

Housing Protections for Domestic Violence Survivors

MassHousing

Special Needs Housing: Housing for Persons with Special Needs

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Overview

MassHousing's mission involves not only financing housing that is affordable but also supporting the individuals and families who need this housing. As part of this, the Agency has long supported survivors of sexual and domestic violence. In fact, MassHousing's Tenant Selection Plan includes a preference for those displaced by domestic violence. Additionally, MassHousing's Community Services Department Director, Thaddeus Miles, co-chaired the 2016 Massachusetts White Ribbon Day Campaign, which encourages men to speak out against violence against women. The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) Reauthorization of 2013 extended protections against housing discrimination or eviction due to domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, or sexual assault to tenants in federally assisted housing. In 2016, HUD issued the final rule with regard to the VAWA reauthorization which further outlined the responsibilities of housing providers. MassHousing has undertaken a broad VAWA initiative to assist all of the Agency's customers – owners and agents – in implementing HUD's VAWA guidance and other best practices to assist survivors. The goal for residents/survivors is to seek safety through emergency transfers or lease enforcement against the perpetrator; for applicants/survivors to be able to access affordable housing opportunities; and for owners and agents to have the tools, knowledge, and resources to assist survivors in accessing and maintaining affordable housing.

The Need

In Massachusetts, one in three women and one in five men reported having experienced rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Sexual and domestic violence (SDV) survivors face numerous challenges, one of which is housing status. One in five Massachusetts residents reports domestic violence as a reason for their homelessness. Additionally, 92% of homeless mothers experience sexual violence in their lifetimes. In 2018, Safelink, a 24/7 hotline for victims of domestic and dating violence in Massachusetts, received 27,067 calls. Of those calls, 91.8% called primarily for DV emergency shelter. Only 5.9% of callers were connected to a shelter with open space, and for 89% of callers, there was no shelter option available. These staggering statistics demonstrate the urgency in serving the needs of the victims of SDV in our state, while at the same time illustrating the devastating connection that exists between housing instability and SDV.

MassHousing's Multi-Faceted Response: Training, Convening, and Resource Sharing

In 2016, MassHousing developed a two-part training to assist housing professionals. Part One of the training, *Introduction to Domestic Violence, Dating Violence, Sexual Assault and Stalking*, provides housing professionals with a foundation for understanding and working with applicants and residents who are survivors of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and/or stalking. Participants learn from local domestic violence service providers about the cycle of violence, the pattern of power and control, the impact of traumatic experiences, and the resources and community partners in their communities. Part Two of the training, *Housing Protections for Victims of Domestic Violence, Rape, Sexual Assault and Stalking*, outlines the protections against housing discrimination or eviction due to domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, or sexual assault to tenants in federally assisted housing under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) Reauthorization of 2013. It also covers the responsibilities of housing providers and addresses documentation requirements and other practical issues including: required notices; emergency transfers and plans' lease bifurcations; reporting, and; recordkeeping. Since 2016, MassHousing has consistently offered this training with partners throughout the Commonwealth through the Agency's Tenant Assistance Program training offerings. To date, MassHousing Community Services

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has offered nine in-person trainings serving a total of 232 attendees, including representatives from the Massachusetts Housing Court.

Moreover, MassHousing recognized the need for the information from the trainings to be compiled into a comprehensive handbook for housing and service providers, similar to its nationally recognized Reasonable Accommodations Handbook. The handbook, titled *The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), Massachusetts State Law and Housing: An Overview for Housing Providers*, is separated into three chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking including statistics, and outlines state resources, definitions and models. It also provides an overview of housing instability and poverty, trauma-informed practices, and information for housing providers around responding to disclosure. Chapter 2 is separated into three parts representing the occupancy cycle. This includes Part 1: Applicable Laws, the Legal Framework and General Questions; Part 2: Application Process; and Part 3: Occupancy and Termination of Assistance & Tenancy. Chapter 3 is focused on removing barriers including coordination of compliance, a review of rules, policies, procedures, and documents, and affirmative steps. In addition, the handbook features 12 appendices. These appendices highlight state and federal resources, provides a breakdown of complex housing terminology and programs, and housing search resources. The handbook was developed in partnership with housing providers and direct service providers to ensure that the information is realistic, substantive, and impactful for any reader. It was reviewed by more than 20 readers who provided comments and constructive feedback and was made available in January 2020 to partner agencies and organizations and is currently being utilized in conjunction with our trainings. The handbook has also been made available as a free resource on a new VAWA-focused webpage on the MassHousing website (<https://www.masshousing.com/en/programs-outreach/community-services/knowledge-capacity-building/vawa>). This webpage also includes many helpful state and federal resources.

MassHousing focused its 2019 Community Services Department annual conference on its work supporting survivors of sexual and domestic violence in housing. The conference was attended by 267 housing professionals and staffed by 30 resource tables from service provider organizations. Content for the event included remarks from Massachusetts Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito, who chairs the Governor's Council to Address Sexual and Domestic Violence. There were speakers from the Department of Public Health who presented statewide resources, a university professor who provided an overview of trauma, a consulting partner who provided the legal obligations around VAWA, as well as a restorative Qi-Gong session. The conference also featured an interactive resource table session, where service providers from across the Commonwealth were organized regionally and attendees could gather information and network with organizations that serve their communities. There were then five breakout sessions in the afternoon for attendees with topics including: "Housing Protections Under VAWA: A Focus on Emergency Transfers" and "Promoting a Culture of Safe Housing and Access to Services for Diverse Populations."

Leading up to this annual conference, MassHousing also hosted a series of five regional resource forums. These half-day events were designed as networking events for housing providers to connect and learn from organizations that work to address issues of sexual and domestic violence. SDV service providers presented on the resources available through their organizations and exchanged information with housing staff. A total of 141 participants attended these resource forums.

Following the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent quarantine measures, there was widespread concern expressed by SDV advocates and housing partners about residents who could not safely access SDV resources. MassHousing worked with a local domestic violence organization to offer a series of three

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webinars titled, “Supporting Domestic Violence Survivors During COVID-19.” This was followed up with a webinar titled, “VAWA Emergency Transfers During COVID-19” that was presented in partnership with a legal consulting partner. These webinars were attended at full capacity by 510 participants.

Statewide Leadership and Relationship Building

Over the past 15 years, MassHousing staff have participated in the Governor’s Council to Address Sexual Assault & Domestic Violence Housing and Self Sufficiency (HSSS) subcommittee. Since 2019, MassHousing has co-chaired the HSSS subcommittee, convening working groups on SDV Housing Policy, Training & Collaboration, and Economic Mobility. Among the recent HSSS achievements, the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development adopted recommendations related to SDV notices for public housing authorities, a survey of housing-related training needs of SDV providers, and broad stakeholder engagement, including assisted housing providers, SDV advocates, legal advocates, and government representatives on the issues of SDV survivors’ housing needs. MassHousing has also presented to the entire Governor’s Council on three separate occasions and made presentations to state legislators as well.

Through the HSSS, MassHousing is facilitating relationship building among the state’s Continuums of Care and their local SDV provider agencies. Plans are now underway to offer trainings on best practices in creating local partnerships and developing DV bonus programs, building upon the experiences of existing collaborations.

Facilitating Discussions and Problem Solving

On two occasions in 2018, MassHousing conducted a VAWA roundtable discussion with property management staff from the New England Affordable Housing Management Association (NEAHMA). Asset Managers discussed the nuances of VAWA legislation as it relates to housing as well as case studies that have come to their attention over the last year. MassHousing’s Community Services Department Staff presented various community resources available as well as a resource guide including relevant notices, forms, professional resources, and Massachusetts specific resources. Attendees also had the opportunity to discuss difficult situations and solicit advice on specific cases they have encountered at their developments.

Searchable Database to Assist with Emergency Transfers

MassHousing has partnered with a nonprofit in Massachusetts, the Citizens’ Housing and Planning Association (CHAPA), to integrate information about VAWA-related waiting list and emergency transfer preferences within an online accessible housing registry known as, “MassAccess.” MassAccess is a free online program managed by CHAPA that matches people with disabilities with accessible housing in the community and serves as a searchable database of affordable housing across the Commonwealth. Notably, the new MassAccess VAWA-module allows properties to indicate whether they offer a preference for new and emergency transfer applicants meeting VAWA criteria. With a searchable database of VAWA preferences, management agents can meet their obligations under the VAWA Final Rule to make reasonable efforts to assist tenants requesting a VAWA emergency transfer. MassHousing will also partner with CHAPA, the Governor’s Council, and Casa Myrna (Boston’s largest provider of domestic violence awareness efforts) to train SafeLink advocates working on the statewide domestic violence hotline, as well as other advocates, on how to search the MassAccess database in order to utilize this tool most effectively.