

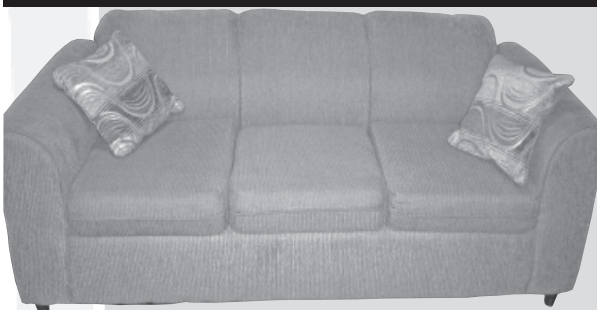


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## UNKNOWN

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economy makes permanent housing less accessible to low-income people, the housing offerings available to survivors are being stretched to capacity.

Big Bend agencies are finding ways to make the system work for domestic violence survivors, but options are limited. And for domestic violence victims, the unavailability of a safe place can mean the difference between staying in an abusive relationship and leaving.

According to advocates, making that decision appears to have become more life threatening as the number of domestic violence homicides rises across the state.

### A safe place

Once they decide to leave, domestic violence victims in Florida are finding it challenging to obtain safe haven. According to the Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence, more than 7,000 victims were unable to access emergency shelters because of a lack of beds.

"We know that across the board from our state needs assessment and from talking to women in shelter that the No. 1 need is housing," FCADV executive director Tiffany Carr said.

"We know that the one primary reason women have to turn back home is because of the lack of affordable housing. If there's nowhere for her to go to take the children, there's no option out."

In the eight-county area served by Refuge House, housing — at all levels — represents the No. 1 need for domestic violence survivors, Refuge House executive director Meg Baldwin said.

The one-stop service provider for domestic violence survivors in Leon, Gadsden, Wakulla, Franklin, Jefferson, Madison, Taylor and Liberty counties serves an area about the size of Connecticut. Refuge House runs two emergency shelters, one in Leon County that has a capacity of 35 and another in Taylor County that has a capacity of 15, and it has a transitional housing program with 72 beds.

While the number of individuals served overall at the Refuge House



### ABOUT THE WRITER

Democrat staff reporter David Sáez has worked with the *Tallahassee Democrat* since March 2008. He worked as a sports reporter covering high schools and colleges until last August, when he joined the metro news section of the Information Center as the public safety reporter. He has worked as a journalist for six-and-a-half years.

emergency shelters have shown some decreases annually (446 in 2008-09 and 478 in 2007-08), Baldwin says several new pieces of data show an increased need for emergency shelter.

For instance, at the Leon County shelter 334 individuals were served in the 2008-2009, compared to 226 in the first six months of the 2009-2010 statistical year. It represents a 40-percent increase in the occupancy rate. Another notable occurrence was the Leon County shelter running over capacity in October, November and December last year.

"We've not seen it at capacity for this length of time, and I do think the economics has had a lot to do with that," said Deborah Lloyd, the Refuge House Region I director. "I don't know that we have statistics that bear that out, but we do have more women who are seeking shelter because of their difficult situation."

An increased need in emergency shelter services results in a greater need for other services, including transitional housing.

### Ties to homelessness

When there are no other affordable options, some survivors choose homelessness over abuse.

Big Bend Homeless Coalition Executive Director Susan Pourciau points to a national statistic stating that 28 percent of homeless families cite domestic violence as the reason for their homelessness.

No one has the local numbers linking domestic violence and homelessness, but Pourciau estimates that about 75 percent of the women served in the HOPE Community, the BBHC's transitional housing program, had been in a domestic violence situation or had been sexually assaulted.

"I think domestic violence, combined with the economic recession, is the reason we've seen an increase in the number of homeless families," Pourciau said.

The increasing number of homeless families has resulted in BBHC making emergency shelter for homeless families with children one of its highest priorities. Pourciau estimates that the need for households with children is 42 beds for emergency shelter and 112 beds in transitional housing.

### Time to recover

Before leaving her post as the Refuge House executive director five years ago, Kelly Otte had worked to purchase six apartments for transitional housing designated for domestic violence survivors.

"We knew even when we bought the apartment complex that it was not enough," Otte said.

Transitional housing helps survivors by providing them an affordable home during a time when they can seek permanent employment and housing as well as access social services.

With about 470 individuals served annually in its emergency shelter, Refuge House's transitional housing is limited to supporting between 30 and 50 women and children annually, according to Baldwin. And this is after more than doubling its capacity since the program began.

Other Big Bend transitional housing options, which serve more than domestic violence survivors, are often filled. According to a Big Bend Homeless Coalition 2009 survey, all 304 transitional housing beds were being used.

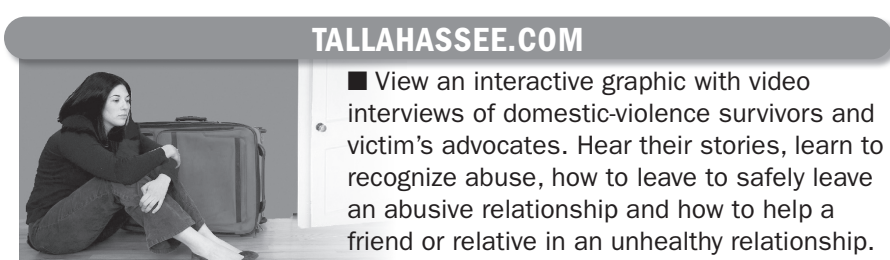
Like other local transitional housing providers, ECHO Family Services receives referrals from Refuge House. Placing those referrals has proven difficult, said family services program director TaSheika Williford.

Since July 2009 through last Monday, Williford says that ECHO's program had received 23 referrals and placed one.

"The immediate need is definitely housing," Williford said. "But the agencies equipped to provide that service don't have the space and adequate staffing to meet the need."

### Keeping her kids

Tere Craig-Garren's decision to



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■ View an interactive graphic with video interviews of domestic-violence survivors and victim's advocates. Hear their stories, learn to recognize abuse, how to leave to safely leave an abusive relationship and how to help a friend or relative in an unhealthy relationship.

leave an abusive marriage came to her as she sat in the emergency room of a Jacksonville hospital awaiting stitches for an injury that had come at the hands of her abuser (though she told the medical staff she'd tripped on a skateboard). He'd struck her before, but this time she asked herself what she wanted from her life.

"The answer was I need to raise my kids," she said. "And I can't do that if I'm broken."

This was her reason for leaving. Housing has played and continues to play a significant role in meeting her personal goal.

"If I didn't have housing for my children, I'd lose them," she said. "Chances are I would have ended up doing what a lot of women do — go back."

Transitional housing gave her time to deal with issues of bad credit and work on self-esteem through counseling. It also allowed her to pursue employment. After starting as an employee at the former Refuge House thrift shop, Craig-Garren found a job with a local health-care organization.

"Transitional housing gives women more stable time to work themselves back," said Otte, the former Refuge House executive director. "That's the way it should work. We should have enough housing to give them a chance to recover."

### Isolating circumstances

Rural residents in Refuge House's service area face the greatest lack of services, says Lloyd, the Refuge House Region I director.

"When you're living in a rural community, there is a lack of housing as well as employment," Lloyd said. "And we are talking about those who are already reluctant to leave their community because of the distance."

The reluctance to travel to Tallahassee or Taylor County for emergency shelter is another barrier that advocates for domestic violence survivors must negotiate, according to Alice DuPont, the former chairwoman for the Gadsden County Domestic Violence

Coordinating Council.

### Some barriers faced

Local advocates explain that domestic violence survivors face a variety of obstacles, among which are:

■ Rental discrimination against survivors who have been arrested for a felony related to their domestic violence case even though they were never charged;

■ Housing denial because of a prison record when the survivor is trying to gain independence;

■ Poor credit history, which in some cases is the result of an abuser limiting the survivor's access to control their finances;

■ Lack of affordable housing;

■ Limited access to public housing and Section 8 subsidized housing.

Those who turn to public housing are often placed on a waiting list because of the extent of the need, Tallahassee Housing Authority executive director Claudette Cromartie said.

### Deadly violence

The need for safe housing has become a more urgent matter as it appears the severity of domestic violence is increasing. In Florida, the number of domestic violence homicides has increased 8.9 percent, according to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.

In Leon County, the five domestic violence homicides in 2008 were the most since 1995, when there were six. Gadsden County had one domestic violence homicide from 2006 to 2008, but in 2009 it had two, both murder-suicides.

"The level of brutality is unlike anything I've seen in my 16 years," the FCADV's Carr said. "Obviously the economic downturn coincides with this."

### Opportunities for change

Strategies to address the housing need exist. Some say it's a matter of reducing the shameful silence around domestic violence that holds commu-

nities back from seriously making it a priority.

From her experience as a survivor, Craig-Garren recommends a program that establishes a payment structure that makes paying for the initial costs of moving into permanent housing affordable.

At the FCADV, Tiffany Carr suggests that communities consider a sliding-scale payment plan for survivors moving into permanent housing.

She also stresses the importance of capturing local data about housing needs for domestic violence survivors. This information can be used to educate leaders and help communities strategize.

For Deborah Lloyd with Refuge House, needs assessments are important, but she thinks needs are best met at the neighborhood level.

"I think it's important to have coalitions, but I also think it's important that communities pick up the banner and become proactive about the issues," Lloyd said.

"Let's plan for domestic violence prevention in Killbuck. Let's plan for prevention in Frenchtown, in the south side, or in SouthWood. Who knows better than our communities what the community's needs are than communities?"

One example of small communities working to meet a need is occurring in Gadsden County. A group of women who are part of the Gadsden County Chapter of the National Hook-Up of Black Women is trying to make arrangements with local hotels to cover the cost of temporarily housing victims.

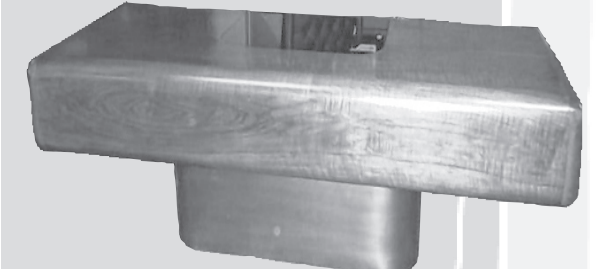
"If a woman calls the police department at 11 p.m. and walks out with just the clothes on her back, we can either take her to the Refuge House shelter in Tallahassee, or we can work it out so they can stay here without them having to stay in a situation they can't handle," DuPont said. "It's a stop-gap, but it gets them out of the situation when it is most heated."

With the need for safe, affordable housing rising, Lloyd says a question must be asked and answered: "Beyond saying, 'Isn't that a shame,' we need to ask, 'What is it that we are going to do?'" Lloyd said. "We do what we can with what we have just like any other agency in the eight-county area, but we are all painfully aware of the need."



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I need time with my family."

That was in April, and by the end of August, I saw no improvement. I made my decision.

My counselor once told me that it can take years for a woman to leave, but once she truly decides, there's no looking back. That is how it has been for me.

### 'I made the right choice'

The first apartment I had on my own was a small one-bedroom unit that I shared with my very large and very hyper dog Hershey.

I would lie in bed and stare at the stark white, bare walls. They seemed lonely and disorienting, but a shift in my thinking occurred somewhere along the way. Those were my walls. I could put whatever I wanted on them. If I wanted to paint them hot pink, I could do it.

My divorce was final in April 2007, and I've spent a lot of time since then figuring out what I enjoy, what I like, who I am when no one is telling me what to do.

For me, the decision to leave came down to one of what I wanted to risk. Did I want to stay in that marriage and risk the abuse getting worse, which I believed it would?

Did I want to risk my spiritual, physical and mental wellbeing, my career even?

Or, did I want to leave and take a chance on whatever life awaited me on my own?

There are simple times, quiet times, in every day when I know I made the right choice.

When I share a laugh with my friends on a girls' night-out, when I relax with a glass of wine on my couch after a long day, when my head touches the pillow at night, and I close my eyes, thanking God for the peace in my heart, I know.

■ Contact Content Editor Rebecca Cantley at (850) 599-2391 or rcantley@tallahassee.com.

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