

**Developing a Framework to Provide
Transitional Housing for Survivors of Domestic Violence**

**A Summary of the
National Teleconference Hosted by
The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence
December 11, 2003**

Developing a Framework to Provide Transitional Housing for Survivors of Domestic Violence

The presenters for this teleconference call were Cris Sullivan and Debra Cain (biographies attached), who discussed Michigan's efforts to date to develop a feminist, empowerment-based framework for providing transitional supportive housing for survivors of domestic violence. After the presentation, questions and comments were taken from the teleconference participants. A summary of this presentation follows.

Debi Cain, the executive director of the Michigan Domestic Violence Prevention and Treatment Board (MDVPTB), began by providing the history of Michigan's efforts. MDVPTB is a legislated board that is a part of state government. Among the legislated responsibilities of the Board, they are responsible for advising the governor and legislature on key legislation, policy issues, and practices within state government. They are responsible for coordinating and working with other state agencies and state initiatives on issues on violence against women. They are also the funding agent on behalf of state government on issues of domestic violence and sexual assault. Not quite four years ago, MDVPTB received \$3M in TANF dollars from the state to put out requests for proposals for people to provide transitional supporting housing for domestic violence victims in Michigan. Fifteen agencies were funded that first year, and most were domestic violence victim service programs. Because MDVPTB did not give a lot of specific direction in designing the programs, many agencies patterned themselves after traditional transitional housing programs.

Traditionally, transitional housing had been designed for people who were chronically homeless, for people who were addicted to one form of substance or another, and often for the chronically mentally ill. That became very important in how many of the agencies ended up structuring their programs, and what kinds of requirements they put into place. There was definitely a lack of survivor input in the creation of the programs, and many agencies were engaging in practices that were inconsistent with the empowerment-based mission of the Board (e.g., mandating services).

As a result, Debi asked Cris Sullivan to conduct a study that would give the Board some indication of where the services were well designed, and where they weren't so that the Board could determine which dollars were in fact going to services that would most make a difference for the women and children who needed them. With input from MDVPTB, Cris designed a study involving six transitional housing programs across Michigan. The programs varied in geographic area served, program size, structure, and the types of services offered. Four of the sites were in fairly large metropolitan areas, one was in a suburban area, and one was in a rural area.

Most of the units were in scattered sites, although one agency operated a two-tier program in a shelter so that some of the shelter rooms were actually transitional housing rooms for that program. Women could stay up to two years in four of the programs, and up to one year in two of the programs.

Two highly trained interviewers conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews with 20 women who were receiving transitional housing services, 4 women who had received services in the past, 12 women who were currently in shelter (about what they would like in transitional housing) and all of the direct service staff across the six sites. Summarized results follow:

Eligibility. Programs differed a great deal in how they determined eligibility. Everybody had to have a history of domestic violence, and they had to be homeless, which often meant they were coming out of shelter programs and they had nowhere to go. They also had to have a desire to terminate the relationship. Other than these three requirements there was a great deal of variability, with some program taking women in the most dangerous of situations and others refusing services to women being actively stalked (out of fear for the other residents). Some refused services to women with felonies or who had addictions or mental illness. Most preferred “highly motivated” clients.

Services offered. All of the programs offered counseling, support groups, safety planning, limited advocacy services, and then various forms of practical assistance that might include transportation vouchers, free telephones with local service and 911 service, or referrals to other agencies. All also provided what they called case management, where staff worked with clients to determine goals and to meet their goals.

Rules and regulations. All programs expected women to pay some amount of rent, usually dependent on income; all of the women had to house only themselves and their children in the unit; they had to maintain confidentiality of the other women, they had to maintain the property as they would any apartment; and they had to refrain from illegal behavior. There was a great variability in the extent of other rules. Some programs had very few rules other than these, while others had many prescriptions and proscriptions. Some programs mandated services, prohibited any alcohol on the property, prohibited all overnight guests, checked on the cleanliness of the housing, etc. Overall, women in programs with strict rules felt patronized and could not provide explanations behind all of the restrictions.

Safety. All of the programs had some type of security system, and rules prohibiting assailants from the property. All engaged in ongoing safety planning with women. All of the units had telephones. Some of the agencies were pretty creative, and would put the lease in the agency's name and not the woman's name, which would limit the assailant's access to her. Most of the programs had a good relationship with the police, and would have the police monitoring the building or watching for any especially violent or stalking assailants. The women were very happy overall with the safety precautions with all of the transitional supportive housing programs.

Relationship with staff. Women's individual relationships with staff were extremely important to their use of services and satisfaction with the program. When women felt positively toward their advocates they availed themselves of more of the services being offered. When women felt patronized or disrespected, however, they tended to avoid staff by not using services.

Most helpful services. Women were asked which services had been most helpful to them, and which had been least helpful. Interestingly, for every service that one woman mentioned as

being the most helpful, another woman might have mentioned the same service as being the least helpful. For instance, some women loved support groups, while others felt that they just didn't need support groups. This speaks to the importance of providing a wide variety of services and being very flexible, but letting women pick and choose what's the most useful for them because the women had very different needs and expectations.

If transitional housing had not been available. Many women noted that, if transitional housing had not been available, they would have had to go back to the assailant, even though they didn't want to. Some talked about being homeless, and more than one woman mentioned that either she would be in prison for killing her assailant, or she would be dead. Women talked about having to prostitute or engage in illegal behaviors just to feed their children or get money together.

Summary. Women's responses indicated there is a very strong need for transitional housing. Women overall were very happy with the services, even though they may have had some complaints. They were overall very grateful that transitional housing was there, they felt like it was helping them get on their feet, and they felt like they were going to be in a better position to have permanent housing at the end of this. The greatest strength of transitional housing may be that it allows the time to really meet individual needs of women over an extended period of time. There's not that many women in the programs generally, and it's important to individualize the services, and to keep modifying services based on what women are saying they want.

As a result of this study, which has been shared and discussed with programs across Michigan, a number of changes have occurred but agencies are also still struggling with a lot of these issues as well. It is not always easy to balance the desire to respect women's autonomy with agency's concerns about liability and funding. Program staff are clearly committed to providing the best services possible for survivors. As we continue to talk with each other, share experiences, and document our successes and challenges, we can hopefully build an empowerment-based framework for transitional housing.

For the complete transcript of this teleconference call or for additional materials on housing issues, please contact the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence at 1-800-537-2238 between 8:00am and 5:00pm EST Monday through Friday.

An article providing more specific information about the research conducted in Michigan has been published as:

Melbin, A., Sullivan, C.M., & Cain, D. (2003). Transitional supportive housing programs: Battered women's perspectives and recommendations. *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, 18(4), 445-460.

Brief Biographies of the Presenters:

Cris Sullivan, the NRCDV's Senior Research Advisor, is Professor of Ecological/Community Psychology at Michigan State University, and is also the Director of Evaluation for the Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. She has been an advocate and researcher in the movement to end violence against women since 1982. Her areas of expertise include developing and evaluating victim services, and her work often involves directly interviewing survivors of intimate partner violence about their experiences and perspectives. Dr. Sullivan has received numerous federal grants to support her work and has published extensively in this area. She has also served as a consultant for a number of local, state, and federal organizations and initiatives.

Debra Cain is Executive Director of the Michigan Domestic Violence Prevention and Treatment Board. For 15 years Ms. Cain was the Executive Director of Haven, Oakland County's Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Program. From 1992 to 1996, she was the Director of the Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center at the University of Michigan. Prior to her current position, Ms. Cain served for three years as the Director of the Violence Against Women Training Institute under the Domestic Violence Prevention and Treatment Board. Ms. Cain is a founding member of the Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, and was selected by the University of Michigan to chair the Violence Against Women Task Force at the University. In 1995 she was appointed by the governor to the Michigan Domestic Violence Prevention and Treatment Board. She has served as a consultant, author, and editor on a number of publications related to violence against women and children.