity actions, in the contextual relevance of their community and populations of survivors served, can support increased housing accessibility for historically marginalized communities. Additionally, such approaches support communities in disrupting habits of designing programs and responses in ways that create one-dimensional survivor identities and experiences.

## REFERENCES

- Akinsulure-Smith, A. M., Chu, T., Keatley, E., & Rasmussen, A. (2013). Intimate Partner Violence among West African Immigrants. *J Aggress Maltreat Trauma*, 22(1): 109-129.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080%2F10926771.2013.719592>.
- Ayeni, O. O. & Hampton, C. (2023). Evolution of a Flexible Funding Pilot to Prevent Homelessness among BIPOC and LGBTQ+ Survivors. National Resource Center on Domestic Violence.  
[https://safehousingpartnerships.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Process%20Evaluation%20of%20a%20Flexible%20Funding%20Pilot Program to Prevent Homelessness among BIPOC and LGBTQ%2B Survivors Report.pdf](https://safehousingpartnerships.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Process%20Evaluation%20of%20a%20Flexible%20Funding%20Pilot%20Program%20to%20Prevent%20Homelessness%20among%20BIPOC%20and%20LGBTQ%20Survivors%20Report.pdf)

This publication is supported by Grant Number #90EV0536-01-01 to the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence from the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.