

Some domestic violence survivors need more help

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Wendy Linsalata and Catherine Trapani



The Suffolk County Sheriff's Office Domestic Violence Bureau at District Court in Central Islip.

This guest essay reflects the views of Wendy Linsalata, executive director of L.I. Against Domestic Violence, and Catherine Trapani, assistant vice president of public policy at Volunteers of America-Greater New York.

Gov. Kathy Hochul has long been a champion of women, the LGBTQ+ community, and survivors of domestic violence. She now has an opportunity to affirm her support for survivors by changing the way the state allocates resources for these vulnerable New Yorkers. Too many survivors are excluded by the systems designed to support them in times of critical need. The fix? The state must adjust its funding parameters and level the playing field, allowing survivors of domestic violence without children equitable access to the emergency domestic violence housing they desperately need.

Currently, most rooms in emergency domestic violence shelters are configured for families, and providers are financially penalized for offering these rooms to single adults. That often forces survivors to stay in a dangerous situation with their abuser, enter the general homeless shelter system — which is not designed to meet their unique needs — or move onto the streets.

While the first image of domestic violence survivors for many people is a mother and her children fleeing an unsafe situation, the largest population of individuals seeking domestic violence shelter are actually single adults with no children — a number that is increasing year over year. In 2023, around half of all hotline callers seeking shelter placement to Safe Horizon, a New York City-based victim services agency that also fields call from Long Islanders seeking help, were single adults with no children. However, only 18% were placed, compared to 26% of hotline callers who were families of two.

A new bill passed by the State Legislature would give shelter providers the flexibility to provide temporary housing to all survivors. The SAFE Shelter Act authorizes emergency domestic violence shelters to be reimbursed the full cost of serving single-member households. This is particularly critical when a single occupancy room is not available, and a single individual must be given a double occupancy room.

The current funding structure is especially prohibitive for LGBTQ+ individuals who are nearly four times more likely than non-LGBTQ+ individuals to be victims of violent crime — 63% of transgender adults and 80% of gender nonconforming adults experiencing homelessness nationally went unsheltered, compared to 49% of cisgender adults experiencing homelessness.

Gov. Hochul understands well the impact for survivors. She worked with her mother to open a domestic violence shelter and has seen firsthand the necessity of this service for survivors — and how funding can be a barrier to providing a safe haven to those who desperately need one.

A state comptroller report on domestic violence trends found that in a single day 9,157 New Yorkers received services from a domestic violence program, 5,673 New Yorkers found refuge in emergency housing, and hotline staff received 1,572 calls. Amending current funding rules would make an immediate difference in the life of thousands of New Yorkers.

Enacting the SAFE Shelter Act would address a vulnerability in New York's shelter system. Without the reimbursement, shelter providers cannot afford to house single survivors.

We have a responsibility to meet domestic violence survivors where they are at when seeking shelter. The SAFE Shelter Act would ensure that providers can serve those who need it most without risking fiscal insolvency. Signing this legislation is a logical and important next step for Gov. Hochul to take to ensure New York is a safe haven for domestic violence survivors — no matter whether they are on this journey with family members or alone.

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