

HousingLink gives families fleeing domestic violence a second chance

January 27 2021, by Maria Elena Fernandez



For nearly two years, Ms. D's 8-year-old twins exclaim "Home sweet

home!" every time they cross the threshold of their New York City apartment.

Domestic violence drove the family out of their house and into shelter life for nine months. At one point, they commuted two hours each way from Brooklyn to Manhattan so the children would not have to change schools again.

The odds were stacked against Ms. D, an immigrant with no other family in the United States and no [work experience](#), despite having earned two degrees in her homeland. (To protect the family's safety, American Heart Association News has agreed to withhold their names and other identifiers.)

From the shelter, Ms. D was connected with New Destiny Housing, a nonprofit founded in 1994 to provide housing and services to victims of [domestic violence](#) and their children. Through the organization's rapid rehousing program, HousingLink, Ms. D and her children were able to move into a permanent two-bedroom apartment in March of 2019.

"In two years' time, we have a home, I have a job and the kids are in school," she said. "We are happy. Every time we go out and come back and I hear my kids say 'home sweet home,' I know all of these challenges were worth it. Even though there's so much going on in the world and here, I feel safe because we have a home. Before this, I was always walking on eggshells."

A collaboration with New York City Family Justice Centers, HousingLink connects families who have experienced domestic violence and are at risk of homelessness with affordable units in privately owned apartment buildings. It also provides rental assistance for up to two years and takes a "trauma-informed care" approach, offering program participants financial counseling and safety planning so they feel

prepared to take control of their lives again and have long-term housing stability.

"Trauma-informed care is a practice that comes out of the social work world where individuals who have experienced trauma need to be met where they are by social workers or other providers," said Alyssa Keil, HousingLink's director.

"We take note of the power dynamics and systems of oppression and power that are often involved with various types of trauma to make sure we don't exacerbate or recreate those structures in our own programs," Keil said. "If you think about the history of the direct service world, decisions are often made for low-income individuals rather than with them—oftentimes direct service programs operate as though 'we know best, and we want to make these decisions for you.' (But) trauma-informed care believes you're the expert of your own life, and we're going to support you to achieve your goals your way."

Since HousingLink launched in 2014, it has placed 131 survivors in permanent homes. With new funding from the American Heart Association's Bernard J. Tyson Fund, the organization plans to hire a data and evaluation manager and a manager of housing partnerships. The fund works to reduce the social and economic barriers to health equity.

During the pandemic, Ms. D has been working remotely as an office assistant, and her children are attending virtual school. HousingLink, she said, has done more for her than put a roof over her head. The organization has connected her to food banks, helped her apply for medical insurance, and pitched in for her rent when a bureaucratic error led to a \$15,000 bill owed to her landlord.

"They always answer all my calls and calm me down and lift my spirits," Ms. D said. "They go beyond. If it wasn't for organizations like this, I

might have had to go back to the abuse. But now we are able to carve out a life for ourselves. My kids are able to dream, and I have hope for myself and for my children. Even though we are in this nation and we have nobody here, there is an army of good people to support and help us and show us the path."

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