

Does secrecy equal safety?

The Women's Resource Center is exploring a new shelter model that is visible and secure, rather than isolated and hidden

BY ELLEN LAHR



"These folks did nothing wrong, and yet they have to go into hiding to be safe."

JESSICA WALSH, WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



As domestic violence intervention agencies revisit whether secret shelter locations are an outdated concept, the Women's Resource Center is preparing to join the new way of thinking: building a public facing, one-stop housing development with apartments, support services and no more secrets.

"People in a shelter can't tell anyone where they are, their children can't invite kids over to play or say where they live," said Jessica Walsh, executive director of Bristol-based WRC, which serves hundreds of regional clients in Newport and Bristol counties. "These folks did nothing wrong, and yet they have to go into hiding to be safe."

Research shows that domestic violence survivors seeking safety shouldn't have to bear the stigma of secrecy once they have fled their abuser. Secrecy can be a hallmark of domestic abuse, and adding another clandestine requirement to a survivor's life may in fact be re-traumatizing. And secret housing often limits clients' ability to begin living a normal life.

"There's a shift toward this model where survivors have more ability to engage in the community as part of their healing and normalcy," she said.

WRC has hired a Boston architecture firm that has developed trauma-informed design concepts and conducted focus groups. But Walsh said the project is on a side-burner due to two key challenges: first, finding an appropriate and affordable parcel of land on Aquidneck Island, on a bus line, has proven a challenge; and second, 80 percent of the agency's funding comes from federal grants, and like many non-profits dependent on federal funds, WRC is cautious about embarking on a large capital project when keeping programs operating is

the first priority.

The other issue driving WRC's plan is increasingly unaffordable housing in the region, a huge hurdle for families seeking to move out of shelters and transitional housing into a new home.

"It's obvious to us that the lack of safe, affordable housing is a true barrier to our survivors in finding safety and peace for their families," said Becky Hill, development director at WRC.

She pointed to a public-facing development in Bozeman, Montana, which opened in 2023 and expanded its bed capacity from 12 to 40. The development is pet-friendly, as WRC's would be, and includes on-site support services, day care and a police department sub-station.

The WRC project doesn't have a specific budget yet, but Walsh said it will certainly be a multi-million-dollar undertaking. The agency has more than \$1 million set aside from the sale of a building it owned in downtown Newport, but with operation funds at a premium, WRC isn't ready to tie up that nest egg in real estate

just yet.

WRC's most recent annual report, for 2024, notes that the agency serves about 1,300 annually with shelter or transitional housing, crisis intervention, counseling, court and law enforcement advocacy, outreach, education and financial help.

The WRC reported \$2.36 million in revenue for 2024, with nearly \$1.9 million coming from federal and state grants. That year, the agency counted \$2.24 million in total expenses, including \$281,896 to cover rent, utilities, and insurance for office space, shelter and transitional housing. The WRC has an undisclosed shelter location that can accommodate about four families, and 10 transitional housing units.

In addition to the philosophical changes behind 'going public' with safe housing facilities, technology has made it harder to keep such locations under wraps, said Walsh. GPS location tracking and new ways of finding people mean that secret shelter locations aren't always secret, and research has shown little difference in safety issues for clients whether they are in secret or public facilities.

Housing families and services on a contained

campus also solves logistical problems for clients, who sometimes don't have cars and need more convenient centralization of support services, said Walsh.

"We want to look toward models that allow our survivors to have as normal a life as possible, and at the same time we have to keep folks safe," she said. "We're excited about this and it's the direction the domestic violence movement will be going in. We're excited to be at the forefront, but we have to be strategic and patient."

In 2024, the agency:

- Answered 1,127 hotline calls, up 28% over 2023 ;
- Provided 1,504 shelter nights to adults and children;
- Provided 3,566 nights of transitional housing to adults and children;
- Distributed \$18,739 in immediate financial help to clients;
- Assisted 32 LGBTQ clients with support;
- Conducted various trainings and outreach in the community.



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