

MetroWest Outreach Connection, Inc.

Health Through Housing

MetroWest Outreach Connection has received a grant from the **MetroWest Community Health Care Foundation** to initiate a new program, **Health Through Housing**, for victims of domestic abuse.

The Health Through Housing Program Collaborators

MetroWest Outreach Connection, Incorporated (MWOC) is an all-volunteer 501©3 non-profit organization. Our Homeless Prevention Program commenced on August 2, 2004. The Homeless Prevention Program provides financial assistance to eligible families and individuals who are in danger of eviction, foreclosure or are currently homeless. The program is designed to stabilize families and individuals in their existing homes, shorten the amount of time that individuals and families stay in shelters and assist individuals and families secure permanent housing. With this new and separate program, we have expanded our mission to include assisting victims of domestic violence.

Voices Against Violence (Voices) is a private, non-profit agency of South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC). Voices provide free and confidential services to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. These include a 24-hour hotline, crisis intervention, counseling and support groups, shelter/safe home services, and community outreach and education. All services are available in English, Spanish and Portuguese. When funds were available, they administered financial assistance programs including Expanded Transition to Independent Living, which offered one-time financial assistance to victims for rent, utility arrears and moving expenses. Transition to Home offered first and last months rent for those families who met the HUD definition of homelessness.

South Middlesex Legal Services (SMLS) is a nonprofit agency that provides innovative, high quality, free legal services to low-income residents of the region. SMLS helps clients with civil legal problems arising from evictions, homelessness, domestic violence, denials of benefits and health care coverage, improper refusal to provide public education services, consumer law issues, and the needs of the elderly. The courts, the private bar, social service groups and low-income people look to SMLS for tenacious advocacy on behalf of the area's poorest and most vulnerable citizens.

Health Through Housing

The connection between domestic violence, homelessness, and poor health is well documented and makes evident the need for communities to support the development and implementation of programs to help victims and their children acquire long term housing stabilization in order to reverse the negative health consequences of homelessness and trauma. **Health Through Housing** is just such a program.

Homelessness and Domestic Violence

According to a February 2007 report published by the National Law Center On Homelessness and Poverty entitled "*Lost Housing, Lost Safety: Survivors of Domestic Violence Experiencing Housing Denials and Evictions Across the Country*", domestic

violence is a leading cause of homelessness nationally, with 50% of cities surveyed **reporting domestic violence as the primary cause of local homelessness**. Victims and their children become homeless when they flee abuse or because they are either evicted or denied housing because of violence perpetrated against them. Once homeless, the path toward long-term, stable housing is fraught with a constellation of barriers.

“Our nation’s lack of affordable housing can dramatically reduce the options for women experiencing domestic violence, trapping them in abusive situations or forcing them and their children to become homeless if they leave. Women living in poverty are especially vulnerable. Despite this, domestic violence often becomes so severe that women leave their homes, even when they have no place to go. In fact, domestic violence is a major cause of homelessness in this country.”ⁱ The survivors often face significant debts from unpaid bills. These can adversely impact their ability to either secure their home once the batterer has been removed or find new permanent housing. Victims also face many unaddressed health problems directly related to domestic violence, often endured over long periods of time.

There is no current source of direct assistance funds to help victims and their children who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless because of domestic violence. For victims fleeing violence, the options are limited and poor. Most are unable to pay arrearages and have no immediate way to pay first, last month or security deposits to obtain new housing. Victims who are forced to leave their home and have no other viable choice but to enter the shelter system could remain there for as long as ten months. A family of three housed at Pathways Shelter in Framingham costs the state nearly \$5,100 per month. And not only is permanent housing a more humane long-term option for families, it is also cost effective. Funding for permanent or transitional housing would cost less than one third of that amount.

MetroWest Outreach Connection (MWOC) is collaborating with the following organizations in this program: Voices Against Violence (VAV) and South Middlesex Legal Services (SMLS). VAV provides free and confidential services to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault throughout the MetroWest region. SMLS helps clients with civil legal problems arising from evictions, homelessness, domestic violence, denials of benefits and health care coverage, improper refusal to provide public education services, consumer law issues, and the needs of the elderly.

There is an urgent need to bring stability into the lives of domestic violence victims in the areas of housing, health, education and employment. If society truly wants to help these people recover from their traumatic experiences, we have to make sure that they have access to the support systems they need. The Health Through Housing Program has the resources to help the domestic violence victims develop and implement a plan, secure needed resources and improve their overall health and well-being.

Our role in the program is to provide funds that assist families of domestic violence to obtain or maintain permanent housing - for rent, deposits, utility payments, furnishings, moving, storage, and housing start-up kits. In some cases we will provide emergency financial assistance to house families temporarily in motels until more permanent housing can be obtained. Legal intervention in eviction or subsidy termination can help

stabilize families without requiring a disruptive move from home and community. SMLS has historically worked closely with Voices and MWOC on such cases.

The following stories were told by survivors of domestic violence in testimony in 2001 before ***The Economic Stability Working Group of the Transition Subcommittee of the Governor's Commission on Domestic Violence.*** The stories illustrate the need to provide a safety net for survivors of domestic abuse in the form of funding to secure safe housing and to get a fresh start. It is one of the first steps in providing the services necessary to improve the health and well being of the family.

"I only wanted some help getting an apartment because me and my children are about to be homeless. I work full-time. I like to work. I was not looking to be supported. I just needed a little help in my time of need."

Heather, Survivor, Plymouth Hearingⁱⁱ

"Many women are prevented from leaving a domestic abuser because they don't have the financial means to support their families' safe departure and living expenses independent of their abusive spouse. I am disappointed my expectations for the length of my recovery were not so well projected early on in my transition from an abuse situation into a new life of my own. . . . The financial and other resources provided to me during this time have truly made the difference between my life and possible maiming or death and [between] healing or permanent decline in my emotional, mental, and physical health."

Cynthia, Survivor, Lawrence Hearingⁱⁱⁱ

"Unfortunately, if you have no money, you're stuck! If you don't have first, last and security for rent, you're on the street with your children. What are your options? Mine was stay with my batterer or go to the street."

Iris, Survivor, Plymouth Hearing^{iv}

ⁱ "Family Violence Prevention Fund," The Facts on Housing and Domestic Violence. Retrieved February 15, 2007, <http://www.endabuse.org>.

ⁱⁱ "Voices of Survival: The Economic Impacts of Domestic Violence. A Blueprint for Action" October 2002. The report was commissioned by *The Economic Stability Group of the Transition Subcommittee of the Governor's Commission on Domestic Violence*. The authors of the report were Janet Fender of the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance and Laurie Holmes of HarborCov. p. 9

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 23

^{iv} Ibid., p. 37

The **Health Through Housing Program** serves the following communities:

Ashland	Bellingham	Dover	Framingham	Franklin
Holliston	Hopedale	Hopkinton	Hudson	Marlborough
Medfield	Medway	Mendon	Milford	Millis
Natick	Needham	Norfolk	Northborough	Sherborn
Southborough	Sudbury	Wayland	Wellesley	Westborough