

# **Supervised Visitations and Domestic Violence: A Need for Funding**

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**The Network**

ADVOCATING AGAINST  
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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## The Network: Advocating Against Domestic Violence

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### Introduction to The Network: Advocating Against Domestic Violence

The Network: Advocating Against Domestic Violence is a coalition of over 30 diverse organizations who provided domestic violence related services in the Chicago metropolitan area. The Network is dedicated to improving the lives of those impacted by domestic violence through education, public policy and advocacy, and the connection of community members to direct service providers. This paper was written by Network staff after collaboration and discussion with member organizations.

# Introduction

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Supervised visitation is a service for domestic violence survivors that offers a safe place for parent-child contact, with a trained staff member to monitor the visits for safety and support. Survivors of domestic violence with children often find it challenging to navigate child custody and visitation requirements resulting from separation or divorce. This obstacle is particularly challenging during this time, as it is often most dangerous for survivors. When survivors of domestic violence separate from their partner, it often results in the escalation of violence and increased risks[1]. Supervised visitation services are one of the few services that provide support and safety to survivors of domestic violence and their children. These programs help prevent future violence. Many experts recognize these programs as the most protective setting for parental contact for survivors of domestic violence and their children[2].

In the Chicago metropolitan area, there are currently three centers that offer free supervised visitation services for survivors of domestic violence. These programs adhere to guiding principles created by the U.S. Department of Justice and meet a vital need in the community. This paper outlines the importance of these services, the benefits they provide to families impacted by domestic violence, and advocates for additional funding for organizations to continue to provide these services and to be able to assist a broader population of survivors.

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[1] Jaffee, Peter G., Lemon, Nancy K.D., Poisson, Samantha E., Child Custody & Domestic Violence: A Call for Safety and Accountability. 2003.

[2] Bunker Rohrfaugh, Joanna, A comprehensive Guide to Child Custody Evaluations Mental Health and Legal Perspectives. 2007.

# Background

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In the United States, studies estimate that 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men have experienced some form of physical violence by an intimate partner[3]. In Illinois, in 2016, there were over 70,000 reports to Illinois law enforcement of intimate violence. Many others will have undoubtedly gone unreported[4]. Many of these people are parents, whose children are also profoundly impacted by the violence which occurs in their households. In the United States, it is estimated that 7 million children live in homes where severe domestic violence has occurred. 15.5 million children live in homes in which at least one act of domestic violence has occurred in the past year[5]. The majority of studies on the correlation between domestic violence and child maltreatment indicate that in up to 60% of families experiencing domestic violence, there are both adult and child victims[6]. In Illinois, there were 84 domestic-violence deaths, including 15 children between July 2013 and June 2014[7]. Despite the high occurrence of child and adult victims, most services are usually only equipped to meet the needs of one of the two groups.

This connection between domestic violence and children is also shown in the expressed needs of survivors. In the Domestic Violence Outcome Measures Project[8], participants were asked questions about their current needs. The sample totaled 450 individuals, mostly females, except for three males. 33.3% of participants were Latinx, 31.9% were Black/ African American, 27.7% were White, 5.1% were Asian, and 2.1% were from Indigenous or Mixed Race groups. 17% of the sample mentioned that they needed help with child custody, and 13% stated that they needed referrals to child visitation. 20% of White participants said that they needed assistance with child custody, and 16.4% of Latinx participants needed help managing contact with a partner/ ex-partner. Furthermore, 19% of participants with children expressed a need to help manage contact with the abuser. Survivors with children need supervised visitation services so that children can see their parents and they can have safe and monitored contact with their ex-partner.

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[3] NCADV. (2015). Domestic violence national statistics. Retrieved from [www.ncadv.org](http://www.ncadv.org)

[4] Illinois State Police (2017). Crime in Illinois: 2016. Retrieved from [http://www.isp.state.il.us/docs/cii/cii16/cii16\\_SectionII\\_Pg245\\_to\\_248.pdf](http://www.isp.state.il.us/docs/cii/cii16/cii16_SectionII_Pg245_to_248.pdf)

[5] McDonald, R, Jouriles, E.N, Ramisetty-Mikler, S, et al. 2006. Estimating the Number of American Children Living in Partner-Violent Families. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20(1):237-142

[6] Bragg, H.L & United States. 2003. *Child Protection in Families Experiencing Domestic Violence*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, Office on Child Abuse and Neglect.

[7] NCADV. (2015). Domestic violence national statistics. Retrieved from [www.ncadv.org](http://www.ncadv.org)

[8] Riger, Stephanie, et al. Domestic Violence Outcome Measures Project. Chicago Metropolitan Battered Women's Network, 2016, Domestic Violence Outcome Measures Project, [the-network.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Final-DV-Outcome-Report-9-24-16-Final-revisions.pdf](http://the-network.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Final-DV-Outcome-Report-9-24-16-Final-revisions.pdf).

# The Importance of Specialized Supervised Visitation Programs

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Supervised visitation programs were originally created to serve children that had been neglected in the child welfare system. Moreover, supervised visitation and safe exchange services were created with the intention of providing visiting or non-custodial parents with an opportunity to see their children with an appropriate third party that monitors interactions during the visit. Children coming from families that have experienced domestic violence may still have attachments to both parents. It may be decided, in or out of a court, that shared custody or visitation rights still be granted to the violent parent. One study revealed that in over a quarter of child custody proceedings that involved domestic violence the perpetrator of the violence was still given joint custody or visitation rights[9]. The most protective setting for these visitations is a supervised setting with trained staff[10]. There are strict guidelines that protect the child, including drop-off and pick-up systems, parent conduct restrictions, and also staff presence. In domestic violence situations, service providers must also be able to provide a safe environment for the parents. The safety risks after a survivor leaves a relationship, create a unique need for supervised visits.

An escalation in violence and manipulation often follows the separation from an abusive partner. The risk of lethality is highest at the point of separation[11]. Perpetrators of violence may use visitations as opportunities for violence. In a Canadian study, one-quarter of women reported lethal threats from their former partner during child visitations[12]. This risk requires more than traditional child welfare based supervision. The programs have different goals, and staffing needs to meet the additional security issues. They must provide a safe space for children to visit with their parents, keep adult victims safe throughout visitations, hold the abusive parent accountable for their violence, provide referrals to other services, and serve as an expansion of other services for child and adult victims. Providers and advocates recognize domestic violence as an important issue that need special attention in supervised visitation.

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[9] Jaffee, Peter G., Lemon, Nancy K.D., Poisson, Samantha E., Child Custody & Domestic Violence: A Call for Safety and Accountability. 2003.

[10] Bunker Rohrfaugh, Joanna, A comprehensive Guide to Child Custody Evaluations Mental Health and Legal Perspectives. 2007.

[11] Guiding Principles Safe Havens: Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Grant Program by United States Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

[12] Jaffee, Peter G., Lemon, Nancy K.D., Poisson, Samantha E., Child Custody & Domestic Violence: A Call for Safety and Accountability. 2003.

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In recognition of this need, in 2002, the U.S. Department of Justice and the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) established Safe Havens: Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Grant Program. As part of this program, a national advisory committee was created so that the committee could develop The Guiding Principles of the Safe Havens Program. Three Chicago organizations and Network members, Apna Ghar, Inc., Metropolitan Family Services at Midway, and Mujeres Latinas en Acción, were a part of the committee focusing on the cultural piece of supervised visitation. The principles created by the committee aimed to eliminate any further violence so that survivors of domestic violence and their children remain safe. They have been accepted as standards for organizations offering supervised visitations to domestic violence survivors.

# How Current Services Help Survivors

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The following organizations: Apna Ghar, Inc., Metropolitan Family Services at Midway, and Mujeres Latinas en Acción offer supervised visitation in Chicago. The three serve survivors of domestic violence and their children by offering monitored supervised visitation at no cost due to a grant from the Chicago Department of Family Support Services and general operating or programmatic dollars. During these visits, a trained staff member is present in the room while the visiting parents are meeting with their child(ren). The staff members recognize supervised visitation centers as a safe, controlled environment that are home-like, warm spaces for children and the visiting parent. There are no income guidelines for families that need supervised visitation. The absence of fees allows for families to focus on having safe and healthy interactions, but place additional funding burdens on the organizations. The three organizations work to provide the highest level of service by following the guiding principles set forth by the U.S. Department of Justice, as outlined below.

The first principle is “equal regard for the safety of child(ren) and adult victims: Visitation centers should consider as their highest priority the safety of children and adult victims and should treat both with equal regard”[13]. Staff members at Apna Ghar, Inc., Metropolitan Family Services at Midway, and Mujeres Latinas en Acción have emphasized the importance of safety for the survivor of domestic violence and for children. 90% of parents either agreed or strongly agreed they feel safe from abuse while in the center[14]. There are strict rules in place so that the sites are a safer space for survivors of domestic violence and their children. Some examples include enforcing time rules, staggering entry and exit time, and eliminating any physical contact. Additionally, advocates honor the autonomy and decision-making of children in the programs; they are not forced to see their visiting parent if they do not want to interact with them. Children also have the power to stop any visit if they no longer want to interact with their visiting parent.

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[13] Guiding Principles Safe Havens: Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Grant Program by United States Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

[14] Mujeres Latinas en Acción Survey. 2018.

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Before initiating supervised visitation, both parents participate in separate intakes. Survivors of domestic violence are able to express their concerns, and staff members take into consideration these concerns in the services. At the end of intakes, it is made certain that both parents understand the agreements of the program. Children also participate in the intake. At this time, they can express their thoughts about the visit with the parent and can ask questions. Staff members also give children an orientation of the space so that they familiarize themselves with the environment. Staff members review each case and can assess if there are low risks to proceed with supervised visitations. If the visiting parent is not adhering to the visitation agreements and causing harm to the children and survivors, then the case can be terminated.

Allowing the child(ren) to be acclimated and have autonomy in the situation has help lead to many positive outcomes. Recently, a family came to Mujeres Latinas en Acción to utilize supervised visitation services for their daughter to visit with her father who had recently been incarcerated. Leading up to the visitation, the daughter shared with her mother that she was extremely nervous as she felt she did not know her father anymore, and didn't remember him. In order to make the re-introduction less shocking, the mother and Supervised Visitations' Supervisor set up a separate appointment for the daughter to take a tour in the facility, go over the dynamics and safety rules of the visit, and meet the rest of the staff.

The staff explained their safety protocols and what they were do if at any point during a visitation the daughter was not comfortable. They assured her that she would never be forced to participate if she did not want to and their job was to ensure her safety and comfort. The daughter was still nervous, but felt safe enough to move forward with the visitations.

During the first visit, the daughter had a hard time interacting with her father due to her nerves, so their assigned supervisor assisted them by introducing games and books to use as bridge to initiate conversations and interaction between them. After that, the daughter was comfortable for the remainder of the visit. The family is still enrolled in the program, and daughter is continuing to build a relationship with her father.

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The second principle values multiculturalism and diversity[15]. The three organizations consider individuals' backgrounds, culture, and family dynamics. At Mujeres Latinas en Acción and Metropolitan Family Services at Midway, staff members are bilingual and understand the importance of extended family. To accommodate extended families, they have created policies to ensure that the visiting parent can bring a family member(s) or co-visitor(s) that will abide by the same rules as the visiting parent. Staff conduct additional assessments of these co-visitors. The family member can only visit the child if they are not a harm to the children and the survivor. Similarly, to help meet the need of individuals with diverse backgrounds, Apna Ghar, Inc. staff members speak more than twenty languages and are also supportive of cultural differences.

The third principle states that there needs to be an understanding of domestic violence in services[16]. Staff members from the three organizations know how crucial it is for providers to have extensive knowledge of domestic violence. For this reason, all providers participate in forty-hour domestic violence training. Having a deep understanding of domestic violence helps prevent further abuse from occurring. For instance, staff members, while in the room with visiting parents and children, are able to detect and stop any behavior that is going to perpetuate further violence. Providers seek to cut out any battering tactics. By having a comprehensive awareness of domestic violence, providers are able to make the space a safer environment for the children maintaining their emotional safety intact.

The fourth principle includes being respectful and having fair interactions: "Visitation centers should treat every person using their services with respect and fairness, while factoring in the abuse that has occurred within the family"[17]. At the three organizations, everyone is treated with respect, which promotes a welcoming environment so that the visit is a healthy interaction. Knowing that the interaction between the visiting parent and children is going to be healthy also brings tranquility to survivors knowing that their children are safe. This respect helps the organizations better assess an individual's needs and help families transition to unsupervised visitations.

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[15] Guiding Principles Safe Havens: Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Grant Program by United States Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

[16] Guiding Principles Safe Havens: Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Grant Program by United States Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

[17] Guiding Principles Safe Havens: Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Grant Program by United States Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

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One example of this, is a recent case from Mujeres Latinas en Acción. A mother came to the agency seeking services so that her infant daughter could visit with her father. During her intake, the mother explained that the father had an aggressive temper which led to constant conflict and eventually to their separation. She explained that their relationship did not last long and whenever the father wanted to see the child, the mother would have to take her to him. She continued explaining that the father took no responsibility for the child and relied heavily on the child's paternal grandmother and aunt. He never changed the child's diaper, fed her, nor took care of her. Additionally, the mother stated that an argument about his lack of knowledge about how to treat their daughter and lack of responsibility and accountability broke out and this made the father become violent. She described an incident where she confronted him about not knowing how to change a diaper and he pushed her against a television, broke it and then took her cell phone away and broke it as well so she could not call for help. After that incident, the mother obtained the court order granting supervised visits and they came to the facility for visitation. The mother stated she did not want to allow outside visitors coming with the father to visit the child.

Once the first visitation began, the father turned to supervisor for guidance and help with the child. He could not settle her when she got fussy and he relied on the supervisor's advice to soothe her. It took a couple of weeks for the child to become more familiar with the father, and the father to get to know his daughter and the ways to care for her.

After some time, the mother saw a change in the daughter's demeanor when arriving to visitation. Upon realizing the daughter had become more comfortable with her father and visitation, she allowed the paternal grandmother to visit the child with her father. Visitation continued to progress and a week before their court date, the mother called Mujeres Latinas en Acción and told them she wanted to cancel visitation because she had allowed the father to have an outside visit which went well and was going to ask for visitation to be unsupervised on that upcoming court date. She shared with staff the visitation helped the father become more responsible and helped her become more comfortable with the child being alone with her father.

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The fifth principle is community collaboration[18]. The three organizations in Chicago recognize the importance of being able to work with each other in order to best support clients. Staff members are aware and have relationships with community organizations that provide a variety of services since their clients need distinct services like domestic violence counseling, sexual assault programs, family therapy, legal aid, parenting classes, and much more. In a survey of clients, 97% of parents either strongly agreed or agreed that they were given information and referrals for other services that they may need[19]. Simultaneously, the three organizations are also working with each other to create an internal infrastructure that is going to best support children and survivors. This collaboration allows the agencies to address not only domestic violence needs, but other challenges the family may be struggling with as well.

One example of this is a case from Apna Ghar, Inc. of a visiting father. The father had been coming consistently for a year and half and had positive engagement with his son, when a new judge assigned to his family's case made a change to the case. The new judge ordered one hour of safe exchange, an unsupervised means of parenting time, to occur immediately after one hour of supervised parenting time. At this time, a whole new supervised visitation and safe exchange team was in place.

The new advocate, however, built trust and understanding especially with the visiting father, a man who had experienced homelessness, joblessness, lacked a strong support system as he was not from the US, and felt very judged or not listened to by his former advocate. The new advocate provided case management surrounding housing options and counseling services and was in direct communication with legal representation on both the parents' and the child's behalf.

The father was connected with community services and involved with Apna Ghar, Inc.'s services that are geared toward fathers' healing and community-building. These additional tools along with the safe exchanges helped the father to stay in the US and continue to be a regular presence in his son's life amidst all the chaos and hopelessness he'd been experiencing for years.

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[18] Guiding Principles Safe Havens: Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Grant Program by United States Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

[19] Mujeres Latinas en Acción Survey. 2018.

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The sixth principle is advocacy for children and survivors of domestic violence[20]. Service providers are advocating for survivors of domestic violence and their children through different avenues. All organizations ensure that they are meeting with survivors to ensure that their needs are being met. Mujeres Latinas en Acción educate many individuals, including lawyers, about supervised visitation. Apna Ghar, Inc. has done similar trainings for judges. These trainings help raise awareness and inform individuals about supervised visitation programs and how they are a viable pathway for survivors and children. The three organizations also do community outreach to make the public, along with other service providers, aware of supervised visitation and safe exchange.

In 2018, Mujeres Latinas en Acción was able to provide supervised visitation and safe exchanges to 128 parents and 178 children. In total, they provided 1,232 visits and 182 safe exchanges. In 2018, Apna Ghar, Inc. supervised visitation and safe exchanges staff facilitated 902 visits and 311 exchanges collectively in their Chicago and Skokie offices. In 2018, Metropolitan Family Services at Midway provided 441 visits to 84 parents and 68 children. Staff members from Apna Ghar, Inc., Metropolitan Family Services at Midway, and Mujeres Latinas en Acción recognize how crucial supervised visitation is for survivors and their children. By providing this service, they are preventing further abuse from occurring, breaking the cycle of violence. Despite these number, the organizations have not been able to meet the need for these services within the community.

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[20] Guiding Principles Safe Havens: Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Grant Program by United States Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

# Barriers to Providing Services

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Each individual supervised visit requires paying for staff time, the cost associated with the facility usage, and the supplies to have a welcoming environment where kids can play and connect with their families. Organizations that offer comparable services typically charge between \$40-130 an hour for visitations and a \$150 intake fee[21]. This helps them cover the costs to the organization, but create a large barrier for families to access these vital services. At no cost to families, the financial burden is large for the organizations and prohibits them from providing the services to all those who need it.

Current lack of funding prohibits effective implementation of supervised visitation and safe exchange services. The agencies receive a high volume of calls from people who need services can often lead to periods of time when there is a wait list or intakes have to be put on hold, further delaying services. These delays force families to either pay for services elsewhere or continue with visitations and exchanges without the safety offered by these agencies.

The three largest providers of supervised visitation and safe exchange services are located in Chicago. In the suburbs there are practically no services available for families. Apna Ghar, Inc., Metropolitan Family Services at Midway, and Mujeres Latinas en Acción have limited resources to provide services to non-Chicago residents given their current grant funding. As outlined by the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program, currently more people are living in poverty in suburbs than in the cities[21]. In Chicago suburbs between 2010 and 2016 there was a 54 percent increase in the number of people living in poverty, with an additional 270,000 people falling below the line by 2016[22]. As of 2016, 56 percent of those in the Chicago area living below the poverty line were in the suburbs[23]. Many of these families living in poverty will also face domestic violence. Those families are unable to handle the burden having to pay for supervised visitations. As current organizations generally cannot reach these families, they may be forced to have unsupervised visitations that continue to put survivors and children at high risks.

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[21] These values are based on organizations listed on the Supervised Visitation Directory with pricing published online. This directory was accessed at <http://www.svdirectory.com/state.htm?st=il>.

[22] Kneebone, Elizabeth, *The Changing Geography of US Poverty*. Brookings Institution, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-changing-geography-of-us-poverty/>

[23] Waas, Shehara, Templeton, Martha, *Data Points: What does Suburban Poverty Look like in Chicagoland?*. Metropolitan Planning Council, <https://www.metroplanning.org/news/8623/Data-Points-What-does-suburban-poverty-look-like-in-Chicagoland>

[24] Waas, Shehara, Templeton, Martha, *Data Points: What does Suburban Poverty Look like in Chicagoland?*. Metropolitan Planning Council, <https://www.metroplanning.org/news/8623/Data-Points-What-does-suburban-poverty-look-like-in-Chicagoland>

# Conclusion

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The Network supports and recognizes the importance of having supervised visitation programs that address the unique concerns of families impacted by domestic violence. The Network advocates for the extension of supervised visitation programs in the Chicago area as there is a high need for the services that are crucial to survivors with children. Funding is essential in order to continue to serve families and extend to families that are in need of supervised visitation.

Apna Ghar, Inc., Metropolitan Family Services at Midway, and Mujeres Latinas en Acción are applying the guiding principles in their supervised visitation programs to ensure the safety of survivors and their children by intervening in the cycle of violence. By implementing the six guiding principles, the organizations are able to provide a safer space for survivors of domestic violence and their children, but are unable to provide these services to all who need them.

Restricted funding has prevented these organizations from meeting the needs of many families in search of obtaining supervised visitation. It is critical that funding be increased in order for these organizations to continue to provide this vital service to families. The Network and the three organizations urge for the distribution of VOCA funding to continue to support their work with supervised visitation. This funding is necessary for Apna Ghar, Inc., Metropolitan Family Services at Midway, and Mujeres Latinas en Acción to continue to provide services to survivors throughout the Chicago metropolitan area.

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