



Testimony on the Benefits of Statewide Eviction Sealing Policy on Domestic Violence Victim and Survivor Safety before the Joint Democratic Policy Committee

Deanna Dyer, J.D., Policy Director,
Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence
February 15, 2024

Thank you, Senators Costa, Muth, Saval, and Schwank, and Representatives Smith-Wade-El and Salisbury for holding a hearing today on the need to adopt a statewide eviction record sealing policy in the Commonwealth. My name is Deanna Dyer, and I am a domestic violence advocate and attorney with nearly 20 years invested in the movement to end gender-based violence. I currently serve as the Policy Director at the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence (PCADV), the state contractor for domestic violence services in Pennsylvania. PCADV is the oldest statewide domestic violence coalition in the nation.

PCADV's network of 59 local domestic violence programs provides free and confidential services to nearly 90,000 victims, survivors, and their children each year. We envision a Commonwealth where all Pennsylvanians are supported in the human right to live healthy, stable, and rewarding lives free from domestic violence and all forms of violence and oppression. This vision is the compass for our work and pervades our priorities of prevention, intervention, and change.

I. Defining Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a pattern of coercive behavior used by one person to gain power and control over another in an intimate or familial relationship. The tactics of abuse used to gain this control vary and can include financial and economic abuse, emotional abuse, spiritual abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, digital abuse, sexual coercion, reproductive coercion, and stalking, among others. These tactics of abuse can manifest in different ways, and multiple types of abuse usually occur in an abusive relationship.

While physical abuse is one of the most easily identified types of abuse, when it is used, it is most often to reinforce the regular use of other, more subtle types of abuse. Financial or economic abuse, for example, happens when one intimate partner has control over the other partner's ability to access, acquire, use, or maintain economic resources, which diminishes the victim's capacity to support themselves and forces intentional dependence. While economic abuse and other abusive behaviors are often harder to identify, they are just as serious as physical abuse. Yet, 78% of Americans don't recognize economic abuse as domestic violence. The reality is economic abuse occurs in 99% of abusive relationships and is the number one reason victims stay in or return to abusive relationships. When advocates ask victims and survivors of domestic violence what they need to keep themselves safe, the answer is resoundingly clear: financial self-sufficiency and access to safe, stable, and affordable housing.

II. Frequency of Domestic Violence & Correlation to Homelessness

Domestic violence remains a pervasive societal issue, affecting individuals and families regardless of age, race, gender, or socioeconomic status. According to the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention (CDC), 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men have experienced severe physical violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime. The CDC has indicated that domestic violence is our nation's number one public health issue, with devastating physical, emotional, financial, and societal consequences affecting over 10 million Americans every year. The statistics are sobering. In the Commonwealth alone, during the ten years between January 2013 and December 2023, at least 1,725 Pennsylvanians lost their lives to domestic violence. These victims were mostly abused women but also included children, law enforcement officers, relatives, friends, coworkers, and passersby, as well as perpetrators who killed themselves or were killed by others. These numbers are not mere statistics; they represent lives lost and families shattered by the devastating effects of domestic violence.

The correlation between domestic violence and homelessness is deeply troubling. According to national statistics, 92% of homeless women and children have experienced domestic violence, and more than 50% cite fleeing domestic violence as their direct cause of homelessness. This means that a significant portion of our homeless population is comprised of individuals who have bravely escaped abusive situations only to find themselves without safe and secure housing options.

In Pennsylvania, child and youth homelessness is increasing, with 52 counties identifying more homeless children in 2022 than the previous year. Because of funding shortfalls and the challenge of shelter staff retention due to insufficient wages, 11 PCADV programs were forced to cut back emergency shelter services in 2022. In a single 24-hour period, 166 requests from domestic violence victims for emergency shelter, hotels, emergency relocation, and other housing needs to PCADV programs were unmet due to a lack of funding.

PCADV.org

3605 Vartan Way, Suite 101, Harrisburg, PA 17110

Main Phone: (717) 545-6400 Toll Free: (800) 932 4632 TTY: 800-553-2508

III. Safe Housing as Domestic Violence Intervention & Prevention

The connection between safe housing and the safety of domestic violence victims cannot be overstated. For many survivors, escaping an abusive relationship is just the first step on the long road to recovery. Without a safe place to call home, survivors remain at risk of further harm from their abusers. Providing safe and secure housing options is a crucial component of ensuring the safety and well-being of survivors. Yet, access to safe and affordable housing is one of the most significant barriers victims encounter.

Research consistently demonstrates that early intervention and prevention efforts are essential to effectively combating domestic violence. Domestic violence prevention work involves identifying and addressing both risk factors, such as housing instability and poverty, and protective factors, like access to supportive networks or economic stability, to mitigate the risk of domestic violence and promote healthy, violence-free communities. Enacting policies like eviction sealing provides an opportunity to transform a factor like housing insecurity, a would-be risk factor for domestic violence victimization, into a potential protective factor, housing stability.

More specifically, we know survivors commonly face challenges in obtaining safe housing due to previous evictions, which are often the result of the abuse they endured. Eviction sealing will help ensure that survivors of domestic violence are not unfairly penalized by having an eviction record that follows them, making it difficult for them to secure future safe housing. By sealing eviction records, Pennsylvania policymakers will remove a significant barrier for survivors of domestic violence to access safe housing and achieve economic self-sufficiency.

PCADV.org

3605 Vartan Way, Suite 101, Harrisburg, PA 17110

Main Phone: (717) 545-6400 Toll Free: (800) 932 4632 TTY: 800-553-2508

Sealing eviction records is not only an essential intervention measure that takes Pennsylvania one step closer to ensuring safety for domestic violence victims; it is also a forward-thinking step toward prevention, promoting victims' ability to rebuild their lives free from fear and violence. No survivor should have to choose between homelessness or staying with an abusive partner.

IV. Conclusion

PCADV is grateful to each Legislator here today for the opportunity to speak with you about the connection between secure, stable, and affordable housing and the safety of domestic violence victims. By providing accessible and safe housing options for survivors, the Commonwealth can help prevent further violence and trauma, ultimately saving lives and strengthening our communities.

PCADV.org

3605 Vartan Way, Suite 101, Harrisburg, PA 17110

Main Phone: (717) 545-6400 **Toll Free:** (800) 932 4632 **TTY:** 800-553-2508