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Key Considerations: Use of the Danger Assessment by Domestic Violence Programs in the Housing Advocacy Context

I. Introduction

This paper provides information on the Danger Assessment and identifies key considerations that should inform the use of this tool by domestic violence (DV) programs in the housing advocacy context. In an attempt to maximize scarce housing resources, homelessness programs and victim service agencies, as well as community Continuums of Care (CoC) receiving U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funding, are looking for tools that aid in the very difficult process of housing prioritization and placement of survivors in appropriate and safe housing. Some of these programs are considering the use of the Danger Assessment to evaluate the survivor's vulnerability and risk of lethal violence in the housing prioritization process.

II. What is the Danger Assessment?

The Danger Assessment* is an instrument created by Jacquelyn C. Campbell, PhD, RN, FAAN, that can help determine the level of danger a domestic violence survivor has of being killed or nearly killed by their intimate partner or ex-partner. It is intended for use with survivors to educate them about their risk of lethality or near-lethal re-assault and to inform their decision-making. The Danger Assessment has been used by law enforcement, health care professionals, and domestic violence advocates for over 25 years. It is not a screener for the presence of domestic violence, nor is it designed to be a stand-alone housing screening or housing assessment tool.

III. What should be considered before using the Danger Assessment to prioritize, refer, or recommend housing options for survivors?

Why Housing Assessment Screening Tools in Coordinated Entry?

[Coordinated entry \(CE\)](#) is a HUD COC funding requirement meant to improve the collaborative efforts of CoCs to house persons experiencing homelessness. The primary goal of CE is to make sure

* Campbell JC, Webster DW, Glass N. (2009). The Danger Assessment: Validation of a lethality risk assessment instrument for intimate partner femicide. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 24(4):653-74. The Danger Assessment can be accessed at www.dangerassessment.org.

that wherever a person enters the homeless system, they are given fair and equal access to resources and services offered by the homeless system and in ways that are culturally competent (responsive to individual cultural identities and reflecting an understanding of cultural differences) and person-centered (based on the needs and desires of the person in need of housing support). CoCs use standardized housing assessment screening tools to prioritize vulnerable people for limited COC homelessness housing resources. HUD supports fair and equal access for survivors, CoC-wide safety protocols, and the implementation of trauma-informed and client-driven assessment tools.

Many communities use housing assessment screening tools that do not address the population-specific vulnerabilities facing survivors fleeing DV/sexual assault (SA). As a result, communities are looking for solutions to address the gap in vulnerability screening questions for survivors and their families. Screening questions provided by DV/SA service organizations offer critical input into the CE assessment tool used to identify individual and family housing needs and guide placement into available housing options. In the absence of a tool that appropriately assesses survivors' vulnerabilities, a number of communities have incorporated part or all of the Danger Assessment in CE housing assessment for survivors.

Communities developing and refining their CE should consider the following with respect to survivors in CE assessment and eligibility criteria:

- What questions are used to identify current or past domestic and sexual violence? Are they effective at determining relative levels of vulnerability or service needs? Are they trauma-informed?
- Are CE participants notified of their rights not to share certain personally identifying information and still have access to housing options?
- Are the tools or questions useful if a survivor does not choose (or does not feel safe) to disclose current or past domestic and/or sexual violence?

CE must give special consideration and apply trauma-informed assessment tools and techniques when working with victims of DV/SA to help reduce the chance of re-traumatization and to increase access to housing. Though research on survivors' experience with assessment tools is unavailable, one study showed limitations posed to, and less access for, families and communities of color in communities' assessment tools. These obstacles should be taken seriously as communities refine their processes.¹

With the required training, the Danger Assessment could be included as **part of** CE if victim service providers and domestic violence advocates are:

- pairing it with a housing-specific assessment tool that assesses for DV/SA vulnerabilities and
- in instances where the victim has *disclosed* that they are experiencing IPV.

What is needed to use the Danger Assessment as it was designed?

Using the Danger Assessment requires the ability 1) to assign weighted scoring and 2) to properly interpret the information provided by a domestic violence victim. In order to precisely score and interpret the instrument to understand a survivor's level of danger, individuals using the tool **must complete the training program** and receive a certification from Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell and the

Danger Assessment Technical Assistance Center. *More information about the Danger Assessment and certification training is available at www.DangerAssessment.org.*

What should be considered before domestic violence advocates use the Danger Assessment to prioritize, refer, or recommend housing options for survivors?

The Danger Assessment helps to determine the level of danger a survivor has of being killed by their intimate partner. When safety planning for safe shelter and housing, the Danger Assessment can help inform decisions related to the type of housing options that are most appropriate based on the survivor's current situation, the geographic locations that might be safest, the kinds of security measures that need to exist around the housing property and within the survivor's home, and other safety-related measures.

Using information gained from the Danger Assessment to prioritize housing options, or in conjunction with other prioritization tools, should be done with careful consideration of the survivor's current life circumstances, their wishes and preferences, and their individualized housing needs. The Danger Assessment should always be used in combination with survivor self-determination and practitioner expertise to collaboratively develop the best way forward for each individual.

In addition, the following considerations are important:

- **Deciding when the Danger Assessment might be used and by whom.** The Danger Assessment should be used when intimate partner violence has *already been identified*. To administer the Danger Assessment, a DV Advocate must be trained. The assessment is done confidentially, should only be used after a positive screening for intimate partner violence, and should not be used to refuse access to advocacy or housing services.
- **Survivor consent.** The instrument should be used only with the *consent of the survivor*, after informing the survivor about the purpose of the instrument and how the information will be used. When the Danger Assessment is complete, the survivor should be informed about their level of danger based on the Danger Assessment score. Housing and other supportive services should never be contingent upon the survivor completing the assessment.
- **Safety planning and referrals.** Appropriate follow-up and referrals should always be offered after use of the Danger Assessment. At all levels of danger, survivors should be provided individualized safety planning support to respond to the risks identified. Advocates should be prepared to offer a full range of referrals to address all safety and support needs that the Danger Assessment may raise. For instance, item 20 on the Danger Assessment asks about the victim's suicidal thoughts or attempts. Although this item does not indicate increased homicide risk, it is a cue that additional services or resources should be provided if a survivor responds in the positive to this item. Advocates must be knowledgeable of other community resources, such as address confidentiality programs, [VAWA housing protections](#) for survivors, housing resources, therapeutic interventions, and legal supports. Further, the assessment should be made available to the survivor if they wish to use the findings in court or legal proceedings.
- **Safety and confidentiality.** When working with survivors of domestic violence, [safety and confidentiality](#) are of the utmost importance. In every instance in which advocates use the

Danger Assessment with survivors, they must ensure that the tool is administered in a safe and confidential space. All materials used in the completion of the tool should also be kept [confidential](#). The detailed information from the Danger Assessment **cannot** be entered into the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS).

The Danger Assessment in the housing context.

As noted above, the Danger Assessment is not meant to be a stand-alone housing screening tool to determine whether an individual has experienced domestic violence. Rather, the Danger Assessment helps assess the risk of severe or lethal violence from an abusive intimate partner after abuse has been identified. Advocates can employ other tools and approaches in tandem with the Danger Assessment that can be used by their housing and CoC partners to provide safe and confidential opportunities for someone seeking housing services to disclose domestic or sexual violence. Many domestic violence providers have created [assessment tools](#) specifically designed to screen and identify housing prioritization for DV survivors. Since the Danger Assessment is not designed to directly inform the types of housing priority and placement decisions that are made within the context of coordinated entry, advocates who use the Danger Assessment should not use those scores alone to make decisions about housing. CE must consider other important factors, including history of housing and economic instability, length of homelessness, age, immigration status, legal and custody issues, types of supportive services needed, and other pertinent factors.

The Danger Assessment should also ***never be used to screen clients out of safe and affordable housing or to limit them to certain housing options***. Instead, agencies should consider the safety, availability, and potential barriers to housing options when looking at Danger Assessment scores. For example, survivors at lower levels of danger may be good candidates for permanent housing, whereas someone at a higher level of danger may need the confidentiality or community support that many emergency shelter and transitional housing programs provide. The safety needs of many survivors, particularly survivors from marginalized communities, may differ from the general homeless population, but this should not preclude them from receiving housing, nor should they be denied access to housing because of Danger Assessment scores.

Information provided through the assessment process should be used to assist survivors to develop individualized safety plans and access community resources. Survivors with limited financial resources are often discriminated against in the housing market – and this is disproportionately so for survivors of color. Victim service providers and their community partners should always be aware of additional barriers and risk factors that may compound a survivor’s danger and underscore the need for protections and support as they work to secure safe housing.

In summary, used with the appropriate training, the Danger Assessment is a useful assessment for determining a survivor’s risk for fatal or near-fatal violence and, in particular, for safety planning around identified risks. With the survivor’s consent, it can be used as one piece of confidential information when identifying housing needs, but should not be used in isolation when determining a survivor’s housing placement.

For further information or technical assistance about the use of the Danger Assessment and housing prioritization screening tools, please reach out to the DV and Housing Technical Assistance

Consortium at the [Safe Housing Partnerships](#) website. The [Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing](#) is also available for technical assistance and training on the Danger Assessment.

The National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV), a social change organization, is dedicated to creating a social, political and economic environment in which violence against women no longer exists.

www.NNEDV.org



Visit SafeHousingPartnerships.org to access a comprehensive collection of online resources and to request technical assistance and support.

¹ A recently released multi-city [study by Center for Social Innovations](#) found that families and communities of color are not prioritized at the same rates as white people or single homeless people because “Black, Indigenous, People of Color individuals and families experience system-level inequities in housing resource prioritization.

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