

What do Domestic Abuse/Sexual Assault Victim Service Providers Do?

Victim service providers serving clients in domestic and/or sexual assault and shelter programs are collectively referred to as victim 'advocates.' Advocates provide crisis response and comprehensive support services to survivors of domestic abuse and/or sexual assault to help them heal from trauma, rebuild their lives, and ultimately continue on a path toward a future free from violence. Services provided in comprehensive domestic abuse, sexual assault, and sheltering programs include (descriptions on back):

- Crisis intervention: 24/7 crisis helplines (phone); in-person; chat line (email)
- Crisis accompaniment, e.g. sexual assault advocate w/ victim at hospital for exam following a rape, or advocate with dv/sa victim to law enforcement if requested
- Shelter/Housing assistance: emergency shelter/housing, permanent housing
- Culturally specific services and/or referrals to culturally specific programs
- Transportation assistance: provide or facilitate public transport to shelter, jobs, court, school, appointments; arrange/fund car repairs
- Safety planning (including children and pets)
- Legal/court advocacy and accompaniment to court hearings, meetings with lawyers
- Civil legal assistance to sexual assault victims in middle school, high schools, colleges and universities including support changing classes, housing, negotiating schedule change, or safety, and to avoid traumatic encounters w/ person doing harm
- Mental health services including counseling, support groups, referrals
- Medical care referrals
- Education and employment/job search assistance
- Childcare assistance/referrals
- Assistance enrolling or accessing mainstream resources and support services
- Financial literacy education; Matched savings services
- Homicide victim services
- Community Education including healthy relationships and sexual violence prevention programs in schools, youth-based organizations and presentations to community groups
- Professional Training including courts, DHS staff, health care providers, and other community groups

REAL LIFE STORIES: What do Domestic Violence Victim Service Providers Do?

The following stories come from Iowa domestic violence victim service providers. Most narratives came from responses to an annual survey conducted by the National Network to End Domestic Violence asking providers to describe who they served on the day of the survey. Other stories came from interviews with program directors. The majority focus on positive outcomes because victim service providers prefer to focus on survivor successes- but the last two illustrate unmet need due to lack of funding.

Crisis Response+Legal Advocacy+Post-crisis support = Stability, Hope

Law enforcement referred a woman to our agency who had been assaulted in front of her children. One of the children placed the 911 call. After staff explained her options she decided to get a civil protection order in addition to the no contact order imposed by the court. For months, her abuser continued to contact her. He refused to schedule a time with police to remove his belongings from the home so he could use it as an excuse to keep going back to the house. He continually drove by their home so that she and her children had to keep the window curtains drawn and doors locked. She had to get her door fixed and replace the locks. She battled her own feelings of love, betrayal, hatred, loss, guilt, sadness, and frustration. When things quieted down she wanted to modify the protection order to communicate regarding the children who up until that point had not seen their father nor did they want to. As soon as phone communication was allowed he began calling upwards of thirty times a day. She reinstated the original order. Her faith in herself and her strength wavered but did not give. Instead, she called in reinforcements to support her. She welcomed BACA (Bikers Against Child Abuse), she worked with local law enforcement, the county attorney, DHS, and she continued to fight in court and won full custody of her children with visitation at her sole discretion. Over a year later, she still has contempt of court proceedings and a child abuse case against him but we celebrated a small victory that she had worked so hard to get. She cried tears of relief, joy, and strength. She thanked our staff for standing with her through this journey. She said she would not have come this far without help. She said she felt like giving up several times. She thanked us for being a constant source of encouragement and for believing in her strength even when she didn't.

Crisis Response to Eminent Threat: Safety Planning for Family/Legal Advocacy

One of our clients had been served by our shelter program for a little under 2 weeks. During that time, her husband had been actively trying to locate her and her son. One morning she notified shelter staff that her husband's friend, a person she considered to be unsafe, had followed her son to school. After discussing the incident with staff, she decided they needed to move to a different community. Staff worked with her to find a spot in another location and drove them there. Her child was very attached to the family dog but the new shelter could not accommodate the pet. However, since our agency had a pet fostering program we promised to keep the dog until she and her son found stable housing. We also offered transportation to and from the court hearing so she could obtain a protection order.

Crisis Response: Transportation to Emergency Shelter

A woman fleeing a domestic abuse situation contacted the helpline with an urgent request. She and her child were physically assaulted regularly however she was being threatened with more violence if she didn't assist him in committing a drug-related crime. She needed a safe place to go outside the community but didn't have a place to go or access to transportation to get there. Helpline staff connected with a mobile case manager and arranged transportation to a safe shelter. The client expressed relief that this was taken care of while her abuser was at work.

Crisis Response to Dating Violence

A young woman made an emergency call to our agency and explained that she had a very heated argument with her boyfriend the night before after she was late picking him up from work. He dropped her off at a hotel off the interstate and she didn't know if or when he might be back or if she would be safe if he came back. She stated that she was scared and confused and was just trying to get back home to California. Her flight was not going to leave for a few days and she was stranded at the hotel which was far from the airport. She needed transportation to move to a hotel closer to the airport so she could make her flight but also because she did not feel safe knowing that he knew where she was. Our staff assisted the woman in planning for her safety and worked with her to find the resources to provide housing and transportation to the airport. Our agency is in a very rural part of Iowa and this was not an easy task. Due to the sheer persistence of our staff this client's needs were met and she safely traveled home.

Addressing mental health needs=Stable Employment=Stable Housing=Stable Future

Many survivors continue to have trauma-related mental health needs that make it difficult to maintain employment and thus the steady income needed to cover housing costs. Our program works with employers throughout the region to facilitate better access to available jobs and focuses on helping victims navigate and access mental health services. Our staff collaborate with mental health care providers to educate them on domestic violence dynamics, advocate for survivors regarding treatment, and provide more options to victims needing mental health support. This helps survivors maintain steady employment which means they earn the funding they need to maintain stable housing.

Stable Housing = Stable Employment = Hope for positive future

Client was a twenty-five year old domestic violence survivor. When she entered shelter she had no job, money or income, and was determined to maintain her new found sobriety. Within a week she was hired by a local grocery store and started to work toward independence. Being a single mom this is rough but every morning she would walk to the bus stop get her son to daycare and then to work. At meetings with her advocate, she shared that she now has two jobs because she wants to pay off her fines in order to get her driver's license back. Within sixty days, the client accomplished her goal and will be driving soon. Our agency helped her secure stable housing. Her hopeful outlook and resilience was inspiring to our staff.

Legal Advocacy: Assistance ending an abusive relationship

Service provider assisted client wanting to leave and file divorce from abusive partner. After providing the survivor information on the legal process and helping her find an attorney, the survivor asked, "Can you come with me because I feel so overwhelmed with what is happening in my life that I don't want to forget to tell the attorney an important detail." Our victim advocate made arrangements to accompany survivor when she met with the attorney.

Counseling, Assistance getting Health Care = Better Job

A woman contacted our agency requesting counseling and assistance with obtaining needed dental services. Our victim advocate helped her find a dentist who filled several cavities and provided preventive services. This gave her the confidence to look for a better job and feel that there were people out there who really cared about her. She stated, "The dentist was so kind and understanding with me and worked me into their schedule so that I would not be losing work time. I am so grateful for that and for the victim service provider who worked with me to find help without making me feel bad." The survivor said she obtained a better paying job and was not as stressed about being able to pay her monthly bills and provide for her family.

Financial Literacy Education = Stability and Hope

Survivor had been living in a city park for a couple of weeks. One of our volunteers let her know she could come to our program for assistance. As a result of her many years of abuse she struggled with coping skills and financial management. She had no income, no job and no knowledge of community resources. She felt defeated and paralyzed by her circumstances and victimization. Making everyday decisions was overwhelming for her. She attended the Financial Education classes offered by our program. She continues to work towards a future with permanent housing and safe employment, she also took the opportunity to open a matched savings account.

Legal Advocacy: Elder Abuse

On this day our agency served an elderly domestic abuse victim that was being physically abused by her grandson and the grandson's stepfather. She was overwhelmed and frightened to face her abusers at trial. We provided support throughout her court proceeding. We answered her questions, explained the legal process, and sat with her during the trial.

Substance Abuse Services for Teens

Our program collaborated with local substance abuse providers to build capacity in providing services for teens experiencing dating violence or witnessing violence at home. We currently provide weekly support groups that offer teen specific programming for individuals at risk or dealing with substance abuse. We collaborate with providers offering education and substance abuse services in area high schools.

Job seeking assistance paid off

Victim service provider had been helping a survivor with filling out job application and practicing interviewing skills. The survivor was a regular at the program's weekly support group and shared that she was just offered a full time job. She and her two young children recently moved back to Iowa from California to escape her abusive husband.

Unmet need for housing

It is hard when we cannot meet the needs of the survivors that come to our agency. Housing assistance is one of the most requested services but funding that we can use to provide these services runs out quickly. The survivor requesting housing assistance on this day was staying with family and will remain there until she is able to get on her own feet. We informed her of other programs that may assist her and she is on several waiting lists. **She is in a safe place for now but has mentioned how much easier it was when she was with her abuser.**

Unmet need for Housing

On this day, I had a client request help moving to a new apartment. She requested assistance, either personally helping her move, or a vehicle that she could borrow for moving day. Unfortunately it was a busy day so no one was available to physically help her move. Additionally, she wasn't in a crisis situation, i.e. she was moving to a cheaper place so she could live on her own without her partner who harmed her. Housing is one of the biggest needs for the survivors we serve and our housing funds run out early in the year. So relocation that is not directly related to fleeing from domestic violence in an emergency situation is sometimes not possible for us to support financially. The impact on the client was that she would lose her new housing option without help. Losing her new housing option meant facing homelessness or potentially going back to her abuser. Thankfully, this time we were able to help her plan her next steps and found another organizations that could provide support and volunteers to help her move the next day. **We were able to help find possible solutions, but we are limited by lack of funding. We aim never to turn someone away but too often we are unable to give clients the simplest and most direct route to solutions if their needs don't relate directly to fleeing.**