

DAILY NEWS

Supporting homeless survivors of domestic abuse

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Growing up, I never imagined my life would be defined by homelessness and survival. I was born in Trinidad and moved to Harlem at a young age, where instability became my constant companion. After my grandmother died, I was placed in foster care. That's when the abuse began — a cycle that would follow me for years.

Sexual assault, physical abuse, and neglect became a part of my everyday life, and by the time I was a teenager, I was running away, trying to escape a reality that seemed to offer no way out.

As an adult, homelessness felt almost inevitable. I often found myself living on the streets or moving between shelters, struggling to make ends meet. I wondered if things would ever change. But the one constant in my mind, the one thing that pushed me to keep going, was my children. I was determined to provide them with the stability I had never known.

That's where the Center for Urban Community Services (CUCS) came in. CUCS has been a leading service provider for more than 40 years, operating housing, psychiatric, medical and social services programs for more than 50,000 New Yorkers each year. They work with individuals and families on every step of their journey, from initial outreach to those living on the street to supportive and affordable housing.

CUCS didn't just offer me a roof over my head; they gave me a path to rebuild my life. For the first time, I had people who listened to me — people who believed in me and didn't judge me for the mistakes I made along the way.

While living in a family shelter, my CUCS caseworker not only guided me through the necessary steps to rebuild my life but offered me support with essentials. They never arrived empty-handed, visiting my kids and me with Pampers, formula and the critical items we needed to survive.

CUCS helped me secure supportive housing, and I'll never forget the day I received the keys to my own apartment. It was the first time I felt I truly belonged somewhere, the first time I could provide my children with a home that was our own.

My story is not unique. Thousands of homeless New Yorkers, especially survivors of domestic violence, face the same uphill battle. According to the New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, one in four women and one in 10 men face sexual and physical violence by an intimate partner.

And while organizations like CUCS play a critical role in supporting us, they cannot do it alone. We need early and sustained interventions that address not only homelessness but also the trauma that often comes with it. Without addressing the underlying issues — like domestic abuse and mental health challenges — we are simply treating symptoms, not solving the problem.

New York City must invest in programs that offer immediate assistance to those experiencing homelessness, but more importantly, we need long-term support that ensures individuals can rebuild their lives. Survivors of domestic abuse are particularly vulnerable, as the trauma they endure often leads to unstable housing, mental health challenges, and a sense of isolation that makes it difficult to ask for help.

I know firsthand how hard it can be to trust again after years of abuse. When I first came to CUCS, I was hesitant to open up. I was still holding onto the negative emotions from years of continued abuse, homelessness, and vulnerability. But the CUCS team provided a safe space where I could heal. Mental health support was key for me.

Through therapy, I was finally able to confront the trauma that had shaped my life. This kind of sustained intervention is essential — not just temporary solutions, but real, meaningful support that gives people the tools to stand on their own.

If New York is serious about addressing homelessness, it cannot overlook the importance of early intervention and long-term care for survivors of domestic violence. We need more supportive housing options, accessible mental health services, and programs that help us regain our independence and dignity. My story proves that when you invest in people, they can rise above the challenges they've faced.

New York City has the resources and the power to make a difference, but we need leaders to act. Every New Yorker deserves a chance to not only survive but to thrive. Let's give that chance to those who need it most.

Gabriel, a resident of New York City, is a client of the Center for Urban Community Services.