



Flexible Funding for Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Survivors

Frequently Asked Questions

A resource for domestic violence & sexual assault service providers

1) What is flexible funding?

Flexible funding is financial support provided to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault (DV/SA) to address whatever barrier exists between the survivor and safe housing stability. Financial support can be provided in a number of ways depending on the survivor's needs, the parameters of the funding source and organizational policy. Flexible funding can include payments to a third party requested by the survivor (i.e., a landlord, child care provider, mechanic, health care provider and others), the use of an agency credit card to purchase necessities or services requested by the survivor, and cash assistance provided directly to the survivor.

2) Why is flexible funding such an important housing strategy for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault?

The ability for survivors to maintain or access safe permanent housing can be significantly limited by the cascading impact of both domestic violence and sexual assault. Economic abuse from a partner may leave domestic violence survivors with poor credit, evictions, an uneven work history or even a criminal record. Sexual violence can jeopardize a person's housing, and lack of safe housing and homelessness can increase the risk of sexual assault. Victims may not feel safe or comfortable at home after being assaulted due to the impact of trauma and may not be able to afford to break their lease.

These barriers compromise a survivor's housing stability long after the survivor has escaped the abuse and may be compounded for survivors with limited resources and/or from historically marginalized communities. Further, the social isolation associated with domestic and sexual violence can contribute to "network impoverishment," which refers to the lack of a social safety net for those on the verge of homelessness. Defined by research on racial inequity and homelessness conducted by the [Center for Social Innovation's Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities](#), network impoverishment refers to how the social network of poor people of color often functions in an impoverished state and significantly limits the emergency options available to people in crisis.¹

For many survivors, and particularly poor or low-income survivors of color, an immediate but otherwise manageable crisis can quickly snowball into a catastrophe resulting in homelessness. Culturally-specific organizations working in historically marginalized communities have a long history of using flexible funding to support survivors. Their groundbreaking work paved the way for the use of flexible funding as an innovative practice now increasingly utilized by mainstream programs.

Research shows that emergency financial assistance helps survivors achieve and maintain housing stability. A longitudinal evaluation of the District Alliance for Safe Housing's (DASH) flexible funding program in Washington, DC found that this brief, relatively inexpensive intervention may increase housing stability—94% of clients were housed 6 months after funding was received.² Evaluation of the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence's DV Housing First (DVHF) model showed that the impact of flexible funding, a core component of the model, was multifaceted. It allowed agencies to reach a broader group of survivors by offering a range of options for housing stability and also better meet the needs of survivors not served in emergency shelter.³ International aid studies also show that direct funds to those in need have immediate and long-term positive impacts.⁴

3) What are examples of flexible funding grants?

Flexible funding is used to support survivors' housing stability in several ways:

- As bridge support to help a survivor transition from temporary shelter to permanent housing, such as:
 - Moving expenses
 - Storage fees
 - Security deposit
 - First month's rent
 - Utility expenses

- As a strategy to prevent homelessness, including costs that can directly or indirectly impact housing stability, such as:
 - Rent and/or rental arrears
 - Enhanced safety features for the unit (locks, alarms, security system)
 - Automobile repair, loans, insurance, impound/reposition
 - Help expunging prior convictions from record
 - Child care
 - Medical bills
 - School tuition or job training
 - Travel for court appointments
 - Children's needs that can build resilience for the child and peace of mind for the parent

- As a tool used in concert with other housing advocacy approaches to address survivors' housing needs. For example:
 - Flexible funding is used within the context of [DV Housing First \(DVHF\)](#), a model that supports survivors in maintaining current housing or rapidly accessing new safe and stable housing while providing advocacy and support to rebuild their lives free from abuse. The DVHF model includes flexible funding along with survivor-driven, trauma-informed mobile advocacy and community engagement. Individualized flexible funding is used to support housing access and stability and is not limited to rent or one-time grants. Partnerships with housing providers, including landlords, increases housing access for survivors and supports broader systems change.

4) What are the core components of a flexible funding program?

The following four elements are core to a flexible funding program. They help to facilitate the access and support needed to counter the isolation and economic disempowerment associated with domestic violence and sexual assault that can lead to housing instability.

Low-barrier access

Flexible funds must be accessible for those who need immediate assistance. Requirements for survivors to produce documentation verifying the abuse should be minimal to none, and there must be no service requirements or preconditions in order to receive help. Advocates can effectively determine when flexible funding can assist with stabilizing safe housing without a complicated determination process. Advocates can make sound assessments by establishing a relationship with the survivor, using a trauma-informed approach, and developing a trusting relationship through listening and affirmation. If there are no limitations posed by funds available, there should be no cap on the amount of assistance a survivor can request or limited number of times a survivor can obtain support. This is grounded in the understanding that every survivor's situation is unique and the complex nature of domestic violence and sexual assault often requires ongoing support. All decisions should be informed by how effectively the flexible funding will directly or indirectly support housing stability.

Swift dissemination of funds

Flexible funding should be provided to survivors within 24 to 48 hours from the time of the request to effectively respond to the crisis threatening housing stability. Often this requires an organizational structure that minimizes layers of bureaucracy and empowers program advocates working directly with survivors to make the immediate funding decisions. This can include providing program advocates with discretion over a flexible funding budget (i.e., program advocates are empowered to determine the grant amounts and frequency they provide grants within their flexible funding program budget).

Survivor-driven advocacy

To support housing stability, advocacy should be available alongside provision of flexible funding grants. Through the survivor-advocate relationship, the kind of advocacy and funding needed to support ongoing stability can be meaningfully determined. This will look different for each survivor and may include emotional support or counseling, systems navigation, help with employment access, immigration or civil legal advocacy, support for the children and beyond. Regardless of the level of advocacy the survivor wants or needs, advocates must always offer safety planning before, during and after the flexible funding grant is provided. Housing and landlord advocacy is often required to ensure survivors are safe in their homes and that their full protections under local and federal laws are provided. Through partnerships with faith-based organizations, community resources and other service providers, advocates can often leverage flexible funding to increase the scope and reach of the assistance provided.

Flexibility

A flexible funding program should be just that, flexible. Addressing the barriers that exist for a survivor achieving housing stability can be direct, such as paying for rent, back rent, or utilities arrears. Or it can be indirect, such as helping to pay for travel, childcare, or car repair. Combining public and private funds to finance flexible funding can provide programs with the latitude needed to address the diversity of need.

5) How do advocates determine when a flexible funding grant is appropriate?

As mentioned above, using a trauma-informed, survivor-driven approach, the advocate should work to establish a relationship with the survivor to assess their needs. Flexible funding is typically effective for survivors who are likely able to maintain stability once the immediate crisis (e.g., impending eviction, car repair, child care) is addressed. However, each situation is unique. Some survivors may need more intensive support than flexible funding alone can provide. In this case, flexible funding might be used to supplement other longer-term resources to meet critical needs not eligible under other funding sources. Flexible funding should always be offered with ongoing advocacy and safety planning.

Michigan State University researcher and the District Alliance for Safe Housing in Washington, DC documented DASH’s process for making flexible funding grants. [DASH’s Step-by-Step Process from Assessment to Award](#) is a 3-page handout detailing 18 steps for flexible funding from assessment to award such as survivor’s initial contact, exploration of services and assessment of need, decision-making protocol, and payment of the award.

6) How are flexible funding programs financed and administered?

Flexible funding programs are financed in a variety of ways, such as through development of a public-private funding partnership, utilization of charitable foundation funding, fundraising appeals to the community using a strengths-based marketing approach, and/or through state, local, or federal funding. In 2016 the Department of Justice’s Office of Victims of Crime (OVC) issued a final rule to clarify the use of Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funds, including the use of VOCA to support safe and stable housing for survivors of domestic and sexual violence. The final rule is designed to provide State VOCA administrators with maximum flexibility to address survivors’ housing needs, particularly as a result of their victimization.⁵ The VOCA final rule specifies that funds can be used for:

- Expenses related to the relocation of victims (generally where necessary for the safety and well-being of a victim), including, but not limited to:
 - Reasonable moving expenses, storage fees
 - Security deposits on housing
 - Travel expenses to relocate
 - Rental expenses or back rent
 - Utilities and utility startup costs
 - Other costs incidental to relocation to such housing
 - Transitional housing costs to support transitional housing for victims (generally, those who have a particular need for such housing, and who cannot safely return to their previous housing, due to the circumstances of their victimization);
- Shelter for victims of domestic violence or human trafficking, as well as victims of sexual assault where a victim needs to move;
- Children’s needs related to support for childcare, children’s health needs and counseling, particularly if the need is directly related to support services being provided to victims and secondary victims of crime; and
- Transportation needs related to accessing support services.

Specific examples of how state and local agencies are funding and operating flexible funding programs for survivors include:

- [The Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#) received an initial investment from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to support 13 agencies across the state in implementing DV Housing First. Half of the funds granted were to be used for survivor-defined flexible financial assistance. Flexible funding is a key service component for DV Housing First, which has expanded throughout Washington State through ongoing Gates Foundation funding, other private foundation funding, and funds from a public-private partnership through King County/Building Changes. The advantages of flexible financial assistance have been integrated in King County and City of Seattle strategies to support not only survivors of domestic and sexual violence, but also to prevent homelessness among culturally specific populations and youth.

- [Violence Free Colorado \(Formerly the Colorado Coalition Against Domestic Violence\)](#) worked collaboratively with the [Colorado State's Division of Criminal Justice \(DCJ\), Office for Victims Programs \(OVP\)](#) that identified housing for victims of crime as a Special Project for the use of additional VOCA Victim Assistance funds received in Colorado. Together they developed a 20-month Housing for Crime Victims Special Project, funded through VOCA, and launched 8 project sites across the state. The project sites follow evidence-based models of long-term housing for victims of crime such as, the Domestic Violence Housing First (DVHF) approach and Rapid Re-Housing. Examples of supportive services provided with VOCA funds through these sites include transportation assistance, temporary rental assistance, and other types of support. The core components of the project include survivor-driven mobile advocacy, community engagement, housing assistance, supportive services, and financial assistance, all provided with a low-barrier approach.
- [The California Office of Emergency Services \(Cal OES\)](#) is funding programs across the state to pilot the DVHF model. Sites are using VOCA funds to provide flexible financial assistance and mobile advocacy to survivors to help them avoid homelessness and achieve safety in housing. A process evaluation was conducted in 2017 by Sullivan et al. to document the DVHF model's impact on the lives of survivors and their children. Over the course of 2017, the evaluators gathered detailed information about the process, including the use of flexible funding, from key staff members, conducted site visits, and interviewed clients of the DVHF program.⁶
- [The Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women \(MCBW\)](#) used their [Allstate Foundation Purple Purse Moving Ahead](#) grant award to finance their flexible funding program for survivors and Allstate's Moving Ahead curriculum to train advocates on strategies for increasing survivor's economic empowerment. Drawing on the core flexible funding program elements discussed above, advocates were trained so they could submit requests to MCBW on behalf of survivors for a maximum of \$500 with the ability to request more if needed, and decisions are made on a case-by-case basis. MCBW received bonus money from Minnesota's Office of Justice Program to raise the cap they can provide to \$3,000.
- [The District Alliance for Safe Housing \(DASH\)](#) in Washington, DC piloted its Survivor Resilience Fund (SRF) through an innovative public-private partnership that included a local foundation and the DC Office on Victim of Services. Through DASH's non-residential housing resource center, advocates provide SRF grants, offer survivor-driven housing advocacy and safety planning. To meet survivor needs while adhering to funder guidelines, public funds are used for grants made for housing expenses such as back rent and security deposits, and private funds are used for other expenses which, if not paid, could pose a threat to a survivors' housing stability.

7) What do advocates need to know to ensure flexible funding grants do not impact a survivor's eligibility for public assistance?

It is critical that advocates avoid adversely impacting a survivor's ability to enroll in or take full advantage of public benefit programs as a result of a flexible funding grant, which can count as income. Advocates must always ask survivors about what public benefit programs they are enrolled in or may be eligible for and work with the survivors to maximize the impact of all possible supports. Advocates need to know the public benefit enrollment and recertification processes in their communities, which vary by state and jurisdiction depending on the specific benefit program. For example, with regard to TANF eligibility in Washington state, if the flexible funding grant is provided directly to a survivor during the month a survivor is applying for or renewing TANF benefits, it can count as income and that can potentially affect eligibility for TANF.⁷ In their [DV Housing First Toolkit](#), WSCADV provides a fact sheet for Washington State advocates on how to talk to survivors about this

process and offers advocacy strategies. A survivor can maximize both TANF and flexible funding resources so long as the grant is not provided during the month the survivor is applying for or renewing TANF.

8) Should flexible funding grants be payable directly to the survivors?

Evaluation research shows that flexible funding grants payable directly to the survivor can swiftly address critical needs.⁸ Providing cash assistance directly to survivors challenges false but long held assumptions about people in need being unequipped to make decisions that are in their best interest. In reality, survivors know much more precisely than advocates or others what will help or hinder their stabilization. For example, the purchase of a washing machine, [illustrated in this video](#) highlighting the importance of survivor-led advocacy, allowed a survivor to maintain her employment and as a result, maintain safe and stable housing. Funding that is truly flexible can help survivors address needs that indirectly support housing stability and often require direct cash assistance. Other examples of when flexible funding grants are payable directly to the survivor include when a survivor is required to make a payment directly to resolve outstanding debt, or the survivor does not want to disclose their status as a survivor by having a nonprofit DV program paying on their behalf.

9) How do organizations account for grants made directly to survivors to satisfy auditing and funding requirements while adhering to core program principles?

In their [DV Housing First Toolkit](#), WSCADV offers nonprofit organizations guidance on how to provide grants to individuals, which is permitted under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code under two certain conditions: 1) Disaster relief: A cash grant can be made to address an individual's need arising out of a disaster or emergency. The kinds of needs include but are not limited to: medical costs, temporary housing, financial aid to enable remaining at home or to meet rent or mortgage payments on a primary home; 2) Gifting, which the IRS defines as the transfer of an asset to another individual. The transfer cannot be contingent upon an event or action and the donor cannot have the ability to get the asset back. IRS code states individuals can give up to \$14,000 annually to others without the donor needing to pay taxes.⁹ WSCADV's document offers direct links to IRS code and guidance for appropriately documenting grants made to individual survivors, while strongly recommending that organizations engage a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) to determine appropriate financial reporting practices.

10) What outcome measures are used to track the impact of flexible funding?

Outcome measures should track the many ways in which flexible funding impacts survivors beyond housing stability. Emerging evaluation research shows that flexible funding impacts survivor's sense of well-being and safety and the well-being of their children.¹⁰ Researchers also examined mothers' perceptions of how receipt of flexible funding designed to increase their housing stability may have also impacted their children's safety, stress, mood and behavior.¹¹ Programs have qualitatively measured how the flexible, low-barrier, survivor-centered way in which the funds are disseminated impact survivor's experience with accessing resources. Ongoing evaluation research on flexible funding program outcomes, as well as flexible funding program tools and resources, are posted and regularly updated on [SafehousingPartnerships.org](#), located under the "[Flexible Funding](#)" subcategory of the "[Preventing Homelessness](#)" section.

You can find more information about the authors of this FAQ at the [National Alliance for Safe Housing \(NASH\)](#) and the [Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence \(WSCADV\)](#).



Questions? Visit SafeHousingPartnerships.org, a comprehensive collection of online resources to help communities expand access to an array of safe housing options for domestic and sexual violence survivors and to request TA, training and other support.

Endnotes

¹ Olivet, J., Dones, M., Richard, M., Wilkey, C., Yampolskaya, S., Beit-Arie, M. & Joseph, L. (2018). *Phase I Study Findings: Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities*. Center for Social Innovations. At: <http://center4si.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/SPARC-Phase-1-Findings-March-20181.pdf>

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⁵ Office for Victims of Crime (July 2016). Final Rule: Victims of Crime Act Assistance Program. U.S. Department of Justice. Federal Register / Vol. 81, No. 131, pp. 44515-44534. At: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2016-07-08/pdf/2016-16085.pdf>

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⁷ Washington Coalition Against Domestic Violence (n.d.) "Did you know that flex funding can affect a survivor's TANF benefits?" At: <https://wscadv.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/FLEX-FUNDING-and-TANF.pdf>

⁸ Sullivan, C.M. Bomsta, H., & Hacskaylo, M. (2016).

⁹ Washington Coalition Against Domestic Violence (n.d.). Financial Assistance and Grants by NonProfits to Individuals. At: <https://wscadv.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Financial-Assistance-and-Grants-by-Non-Profits-to-Individuals-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁰ Sullivan, C.M. Bomsta, H., & Hacskaylo, M. (2016).

¹¹ Bomsta, H., & Sullivan, C.M. (2018). Research Brief: IPV survivors' perceptions of how a flexible funding housing intervention impacted their children. At: <https://safehousingpartnerships.org/sites/default/files/2018-06/Research%20Brief-Bomsta%20Sullivan-How%20Flex%20Funding%20Impacts%20Children-6-2018.pdf>; Bomsta, H., & Sullivan, C.M. (2018). IPV Survivors' Perceptions of How a Flexible Funding Housing Intervention Impacted their Children *Journal of Family Violence*, Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-018-9972-5>.

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