Wisconsin Department of Children and Families



Domestic Abuse Program Annual Report

2025

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Division of Safety and Permanence

Please email DCFDVProgram@wisconsin.gov with any questions regarding this report.

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Wisconsin Department of Children and Families
Domestic Abuse Program

The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) Domestic Abuse Program administers state and federal funding dedicated to providing shelter and supportive services for survivors of domestic abuse and their families. This funding is critical to the ability of domestic abuse agencies across the state to provide safety to survivors and their children when they need it most.

Domestic Violence in Wisconsin

In Wisconsin, it is estimated that 40% of women are abused, physically or psychologically, by an intimate partner at some point during their lifetime. It is also estimated that 35% of Wisconsin women will experience intimate partner violence-related impacts due to contact sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking.

There are both chronic and acute consequences to intimate partner violence. One of the biggest barriers for people and families attempting to leave relationships impacted by domestic violence is the lack of safe and stable housing (Gezinski & Gonzalez-Pons, 2021; Mayock & Neary, 2025). There is also not enough capacity for emergency shelters to serve all the needs of survivors around the state due to lack of funding. This means there are immediate needs not being met.

There are also challenges with finding long-term stability, which is a protective factor to keeping survivors from feeling the need to return to their perpetrators. Often, financial abuse is a part of a survivor's experience, leading to lack of funds and/or credit rating which are required to obtain stable housing (Postmus et al., 2020).

Addressing Domestic Abuse in Wisconsin

The goals of the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) Domestic Abuse Program are to:

- Provide accessible, trauma-sensitive, culturally responsive crisis, safety, and support services for victims/survivors of domestic abuse and their children;
- Provide accessible, effective, and culturally appropriate services to survivors of domestic abuse from traditionally underserved groups and from across the life span;
- Educate the community about issues related to domestic abuse;
- Promote a coordinated community response to domestic abuse; and
- Promote the social change necessary to end domestic abuse.

"A child said to his mother after his first group, 'I'm not the only one. Other kids' parents fight, and they left home too.' A young man who came to an appointment with his Mom state, 'Thank you for saving my Mother's life. She told me all you did for her that no one else would have."
– Youth receiving services

Wisconsin DCF Domestic Abuse Funding

In calendar year (CY) 2025, DCF administered over $16 million to local domestic abuse programs to provide core support services for survivors, as well as services to children and underrepresented communities. An additional $2 million was administered for prevention, training, and technical assistance to domestic abuse programs. This funding included state and federal funding sources.

DCF Domestic Abuse Contracts fund 41 shelter programs, 71 nonprofit domestic abuse and dual DV/SA agencies; ten federally recognized tribes; and three technical assistance and training providers.

Services Funded by DCF in Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2025

Between Oct. 1, 2024, and Sept. 30, 2025, DCF domestic abuse funding provided 240,766 nights of safe shelter for 4,843 survivors and their children. Of the total number of people staying in safe shelter, 47% or 2,280 of those were children and youth. DCF domestic abuse funding also provided 26,627 survivors with supportive advocacy, counseling, and other community-based services.

24-Hour Crisis Line: Programs provide or contract for immediate, live access to trained staff or volunteers on a crisis hotline so that survivors have access to assistance any day, any time. In FFY 2025, programs across Wisconsin were able to respond to 91,844 crisis hotline contacts (calls, messages, emails, and texts).

In CY2025

41
Shelter Programs



71
Non-profit Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault Agencies

10
Tribal DV Programs

3
Technical Assistance and Training Providers

I just wanted to tell you thank you for everything… I feel it's only right to pay it forward back to the place that helped my boys and me now that we're doing good."

– Wisconsin Survivor 2025

Information, Referral and Follow-up Services: Programs have linkages and provide information and referral to community resources for those services which are needed and requested by survivors but not provided directly by the program.

Advocacy and Counseling: Programs provide survivor-driven information, support, assistance, accompaniment, and intervention. These services may include individual support and safety planning, support groups, legal advocacy, and/or individual therapy.

In this fiscal year:

- 6,675 children received individual or group counseling
- 28,281 adult survivors received individual or group counseling support
- 14,483 adult survivors received legal advocacy*

*Legal advocacy can include, but is not limited to, preparing paperwork for protection/restraining orders, accompanying a survivor to a protection order hearing, and all other advocacy within the civil justice system.

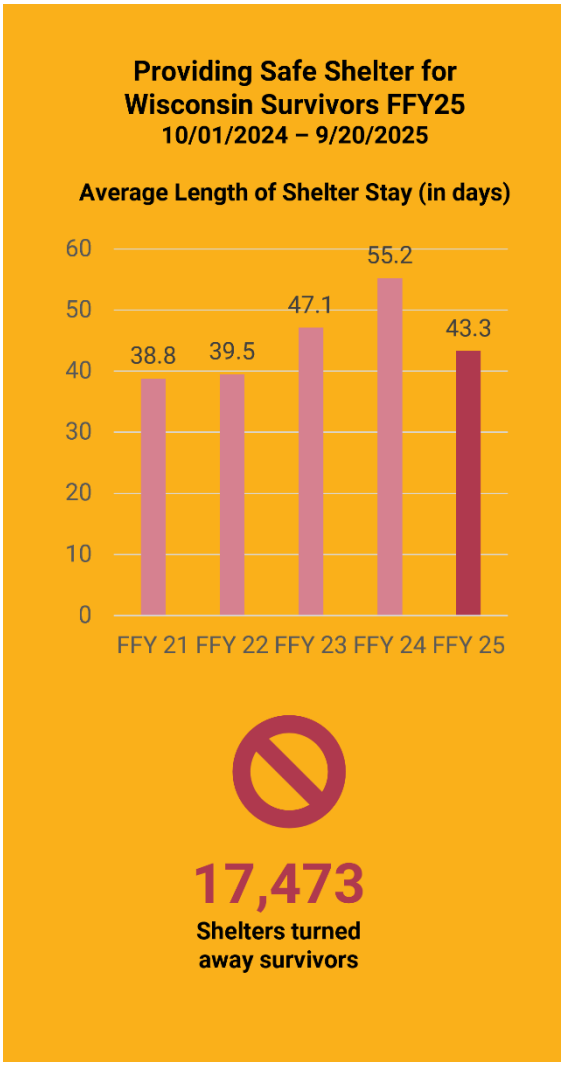
Safe Shelter

Wisconsin Domestic Abuse Programs report that the housing crisis in many communities has impacted survivors' ability to find safe housing. In FFY 2025, the number of nights of shelter provided annually was 240,766. In the same span of time, the average length of shelter stay for a family in crisis was 43.3 nights.

Safe shelter can be provided in numerous ways. Domestic abuse programs work with survivors to provide the best option available depending on survivor needs and the availability of space and funding. DCF currently funds 41 domestic abuse shelters which provide residential and support services for survivors and their children fleeing violent homes. When shelters are full or the needs of a survivor warrant it, domestic abuse programs may provide hotel rooms or emergency funding to help a survivor remain safely housed.

Sometimes however, there are not enough resources to safely shelter/house all survivors who need safety. In FFY 2025 alone, 54.9% of domestic abuse shelters had to turn away survivors due to lack of capacity to serve and more than 17,473 survivor requests for shelter went unfulfilled.

In addition, the average length of stay in shelter increased almost 8 days in length from the prior year; a trend that advocates attributed to the shortage of affordable housing throughout Wisconsin.



Community Education: Programs educate individuals and organizations about issues surrounding domestic abuse. Many programs provide education to youth of all ages through programming in schools. Community education may include information about available services, information about abuse, prevention of domestic abuse, and the need for social change.

"This program quite literally saved our lives in more ways than I could count. Thank you all so very much." – Shelter Services Recipient

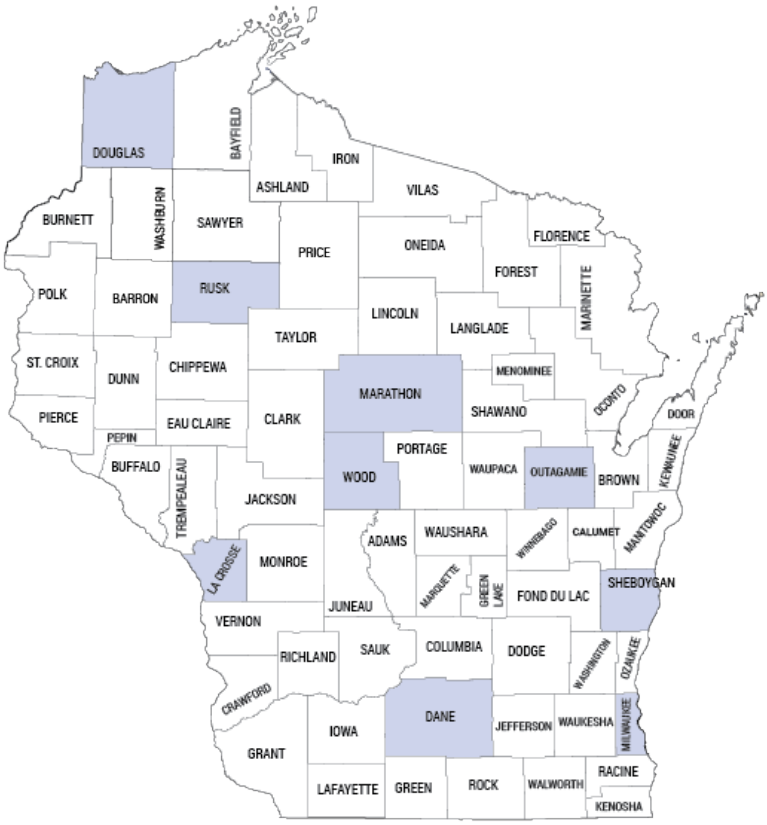
Housing Insecurity: The Impact of Wisconsin Domestic Abuse Survivors

In Wisconsin, the threat of homelessness remains a significant barrier for families attempting to escape domestic abuse. Emergency domestic abuse shelters, a common and critical mechanism for providing immediate shelter, are often at capacity and spaces are limited across the state. To address this phenomenon, the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) has taken a proactive approach to creating safety housing for survivors.

Domestic Violence Housing First Pilot Project

In 2021, the DCF received funding from the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to continue efforts to "prepare, prevent, and respond to COVID-19". DCF reviewed stakeholder feedback, along with national research, and decided to utilize this funding to support a pilot Domestic Violence Housing First (DVHF) project. DVHF is an evidence based and trauma informed practice that moves domestic abuse survivors into safe, stable, and permanent housing as quickly as possible, reducing or avoiding the need for emergency shelter. Once housed, survivors have access to supportive, holistic advocacy resources.

This pilot project started in December 2021 with DCF issuing awards to nine domestic abuse agencies from around the state: Embrace (Ladysmith), Cia Siab (La Crosse), The Family Center (Wisconsin Rapids), Safe Harbor (Sheboygan), Harbor House (Appleton), Domestic Abuse Intervention Services (Madison), The Women's Community (Wausau), Center Against Sexual and Domestic Abuse (Superior), and the Milwaukee Center for Children and Youth (Milwaukee). End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin provided training and technical assistance to support the pilot project.



The DVHF pilot program is designed to address housing stabilization, reduce use of shelter facilities, and support housing-first practices. It allows providers to both trial and implement innovative and unique solutions consistent with DVHF philosophy. The aim of flexible financial assistance is to reduce any type of barrier faced by a domestic abuse survivor in acquiring safe and stable housing. This project will be administered through December 31, 2026.

Research to Assess the Effectiveness of the DVHF Approach

In implementing DVHF in Wisconsin, DCF contracted with the University of Wisconsin-Madison to provide an evaluation of the pilot project. This evaluation examined how the use of DVHF funding was associated with changes in operations and functions across domestic abuse organizations. Changes were seen in housing stability, exposure to violence, mental and physical well-being, and family functioning for survivors who received DVHF assistance (Barnes, 2025).

A long-term evaluation that examined both outcomes and lived experiences included:

- 27 interviews with the nine domestic abuse organizations in Wisconsin over a 30-month period,
- Surveys with 108 domestic abuse survivors at four points in time over the course of 12 months,
- Monthly administrative expenditure data for the DVHF program were submitted over 38 months and,
- Monthly technical assistance cohort calls allow for peer and technical support.

Program Survey Trends

1. Survivors who received more funding were more likely to be employed over the course of the study;
2. Survivors who received ongoing support secured housing for longer periods than those who received one-time support;
3. Survivors who received ongoing support had higher post-traumatic stress (PTSD) symptoms across the study than those who received one-time support;
4. Survivors who received funding for rent were less likely to visit the emergency department over time compared to those who received other expenditure types; and,
5. Survivors who received funding for rent reported improved behavior of their children at home over time compared to those who received other expenditure types. **There was a significant and robust association for those who received more funding to report improved school attendance of their children over time**, which suggests that increased support for housing has positive impacts on child outcomes.

Site interview data highlighted several challenges to effective DVHF program implementation including difficulty transitioning from a scarcity mindset when budgeting DVHF funds, difficulty training and retaining staff, hidden conditionality, and effectively administering DVHF in the face of limited housing availability and community resources. However, benefits included flexibility in administering DVHF funding, which allowed staff to pay for survivor needs beyond rent and security deposit payments, enhanced investment in staff wellbeing through increasing staff wages, and overall improvement in staff morale.

The mean amount of funding provided was $3,608 per survivor (range = $0-$20,490) and the mean number of months of support was 3.2 (range = 0-17 months). **The most common expenditures were rent/security deposit (*n* = 91), transportation and vehicle repairs (*n* = 32), and utilities (*n* = 22).** About one-third (*n* = 34) were current or prior shelter residents, and more than two-thirds (*n* = 74) received support on more than one occasion (Barnes, 2025).



Overall Conclusion

The DVHF pilot project played a critical role in providing housing support to survivors in Wisconsin and was associated with improvements in safety and mental health, along with positive educational outcomes for the children of survivors. This included observed reductions in violence severity and posttraumatic stress alongside increases in housing stability and child school attendance.

The DVHF was unable to address all concerns (e.g., economic security) related to stable housing for survivors. Other supports (affordable and flexible childcare, more affordable housing in the community, access to affordable mental health care + childcare to address these needs) could be important for improving these outcomes.

"My kids and I would be on the street or back in the situation that would expose us to more domestic violence if we didn't have house first help."

"Saved my life literally and helped me reunited with kids."

"It has been such a blessing to have had the assistance to get out of a toxic martial house and into my own apartment that my children and I call HOME!"

– Quotes from DVHF participants

2025 Teen Summit

Annual Teen Summit on Healthy Relationships

The 2025 Teen Summit was held in person February 26-28, 2025, with over 300 people attending. The Summit is End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin's largest training, bringing youth, parents, educators, activists, and mentors from all over Wisconsin together to learn about healthy relationships, teen dating violence, and sexual assault. The Teen Summit includes educational and enthusiastic plenary speakers, as well as topic-related workshops and performances and plenty of opportunities for teens to network with peers from around the state on a deeper level.

Teen Summit 2025 Recap



2025 Quotes from Teen Summit Youth Participants

(An event highlight was...)

"Getting to speak to Miss Alexis Smith and her giving me personal advice on my relationship, self-worth, and getting rid of bad habits."

"I enjoyed the talent show because I got to showcase my talents in a safe space."

"I loved how open and welcoming it is, I felt safe in the presence of all these wonderful souls."

"About how we talked about teens and the importance of learning dating violence and communication and opportunities to let the teens speak up with their voice."

"I loved the workshop "Poetry Made me Pretty" mostly because when we were talking it felt so healing just talking to another stranger even though we didn't know of each other."

"Overall having the ability to me new people that are all over my state. My highlight was connecting and making new friends, able to learn about the different types of violence and struggles that our country is currently going through."