

New Destiny Housing Corporation

Revised August, 2004

ON THE VERGE OF HOMELESSNESS: THE IMPACT OF DPE DISCHARGES ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SURVIVORS

Introduction

New York City's specialized emergency shelter system for low-income domestic violence victims has a mandated 90-day length of stay with the possibility of one 45-day extension. Shelter residents cannot apply for housing until they have been in the system 42 days—giving them a little over 90 days, or 3 months, to obtain housing. Because it takes 4 to 6 months, on average, to obtain housing subsidies or public housing, the enforcement of the 135 day limit results in many women leaving shelter without permanent housing. Where do domestic violence survivors who leave shelter without housing go?

From the summer of 2003 to the summer of 2004, New Destiny Housing Corporation, with the assistance of a graduate student intern and working in cooperation with shelter operators from the New York City Coalition of Domestic Violence Residential Providers, conducted interviews with 101 domestic violence survivors. Funded initially by JP Morgan Chase and then through a grant from the ADCO Foundation, Suzanne Marcus developed the survey, conducted the interviews, and then analyzed the interview data. Eighty-one (81) of the 101 interviews were with women still in emergency domestic violence shelters whose date payment ends ("DPE") or discharge dates were fast approaching. The balance—or twenty (20) interviews—were with women who had been discharged from shelter. Of those twenty (20) women, fourteen (14) had gone to the Emergency Assistance Unit ("EAU"), the City's entry point to the general homeless shelter system after leaving domestic violence shelters.

The original purpose of the study was to document where women who left emergency shelters actually went. We discovered that it was difficult to identify women discharged from shelter who were willing to cooperate with the project. Many women were angry with the shelter and its staff, felt a strong sense of betrayal, and responded by severing all contact with shelter caseworkers. This made it difficult for the New Destiny intern to locate women who had left. As a result, the intern began to do focus groups with domestic violence survivors

who, while still in shelter, were approaching their discharge dates. The hope was that, once discharged, more of these women would be willing to maintain contact with the intern and be interviewed.

This brief report discusses some of the concerns that emerged in interviews—both with women on the verge of discharge and with women who had been discharged. Four themes in particular appeared repeatedly:

Themes that emerged from the interviews:

- **Reversal of progress made in shelter (112 mentions)**
- **Fear for personal safety (67 mentions)**
- **Difficulty of finding permanent housing within the allotted time (54 mentions)**
- **Negative effects on children and family (52 mentions)**

1. Reversal of progress made in shelter

The domestic violence shelter system has a rich social service environment devoted to helping women and children heal. Caseworkers not only help to move families to a better place, but through support groups and individual therapy, empower women to live free from violence. The abrupt cut-off of shelter stay undermines social service goals and ends the confidentiality and safety that the shelter provides. This leads to an overwhelming sense of betrayal when the women are told by their caseworkers that they must leave and go to the EAU. The DPE discharge, or possibility of receiving a DPE discharge, leads to a reversal of the gains made in shelter, causes women to doubt their decision to leave the abuser, promotes insecurity and anxiety, and effects women's ability to take advantage of other services.

- “I was comfortable in the shelter – I’d gathered things and made the apartment my own. When they told me to go to the EAU I felt I had done something wrong. Even though I was very active and everyone told me I was doing great – I felt like it wasn’t enough. I felt let down.” (4/04)
- “The bottom line is that it’s hard enough to start at square one, but these people are making my life harder than it already is. It was hard enough to go through four years of abuse, hard enough to move with my son ... I didn’t know that once I left things could get even worse.” (4/04)
- “It’s depressing. At [the battered women’s shelter] I was going on with my life. I was starting to build again – saving money, buying stuff for my

apartment, I was in school. And just like that they snatch that from you. You're lost and confused all over again." (3/04)

- "Being discharged totally undid everything. At the shelter we were building our confidence, and they told us that we could change things – but I don't believe that anymore. Now the system is abusing us. They said we could really change things, so I enrolled in college – but then I was discharged, I had to leave and I dropped out. What's the point? They get our hopes up only to burst our bubble." (9/03)
- "One of my sons had occupational therapy. We were all getting mental health services. My son saw a psychiatrist every week. I was taking medication, seeing a psychiatrist and a therapist once a week. We were making progress and we had to stop everything. The early intervention programs, daycare, and summer school all stopped. They said, 'Today's your deadline; forget about taking the kids to school.' Summer school stopped. My 12 year old son is acting out now at the new shelter." (7/03)
- "The DPE discharge affected us bad. They just pushed us out the door. I feel I wasn't being helped at all. All I needed was a place to be safe and I appreciate that they gave me that, but now I am on my own and if he finds me then he finds me!" (6/03)
- "Girls sit there and cry, 'I'm not going to go to the EAU.' What they (shelter workers, the system) have to understand is that you turn those women right back to their abusers, or out on the street." (6/03)

2. Fear for Personal Safety

Women fear that they will be found and assaulted by their batterer while at the EAU. Many women know that their batterer is trying to find them and the EAU is a central and public location. For many women confidentiality is still critical to maintaining their family's safety and they reported: "Batterers know to check the EAU," "I fear running into people that know you and know your batterer," and "I won't feel safe at the EAU because my batterer is always trying to find me." In addition, women fear the EAU because they either have experienced or heard about the violent and unsanitary conditions that put their health and safety as well as that of their children at risk.

- “The doctor said the EAU would not be good for my daughter – she has a weak immune system. I said I’ll just go back to my abuser. For a moment it was good – but the abuse is going on all over again. I’m not safe there at all. Everyday is something new. Everyday it’s getting worse. There’s no room at my mother’s to stay and my birthday is coming up – I know something is going to happen.” (7/04)
- “My batterer lives out there (near the EAU) and due to the EAU being an emergency assistance unit for all five boroughs, I am scared to death. If he sees me he might kill me because I had him arrested and they let him go. I also won my case in family court against him, so I know he is extremely mad and awaiting his chance for revenge.” (7/03)
- “I know if I have to go to the EAU I won’t be safe, and being on the streets is not safe either. Going back to my abuser isn’t safe because I am scared of the outcome.” (6/03)

Over half the women issued DPE discharges from emergency domestic violence shelters have no other option but to go to the EAU. When they arrive they are supposed to be referred to the HRA NOVA (No Violence Again) unit, where NOVA staff determines whether they are eligible to return to confidential domestic violence emergency shelter. Although women discharged from DV shelters because their length of stay expires come to NOVA armed with letters from their shelter caseworkers stating that they are still in danger, few actually meet NOVA's criteria for being in imminent danger. Thus few women, if any, are found eligible for confidential domestic violence shelter and many women reported being placed in non-confidential shelters that were in close proximity to their abusers. Moreover, the NOVA unit is supposed to ensure that abusers are not contacted by workers in the Eligibility Investigation Unit (EIU) of the EAU, who verify former places of residency as part of the standard procedure to determine one's eligibility for homeless shelter. However, women reported that this is not always the case, and that they were terrified when their abusers were contacted by investigators.

- “I went to the EAU and it was bad. You start to walk with insecurity and a lot of fear. They were sending me to sleep very close to where I was abused. On the third night the EAU placed me four blocks from my abuser. I tried to tell the NOVA unit but they didn’t speak any Spanish. They didn’t give me DV status.” (7/04)

- “I had an order of protection and a letter stating that I was high-risk. NOVA didn’t believe it. NOVA didn’t realize that if they contact my abuser he will come and find me. They sent me to the EIU and there they wanted to contact my abuser and my abuser’s mother. I couldn’t believe this was happening to me.” (4/04)
- “The EAU told me I was no longer a DV client (eligible for confidential domestic violence shelter) – they tell you to just keep your stay-away order on you. I told them my batterer could meet me and kill me and they just say, ‘keep your stay-away order on you at all times.’ One woman at the EAU was worried about her stalker finding her. She was a former [battered women’s shelter] client that had an administrative discharge. On May 18 he found her and cut her face. I always fear for my safety. I know my batterer is upset and that he’s looking for me.” (3/04)
- “They sent me to a shelter in Brooklyn that was one block away from my batterer. I lived there in constant fear. Then they sent me to the Bronx, to a shelter that is not confidential. The address is public – they submitted that information to my kids’ school. My batterer’s mother works for the Board of Education. They don’t care.” (9/03)
- “They denied me (eligibility for emergency domestic violence shelter) because I don’t have police reports. I went to the EIU and they asked me for the last address I was at and I had to give them my abuser’s address. I’m concerned. He’ll know I was at the EAU and common sense will tell him to go there.” (6/03)

3. Difficulty of finding permanent housing within the allotted time

Women stated that it is not realistic to be expected to obtain housing and/or housing subsidies within the time allotted for shelter stay. Coupled with the lack of affordable housing and myriad processing delays are barriers that are unique to survivors of domestic violence. For example, as part of the abuse, many women were not allowed to work or obtain job training. But, landlords tend to prefer people who have an employment history. In addition, women mentioned that the 42-days they are required to wait before submitting their housing applications further limits their ability to obtain housing within the time allotted for shelter stay.

- “I am hopeful that I will find an apartment. Although right now I have no time to search because I have no childcare. I have to carry two kids with me – one is sick and it’s getting hot. So, I have to get the best apartment I can, given that I don’t have much time to look. The shelter I am in now has curfew and you have to sign in and out for everything. It’s a stressful situation – I sit back and say, ‘what else can go wrong?’” (7/03)
- “I feel domestic violence victims should stay in their DV shelter until they receive permanent housing because people in regular family shelters stay until they receive permanent housing so domestic violence victims should get the same exact treatment. Battered women should not have a time limit due to their situation. It’s just not fair to battered women who finally got the heart to leave their batterer and the system takes them in and makes them feel safe and after a few months they throw them back into the streets.” (7/03)
- “I got up at 6 AM and went to the welfare office, went to the required classes and workshops, found childcare, and went to school. I did everything. I had my Section 8, found an apartment, and I was waiting for inspection when I was discharged. That apartment didn’t come through for me because the landlord didn’t pass inspection and lost his EARP license. Now I’m back in square one - in (DHS Transitional) shelter and looking for housing.” (6/03)

4. Negative effects on children and family

Women are concerned about the physical and emotional impact the DPE discharge has, or will have, on their children. Women and shelter advocates concur that a DPE discharge creates even more instability in the lives of the children and the emotional and behavioral impact of these sudden changes is severe. It is upsetting for the women to witness the progress their children made while in shelter be reversed. One advocate stated, “Just when the children start healing the rug is pulled out from under them.” In addition, many women spoke about the impact the unsanitary conditions at the EAU have on their children’s physical health.

- “Psychologically it’s affected my children a lot. It’s made them anxious. They were stable and now they are feeling unstable – they’ve fallen off equilibrium. I’ve noticed that they’re frustrated. They count the days they are in shelter and they are very aware of the process. They were accepted to camp this summer but they couldn’t go because of the discharge.” (7/04)

- “I had all three children with me and they all got sick at the EAU. They got bad throat infections in just 2 days ... all three of them, from the little one on up. The EAU gave us referrals to go to the ER. The doctors at the hospital showed me their throats and I couldn’t believe how red their throats were.” (8/03)
- “It is already too much for the children to be victims of domestic violence and to witness their mothers being beat and abused. To have them move from place to place is not the best life that you can offer to a child. We are not in the shelter because we want to, but we’re here for our protection and the children.” (6/03)
- “For them this is something else that makes them unstable. They say, ‘Again! We have to move to another place?’ It’s aggravating because the best we can do for both of them is to give them stability. My oldest was not allowed to visit me at the shelter. He’s 9 years old and he said he felt rejected. I had to lie and tell him it’s safer for him not to see me there. His school has a summer break and he was supposed to stay with me for two weeks, but he’s at school and not with me because there’s no place for him.” (6/03)
- “I worry about my kid getting asthma. A lot of children have asthma and the EAU is dirty ... it aggravates it. And when you go to the hospital you lose your space at the EAU.” (6/03)

Conclusion:

This report represents the data collected over a thirteen month period. While this information is not conclusive, it provides useful qualitative data to compliment monthly surveys tracking the number of women discharged from HRA domestic violence emergency shelter. We are continuing this research because the information tells us where survivors are going, when they are discharged from shelter, and the specific ways in which these discharges impact survivors and their children. This report will be updated as we continue to interview additional women receiving DPE discharges.

We gratefully acknowledge the New York City Coalition of Domestic Violence Residential Providers and the many shelter advocates and caseworkers who provided assistance and support during the research phase of this report. Their counsel, extended time, and vast expertise helped to make this report possible. We also thank the survivors who shared their stories.

Prepared by:
Suzanne Marcus
New Destiny Housing Corporation