



Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh

FALL 2022



Trigger Warning: domestic violence, suicide attempt, animal abuse, threats of rape, threats of murder.

New Beginnings: A Place of Her Own

"John and I met on a dating app. I was in a dark mental place, and he looked exactly like my favorite musician. It seemed like it was meant to be," Luna began. "He lived out of state and one weekend, he came to visit me. He never left. We were together for seven years."

Luna said that the relationship started off well. At first, he kept the apartment very clean, cooked meals, and ran errands. "I have a disability, so it was great to have help around the house," explained Luna.

The first red flag was the drugs. One day, John sent her to the store for some Sudafed for his sinuses. She bought a different version of the medicine, and he cussed her out for buying the wrong one. Later, Luna discovered he was making meth in the basement of her apartment. Luna started to use the drug with John. "He got me started on meth, but he'd control my access to it. If we fought, he wouldn't let me use any."

"I remember the first time he put his hands on me. At that time, I was still feeling that independent strong woman Black Girl Magic," said Luna. "We were arguing, he spit on me, and next thing I knew, he had me against the wall by my neck. He was pummeling me against the wall and then on the bed. I remember thinking 'I let a snake into my house.' That was the first time Luna called the police.

"I just wanted him gone. I didn't want him to be arrested. But, I also didn't want him to be homeless. He wasn't from the area and I couldn't have that on my conscience," she said. "After every incident, he would tell me that he loved me and he wouldn't hurt me."

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The abuse worsened. John would strangle, punch, and kick Luna, and she believes he even killed her cat. Luna fell deeper into depression because of the abuse and was eventually let go from her job. "I attempted suicide and was 302'd [involuntarily committed], and when I returned home from the hospital, John didn't even welcome me back or ask me how I was," she said. "Part of me had just given up on life. The only thing that was keeping me going was the drugs."

Luna's mother passed away and her father reached out asking her to help pay for cremation. "John didn't like that at all," said Luna. "He needed to control everything, including my money." John called Luna's dad and threatened him, saying he would rape and kill Luna. "My dad and brother showed up where we were staying and they fought him. John broke my dad's wrist and I went to the hospital with him and my brother. It broke my heart that this was destroying my family, too."

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After being evicted from several apartments, Luna and John moved from hotel to hotel, only staying places where she could bring Peach, her dog. In the final hotel, Luna couldn't speak to hotel staff or neighbors without John accusing her of cheating on him.

"John was working at the hotel so we could afford to stay there. He put cameras all over the room and cut the cords to the phone and the television. I just had to sit there and wait for him to return. The only thing I had was a list of numbers that I hid in a hole in the sole of my slipper." Luna was completely isolated from friends and family. "The violence was increasing. I knew he was going to kill me. I just had nowhere else to go."

The night Luna left, John told her he was going to paralyze her and make her watch as he killed her dog. "He named specific vertebrae that he would cut, so I would be alive and awake as he did it. I remember him saying 'when we leave here tonight, I'll be in handcuffs, and you'll be in a body bag.'"

Luna's story continued inside ... ➔



*If you want to go fast, go alone.
If you want to go far, go together.*

In the world of domestic violence advocacy, teamwork and collaboration are absolutely essential — to do the work, to support each other, and to consider a wide variety of lived experiences.

We are currently bringing this to life in two unique ways: serving survivors in extremely high-risk situations and helping to drive new systems advocacy efforts in the County. Helping high-risk survivors requires working efficiently and in a timely manner, gathering resources, and relying upon a vast network of partners in highly complex situations. Systems advocacy is a slower process, marked by building systematic infrastructure, procedure, and relationships. Both initiatives require a high level of teamwork and collaboration for success — for providing lifesaving, urgent services to a victim, and for improving fragmented systems so that survivors in our community can thrive.

In the wake of recent intimate partner violence-related homicides in Allegheny County — and considering the increase in overall homicides across the country during the pandemic — WC&S knew there was urgent work to be done. So, we created a new process for helping high-danger clients who are most at risk for being killed by their partner/ex-partner.

To determine whether to offer a survivor these more intensive high-danger case management services, we consider if the offender has active criminal charges or is likely to have them filed based on the injuries or threats made against the survivor. We also try to learn if the offender has outstanding warrants, bond revocation, or probation/parole violation issues. In any of these instances, we know that the offender may behave more dangerously and rashly, and the survivor may need high-danger case management.

When a staff member identifies a survivor whom we assess to be in an imminently lethal situation, they trigger a series of events that rallies the team to create a survivor-specific plan of action, laser-focused on the survivor's ongoing safety. Within minutes, various teams start working externally with partners and internally to provide intensive case management, legal advocacy, emergency shelter, immediate needs, and more. To date, thirteen survivors have been identified as in high danger. I am directly involved in the process when a survivor is identified as high-risk, and the actions that follow are a testament to the power of partnership — among staff and also including our partners: Allegheny County District Attorney's DV Unit, Pittsburgh Police DV Unit, Allegheny County's PFA Unit and other specialized court systems, the Sheriff's Department and other law enforcement agencies, Allegheny County Department of Human Services, and more. The focus, determination, and collaboration of this crew is truly inspiring.

Teamwork is improving at a county-wide level for system improvements, too. Earlier this year, the Intimate Partner Violence Reform Initiative was launched to coordinate policy and system level work across agencies to improve a complex and fragmented system for intimate partner violence victims. The Leadership Team is comprised of the leaders from civil and criminal courts, law enforcement, human service providers, the IPV-involved medical community, and government, and led by: Ed Gainey, Mayor of the City of Pittsburgh, Rich Fitzgerald, Allegheny County Executive, The Honorable Kim Berkeley Clark, President Judge of the Fifth Judicial District of Pennsylvania, and Erin Dalton, Director of the Department of Human Services. Working with the Leadership Team, the IPV Reform Task Force includes the on-the-ground representatives designated by the leaders to work with one another year-round on collaborative solutions for the priorities set by the Leadership Team. WC&S is proud to participate in the Leadership Team and Task Force with such knowledgeable and committed groups of specialists.

The Intimate Partner Violence Reform Initiative is addressing domestic violence as a public health issue that takes communication, coordination, and collaboration to tackle.

At the center of our work is a collective belief that we must listen to the voices and experiences of survivors ...

The Initiative has prioritized re-starting IPV homicide reviews, sharing data across systems, mapping out the systems used by those experiencing IPV with an eye toward making improvements, moving towards trauma-informed models, and more. At the center of our work is a collective belief that we must listen to the voices and experiences of survivors to inform the programs and procedures designed to help them. Through survivor-centered teamwork, we can help our community members find lives free from violence.

Last — but certainly not least — WC&S could not do what we do without the teamwork of YOU, our ardent supporters. Through your time, advocacy, gifts, and willingness to spread the word, we can continue to provide help and healing to survivors of domestic violence and their children. Thank you.

In partnership,

Nicole Molinaro, President/CEO

New Beginnings: A Place of Her Own

Luna doesn't remember exactly how she got out of the room that night. "He had me backed into a corner, but somehow, I made it through the door. I went down to the front desk. I had a cut on my head and blood running down my face. I said I needed to stay just one more night, but I didn't have any money. They gave me and Peach another room, but it was right down the hall from him."

After calling around to find a shelter that would allow her to bring Peach, Luna connected with WC&S. “I don’t even remember what I said. I was probably bawling my eyes out. The advocate said it sounded like I was in lethal danger, so I went to stay in shelter.”

“ Soon after I got there, I felt welcome and at home. ”

“Soon after I got there, I felt welcome and at home. Somehow, I didn’t think about John very much. I was focused on healing and creating a better life for me and my dog,” Luna recalled. She attended nearly every shelter support group, connected with a psychiatrist, quit using meth, and visited the on-site medical clinic for a concussion and broken finger. “All of the staff members were so caring and helpful. WC&S changed my life for the better.”

Luna made two good friends during her stay. “You start to form a family in shelter. Some connections you make are just temporary, but sometimes you know these relationships are for life,” Luna remarked. “One former resident owned a building, and a friend and I went to visit her. When it was time for me to find housing, the woman asked if I would want to move into a vacancy in her building. I toured the building with WC&S’ Rapid Rehousing Coordinator and it was amazing — my dog could have a yard! I don’t know how, but everything worked out so well.”

Today, Luna is continuing her healing journey and looks forward to attending weekly support groups. “It’s great to be around people who get it. Everybody is at different stages — I’m at the end and I want to help others who are still at the beginning. We can all learn from each other.”

"I view this as rebirth. I'm going to try to do it the right way — for me and Peach. It's not going to be perfect, but I've learned from my mistakes and I know my faults. I know I need to put myself first. It's not worth sacrificing your whole life for someone else who doesn't respect you." ●

*This story has been shared with permission of the survivor.
All identifying details have been changed.*

WC&S has a new Diversity Library

It is stocked full of a variety of books, a list of podcast recommendations, meaningful decorations, and other handouts.

Rhonda, Chief of Prevention, Intervention, and Outreach, came up with the idea of a Diversity Library because she wanted to do something tangible to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within WC&S. “We have lots of trainings, discussions, and meetings — I thought we should also have something that people can get their hands on,” said Rhonda. From there, the Diversity Committee planned out the different types of content they would like to see and what they could contribute individually.

If staff members want to add a title to the Diversity Library, they will contact the Diversity Committee for consideration. “We want to make sure the optics are balanced and all kinds of people are represented,” said Rhonda.

What's next for the Diversity Library? The committee will be adding a question box for DEI-related inquiries. Also — we'll be adding a Diversity Library to the existing Shelter Library so that survivors can have access to all of this information, too. ●



Domestic Violence Awareness Month Schedule of Events

Learn more and register at dvampgh.org

DV And... Series

The “Domestic Violence (DV) And...” Series is an informational series modeled around the topics most commonly asked about by volunteers, community partners, and supporters. It takes place virtually throughout October.

► DV and Youth

Witnessing domestic violence is traumatic for youth, affecting their childhood development and impacting their future relationships.

Find out how WC&S works with children and teens to help them recover from their trauma, learn about healthy relationships, and break the cycle of abuse.

► DV and Substance Use

1 in 10 Americans report having sought treatment options for drug and alcohol addiction. Both survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence may struggle with alcohol and substance use. Learn about the link between DV and substance use, why survivors turn to substances, and how DV programs help survivors struggling with substance use find safety.

► DV and Gun Violence

Guns pose a particular risk for those trapped in violent relationships. Learn the facts about gun violence in the home, current trends, and which common sense gun laws have been passed and proposed to keep victims of domestic violence safe.

DV Awareness Month Kickoff Event

Wednesday, September 28

5:00 – 7:00 p.m.

Rhododendron Shelter in Highland Park

Join WC&S and **Aspirant** for a preview of this year’s Domestic Violence Awareness Month programming and find community among DV advocates and supporters. Discover out how you can become a part of the solution to DV while enjoying **food, drinks, friends**, and meaningful, hands-on activities in a beautiful outdoor pavilion.

Registration is free with a suggested donation of \$25.



At the beginning of June, Eat’n Park Hospitality Group and Grow Pittsburgh teamed up to replant the garden in WC&S’ backyard.

Thanks to their generosity (and the attentive gardening of several green thumbs from the community who have helped us maintain them) our planting beds are now bursting with fresh herbs, delectable fruits, and hearty vegetables. Even the kids enrolled in our Children’s Advocacy Program have gotten their hands dirty exploring the bounty of the garden and learning about the different plants and how they grow. Thank you to Eat’n Park, Grow Pittsburgh, and all our gardening volunteers! ●





WCS IPV Homeless Provider Program and the Auberle Housing Services Staff after the very first DV 101 training

Homeless Providers Program

Over the past year, there were 880 people reported as experiencing homelessness in Allegheny County — 550 men and 326 women.

Overall, one in four women and one in seven men experience physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. However, that statistic is higher for women who are experiencing homelessness — 80% of women who are homeless have also experienced domestic violence, according to the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness. That means more than 260 of the 326 women experiencing homelessness in Allegheny County are now, have been, or will be victims of domestic violence throughout their lives. WC&S and Allegheny County, through a grant provided by an anonymous foundation, are addressing this harrowing reality with the new Homeless Providers Program by training, coaching, and consulting homeless providers in our community, and providing direct services to clients in need.

This pilot program aims to change the culture within adult and youth homeless provider organizations, so providers are better able to recognize and serve individuals or families who are at the intersection of intimate partner violence and homelessness. Ultimately, the goal is to increase safety for clients in the homeless system. Homeless providers have communicated a spike in dating and domestic violence since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“If you talk with people in a homeless shelter, it’s really common to hear that they left their homes — either willingly or unwillingly — because they were experiencing domestic violence. In some cases, they experienced the abuse years ago, but it sent them in a

trajectory that ended with homelessness,” said Rhonda Fleming, Chief of Prevention, Intervention, and Outreach. **“When the homeless provider staff members recognize and respond to signs of domestic violence, those experiencing homelessness can receive trauma informed care and get access to resources like safety planning and counseling.”**

Working with the County, WC&S has identified twelve homeless provider programs for the pilot year. For each program, the two-person team, comprised of the IPV Homeless Provider Supervisor and IPV Homeless Specialist, give an introductory presentation on domestic violence (featuring pre- and post- tests), provide coaching and consultations through regular on-site visits, and connect homeless provider staff to WC&S’ services and other resources on an as-needed basis. The training focuses on recognizing the signs of domestic violence, dispelling DV myths, and approaching clients in a trauma-informed way.

“By helping homeless provider staff members to overcome the common myths — like ‘why doesn’t she leave’ — their services become more accessible to DV victims and survivors,” said Matthew Grayson, IPV Homeless Provider Supervisor. **“They can welcome survivors to talk about their experiences, respond in an empathetic and caring way, and get them access to services they need.** One caseworker shared a story of a woman who left the homeless shelter to return to an abusive partner because she needed to be on

his health insurance to get an inhaler for her child with asthma. We’re hoping that through this partnership, no one will have to make that choice.”

Having just launched in July, over the next few months the Homeless Providers Program team will schedule and provide trainings, maintain collaborative working relationships with providers, consult on specific situations of client families experiencing IPV, engage in ongoing systems advocacy on behalf of survivors with IPV who are experiencing homelessness, and coordinate with other agencies to benefit families involved with the homeless system. Allegheny County DHS has shown their commitment to this initiative through offering a PhD-level analyst who has been working since inception on developing measurement tools to ensure tracking and success of the program

The program has been around for just a few months and is already making an impact...

“The program has been around for just a few months and is already making an impact,” said Matthew. “Recently, a person who was formerly homeless asked their caseworker how they could keep their abusive ex-partner from finding their new address. The homeless provider reached out to WC&S and we got them connected with a program that removed the survivor’s address from public listing. Their family is safe because of these connections.” ●



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of Greater Pittsburgh

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Remember to visit
dvampgh.org
to learn about all
of WC&S' DVAM
activities!

Learn
more
inside

SAVE THE DATE 2022 AWARDS
LUNCHEON

STAND UP FOR STANDING FIRM

Tuesday, October 25, 2022 | The Westin Pittsburgh

Presented by UPMC HEALTH PLAN UPMC | MAGEE-WOMENS
HOSPITAL

STANDING FIRM[®]
The Business Case to End Partner Violence
A National Program of Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh



Our mission is to strengthen our ability to meet the individual and evolving needs of those affected by domestic violence by investing in the growth of our people, deepening community engagement, and amplifying the voices of all survivors.

Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization — donations to which are tax-deductible to the fullest extent permitted by law. The official registration and financial information of Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll free, within Pennsylvania, 1-800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement.