



Finding Safety and Hope: *One Survivor's Journey*

When Sharon arrived at Women's Center & Shelter (WC&S) years ago, she had nothing but the clothes on her back. Coming directly from a hospital, she had no belongings, no place to go, and no idea what the next step in her journey would be. What Sharon found at WC&S was more than shelter; she found a path forward.

For many survivors, the idea of entering a shelter can be daunting. Misconceptions about cleanliness, structure, and community can deter people from seeking the help they need. However, her experience at WC&S was vastly different from what she had feared. The shelter was not just a place to stay — it was a welcoming, engaging space where residents could regain a sense of stability while fostering both a sense of empowerment and autonomy.

"I was blessed to be able to get in immediately...I knew I had nowhere else to go. I allowed him to separate me from my friends and family."

Her marriage was not initially abusive, but there were warning signs from the start. Over time, the emotional and verbal harm escalated, deepening her isolation. When the couple became involved in a church that reinforced rigid gender roles, her husband's controlling behavior intensified. Manipulation, gaslighting, and emotional degradation became routine, making it nearly impossible for her to see a way out.

"If it was physical, that would be one thing — I can defend myself against that — but I can't fight what I can't see. Abuse at whatever level, you may not realize it, but it takes a part of you."

Leaving an abusive relationship is never easy, and for her, it was made even harder by legal and social hurdles. Sharon, in her experience, faced false accusations, biased

police interventions, and a legal system that often failed to protect her. Each step of the court process was fraught with obstacles, and instead of receiving the support she needed, she found herself battling against a system that frequently sided with her abuser.

"He would call the police on me for simple things — If I didn't want to make his lunch or go to church — but he would turn it around on me and the police believed him."

One incident changed everything. After enduring years of abuse, Sharon and her husband were both arrested for domestic violence. While painful and humiliating, this moment also exposed his behavior to the outside world. The shame of this exposure led him to seek a divorce — offering her the first step toward freedom. The journey was far from easy, but Sharon found support in places she never expected, especially in the mental health resources provided by WC&S.

Through therapy, support groups, and ongoing advocacy, Sharon began to heal. Having someone to talk to, someone who understood her experience, made all the difference. Hearing others share their stories who had walked a similar path provided a sense of validation and community. Mental health support became a cornerstone of her recovery.

"I enjoyed the group meetings, even if it was for a day or an hour, that helped me a lot with my depression. Sometimes when it's just you, you think 'woe is me' but when you hear other women's stories...it helps."

Now, Sharon is in a place she never thought possible. While healing is a continuous journey, Sharon is further along than she ever imagined. Hope, she says, is what carried her through — the hope that things could be different and that a new life was waiting for her beyond the pain. Community support played a crucial role in her journey, and she encourages others to seek it out.

"When you're putting yourself back together, you need someone there. Whether they're there for advice or just to listen to you, you need them."

To others in similar situations, Sharon offers this advice: be cautious and strategic when planning to leave. Her story illustrates the vital role that WC&S plays in supporting survivors. Every day, trained advocates provide safety planning, crisis intervention, and connection to resources through Hotline Services, including Text and Chat. Her story is one of resilience, survival, and ultimately, hope.

"It would drive me nuts if I sat here and thought about why and how he had this power to do what he did. I would go crazy. What's important is that I survived, and I got out of it." ●

**If you or someone you know needs support, WC&S is here to help all survivors.
You are not alone.**

Dear friends,

Joining WC&S as staff in July 2023 marked my professional transition to an organization I long admired and supported: as a donor, as a friend and as a member of the STANDING FIRM Advisory Council.



In March 2024, I had the opportunity to attend the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) Economic Justice Summit. I was drawn in by the stark statistics and the connection to our work with employers: 99% of survivors experience financial abuse during their relationships, including limitations on obtaining and maintaining employment, as well as impacts to credit scores and financial security long

after the relationship is over. This important national convening of advocates, state and territorial domestic violence coalitions, national experts, researchers, evaluators, and allies focused on improving economic security for domestic violence survivors and set in motion strategic changes for WC&S, effective January 2025.

In addition to creating connections nationally, attendance at the Economic Justice summit spurred WC&S leadership to reflect on the ways we are already bringing financial stability to survivors' lives, as well as the opportunity to build longer-term financial security through strategic collaboration and integration.

As a result of this reflection, WC&S restructured existing programs into a new department focused on increasing survivor financial stability at the individual, organizational, and systems level. **Our bold goal: ensure more survivors reach educational attainment, obtain and maintain gainful employment, and retire with financial security.**

At the individual level, this includes taking inventory of financial support offered to WC&S clients through its Immediate Needs Coordination (INC) program, identifying gaps, and targeting additional partnerships to better meet the needs of survivors and their families.

At the organizational level, this includes strengthening workforce development collaborations to ensure programs are aware and equipped to address the barrier of domestic violence for program participants, while maintaining our best-in-class employer engagement, including specialized support for colleges and universities with unique compliance needs under Pennsylvania's Act 55.

At the systems level, this includes continuing issue-based advocacy, such as the need for affordable and accessible childcare and paid family medical leave, now better informed by client experiences.

Now, as the Director of Economic Impact, I am honored to integrate WC&S investments in survivor financial stability and security. Together with our clients, programs, and partners, we can assure even more lives are free from violence by supporting survivor financial independence.

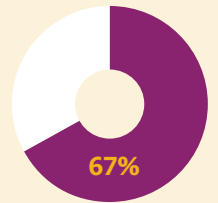
Gratefully,

Megan Rose, JD
Director of Economic Impact

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT Department of Economic Impact

Financial abuse is experienced by the vast majority of survivors. Financial abuse is part of the dynamic of power and control and includes: forcing a partner to miss, leave, or be late to work; harassing a partner at work; controlling how money is spent; withholding money or basic living resources; giving a partner an "allowance"; stealing money, credit, property, or identity from a partner; and/or forcing a partner to file fraudulent legal financial documents or overspend on credit cards.

A survivor may be forced to stay with an abuser because they are financially dependent. According to findings from the National Domestic Violence Hotline, two-thirds (67%) of survivors surveyed said that they stayed longer than they wanted or returned to an abusive relationship because of financial concerns, such as not being able to pay bills, afford rent/mortgage, or feed their family.



In response to this widespread survivor experience, WC&S assembled its Department of Economic Impact in January 2025, combining two existing programs designed to help survivors find immediate financial stability and reach long-term financial security:



Our Immediate Needs Coordination (INC) program, created in 2015, coordinates resources for client survivors' immediate needs, such as groceries, rental assistance, utilities, and other measures to increase safety in their homes such as cameras and video doorbells. Last fiscal year alone, INC distributed close to \$800,000 in direct financial assistance to 640 clients.



Our STANDING FIRM program, in existence since 2014, engages employers to develop and strengthen their response in the workplace and for the workforce. By empowering employers through consultation and training, STANDING FIRM is changing culture and systems so that survivors may move toward financial independence, and closer to a life free from abuse.

By integrating our existing investments in survivor financial health, we are also identifying opportunities for strategic collaborations to address whatever else survivors may need on their journey to financial independence, such as access to workforce development programs that consider the unique needs of survivor participants.

Survivors deserve the safety that comes with financial security and we are proud to be working with partners on the national, state, and local levels with this focus in mind. ●

Celebrating Survivors and Honoring Lorraine Bittner, Esq.

Women's Center & Shelter (WC&S), in partnership with UPMC Health Plan, our Presenting Sponsor of Hope, invites you to join us on Saturday, May 17, 2025, at Nova Place beginning at 5:30 p.m. for our annual Celebrating Survivors event.

This special evening will celebrate survivors of domestic violence, remember those we have lost, and honor the extraordinary contributions of WC&S Chief Legal Officer, Lorraine Bittner, Esq., with the Sherley and Ted Craig Humanitarian Award.

Lorraine has been a relentless advocate for survivors for over four decades. A graduate of the University of Pittsburgh School of Law, she began her career at Neighborhood Legal Services (NLS), where she became a leading expert in Protection from Abuse cases. Since joining WC&S in 1996, Lorraine has been instrumental in shaping the legal landscape for survivors and founding the WC&S Civil Law Project, which provides free legal representation to over 450 survivors annually.

Beyond the courtroom, Lorraine's impact is far-reaching. As Chair of the Allegheny County Domestic Violence Task Force, she has played a crucial role in improving the county's systemic response to domestic violence, from specialized courtrooms to attorney training programs. Her expertise and advocacy have earned her numerous accolades, including the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence's Leadership in Action Award and the Allegheny County Bar Association's inaugural Public Interest Attorney Award, now named in her honor.

“Lorraine is a tour de force and an inspiration. She has spent decades tirelessly advocating on behalf of vulnerable people whose voices weren't valued. Lorraine is brilliant, hardworking, and caring. She has made me into the person I am today, and there is no greater privilege than to call Lorraine my colleague, mentor, and friend.”
— Maggie W. Prescott, Esq., Chief of Mission Integration

“Lorraine is an absolute force of nature. One of the best and most admirable things about Lorraine is that if something isn't right or is unjust, whether that is a judge minimizing domestic violence in a particular case or an entire system failing to address victims' needs, she will point it out and then work with others to change it. She does not accept explanations like “Well, that's just how it is,” or “It's always been done this way.” Her convictions, her ideals, and her feelings of right and wrong drive her to make change on behalf of all survivors of domestic violence. Her drive and determination, always used on behalf of others, inspires everyone who works with her. Working with Lorraine has made me a more confident attorney, a more empathetic advocate, and a better human. Simply put, I love her.”
— Brittany A. Conkle, Esq., Legal Director



Lorraine Bittner (Chief Legal Officer) (far left), Nicole Molinaro (President/CEO), Brittany Conkle (Legal Director), and the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police's DV Unit.

Celebrating Survivors

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UPMC HEALTH PLAN

This evening will feature delicious food by Bistro To Go Catering, opportunities to connect with fellow supporters, and a silent auction. Proceeds from the event benefit WC&S' programs designed to bring safety and empowerment to individuals and families affected by domestic violence. Please consider joining us for this inspiring night of celebration and advocacy.

To learn more, visit CelebrateSurvivors.org.

Recognizing 40 Years of Service at WC&S

Marian G. was a school teacher when she began volunteering in her off hours and during the summers with Women's Center & Shelter 40 years ago. Eventually, she began volunteering in WC&S' Legal Advocacy Department where she then became a part-time, then full-time staff member. Now a Legal Advocate, Marian provides court accompaniment, outreach, safety planning, and emotional support to survivors who are attending criminal court hearings as victim witnesses. Many of our clients say that Marian makes them feel less alone and that it feels like they are being supported by a friend. She calms anxious clients by connecting with them on a personal level, asking them questions about themselves and remembering the small details of their lives. Marian also serves as the connector with the District Attorney's Domestic Violence Unit as well as courtroom staff in the Criminal Division. She has unlimited positive energy, a wonderful sense of humor, and a truly caring nature to everyone she encounters, especially survivors of DV. Marian is thoughtful and always thinking of others. She excels at doing the little things to brighten someone's day, like sending Dairy Queen or Starbucks gift cards, and keeping chocolate on hand for co-workers. She is revered by her colleagues, WC&S' partners, and the survivors she's worked with because of her compassionate nature. By doing this work for 40 years, she has touched thousands of lives. ●





Help & hope
are available



412-687-8005

Available 24/7



412-744-8445

Available 9am-5pm, Monday - Friday



WCSCanHelp.org

Click the chat bubble to begin

Available 9am-5pm, Monday - Friday

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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.

Remembering The Honorable R. Stanton "Tony" Wettick

Judge R. Stanton "Tony" Wettick, who served as a Board Director for Women's Center & Shelter for 33 years, passed away on December 21, 2024, at the age of 86. An Allegheny County Common Pleas Court judge for 40 years, he was known for his unwavering work ethic and his fierce and fair pursuit of justice. During his career, Judge Wettick also served as the Executive Director of Neighborhood Legal Services, a close partner of WC&S that promotes fairness in the civil justice system, regardless of financial circumstances.



As a Board Director of WC&S, his motivation for social justice made him a steady voice, always focused on the needs of survivors and their children and assisting with the navigation of systems improvements

on behalf of survivors. He served as the Chair of the Long-Range Planning Committee, which focused on the agency's strategic plan and future goals and objectives. WC&S Chief Legal Officer, Lorraine Bittner, who worked with Judge Wettick in several capacities, said of him, "He was incredibly smart and the most ethical, dedicated public servant." Judge Wettick also worked tirelessly to ensure that those who needed it had access to the court system.

John Sylvester, a partner at K&L Gates who served with Judge Wettick on the WC&S Board, recounted that, "It was a rite of passage for young lawyers to appear before Judge Wettick during his Friday afternoon Happy Hour motions court, and he treated every lawyer with respect and dignity, giving them a fair hearing. He approached his service on the WC&S Board with equal dedication and commitment, always carefully



analyzing the issues before him to try to get to the right result, just as he did on the Bench every day."

In addition to his role as a judge, he was also a family man, sports fan, avid reader, and theatergoer. His sustaining and positive impact on those he knew, on WC&S as an organization, on his family and friends, the legal system, and on Pittsburgh will be felt for years to come. Simply stated, **"Judge Wettick was one of a kind, and he will be missed."** ●

