

**"I Could Have Kept That To Myself":  
Survivors' Disclosure of Domestic Violence  
and Prioritization of Safety When Seeking  
Services at Virginia Williams Family  
Resource Center**



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## Introduction

Local and federal laws provide protections for those seeking housing due to domestic violence (DV). To comply with these laws, the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center (VW) uses a two-part screening process: (1) clients receive a written DV screening form to complete along with other relevant intake VW paperwork when they arrive; and (2) DHS staff at VW, in the subsequent in-person interview, may inquire about a client's experience of DV. Study results demonstrate that the current VW screening process does not facilitate survivors' informed choices about disclosure, and that staff response to disclosure does not consistently center survivor safety.

Survivors come to VW with a range of experiences of DV, and many are living in an unsafe situation at

the time they seek help. Research demonstrates that even in the process of seeking support, survivors vary in their willingness to disclose their experiences of DV; they balance their priorities and risks at any given time and evaluate the benefits and risks of disclosure in a given context. Service providers, like those at VW, should not push survivors to disclose.

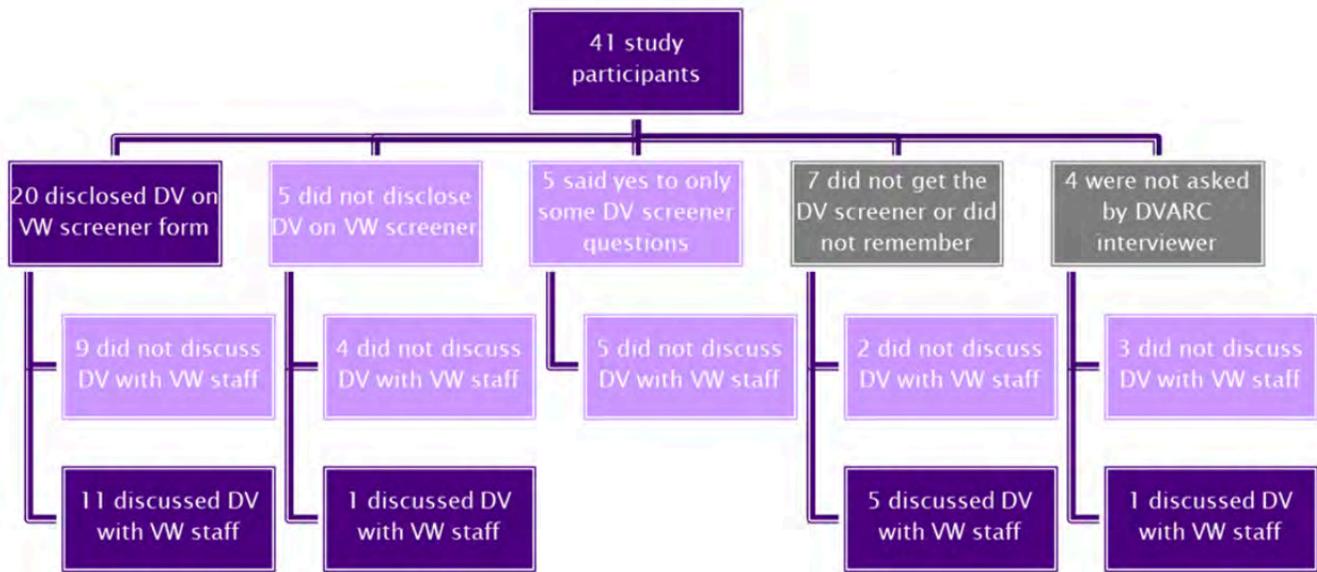
However, service providers must take responsibility for providing opportunities for disclosure to all potential survivors, in part by ensuring that clients have the necessary information to allow them to make informed choices. When survivors do disclose, providers must respond to that disclosure in a supportive and sensitive manner, centering survivors' sense of risk.

## Issues with Survivors' Disclosure of DV

At VW, the 41 survivors in this study made a range of decisions regarding disclosure of the DV they endured. Twenty-five survivors recalled disclosing DV on the brief VW screener form as a part of their routine intake paperwork. However, only eleven of these individuals--less than half--reported that a DHS staff member at VW followed up on their reported experience of DV in the subsequent intake conversation. Five survivors reported that they did not

disclose their DV experiences on the screener; \* of these individuals, only one discussed DV verbally with a staff member. In sum, DHS staff at VW and survivors did not consistently have the conversations needed to determine how DV factored into survivors' housing needs, and what services would increase their safety. Four specific issues likely contributed to the absence of a discussion about DV in the intake conversation.

\*Of the remaining 11 survivors interviewed, four were part of an earlier version of the interview in which this question was not included, and seven did not recall completing the forms.



## Issue 1: The screening form is neither clear nor comprehensive

From May 2018 - May 2019, staff gave all VW clients a four-question DV screening form as part of the intake process (the full text of the screening form is included in the Appendix). These questions ask: (1) whether violence was currently the cause of homelessness; (2) whether the client had been physically or sexually assaulted since the onset of this episode of homelessness; if the client had accessed DV services; and (4) if the client would like to be connected with services for DV.

These screening questions do not clearly represent the breadth and complexity of abuse that connects with survivors' housing instability. For example, although the form inquires only about violence, many survivors in our study had DV experiences that went beyond strictly physical or sexual violence.

For example, Sharon\* was living at a friend's house, but was forced to move out to protect her friend from her abusive ex-partner's stalking behavior. She explained:

Well, he made it hard for me to stay at the places, like, the place where I was staying with one of my friends. She has kids and it's interfering with her family,... so I had to move. I didn't want to endanger or make her feel uncomfortable with her kids.

In order to be sure that survivors have the option to disclose abuse if they choose, the screening questions must clearly request information about a broader scope of DV experiences, allowing more survivors to understand that their experiences are considered relevant.

\*All names used in this report are pseudonyms.

## Issue 2: Survivors' privacy concerns may limit their disclosure

Survivors expressed concerns about the privacy of their personal information in a number of ways. Five of the 30 survivors who remembered completing the written VW DV screener form reported that they marked “no” to all of the DV questions; five reported responding “no” to some of the DV questions and “yes” to others, despite the fact that they were, indeed, survivors of DV. Participants took these actions either because they did not want to discuss their experiences at all, or because they only wanted to discuss it in person.

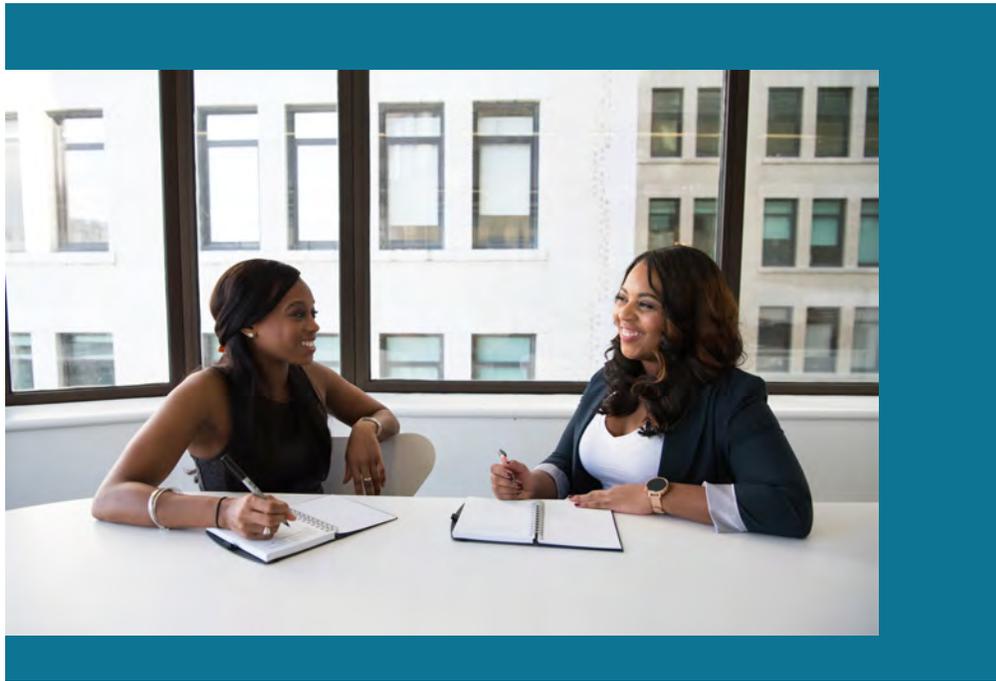


They also expressed hesitance because they did not know what would happen to information they disclosed. Survivors shared that, to facilitate disclosure, they needed a sense that staff would respond with care, trust that information would remain confidential, and an understanding that disclosure would be helpful. As Rita described:

[J]ust rewinding some of the things that happened in the past, I don't think I would be comfortable going into depth as far as what happened, to open some of those wounds all the way back up...I don't think I would want to share that outside of them knowing that I guess what's public information as far as going through the court system, things like that.

Sherry also described the need for a clear sense of confidentiality before she could comfortably discuss her situation:

I mean in my honest opinion, I think it should be a separate program for women who is going through these type of things. Because a lot of women or men or whoever the situation occurs, they don't like to repeat the situation they had. So I think that they should have a totally separate confidential program for people who have been through this type of situation. I don't think it should be mixed for everybody. I think they should have read it, and they should have someone there to pull you to the side, to talk more about it. Then they should offer different programs and different resources for people that's going through that.



### Issue 3: Staff was inconsistent in following up on DV disclosures

Only two survivors reported being referred to DV-specific staff while at VW; overall, however, DHS staff at VW were inconsistent in their response to disclosures of DV made by survivors in this study, regardless of whether they had disclosed on the screening form. Some survivors reported being asked directly about DV experiences, and disclosing to staff in response, while others reported no response to their explicit disclosures. Stephanie shared:

**Interviewer:** Did anyone ask you about other—I guess she asked you a little bit. Did she ask you more about your relationship with the baby's father?

**Stephanie:** Not really.

**Interviewer:** Not really. Did it come up in the process with anybody else or anywhere else in the—

**Stephanie:** No.... she [the study recruiter] asked me more than my case worker [did]. It's like as soon as I said I didn't press charges, she just left it alone.

Given the distress many survivors feel at the time they are seeking services and the difficulty of sharing personal information, DHS staff at VW need to respond to disclosures with care and interest. Generally, survivors may not know what resources exist. In Theresa's case, the staff member asked if she was "a victim of domestic violence;" when she said yes, the staff member "just kept going." She noted her disappointment, and her subsequent reluctance to press for services:

I was still just like overwhelmed in the middle of leaving my apartment. So... I really didn't press [staff] out for it. I just kind of accepted what [staff] gave me... I feel like [staff] should have, after every question, maybe you know, asked a little bit more, if the answer was yes. If the answer was yes, because I didn't understand what was the point of asking me about domestic violence, to not have any more services. Because I could have kept that to myself.

## Issue 4: Staff were not consistently responsive to survivors' safety concerns

Many survivors noted that the assistance they were offered at VW did not take their circumstances, including their safety concerns, into account. Some survivors were asked directly about their immediate needs or about the factors that contributed to their homelessness, while others reported that they were not asked about their current housing status at all. When they were not asked these questions, survivors did not have the opportunity to disclose the urgency of their situation, or the way in which their immediate safety was involved.

Even when survivors disclosed the lack of safety in their immediate situation, DHS staff at VW were not responsive. Ciara recounted that staff explained that she was not eligible for assistance, and that her level of risk was ignored:

Well, they denied me services because my ex-husband receives services in DC for my children. And I'm like, we were at the same address and I'm in a domestic situation. I'm trying to leave him. And they're like, "Oh, well, until he terminates services or you have proof that you have custody." I'm like, proof that I have custody? So you're telling me I need to go to the courthouse, file custody, wait for a court date, and then come back? We're homeless. I feel as though if you're in a domestic situation, you shouldn't get turned away. It's like, she's like, "Well, can you at least sleep there [with her abusive partner] tonight?"

Survivors felt particularly uncomfortable with staff's insistence that they stay with family or friends. Survivors like Nadia simply did not have these networks:

Like I don't know nobody in D.C., but they forced me to put three people's names on that list of friends or relatives that I know in D.C. I'm like, the only person I knew is the person who was beating on me. So how am I going to put these people? And they was like, "Well ma'am, you got to put somebody on there."

Other survivors, like Adrian, had already considered and rejected relying on their networks, for solid reasons:

But they kept telling me, "Oh, can you call this person? Can you call this person?" They were trying to get me to call everybody that I knew just to see if I could stay with them. But nobody is going to [take] me and my three kids in. That's what they didn't understand.

Survivors were particularly upset when they learned that staff had taken it upon themselves to contact their friends or family without their knowledge or consent, while they were in the VW waiting room.

In sum, although abuse played a significant role in survivors' need for housing support, survivors had many reasons to hesitate in disclosing their experiences. This issue was compounded by the fact that neither the information provided by VW nor the conversations with DHS staff at VW facilitated informed choices about disclosure. Even when survivors did disclose, staff responded inconsistently and did not center survivors' safety, at times pressuring them to rely on their social networks or to return to unsafe situations. Given the importance of DV screening when determining the best resources to provide, survivors' tenuous safety at the time they are seeking services, and the legal requirements that VW must take DV into account when making referrals,<sup>1</sup> we offer the following recommendations for the VW process.

***Survivors had many reasons to hesitate in disclosing their experiences.***

## Recommendation 1: Revise DV questions on the VW intake form

We recommend that VW expand its definition of DV to be more inclusive of non-physical tactics of power and control, consistent with the range of abusive behaviors that contribute to housing instability. Specifically, to support Recommendation 1, we suggest that VW:

- Work with the local anti-DV organizations to explicitly define DV to include experiences beyond physical and sexual violence, such as financial abuse, isolation, intimidation, threats of violence, stalking, psychological violence, etc.;
- Revise the DV questions on the VW intake form to include the expanded definition of violence; and
- Ensure that the wording of questions captures the many ways abuse and housing instability intersect, including an expanded definition of what constitutes “fleeing DV” (e.g., the screen might ask: Did DV contribute to your current housing instability?).

## Recommendation 2: Ensure that survivors have the information and environment they need to make informed choices about disclosure

We recommend that, to support survivors’ right to make choices about their own information, and to comply with federal and local law and policy regarding disclosure, DHS staff at VW:

- Ensure that conversations with staff are in confidential and/or private spaces, including front desk conversations, so that public disclosure is not required;
- Clearly communicate confidentiality policies regarding disclosure of DV, with respect to both the screening form, and the conversation with staff;
- Provide clear and consistent information, with the goal of ensuring each client understands how the information they share will be used, including the connection between DV disclosure and service eligibility; and
- Place notice of rights posters at entrance points, in the waiting room, and other heavily trafficked areas of VW to ensure survivors of domestic violence are on notice of VW’s obligations regarding protecting survivors’ confidentiality, and to ensure compliance with the confidentiality provisions set forth in the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013.<sup>2</sup>

### **Recommendation 3: Disseminate information about the prevalence of DV, and inform all clients about the range of resources available to survivors of DV**

Some survivors will choose not to disclose their history of DV or will decline to identify their experiences as physically violent in nature. This is particularly problematic in the VW context, given the prevalence of DV and its intersection with homelessness.

We recommend that VW provide information to all clients about DV by:

- Displaying regularly updated educational materials in the waiting room and other accessible places, that communicate the nature and prevalence of DV, and the intersection of DV and homelessness (e.g. the Power and Control Wheel, the Equality Wheel); and
- Making a regularly-updated list of DV resources available to all clients.

### **Recommendation 4: Train staff to follow up on disclosures of DV with sensitivity using survivor-centered and trauma-informed approaches that center safety**

When survivors choose to disclose, they may do so only on the intake paperwork, or only in conversation with staff.

We recommend DHS staff at VW:

- Respond to all disclosures of DV, in any form, with focus, empathy, and the goal of increasing survivor safety;
- Ensure that clients have the opportunity to talk with staff individually, without any other family members, including children, present;
- Discuss with survivors how any resources offered might affect their safety;
- Refrain from contacting anyone in a survivor's network, including family members and friends, to ask them to provide a place to stay, unless a survivor expressly requests such contact; and
- Assess the safety of survivors and their dependents before they leave VW, including a check-in about next steps.

See attached VW DV Screen for the full set of questions posed.

1. Is violence currently the cause of your homelessness? You left or were forced out of your home because you were not safe from abuse or violence: domestic, intimate partner, dating violence, stalking, emotional abuse, etc.

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. Don't know
- D. Declined

2. Since the start of this episode of homelessness of housing insecurity have you been:

	Yes	No	Don't know	Declined	Safety Concern
Assaulted or physically attacked (hitting, punching, shoving, etc.)					
Sexually assaulted or abused (unwanted or forced sexual activity, rape)					

3. Have you accessed other Domestic Violence Services? Remember, answering this question helps us better serve you. It will not affect your assistance.

Crime Victims  My Sister's Place  DASH  DCSAFE  House of Ruth  Other

4. Would you like us to connect you with services? The District of Columbia offers many services that you may find helpful, including counseling, advocacy, assistance with legal issues such as applying for a protection order and more.

Yes  No  Don't know

5. Do you have a history of domestic violence?

Yes No

If Yes, how many months since experience occurred? \_\_\_\_\_

# Endnotes

1. Eligibility for services within the Continuum of Care, D.C. Code Ann. Section 4-753.02.
2. Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act, 42 U.S.C. § 13701 (2013).