



Understanding Safe Housing for Alaska Native Survivors of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence and the lack of safe, affordable housing are inextricably linked.

What's at Stake?

Alaska's housing crisis is putting families who experience domestic violence (DV) in danger. Abuse is a leading cause of homelessness for women and children. A lack of stable housing often forces survivors to stay with or return to abusive partners. This is especially concerning in Alaska, which suffers from both alarming rates of domestic violence and a severe shortage of suitable housing.

The majority of Alaska Native women have experienced domestic violence, sexual assault or both. Geographical isolation, limited services, and other socioeconomic factors compound the risks and impacts for Alaska Native survivors of DV.

Alaska's housing crisis is worse than in the rest of the United States. Overcrowding is four times the national average. In rural Alaska Native villages, over 44% of households are severely overcrowded, complicating safe housing for survivors and their children. The situation worsens due to seasonal worker and tourist influxes, which reduce rental availability and increase costs.

Key Findings

- Survivors face challenges in fleeing abuse that mirror reasons for returning, including lack of housing, abuser tactics, lack of culturally appropriate services, and co-occurring issues.
- Emergency housing is limited and often inaccessible. Long-term housing is scarcer, with insufficient stock and high costs. Existing housing programs are restrictive and complex.
- Short-term rentals for seasonal workers and tourists limit housing options for locals, especially survivors in crisis.
- Safety resources vary between villages, hub communities, and cities. Urban areas have more established services, like shelters, while villages rely on informal networks of friends, family, and public facilities not designed for housing.
- Survivors utilize a variety of services to be safely housed, and most are not DV-specific. Service provider coordination is essential to maximize resources and ensure service continuity.

The Safe Housing Assessment

The Alaska Native Women's Resource Center (AKNWRC) conducted a comprehensive statewide assessment of safe housing options for Alaska Native survivors of domestic violence. The project aimed to identify where survivors go to find safety, barriers to securing safe housing, factors that lead survivors to return to abusive situations, and innovative solutions to the complex housing and safety challenges faced in both rural and urban Alaska communities.

The findings of this assessment, conducted between February 2023-June 2024 are based on multiple data collection methods including:

- Review of Regional Secondary Data
- Two Waves of Key Informant Phone Interviews
- Brief Survey of Alaska Federation of Natives 2023 Attendees
- Statewide Listening Session in June 2024

Alaska's regions are defined in various ways. This study uses 11 regions as defined by the State Department of Behavioral Health. This breakdown balances urban-rural distinction with compatibility across State systems and regional organizations.



Statewide Listening Session, June 2024



Proposed Action Steps

1. Increase and Leverage Funding & Improve Collaboration Across Service Providers

- a. Increase funding for housing. Coordinate Federal, State, Tribal, and private funding streams to support comprehensive housing projects, using successful models like the Bay Haven shelter.
- b. Foster partnerships between Tribal governments, State agencies, and DV/housing nonprofits to align planning, combine resources, and avoid duplication of efforts.
- c. Utilize creative budgeting strategies, like using existing properties as collateral, to expand the supply of housing.

2. Expand the Use of Safe Homes Beyond DV Service Providers

- a. Partner with foster home networks, faith communities, Tribal courts, and local leaders to increase the pool of volunteer safe homes - particularly in rural villages.
- b. Work with Tribal entities, health providers, and schools to renovate under-utilized facilities that could serve as emergency accommodations.
- c. Build and staff safe homes that provide both short-term crisis housing and culturally-relevant support services.

3. Limit the Use of Local Housing for Seasonal Workers and Tourists

- a. Collaborate with local governments to implement caps, taxes, and zoning restrictions on short-term and vacation rentals.
- b. Create incentives for property owners to prioritize long-term rentals and accept housing vouchers.
- c. Ensure adequate housing for seasonal workers to reduce competition with local residents.

4. Expand Current Voucher Programs

- a. Allow flexibility in geographic restrictions and length of assistance to account for the unique challenges of housing availability in remote communities.
- b. Reevaluate fair market rent rates and housing quality standards to reflect true costs and align with region-specific housing stock.
- c. Provide landlord outreach, education and incentives to increase acceptance of vouchers.

5. Renovate Older or Vacant Structures to Increase Housing Options

- a. Conduct assessments to identify underutilized buildings that could be converted to emergency or transitional housing with appropriate upgrades.
- b. Collaborate with property owners, local governments and housing authorities to repurpose existing structures.
- c. Advocate for changes to federal funding restrictions to allow for both renovation and new construction as needed.

6. Consider Options for Removing the Harm-Doer from the Home

- a. Lean into discussions about what needs to happen for a survivor to stay in their home, and instead remove the harm-doer.
- b. Listen to what has worked for communities that have tried a more restorative approach.
- c. This approach is rooted in Indigenous ways of being and could be possible if Tribal sovereignty is exerted.

*"It's just widely known that it takes somebody seven times. They're going to leave seven times before they leave for the last time. I would say in [community] people really are not leaving because they know that there's nowhere for them to go, so they're staying put. They're not even making it to seven times. They might try one time and they just know it doesn't work, so they stay... I feel like if we were able to have at least that first shelter, it would dramatically change things in the way that we're able to provide services and get those people help."
- DV Victim Advocate*



Closing Discussion

The housing crisis facing Alaska Native survivors of domestic violence is severe, complex, and demands urgent action. The current situation is dire, with a critical shortage of safe, affordable, and culturally-appropriate housing options. Survivors are often forced to choose between staying with abusers or facing homelessness, putting their lives and their children's well-being at grave risk. Overcrowding, skyrocketing costs, limited services, and a lack of coordinated planning compound the challenges, especially in remote villages.

While the proposed solutions offer potential pathways forward, progress will require a significant shift in priorities, policies and resource allocation. Piecemeal approaches and short-term fixes will not suffice. Alaska Native communities must be at the forefront of developing and implementing comprehensive, locally-driven strategies that uphold Tribal sovereignty and cultural resilience.

Amplifying the voices of survivors and securing long-term, sustainable funding must be central to any initiatives. Increased collaboration across all levels of government, Tribal entities, and nonprofit sectors is essential. However, these efforts will only succeed if accompanied by a collective sense of urgency and a steadfast commitment to bold, transformative change. Failure to act decisively will perpetuate the cycle of violence and further jeopardize the lives of countless Alaska Native survivors. The housing crisis demands immediate and sweeping action to ensure safety, stability, and justice for all.

"The Alaska Native residents that come from more rural communities in the state to our facility, they really want to go back home. They want to go back to residing in their own community; it's just not safe at that point. I think that's something that's really important because they're leaving to escape the violence, but that's their home and they want to be able to go back." – DV Shelter Staff

"We're using up thousands of dollars on hotels that charge tourist season prices just to get someone a safe place to stay for a few nights" – DV Victim Advocate

This brief presents findings and proposed action steps identified in an assessment by researchers from Strategic Prevention Solutions. To request the full report, reach out to AKNWRC at info@aknwrc.org

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