

**"I'm Still Homeless":  
Survivors' Outcomes at  
Virginia Williams Family  
Resource Center**



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## Introduction

The Virginia Williams Family Resource Center (VW) is the central point of intake for families experiencing homelessness or housing instability in DC. Based on staff's assessment, if families are determined to be eligible for services, they may receive prevention resources such as emergency rental and utility assistance, temporary shelter, or referrals to other community resources.<sup>1</sup> If they are placed in shelter, clients are entitled to receive case management and housing stabilization services during their stay. Staff's determination of whether families are eligible for services is therefore extremely consequential. This determination is based on whether the client has custody of children, is a DC resident, and whether other safe housing options are available to them. Clients must provide documentation to support that they meet these criteria.

The nature of VW's process for determining eligibility and allocating services can present challenges for all clients, but these challenges are intensified for those who are enduring acute or long-term trauma. Survivors may be in a state of heightened distress when they request services, and may have particular obstacles to providing detailed information and documentation. Indeed, while some survivors expressed appreciation for the resources they received, many in this research study described multiple ways the eligibility process itself created physical, material, and psychological burdens. For some, the VW experience increased, rather than decreased, their stress. We detail these issues below and make recommendations for addressing them.



# Issues with Survivors' Experiences with the Eligibility Process



Of the 41 DV survivors who participated in this study, 22 reported that VW deemed them eligible for services. Four of those deemed eligible were immediately given a housing placement, by being transported to either a shelter or hotel, while 18 received some other form of housing assistance. Many of those 18 received referrals to rapid rehousing – a city program that provides rental subsidies to unhoused families for a set period of one year, after which individuals are expected to be

able to pay their own rent. Some survivors received other sorts of housing-related referrals, including organizations that provided housing counseling, credit repair, mediation services for landlord and tenant issues, single family rehabilitation, and home purchasing workshops. Survivors' reported reasons for ineligibility varied but often involved insufficient documentation of homelessness. Survivors' experiences highlighted several issues to be addressed.



## Issue 1: The VW process is burdensome

Survivors described the process of seeking assistance from VW as being “too much.” The length of the wait time at VW was one potential source of this perception: Some participants reported a quick process, but almost half of the participants waited more than three hours to meet with a staff member, and seven reported waiting five hours or more. These waits were unpredictable, which increased the frustration of those waiting a long time, and survivors reported missing work or needing to find childcare as a result.

Survivors also found the process of filling out the required paperwork to be cumbersome for a variety of reasons, including that the questions were too numerous or too invasive. Cheryl\* discussed how her partner’s physical abuse affected her memory, making it difficult for her to meet the requirement to remember specific details about her past housing history:

I feel like some of those questions on the intake sheet at Virginia Williams [were] either too much or they’re not explaining it clear enough... I can’t remember an address that I had in [state] three years ago. I cannot remember that. Like I could tell you all a particular date from when I stay[ed] from here to here... Because being in that abusive relationship, like some of my memory went away, because I used to get kicked in my head a lot... So like some [things]...I don’t remember. But some stuff I do remember. And I asked [DHS staff member at VW], I was like, “I just cannot remember that particular date that I moved into this house.” They was like, “Well, you got to fill it out, or you’re going to have to go back and sit down.” I’m like, “I can’t remember.” Like I don’t understand why your last address can’t be good enough. If you’re homeless, you don’t have no address.

A significant burden for many survivors was VW’s requirement that they provide multiple forms of documentation as a threshold for service provision. Survivors stated that VW did not indicate what documentation would be required prior to their appointment; as a result, many had incomplete or inappropriate documents at their initial visit, requiring them to return and provide more paperwork as proof of their circumstances. Some staff asked survivors to bring multiple leases, eviction letters, proof of health insurance, other types of notarized letters, or different forms of identification. The more difficult the document was to access, the greater the burden on survivors,

especially if the documents were withheld by or connected to an abusive partner. In an effort to meet these requirements, survivors in our study reported returning to VW from 2 to 5 times. One survivor underscored the difficulty of these return visits for her job, where her situation had already caused strain:

She was like, “Well, you got to come back tomorrow.” I looked at her like, “For real? You know that I have a job, right? This is really short notice for my boss. This is not looking good for me. So I’m already on the chopping block at work so you’re just going to put me right on the block and just let them cut my head off.” She’s like, “Well, if you come back tomorrow first thing in the morning.” “Ma’am, I work the same hours you do. I just can’t leave work.” “Well, you’ll have to make sure you decide what’s more important.” And I walked out. I was like thank you for nothing.

### *Survivors in our study reported returning to VW from 2 to 5 times*

The burden of returning to VW multiple times was compounded when staff informed survivors that the same forms had to be filled out, from scratch, every time they came. At the time of the study, policy dictated that if a person did not have the proper documentation during a visit, all of their paperwork was discarded, and they started the intake process from the beginning when they returned. Leila described her frustration at having to return to VW and re-start the process after a long wait:

When I came back in there, she gave me another list, like small things, like a letter from a family or friend, or number of family or friend. And I was like, okay, I’ll bring them back tomorrow. And she said, Oh, if you come back tomorrow you have to do this process again. I’m like, okay, I just waited five hours and nobody couldn’t tell me that? I explained to her exactly why I was there at the front, because they make you open up soon as you walk in, in front of a room full of people. I had to do all of that in front of her and they couldn’t explain to me, well, these are the things you may need to proceed. If you need to go get them, go get them and come back.

\*All names used in this report are pseudonyms.

## Issue 2: Virginia Williams left many survivors without a satisfactory or safe resolution to their housing need

Many of the survivors we interviewed reported that at the end of their process with VW, they did not have viable housing options that made them feel safe. Ten survivors noted that after leaving VW, they had nowhere to go. Such outcomes left some feeling worse than they had when they began the process, and led some to report that the entire endeavor was a waste of time. Kim described her feelings about going through the process and leaving without support:

No one called. It's just, it's like I said, it's discouraging for people...who are seeking assistance. Walking into a situation like that and just not leaving with anything, no hope, no referrals, no, I guess, on next steps. Maybe if this wasn't the right fit, but we have other things that may be the right fit...maybe that would have changed my outlook on everything I've experienced. But I left feeling discouraged and embarrassed that I told all of these people I did not know my business, just for them to say it wasn't good enough.

Another survivor shared her frustration and hopelessness at the end of the process:

And in the process, she did not give me [any] resources. She didn't do anything. She didn't point me into another direction. And I was pleading to these people that I was in this situation, and that me and my children were homeless. And she basically told me that it was nothing they could do for me.

When survivors received referrals, some found them helpful, but for others these referrals did not increase their stability. Many of the shelter and hotline resources DHS staff at VW provided were already at capacity, had waiting lists, or provided a short-term rather than a desired longer-term option. In some cases survivors had already called the shelter options they were given or had gone to these programs prior to coming to VW and didn't get support, thereby rendering the resource unhelpful. Even longer-term housing options such as rapid rehousing were deemed not useful to some survivors because private landlords would not accept the vouchers, or because available housing was unlikely to increase their safety. As Viva explained:

My challenge is, now that I have [rapid rehousing], where am I going to be able to rent at, that's not a slumlord, or not in certain dangerous neighborhoods? The whole point of me being in my situation is because I'm like, I'm looking for safety. Running to safety doesn't mean that I'm trying to run into harm. That's counter[productive].

Some resources that VW provided to survivors did not match their particular circumstances. For example, one survivor was given a resource for single women despite stating that she was a mother of a young baby. Another survivor described how VW recommended she attend a housing program that had a 6:00 pm curfew, despite her explaining that she had a night job.





Some survivors reported that DHS staff at VW simply gave them a paper with a list of resources and ended the conversation without assistance in navigating these resources. One survivor described her frustration with the referral process this way:

Then you get transferred to another agency. And then it's within your hope that they will be able to assist you with proper accommodations, so that you can receive some sort of housing assistance. But it's not guaranteed. So it seems like Virginia Williams just collects your paperwork. And then they give you a recommendation to go to a different agency. So I'm not sure what their true purpose is, aside from collecting the paperwork. And it's just the same paperwork that they will then, I'm assuming, transfer over to the other agency. And if that's the case, then why could I have not gone to that agency first, and just given them everything the first time?

Due to the lack of housing options, survivors who left VW had to make difficult or dangerous choices. Some had to decide to take risks with their finances; this involved choosing to max out their credit cards to stay in hotels until they could no longer afford it. Others had to beg to stay with family and friends in conditions that were suboptimal or where doing so could compromise their family member's housing arrangement. Others considered returning to their abusive partner. One survivor shared:

### ***Due to the lack of housing options, survivors who left VW had to make difficult or dangerous choices***

I was upset. I was discouraged. And it just left me with the thought, well, maybe I'm not in so much danger. Maybe I can just stick it out a little bit longer, just try not to make him upset or anything. Because I felt like I was walking on eggshells where I was with my son's dad. I was just trying to make it the best that I could. I was there for a few more months after that for a little while.

Finally, there were survivors for whom the VW process did not assist with their housing needs, and also provided obstacles to accessing food and healthcare: Five survivors were told they had to cancel food and health benefits that they were receiving from another jurisdiction in order to increase their odds of becoming eligible for housing services in DC.



### Issue 3: The VW process lacked transparency

In addition to the burdensome nature of the process and the limitations of the assistance many survivors received, the process at VW left many survivors confused. Some reported that they were unsure which services they were eligible for, and what eligibility requirements had to be met. In these cases DHS staff at VW either did not provide any explanation about the process, or provided information in a way that was not clear.

In some cases, survivors experienced inconsistent treatment from different staff members, with staff asking for different paperwork or sharing different information across multiple visits to VW. This inconsistency led to survivor frustration and worry, and exacerbated distrust.

Survivors shared that they wanted a clear process where staff explained what was happening, why it was happening, and what they should expect by the end. For example, Shelia was eligible for services, but she had trouble understanding the next steps she needed to take. She stated:

**Shelia:** [DHS staff at VW] were helpful. But as far as like the procedure or the way they have things set up, it's a little all over the place. Because, you don't know where you're supposed to go if you do have an appointment, or if you don't have an appointment, or if you're just walking in, or you know what I'm saying?

**Interviewer:** Anything that you would change, or you would like to see?

**Shelia:** Maybe something that kind of gives me more information on what's going to happen. So, I went there on [date]. I wasn't going to the next step till the [date]. So between [date 1 and date 2], I'm sitting like, okay—Now what? And so, what's really, even though they said that I'm eligible for the assistance, it's basically I'm thinking like, okay, what's going to happen? How is it going to happen?



# Recommendations

To improve the process, we recommend that VW: (1) simplify the eligibility process and (2) increase transparency of the eligibility process from intake to outcome. We provide specific guidance below to implement both data-driven recommendations.

## Recommendation 1: Simplify the process of determining housing assistance eligibility and comply with existing law

VW needs to improve its process, to be consistent with trauma-informed practice (practices that recognize and respond to trauma) and ease survivors' stress and frustration.

We recommend that VW:

- Adopt an intake system that includes document retention and allows returning clients to complete an previous intake rather than starting from scratch;
- Upon client arrival, review the service sought and verify that clients have the required paperwork before collecting any personally identifying information or starting a record in HMIS;
- Implement low-barrier approaches to eligibility,<sup>2</sup> including alternative methods for survivors to certify that it is not safe for them to remain in current housing or to collect required documentation. These methods should include the option of a survivor's sworn self-certification;
- Utilize needs-based eligibility assessments that center survivors' lived experience;<sup>3</sup> and
- Determine survivors' DC residency without requiring documentary or other proof, in compliance with D.C.'s Continuum of Care for Individuals and Families Who Are Homeless, which states: "The Mayor shall determine that a person seeking shelter by reason of domestic violence ... is a resident of the District *without receiving demonstration of District residency.*" **D.C. Code § 4-753.01(c) (3)(B)**, available at <https://code.dccouncil.us/us/dc/council/code/sections/4-753.01.html> <sup>4</sup>



## Recommendation 2: Increase the transparency of the intake and eligibility process

A transparent VW eligibility process would increase the likelihood that staff will provide the assistance required for DV survivors, and that they will do so in a manner that does not reproduce or exacerbate trauma.

We recommend that VW:

- Communicate clear, concise guidance on VW's website regarding:
  - who qualifies for benefits,
  - what benefits are available,
  - what the intake process will entail, including estimated time,
  - documentation required for benefit eligibility, and
  - helpful items to bring to ease the waiting period (diapers, formula, snacks, water, toys for the children, etc.);
- Minimize and communicate about length of time survivors wait at VW
  - document the amount of wait time for each client and make efforts to reduce it;
  - follow the waiting room practices of other administrative agencies, such as the Department of Motor Vehicles, in communicating, in real time, information about the order in which clients will be seen;
- VW move the eligibility process to an online platform or provide an option to complete that process by phone to decrease the financial and time costs required to engage in the assessment process:
  - once the necessary forms are completed, survivors can be provided with an appointment time in order to reduce the wait time at Virginia Williams.
- When a survivor is deemed ineligible for services:
  - explain the reason(s) clearly, both verbally and in writing;
  - notify the survivor about concrete action steps they can take if they decide to reapply; and
  - identify alternative resources, including DV services.





### **Recommendation 3: Incorporate individual advocacy efforts within the eligibility process**

When participants left VW, they often lacked a sense of how: (1) to pursue the assistance they were deemed eligible to receive; (2) become eligible for assistance; (3) increase their immediate safety; or (4) improve their housing circumstances. Based on participants' experiences and our own expertise in best practices in supporting survivors, we recommend that Virginia Williams:

- Establish an exit interview process to help individuals develop clear action steps to navigate their appointments and/or to make changes to facilitate their housing eligibility; and
- Create collaborative referral processes with the DV community, including organizations serving culturally and linguistically specific communities, to help survivors access alternative resources to improve wellbeing and safety.

# Endnotes

1. DC Department of Human Services. Important Information and Facts About Homeless Services. [https://dhs.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dhs/page\\_content/attachments/Homeless%20Services%20VWFRFC%20Fact%20Sheet-NEW.pdf](https://dhs.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dhs/page_content/attachments/Homeless%20Services%20VWFRFC%20Fact%20Sheet-NEW.pdf)
2. Nnawulezi, N., Godsay, S., Sullivan, C.M., Marcus, S., & Hacskaylo, M. (2018). The influence of low-barrier and voluntary service policies on survivor empowerment in a domestic violence organization. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 88(6), 670-680. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000291>
3. Sullivan, C., & Zeron-Lopez, G. (2020). *Assessing for and appropriately responding to the housing needs of domestic and sexual violence survivors: A decision tree as an alternative to a scoresheet*. National Resource Center on Domestic Violence: Harrisburg, PA. [https://safehousingpartnerships.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/CoordinatedEntryPapers-DecisionTree\\_0.pdf](https://safehousingpartnerships.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/CoordinatedEntryPapers-DecisionTree_0.pdf)
4. Continuum of Care for individuals and families who are homeless. DC Code § 4-753.01. <https://code.dccouncil.us/us/dc/council/code/sections/4-753.01.html>