

Assessing for & Appropriately Responding to the Housing Needs of Domestic & Sexual Violence Survivors: A Decision Tree as an Alternative to a Scoresheet

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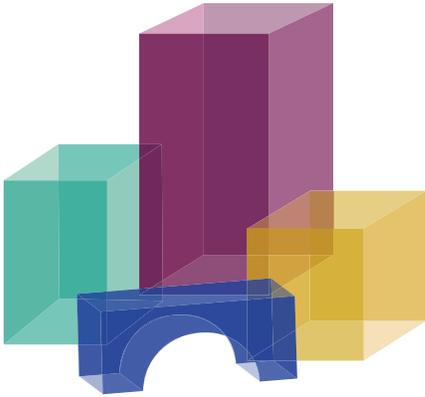
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The federal Domestic Violence and Housing Technical Assistance Consortium (the Consortium) is an innovative, collaborative approach to providing training, technical assistance, and resource development at the critical intersection of domestic and sexual violence, homelessness, and housing.

Funded and supported by an unprecedented partnership between the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Justice, and Department of Housing and Urban Development, this multi-year Consortium brings together national, state, and local organizations with deep expertise on housing, domestic and sexual violence in order to collaboratively build and strengthen technical assistance to both housing/homelessness providers and domestic/sexual violence service providers. The Consortium aims to improve policies, identify promising practices, and strengthen collaborations necessary to improve housing options for survivors of domestic and sexual violence and their children in order to enhance safety, stability, and well-being.

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Introduction

It is understandable, given the high rates of homelessness as well as domestic and sexual violence in this country, that agencies and communities would welcome a brief and easy to use scoring tool that reliably ranks people's vulnerabilities and documents their preferences and needs. Overly simple solutions, however, are rarely the answer to complicated problems.

Prioritizing People into Housing

A [Continuum of Care](#) (CoC) is a local or regional planning body responsible for coordinating homeless individuals' and families' access to limited housing resources within a specific geographic area. The US Department of Housing & Urban Development (HUD), which is the primary federal funder of low-income housing, requires CoCs to utilize a [Coordinated Entry](#) (CE) system in order to prioritize those with the highest need. The system is intended to provide people with fair and equal access to housing, while also prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable individuals and families, especially given scarce affordable housing options in most communities.



While the idea behind prioritizing the most vulnerable people into housing is laudable and was designed to minimize practices based on favoritism or prejudice, communities continue to struggle with how to equitably and fairly implement CE. A common strategy implemented by CoCs across the country is to use a screening tool that assigns points to individuals or families based on their 'vulnerabilities.' The idea is that those with the highest points are then prioritized into more immediate, and/or longer-term and more supported, housing options. The most frequently used screening tool is the [VI-SPDAT](#) or one of its iterations. Unfortunately, the VI-SPDAT was created to assess the vulnerabilities of chronically homeless individuals who are experiencing severe mental illness and/or substance abuse, and does not tend to prioritize domestic and sexual violence (DV/SV) survivors into housing options other than DV shelters (see "[Assessing Vulnerability, Prioritizing Risk: The Limitations of the VI-SPDAT for Survivors of Domestic and Sexual Violence](#)" by McCauley & Reid).

What, then, is a more promising solution than giving people scores based on one set of vulnerabilities? And how do we not only assess who is “in the most need,” but also help determine which housing option is desired by the survivor (and therefore more likely to be used), and which will most likely lead to success? We believe the most promising solution lies in having brief but focused conversations with survivors that cover the topics most relevant to choosing strategies likely to lead to safe and stable housing.

Brief and Focused Conversations to Determine Housing Needs

One motivation for creating a scoring tool was the need to quickly provide housing for individuals and families with immediate needs. Especially in communities with high numbers of homeless and unstably housed people, and long waitlists, the idea of engaging in extensive conversations with each person seeking help is unrealistic. However, focused conversations that get at issues **directly related to housing stability and safety** are a more effective and nuanced way to assess the complexities of each person’s situation and needs.

There are many important questions to ask survivors to help understand their safety and service needs. Answers to most of these questions, however, will not provide information needed to understand which housing option is the best fit for which individual. For example, some programs are now using the Danger Assessment tool to help prioritize housing options. However, knowing that someone has a high risk of being severely assaulted does not tell the service provider if the survivor would be more or less safe staying in their home vs moving to a new location (see ["Key Considerations: Use of the Danger Assessment by Domestic Violence Programs in the Housing Advocacy Context"](#)). A conversation focused specifically on housing needs must cover the following topics:

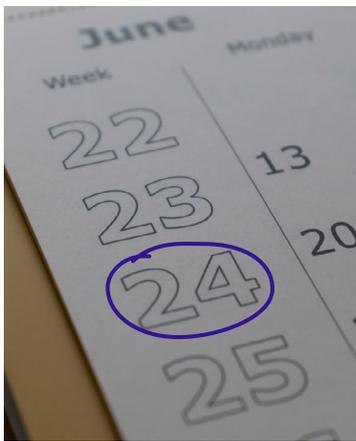
1. Safety concerns as they relate to housing

Why is this important? Ongoing safety is a critical concern for survivors, and can have an influence on choice of housing option. Some service providers as well as survivors, however, quickly jump to the conclusion that leaving the home is the safest course of action. While for some individuals this is true, there are many instances in which survivors could stay in their homes if certain safety precautions were put into place (or the abuser no longer presents a threat). For example, there are now low-cost security camera systems that could be installed, locks could be changed, and neighbors could be alerted about potential dangers. If paying the entire mortgage or rent is a problem (in cases where the abusive partner has moved out of the unit and/or was paying part of this expense), helping cover these expenses for a period of time is likely to be far less expensive than moving the survivor (and their children, where applicable) into shelter. If DV and SV agencies broached these options with survivors and had the means to get these resources paid for, a number of survivors may be able to stay in their homes -- an option that is likely to be the least disruptive path forward.

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In cases where the survivor would not feel safe staying in their home even with added security, or who have other reasons to move, it is important to understand whether they are still at risk of abuse or stalking, and to explore multiple housing options other than emergency shelters. No one who enters a shelter stays there forever, so helping the survivor figure out how to be safe within the community is a conversation that will happen at some point; if there is a way to bypass shelter, it can minimize survivors' stress and begin the 'stable housing' process more quickly.

2. How stably or unstably housed the person has been in the last 6-12 months



Why is this important? If the person has been stably housed in the past and has the income to afford their current housing, but experienced a crisis that has led to housing instability (e.g., they are facing eviction due to the abusers' failure to pay the rent; the abusive partner slashed the car's tires and now the survivor cannot get to work), then the survivor may need one-time or brief assistance to prevent them from becoming homeless. If, on the other hand, the person has been homeless for a number of months, has no employment, speaks limited English, and/or is being stalked, a brief intervention is not likely to be successful.

In these situations, longer-term housing options may be a more suitable housing prospect. It still remains important to discuss all available housing options with the survivor to help them identify the one they are most comfortable with and which provides them with optimum support, safety, and stability. This is not to imply that the survivor needs to be "housing ready" but simply that any and all options should offer survivors the degree of security that they seek and that will afford them the best possible support. The decision to access shelter, transitional, or longer-term supportive housing programs should always be one reached in partnership with the survivor, with full transparency about the limitations and expectations of every options available.

3. What issues they have going on that could prevent them from accessing/maintaining safe and stable housing now and into the future

Why is this important? While safety concerns and financial constraints/assets are critical factors in helping survivors determine a reasonable housing path, there are other factors to consider – and hopefully address – that can either facilitate or hinder long-term success. After presenting the different housing options available to survivors (e.g., safety stay at home, going to shelter, entering transitional housing, receiving

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short-term financial help, getting a housing voucher), it is important to ask “what are other things you’re thinking about that might help us figure out next steps?” Perhaps the survivor needs to stay in close proximity to their job, or needs to avoid particular areas they know the abusive partner/ex-partner spends time in, or has immigration issues preventing them from working, or needs a criminal record expunged....there are many different issues that people can face, and they may not bring these up unless given the opportunity to talk freely.

Having a brief but focused conversation about these issues does require a level of skill on the part of the service provider. Providers need strong listening skills, empathetic responses, and access to a variety of housing options. They need to be able to negotiate those different options and redirect conversations so that the most relevant information comes forth, while making sure the survivor feels heard and in partnership with decisions being made.

These key topic areas cover the types of information that the survivor and service provider both should be aware of in order to identify a strategy that is likely to lead to long-term safe and stable housing. Unfortunately, many communities lack the options that might be most effective (e.g., a housing voucher, an affordable 3-bedroom apartment) and have to either make do with the limited options available, and/or waitlist survivors for a more appropriate or available solution.

The topics covered in this section help the service provider and survivor determine what might work best – but another part of this process is prioritizing the most vulnerable people into limited housing options. That part of the process is discussed next.



Prioritizing Survivors with Similar Housing Needs and Preferences

In many communities across the country, the need for housing (including DV/SV shelters and transitional housing) far exceeds the supply. While we must continue to prioritize expanding the range of housing options within our communities (see the Paper in this series about this topic), in the meantime agencies are faced with the difficult decision of deciding who to give one housing unit or one housing voucher to among multiple, similarly disadvantaged individuals and families. How to make this determination is obviously controversial, and is part of what led to the push for scoring in the first place. We argue, however, that scoring tools – even if they were accurate in determining vulnerability

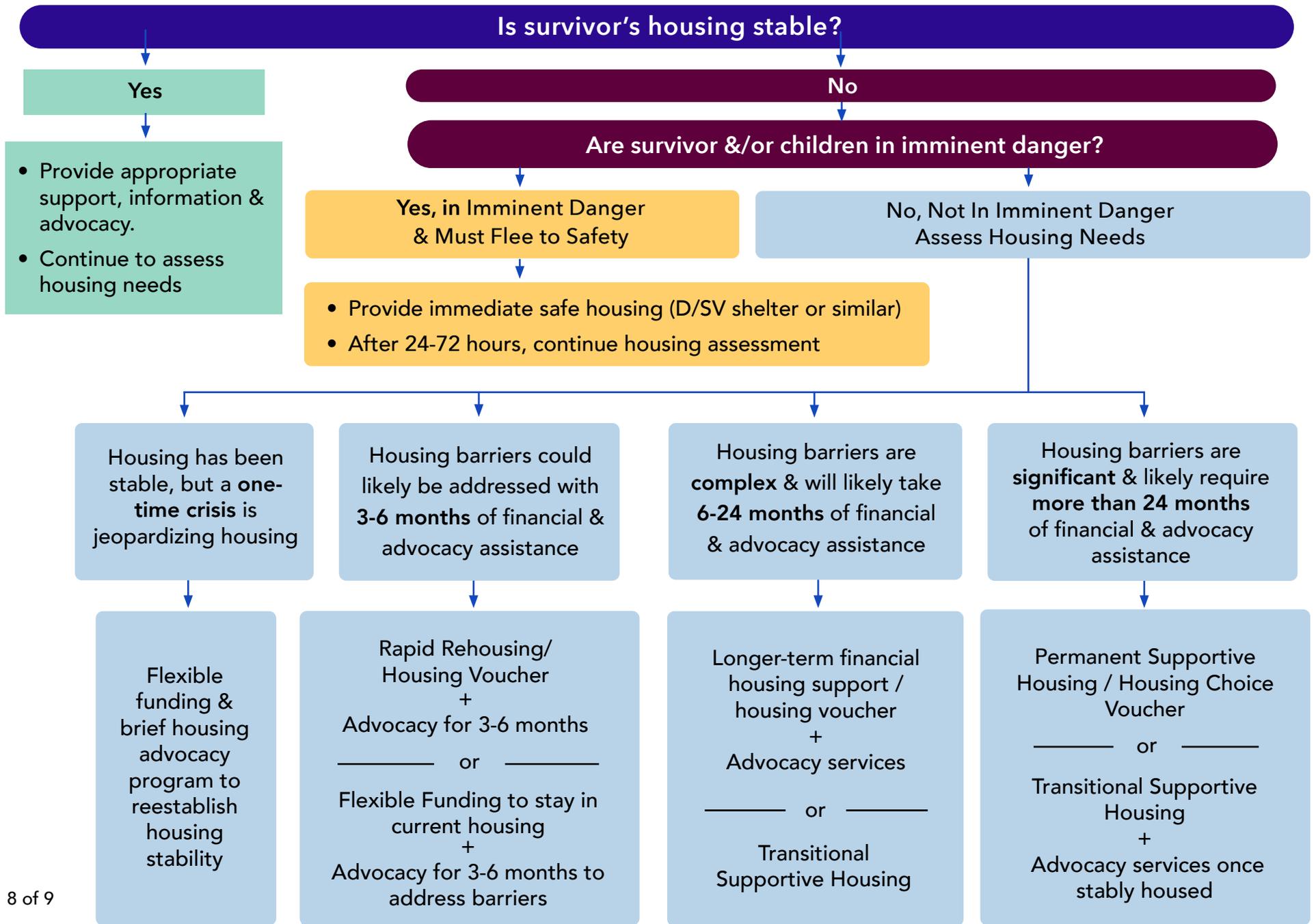
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– do not solve this problem. If three families all have the same score, and only one housing unit is available that all three might likely benefit from, the agency or community is still left with the problem of how to prioritize who receives the help. Therefore, we suggest that the fairest way to make this decision is “first come, first served.” No strategy is ideal, but this does seem to be the fairest when multiple individuals or families have similar needs, and it has been a longstanding practice within DV and SV programs.



The next page provides a flow chart that illustrates the process of Assessing for and Appropriately Responding to the Housing Needs of Survivors. The last page of this document provides a “cheat sheet” of key questions and phrases to help guide an initial conversation about housing so that adequate and appropriate information is uncovered that can help both the survivor and service provider determine appropriate housing options.

Assessing for and Appropriately Responding to the Housing Needs of Survivors



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Brief and Focused Conversations to Determine Housing Needs *Key Questions and Phrases*

Active Listening:

"What I'm hearing you say is..."

"So, it sounds important to you that..."

"It sounds like you'd like to prioritize..."

Providing Options:

"Let me tell you about the different options we may have to choose from and then we can figure out together what might be best."

"Many people assume they have to leave their homes in order to be safe, but we may be able to help pay for some things that would allow you to stay in your home, if you'd like to consider that..."

Demonstrating Empathy:

"I'm so sorry this is happening to you..."

"I know this is extremely difficult for you..."

"Everyone is different and has their own issues and concerns. Some people have criminal records, or are dealing with drugs or alcohol, or have family issues that impact their safety and housing...I want you to feel like you can talk to me and tell me what is going on for you that would help me help you get safely and stably housed."

Negotiating Options:

"I really wish we had a housing voucher to give you. Since we don't, what do you think about...?"

"The shelter is full right now, but I might be able to locate a hotel voucher. Do you think that would be a good immediate option right now? Do you have a family member or friend that would be a better option?"

Redirecting Conversation:

"I know that's a really important concern of yours and I'd like to come back to it, but right now I'd like to make sure we're focused on getting you into housing. Is it okay if we go back to....?"

"Mhmm, okay....and can I now ask you about...?"