

BE BRAVE, SPEAK UP

The Quarterly Newsletter of the Family Violence Law Center's Policy Department



Artist: Joshua Mays
Location: 17th & Broadway, Oakland

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Welcome

Welcome to the Family Violence Law Center (FVLC) Policy Department's first newsletter! We are excited to use this medium as a way to stay connected with supporters of our work and share our department's advocacy, progress, and growth.

Our Policy Department is currently a small, but mighty team of two with Tunisia Owens as the Policy and Advocacy Manager and Nishara (Nashi) Gunasekara as the Housing and Gender Justice Advocate.

Our quarterly newsletters will provide a snapshot of the multifaceted work underway, updates on any initiatives, and occasional reflections, projections, or calls to action.

We will also use this medium as an opportunity to highlight the healing artistry of Oakland. Each newsletter will feature at least one piece of local art to remind us that advocacy, activism, and change can start and stem from multiple forms of work.

We hope this newsletter satisfies our itch for connectedness in this hyper-virtual world. We welcome any feedback on this first issue and future ones. Thank you for your support!

FVLC Policy Work

It has been an ambitious and successful first quarter of 2021. Keeping up with the bustling legislative cycle, the FVLC has already submitted three formal letters in support of AB 71 (L. Rivas), SB 271 (Wiener), and SB 373 (Min).

- **AB 71 (L. Rivas)** proposes a comprehensive plan to address homelessness by committing ongoing funds to long-term solutions. The bill indicates a set-aside of funds for addressing homelessness among domestic violence survivors. In our support letter, we highlight the disparate impacts of homelessness, housing insecurity, and COVID-19 on survivors to underscore the need for a distinct set-aside and plan to adequately serve them. We also signed on to AB 71's accompanying budget request.

- **SB 271 (Wiener)** repeals a 1988 restriction that limited eligibility for the office of Sheriff to those with a Peace Officers Standards and Training (POST) certificate and salaried law enforcement experience. In alignment with the FVLC's participation in Oakland's Reimagining Public Safety Task Force, this bill seeks to increase diversity in gender, ethnicity, skill set, and perspective in a position that has largely been occupied by white men. In our support letter, we speak to: 1) the continued failures by many California Sheriffs to deliver fair, survivor-centered, dynamic responses to address community safety needs and 2) the requirement for change in leadership to even begin the work of "reimagining public safety."
- **SB 373 (Min)** protects survivors from debt collection for debts that were taken out in their name through coercion or fraud. Financial abuse impacts nearly all of FVLC's clients, so supporting this bill was a must. In our letter, we outline how involuntary debt can preclude survivors from a number of stabilizing resources, compelling them to either return to their abusers or make other dangerous trade-offs.



Artist: Unknown

Location: 339 14th St. in Downtown Oakland

Photo by: @1stNoel

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*Advocacy, activism,
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Aside from engaging in legislative work, the FVLC Policy Department is pursuing other channels of advocacy, one of them being a **multi-media series on economic abuse**. Economic abuse affects nearly all domestic violence survivors and FVLC clients are no exception. In response to the complex barriers our Housing First clients face due to economic abuse (destroyed credit, lost life-savings, involuntary debt), we wanted to produce a detailed series on this under-discussed form of violence with the hopes of providing recommendations for action and resources for survivors. Part 1 will go live by the end of this month.

On the topic of economic abuse, the FVLC Policy Department participates in FreeFrom's Survivor Wealth Policy Group (SWPG). FreeFrom is a Los Angeles-based national organization that works to create financial security for survivors of gender-based violence (GBV). SWPG focuses on advocating for policies and best practices that promote survivor wealth across the nation. The group is comprised of GBV advocates from across the nation. In our February meeting, we discussed how we should advocate to improve the nation's response system to survivor financial security. The FVLC Policy Department suggested **creating a best practice guide** that informs how policies and initiatives can be survivor wealth-centered. The idea gained wide support and will now be the advocacy vehicle we use to collectively create a final best practice guide by the end of 2021.

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When we continue to let survivors become economically disenfranchised through abuse, our communities suffer.

(From part 1 of the FVLC Series on Economic Abuse)

Oakland's Reimagining Public Safety Task Force (RPSTF) concluded its last meeting on March 17. The goal of this task force is to reduce the Oakland Police Department's budget allocation from the city's general purpose fund by 50%. As participants, the FVLC has **contributed to the 89 approved recommendations** aimed to achieve this goal as well as to increase community safety. These recommendations will be submitted to Oakland's City Council in the coming weeks.

Lastly, the FVLC Policy Department participates in Alameda County's Continuum of Care Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) Oversight and Systems Coordination Committees. The HMIS Oversight committee focuses on improved performance, accountability, and quality of Alameda County HMIS data. HMIS comprises information of a County's homeless population for the purposes of tracking and coordinating resources available to those homeless. The Systems Coordination committee focuses on improving Alameda County's Housing Crisis Response System through coordinated planning among necessary stakeholders and performance of the system for clients.

As domestic violence advocates, the FVLC Policy Department participates in these meetings to raise the needs and concerns of homeless survivors who are often overlooked in the greater homeless population. Specifically, within the traditional HMIS system, those who identify as survivors are unable to be added to HMIS because of various data confidentiality protections under the Violence Against Women's Act (VAWA). Therefore, a priority for the FVLC Policy Department in these meetings is to advocate for survivor visibility within these systems to ensure adequate services and attention is being paid to these individuals.

In Systems Coordination meetings, our main concern is to ensure that Alameda County's Housing Crisis Response System is tuned in to the unique needs and specific barriers homeless survivors face in accessing stabilizing resources.

A recent point of discussion during HMIS meetings has been around the Point-In-Time (PIT) count and Housing Inventory Count (HIC). The PIT is a count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless people on a given night. The HIC is a count of the beds and units available to those who are homeless on a given night. COVID-19 has interfered with the feasibility of these counts in 2021 and so, the PIT and HIC counts will be conducted in January 2022 and resume their regularly scheduled counts in 2023.

Housing and Gender Justice Project

The Housing and Gender Justice Project is aimed at addressing the specific intersection between domestic violence and homelessness. Since 2021, we have been **researching best practices and models** across the nation that adequately account for, address, and service homeless survivors. Due to a lack of public attention and systemic barriers, survivors of violence are often omitted from conversations around homelessness. This typically results in things like: severe undercounts in any large-scale homeless population count, under-resourced/ inadequate homeless outreach and initiatives, as well as an overall incompatible homeless services system for survivors.

One model that has piqued our interest is Los Angeles's model of incorporating a domestic violence advocate within their homeless services system. This model lends itself to increased collaboration and service alignment between two historically siloed field and improved service rates and quality of domestic violence survivors.

Survivor Provider Community Organizing

The FVLC regularly convenes with a group of Alameda County survivor and homeless providers to: 1) give updates on resources, funds, and support available to providers, 2) share information on the needs and status of clients in respective jurisdictions, and 3) collaborate on advocacy efforts on behalf of survivor needs. Most recently, our continued and collective advocacy resulted in Social Services Agency grant of \$300,000 to multiple of our survivor provider members to assist with hotel costs for sheltering survivors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the proposed cuts to the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA), which is the primary funding source for victim services throughout the nation, we **initiated a working group** to advocate for increased resources and specific budget set-asides to support survivor needs at the local, state, and federal levels. The effort is currently underway with our first meeting held on March 17. We aim to implement our finalized strategy by the end of April 2021, in time for California's state budget revisions.

HOME Cohort

The Housing Opportunities Mean Everything (HOME) Cohort is a group of approximately eight survivor providers from across California committed to addressing homelessness among domestic violence survivors. As a member organization, the FVLC participates in HOME Cohort-wide opportunities, discussions, and advocacy *as well as* directly on two of three HOME Cohort working groups: advocacy and communications. Here are a few wins we've had since 2021:

- **California Apartment's Association (CAA) Webinar on Domestic Violence Housing Laws** - In January 2021, the FVLC participated in a statewide webinar hosted by the CAA to educate California landlords on domestic violence housing laws.

- Together, with Lakin Ambriz, Director of Housing Services at and Rachelle Currie, Associate Director of Haven Women Services (HWS) located in Modesto, California, we developed content on the forms of domestic violence, its cyclical nature, its link to homelessness, and how landlords can be supportive to survivor tenants. The webinar went live on the CAA's website in February. We are now working with the CAA on multiple options to increase accessibility to housing and survivor advocates as well as survivors themselves.
- **National Network to End Domestic Violence's (NNEDV) Annual Economic Justice Summit, *There's No Place Like HOME*** - The HOME Cohort was selected to present at the NNEDV's annual Economic Justice Summit on California's Housing First (HF) model. The presentation focused on the history, structure, and implementation of the HF model as well as audience-specific communication strategies to promote HF in attendee's jurisdictions. Our presentation was attended by over 200 people nationwide. This was a collaborative effort spearheaded by Sara Behmerwold from Human Options in Orange County, Araceli Patino from Rainbow Services in San Pedro, and Nishara (Nashi) Gunasekara from the FVLC in Oakland.
- **Communications Working Group** - The HOME Cohort Communications working group focuses on developing strategic messaging and communication tools to address homelessness among survivors. Currently, we are working with Berkeley Media Studies Group to develop a communications toolkit that assesses the current attitudes towards and media coverage on domestic violence, homelessness, and their intersection. Using information gathered from focus groups of stakeholders across California, we will provide tangible action steps and resources that folks can take to combat gaps in media coverage and public perception, shift the narrative around survivor homelessness, and ultimately, advocate more effectively for solutions that target survivor homelessness.
- **Advocacy Working Group** - The HOME Cohort Advocacy working group focuses on initiating specific advocacy strategies to address the issue of homelessness among survivors. The group is comprised of five members as of now: Erin Scott (Executive Director of the FVLC), Rachelle Currie, Lakin Ambriz, Sara Behmerwold, and Nashi Gunasekara. Currently, we are working on an initiative that aims to add an addendum on rental leases explicitly stating survivor housing rights. We are using *Critical Resistance, Organizer's Toolkit (2019)* to ground and build out our advocacy strategy. The first step in this process is touching base with tenant rights groups across California to gauge interest, get feedback, and hopefully create partnership and momentum around this idea.

Final Thoughts

To close out Women's History Month, we will leave you with a few quotes from two changemakers who passed on this month.

Nawal El Saadawi (October 27, 1932 - March 21, 2021) was an Egyptian secularist, feminist, humanitarian, author, activist, physician, and psychiatrist. **Beverly Cleary** (April 12, 1916 - March 25, 2021) was an American writer of children's and young adult fiction.

"Solidarity between women can be a powerful force of change, and can influence future development in ways favourable not only to women but also to men." - Nawal El Saadawi

"I think adults sometimes don't think about how children are feeling about the adult problems." - Beverly Cleary

"I wrote books to entertain I'm not trying to teach anything! If I suspected the author was trying to show me how to be a better behaved girl, I shut the book." - Beverly Cleary

"When we live in a world that is very unjust, you have to be a dissident." - Nawal El Saadawi

