

Testimony of Trinity White

Joint Committee on Public Health
Hearing on Domestic Violence as a Public Health Issue
October 30, 2017

Good morning everyone, thank you for inviting me to testify this morning.

My name is Trinity White and I am a survivor. I would like to bring you back to my past and why I am standing here in front of you today. Back in 2012 when I was 19 years old, I became homeless due to domestic violence with my son's father. He would abuse me mentally, physically, financially and emotionally. I decided to leave him and stay with my sister, but she had 4 kids of her own plus me and Tayjhaun, my son. That was too many people in one apartment, but I didn't have anywhere else to go.

So one day I went down to the Department of Transition Assistance (DTA) office to seek some help and the experience was very awful. When I went down to the DTA, I explained to my worker my situation and I felt like my worker was no help. She was very rude and out of place with the questions she was asking. Some of those questions were:

"Why didn't you leave when he started to abuse you?"

"Why would you have a baby by him if you know what kind of person he is?"

"Why won't you put him on child support?"

Her body language towards me made me feel very uncomfortable. I came to seek help in finding shelter not to be lectured by someone. I felt like because of my age, being a teen mom, she felt the need to talk to me the way she did. So at that point I felt hopeless and just walked out of the office. Now I know that she should have referred me to a DTA Domestic Violence Specialist, but she didn't give me that option then. As I was walking out the office I noticed a sign that said SafeLink and it had a tear off card on it. SafeLink is the statewide domestic violence hotline run by Casa Myrna. I took the card and called the number. When I called SafeLink I let the person know my situation and the response I received was very uplifting. I called SafeLink every day for about a week or so. I didn't give up hope because the person that was on the other end of the phone was always kind and their words were always encouraging it made me feel like there was light at the end of the tunnel.

On November 13, 2012 I moved out my sister's house and moved into a shelter run by Casa Myrna, which was the Teen Parenting Program or TPP which many people call it. Being at Casa Myrna was kind of a challenge for me at first because I was very isolated I stayed in my room for the first couple of days. I wasn't use to living in a house full of girls, -but once I got comfortable, I was able to talk with

some of the other. I knew that if I was having a challenge with seeking some kind of help before I got here I know they were too. Casa Myrna was very supportive towards the participants. They made sure we got the services we needed without being judged because of our situation, our age, our race, our background, and our knowledge.

Casa Myrna helped with not just the parents but also the children in the program. Some of the kids witness domestic violence and they provided access to services such as Child Witness to Violence, a program that does one-on-one therapy with the child to see how they act towards others, playing by themselves, their response in talking and much more. I honestly loved this program because they worked very well with Tayjhaun and me.

Everyone who lived in TPP all had the same goal and that goal was to get an apartment but it wasn't easy at all. Casa Myrna gave us the resources that we need such as housing applications, a housing advocate, a translator and much more. But actually getting an apartment was the hard part if you weren't a priority such as homelessness, domestic violence, disability, natural disaster ,that's just some of them Now if you was a priority such has being displaced do to domestic violence (-which we all were), we had to have proof and that proof would consist of the following:

- Police Report
- Restraining Order
- Doctors Note/ Statement
- Much more!

Now if you didn't have that proof then you wouldn't get that priority of domestic violence but you will get the priority of being homeless because you're in a shelter. Some people may not have the documentation because some may feel like saying they're a victim mean they get their kids taken away or are looked at differently or because they may not know their rights. Some of us can be waiting years due to lack of affordable housing because we don't have the proper documentation to be a priority so we choose to either stay in the shelter or go back to the abuser and that really sucks. Nowadays in order to get an apartment you have to have some type of good credit. In many cases victims of domestic violence don't have good credit due to the financial abuse from the abuser so they get turned away from an apartment because they don't have the "proper credit score" which I feel as though is discrimination. But I'm glad to say that I received my keys to my own apartment in September of 2014.

3 Years Later I am now working at Casa Myrna as the Outreach and Engagement Assistant. I've been working at Casa Myrna for 2 years. Working here at Casa Myrna has been a life changer for me. I'm learning new things every day. I'm able to talk to others and give them the resources and help they need. Casa Myrna started a Peer Leadership Program which is a program designed for youth ages 14-18 years old. Our teens will go out to the community and to schools to spread their knowledge on healthy and unhealthy relationship, also the different types of abuse because some people may not think they are in an abusive relationship because it's not physically. I've learned a lot about teens within these past few months.

Teens face a lot of emotional or even behavioral challenges due to them witnessing or either experiencing domestic violence, which is very sad to say because these teens may not feel like they have the support to talk to someone to get help because they believe that adults wouldn't understand them because of their age. I can relate to how they were feeling and that is why I have a close relationship with all my teens. I know how it feels to be turned down because someone didn't understand me. I wish I would've known back then what I know now because I would have done a lot of things different. But being young and not knowing my rights or having that support until I got into Casa Myrna, things would've or could have been different.

I strongly recommend that moving forward the staff that works at the DTA office all should go through some type of domestic violence training because they honestly don't have the training on how to properly speak and do an intake with a victim of domestic violence. There should be more affordable housing to prevent homelessness, more prevention and intervention on domestic violence in schools, hospitals, clinics, and any other social services. Also as a requirement; I think all guidance counselors in schools and child care providers should be trained in domestic violence.

Thank you.



Testimony of Stephanie Brown, CEO of Casa Myrna Vazquez

Joint Committee on Public Health
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Thank you for holding this hearing to learn more about solutions to domestic violence and for inviting me to speak with you today.

About Casa Myrna

Casa Myrna believes every relationship should be safe and healthy. We deliver solutions to end domestic and dating violence through intervention, awareness, and prevention. Our comprehensive range of services, available in Spanish and English, provide survivors with the tools to recover from the trauma of abuse and begin to build sustainable economic stability. Through our shelter programs and legal, community, family, housing and economic stability advocacy, we serve over 1,300 survivors annually, answer nearly 30,000 calls annually through the statewide hotline, SafeLink, and reach 2,000 people through public awareness workshops.

Located in Boston, Casa Myrna serves predominantly Black and Latina women and immigrants in the neighborhoods of Dorchester, Mattapan and Roxbury (35% Black; 42% Latina; 14% White; 9% Multi-racial/other). We assist survivors who are least likely to seek help—those from low income, racial, ethnic and linguistic minorities, and immigrants. Because our staff reflects our community (26% Black; 44% Latina; 26% White; and 4% Multi-racial and other), we understand intimately the barriers and oppressions survivors from these populations face.

Domestic Violence as a Public Health Issue

Gender based violence is widespread in our culture. Nearly 1 in 3 women and 1 in 5 men in MA have experienced rape, physical violence or stalking by an intimate partner. Forty three percent of college women report experiencing violent and abusive dating behaviors and 13% of college women report being stalked during their time at college. Most survivors do not report these incidents nor may they have the ability to access supports and services that they many want or need. For immigrant survivors, survivors of color, LGBTQ survivors, and survivors with disabilities, the barriers to support, safety and economic stability are even greater.

Casa Myrna works in an urban environment, and we know that domestic and dating violence do not happen in isolation. The effects of intimate partner violence are compounded by other forms of systemic oppression – racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, homelessness and poverty, community violence, and lack of access to education, jobs that pay a living wage, and economic

mobility – further compounding their marginalization and victimization. Imagine how and if you would reach out for support if you feared the police, child protective services and immigration. If you could not talk about your victimization in your own language. If no one asked you if you were safe or needed help, or if you reached out and no one believed you. Abusers use these forms of oppression to control their victims, threatening homelessness, financial ruin and poverty, arrest, loss of custody of their children, and deportation.

Policy Solutions

Access to housing

More than a third (38%) of domestic violence survivors report becoming homeless immediately after separating from their partners. Every day, survivors make the choice between living with their abuser – with a roof over their heads and their children’s – and homelessness. Were a survivor to want to enter shelter, it is unavailable. The domestic violence shelter system has less than 200 units statewide, and half the families that apply for Emergency Assistance are turned away ineligible. Survivors without children have even fewer options. Because of our severe lack of affordable housing in Boston, even survivors in shelter wait years for permanent housing. The process for obtaining housing for survivors who are not homeless is significantly longer.

According to the On Solid Ground coalition, currently 4,800 Massachusetts families live in shelters and motels each night and an estimated 4,200 more live in unstable or “doubled up” situations, move multiple times per year, or are behind on rent may experience the same harms as homeless families, even though they avoid shelter entry. Of these 9,000 families, we know that at least 60% of them are homeless or at risk of homelessness due to domestic violence. Is there any wonder why survivors stay?

While it may be beyond the purview of this committee, I ask that you work with the Legislature to increase access to safe, permanent, affordable housing and economic mobility for survivors of domestic violence. Work with the MA Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) to utilize its status as a U.S. Department of Housing (HUD) “Moving to Work” entity to implement creative transitional and permanent housing solutions for survivors of domestic and sexual violence. The Cambridge Housing Authority, the only other Moving to Work entity in Massachusetts, has created housing solutions for domestic violence survivors and homeless and runaway youth. Similarly, consider creating a domestic and sexual violence priority for all subsidized housing programs, including the MA Rental Voucher Program (MRVP) and those within local housing authorities and MassHousing.

Systemic awareness of domestic violence

Like all of us, survivors interact with a myriad of systems – schools and after school programs, health care, courts, workforce development, criminal justice, public and private housing, public benefits, and child protective services. Those systems, and the private sector, need to be aware of and sensitive to domestic violence and have relationships with those of us in the community with expertise. Essentially, survivors should not have to find and walk into a domestic violence organization to get help.

At Casa Myrna, we are privileged to have strong partnerships with many of those systems with which survivors engage. Our advocates sit in partner organizations throughout the City, working with people in those systems to understand the dynamics of domestic violence, identify and be sensitive to survivors, and to make appropriate referrals. This is a start, but it is not nearly enough.

I recommend that you hold those systems accountable to survivors. They should be trained in domestic and sexual violence – identifying domestic violence and understanding its effects on survivors and communities, being sensitive to the needs of survivors, on making appropriate referrals to supports, and holding abusers accountable.

And more importantly, those systems must address the disparities that survivors of color, survivors whose first language is not English, and survivors who are immigrants (with and without documentation) face. Those systems must look and sound like the people they serve, be culturally and linguistically appropriate, be informed by the voices of the people they serve, ensure equal and fair access to resources, be trauma informed, and treat survivors with respect and dignity.

To do this, you can:

- Ensure that public health dollars are given to organizations that: provide supports in the languages of the people they serve; have a majority of staff that look like the people with whom they work; intentionally provide opportunities for leadership for program participants, staff of color and staff from marginalized communities; pay direct service staff a living wage; and integrate social and racial justice into their work.
- Support An Act to Protect the Civil Rights and Safety of All Massachusetts Residents (MA Safe Communities Act) (S1305/H3269) so that regardless of immigration status, everyone can feel safe and survivors do not need to fear reporting violence and abuse. All survivors should have access to support and justice.
- Ensure that the 2016 transgender anti-discrimination law remains intact so that transgender people are treated with dignity and experience fair and equal treatment under the law.
- Support An Act Relative to the Well Being and Care of a Child (An Act to Lift the Cap on Kids) (S34/H85). The Family Cap punishes children born to very low-income mother and the child's older sisters and brothers. This bill will help ensure that all low-income families receiving public benefits and survivors who may not be identified as such have a better opportunity to move out of poverty.
- Support An Act Relative to Sexual Violence on Higher Education Campuses (S2081) to ensure that institutions of higher education provide victim support and safety, prevention education, training, and sound policy to facilitate the social change needed to prevent sexual assault and intimate partner violence from occurring in the first place.
- Support the work and policy agenda of the On Solid Ground Coalition, led by the Center for Social Policy, Citizens Housing and Planning Association, and Homes for Families to ensure access to housing stability and economic mobility for families living in Massachusetts.

Invest in prevention, education and awareness

In the past year, we have seen a significant rise in public awareness of and discourse about sexual and domestic violence. Let us not allow these painful stories and this public attention to be in vain. If we do not actively work to address the root causes of gender based violence, we will continue to need shelters and services. We must change our social norms and value “equality between” not “power over,” and provide broad based education across the lifespan and throughout our communities.

We must:

- Believe that domestic violence is preventable, and that ending it is the responsibility of us all.
- Educate children on how to resolve conflict without violence and how to respect others.
- Teach youth empathy, how to value themselves, and about healthy relationships and communication. Challenge gender roles, engage men and boys as allies in prevention, invest in bystander empowerment and education, and foster the voice and leadership of women and girls.
- Create workplace and school policies that hold abusers accountable for their violent or harassing behavior, allow victims to report incidents safely and seriously, publicly post information on the state domestic violence employment law and Title IX protections.
- Raise awareness about domestic and dating violence and where survivors can go for support in government agencies, social service and health systems, private businesses and throughout our communities. Casa Myrna promotes domestic violence awareness and SafeLink, the statewide hotline, through posters, other materials and an annual mass transit ad campaign. We would be happy to work with the Committee to expand far beyond our current reach.
- Recognize that the expertise for ending domestic violence resides with local community based programs like the ones who testified here today and exist across the Commonwealth.

Just last week, Casa Myrna hosted a visit from a delegation from the French National Assembly. We were able to share how privileged we are in MA to have state and municipal funding for domestic violence services and systems that recognize domestic violence.

And yet despite all our resources, still, SafeLink receives over fifty calls a day from survivors seeking shelter who are homeless due to domestic violence. Still, we still have members of our communities who think domestic violence is a private issue. Still, we have systems that create barriers to survivors getting and staying safe. Still, we struggle to ensure all children and youth know what healthy relationships look like and to expect nothing less.

Casa Myrna marked our fortieth anniversary this year. We have been here for forty years, and are working hard to ensure we are not here for another forty. Domestic and dating violence are preventable, but it will take all of us working together to get there.

Thank you for holding this hearing and for joining us in our work to end dating and domestic violence.



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Joint Committee on Public Health and Massachusetts Caucus of Women Legislators Notice of Public Hearing October 30, 2017 – 10:30 AM – Hearing Rooms A1 & A2 Informational Hearing on Domestic Violence as a Public Health Issue

Testimony will be provided by invitation only

Agenda

Panel 1: Support Services

- Trinity White, *Survivor and Outreach and Engagement Assistant, Casa Myrna*
- Stephanie Brown, *Chief Executive Officer, Casa Myrna*
- Sabrina Santiago, *Co-Executive Director, The Network/La Red*
- Dawn Sauma, *Co-Executive Director, Asian Task Force Against Domestic Violence*
- Janis Broderick, *Executive Director, Elizabeth Freeman Center*
- Linda Cavaoli, *Executive Director, YWCA of Central Massachusetts*

Panel 2: Prevention and Response

- Dr. David Adams, *Co-Founder and Co-Director, Emerge*
- Duane de Four, *Senior Prevention Specialist, Violence Prevention and Response, Massachusetts Institute of Technology*
- Dan Lebowitz, *Executive Director, Center for the Study of Sport in Society, Northeastern University*
- Matthew Nicoli, *Family Advocacy Program Specialist, U.S. Coast Guard*
- Jennifer Paruk, *Research Director, Boston University School of Public Health*

Panel 3: State Level Perspectives

- Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito
- Secretary Marylou Sudders, *Executive Office of Health and Human Services*
- Maureen Gallagher, *Policy Director, Jane Doe, Inc.*

Panel 4: Systems Change

- District Attorney Marian Ryan, *Middlesex County, Massachusetts*
- Margo Lindauer, *Director, Domestic Violence Institute and Domestic Violence Clinic, Northeastern University*
- Dean Michelle Williams, *The Learning Lab, Dean, T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Harvard University*
- Dr. Linda Williams, *Senior Research Scientist and Co-Director of the Justice and Gender-Based Violence Research Initiative, Wellesley Centers for Women, Wellesley College*