



# MASSACHUSETTS FAIR HOUSING CENTER

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## October 2019 Newsletter - National Domestic Violence Awareness Month

- In Massachusetts, 1 in 3 women and 1 in 5 men reported having experienced rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime.
- In Massachusetts, over 1/3 of trans people report threats of violence by an intimate partner compared to 13.6% of cisgender people, and LGBTQ adults experience a lifetime intimate partner violence rate of 29% compared to 11% of heterosexual adults.
- In one day in 2017, Massachusetts domestic violence programs served 1,760 victims and were unable to meet 298 requests, of which 65% were for housing.
- In Massachusetts, 1 in 5 people report domestic violence as a reason for their homelessness.
- Studies show that refugee and immigrant women experience domestic violence at rates between 30-50%.
- According to a 2008 national study, those with disabilities experience nearly double the lifetime risk of intimate partner violence victimization compared to those without disabilities.

*All facts from [JaneDoe.org](http://JaneDoe.org)*

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*This month, the Massachusetts Fair Housing Center interviewed Carmen Nieves, the Executive Director of Womanshelter/Compañeras in Holyoke to talk about the connections between housing, homelessness and domestic violence.*

**Could you start off by telling us what kind of services Womanshelter/ Compañeras provides?**

First, we have a 24/7 hotline that survivors of domestic violence can call. That number is 1-877-536-1628. When



we receive a call on the hotline, we are able to work with the caller to create a customized safety plan. We also have multiple support groups to provide support in English, Spanish, and Russian. Additionally we offer one-on-one supportive listening for survivors. We also operate an emergency shelter with 9 rooms and 33 beds.

### **Can you talk about the history of Womanshelter/Compañeras and your approach to providing services to survivors of domestic violence?**

We are almost forty years old and have been providing many of our current services since the very beginning. Our name itself explains our approach: “Compañeras” means a confidant, a friend, and someone who will respect your confidentiality. At Womanshelter/ Compañeras, we treat you as a full person. We know you’re more than a domestic violence victim or a person experiencing homelessness.

### **Can you tell us more about what a safety plan is?**

A safety plan is a plan to keep someone safe before, during, and after an abusive incident. For example, a safety plan might include information about the survivor’s rights, getting a lock change, or a restraining order. Of all of the survivors we talk to, probably 90% want to be able to stay in the apartment or house, so understanding housing rights and safety around the lock change process is very important.

### **How does domestic violence connect to housing and homelessness?**

Nearly all the survivors we have talked to have struggled with homelessness. I believe housing should be a right, and safe and free of violence. I believe that the need for everyone to have safe housing is a public policy issue, because it really affects every part of an individual’s and family’s life. Recently, Womanshelter/ Compañeras was awarded part of a Continuum of Care grant along with the YWCA. This project will help survivors access services, including safe and supportive housing.



### **How does this project support homeless survivors of domestic violence?**

Navigating the emergency shelter system in Massachusetts is very challenging, and not having the proper paperwork can be used to deny shelter. This can be a serious problem for survivors of domestic violence or someone currently fleeing violence. At Womanshelter/

Compañeras, we’re trauma-informed and driven. Our advocates can provide trauma-informed support with navigating the process of accessing emergency shelter, helping with paperwork, and transportation. We also have a housing navigator who can specifically help homeless survivors of domestic violence with this process.

### **What changes would you like to see in housing policies for survivors**

### **of domestic violence?**

Rather than only having shelters, I would like to see more options for survivors to choose the kind of housing and support they need, in the location that they need. Ideally, the system would be survivor driven, as survivors know best what is the safest housing option for them. A housing voucher system for survivors of domestic violence would allow survivors to have this choice.

### **What do you wish that other service providers who work on housing issues knew about domestic violence?**

I remember I once asked a survivor what she thought she wished people knew about her situation. She said, “Do these people know that someone is trying to hurt me?” Service providers can get caught up with the paperwork, and do not understand the fear and danger that survivors are living with.

Additionally, I think that the way we can improve housing for survivors of domestic violence is by being able to work across systems. We need to bring service providers together in the same room to have conversations and collaborate.

### **What's the best way for someone to get in touch with Womanshelter/Compañeras?**

Our Hotline which is 1-877-536-1628 is open 24/7, and includes services for homeless survivors of domestic violence. We are open for referrals. You can reach our office at (413) 538-9717.

***Thank you Carmen, for sharing this information. We are grateful for all of the services that Womanshelter/Compañeras has provided to the survivors in our community for the last 40 years.***

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## **Did you know that under Massachusetts law...**

- A survivor of domestic violence can break their lease and leave home if they feel they are in imminent danger.
- A landlord can--but does not have to--request proof of the domestic violence and the survivor's danger. This proof can include a restraining order, a police report, or a statement from a qualified 3rd party, such as a therapist or domestic violence counselor.
- A landlord is required to change locks, or give permission to change locks, at a survivor's unit within 2 business days if the survivor reasonably believes there is imminent threat of domestic violence, rape, sexual assault or stalking at the premises.
  - The landlord may charge a fee for changing the lock, but it must be a “reasonable price customarily charged”
- A survivor of domestic violence is protected from retaliation by the landlord for requesting a lock change or reporting domestic violence to law enforcement.

- The federal Violence Against Women Act of 2013 (VAWA) also provides significant housing protections for survivors of domestic violence, who live in federally subsidized housing. These protections include lease bifurcations, protections from eviction, and emergency transfers. Housing covered by VAWA includes:
  - Federal Public Housing
  - Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers
  - Section 8 Project-based Housing
  - Section 202 Housing for the Elderly
  - Section 811 Housing for the Disabled
  - Section 236 Multifamily Rental Housing
  - Section 221(d)(3) Below Market Interest Rate (BMIR)
  - HOME
  - Housing Opportunities for People with Aids (HOPWA)
  - McKinney-Vento Act programs
  - Rural Development Multifamily housing
  - Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) housing.
- Both the Massachusetts law and VAWA apply to survivors of all genders, and include the victim's family members

***If you have any questions about the housing rights of survivors of domestic or sexual violence under state or federal law, please contact the Massachusetts Fair Housing Center at 413-539-9796.***



### **Vermont Amends its Fair Housing Law to Protect Survivors of Abuse, Stalking, or Sexual Assault**

As reported on the [Thriving Communities website](#), on June 10, 2019, Governor Phil Scott of Vermont, signed into law an amendment to Vermont's fair housing laws. This change in the law specifically protects survivors, stating that it is unlawful for any person to refuse to sell or rent, or refuse to negotiate for the sale or rental of, or otherwise make unavailable or deny, a dwelling or other real estate to any person because *a person is a victim of abuse, sexual assault, or stalking*. Vermont joins at least ten other states (Arkansas, California, Illinois, Indiana, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, Washington and Wisconsin) and the District of Columbia that have passed legislation to protect survivors of domestic violence from housing discrimination. Currently, the housing rights of survivors in Massachusetts depend on whether they reside in private housing, state public housing or federal public housing. To provide uniform protections for all survivors, Massachusetts should enact a law that adds survivors of domestic or sexual

violence, as a protected class, to the state's anti-discrimination law.



Discrimination against families with children under age six because of lead paint is a tremendous problem in Massachusetts. To help us advocate for these families, we would like to talk to you if you have ever been denied housing because of lead paint, or if you are a service provider who has worked with families who have been denied housing because of lead paint. You can contact us at 413-539-9796 x 105.



## SAVE THE DATE!

We hope to see you at the 14th annual Fair Housing and Civil Rights Conference to be held at the Western New England University School of Law on **Friday April 24, 2020.**

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STAY CONNECTED

