



Women's Center & Shelter
of Greater Pittsburgh

Elizabeth's Story

"Women's Center & Shelter literally saved our lives."

For three years, Elizabeth lived with emergency bags in her car at all times for her and her sons. The last year her then-husband lived with them in their home, she hid all of the knives. He had become increasingly violent, so she hid everything she could think of that he could possibly use against them, but he still found ways to terrorize them. "You come to a point where you just don't realize the extent of the abuse. You don't see a way out so you stop looking for one until something happens that opens your eyes. And then, you are just completely overwhelmed. But Women's Center & Shelter was a way out."

When Elizabeth called the Hotline, she was connected to resources to help her and her boys finally escape the abuse. But they still had to convince themselves that they were safe; after living in fear for so long, it was hard to understand that it was finally over.

Elizabeth and the boys found themselves on high alert at all times. "You react to things in crazy ways," Elizabeth said. "For example, I still have all of the knives hidden. Women's Center & Shelter understands and their mental health offerings are amazing. They have support groups that help you deal with the shame and work through the trauma to deal with the nightmares and the flashbacks."

Elizabeth noted that one of the biggest challenges was finding a balance between taking necessary steps to heal from trauma while still living her everyday life. Between legal fees, the financial debt she accepted in order to officially remove her partner from their lives, and the reduction in her work hours to allow her to

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attend appointments, it was getting more and more difficult to make ends meet. Elizabeth says Women's Center & Shelter assisted with these needs, too. "They helped us get clothes when the boys were growing like weeds and gas so that we could make it to long-distance appointments with specialists. They provided joy in the form of upbeat childcare when I had to bring the kids with me to appointments at the Center and holiday gifts on that first Christmas without Daddy."

Though Elizabeth has been in a much better place recently, she was surprised by some of the triggers that have come up for her during the current COVID-19 pandemic such as being told to stay at home and wear a mask, which closely resembles being controlled and having your airway blocked by an abusive partner. Through virtual appointments and support groups, Elizabeth has been able to ground herself again. "So many of us feel alone anyway...that's what gaslighting does. To know that even if you can't leave your house, you are not in this by yourself, that somebody is out there that cares, is just irreplaceable."

"I don't know where we would be without Women's Center & Shelter and I thank them from the bottom of my heart." ●

A message from Nicole...

As the season turns yet again but we remain stuck in a global pandemic, I find myself feeling as I often have over the last five months — filled with hope, pride, and determination because of the way our staff, board, supporters, and clients have responded to these unprecedented times.

It's been a little over two years since I officially became President/CEO of Women's Center & Shelter, and I can't say that I ever thought I'd be living through — never mind leading our agency through — a global pandemic. But, here we are. This moment in time (during which some days feel like weeks) has been hard in different and in similar ways for many people.

Emotions are high and the world around us is in constant flux. And, though we can't control much right now, what we can control are our reactions to what seems to be a never ending stream of challenges. And in the months to come, the challenges will continue as violence in homes increases in severity and frequency and we will pivot to respond in new and better ways.

Though our last in-person management team meeting in March seems like a lifetime ago, I can remember being in our large conference room — barely having heard the term *social distancing* yet — trying to make sense of what was to come. We couldn't have imagined the roller coaster ride we were about to get on, but we also couldn't have imagined the utterly amazing love that has surrounded us from every corner of this community. From financial contributions to meals to in-kind donations, those we serve have been comforted by the support so many of you have provided. And by knowing they are not alone! While many were able to rush out and buy whatever they needed at the beginning of the pandemic, those living paycheck to paycheck had to go without and then missed getting needed items that were out of stock. After receiving a care package of toilet paper, paper towels, and other necessities, one WC&S client with two children said, "I honestly don't know what I would've done without this. I wasn't able to go out and get anything during the rush because I didn't get paid in time." This was the reality for so many people we serve. Luckily, your generosity has allowed us to deliver hundreds of care packages, meeting basic needs. And that's just one example of how your support has made a difference.

For residents living in our Emergency Shelter during this time, there has been a different set of challenges. Physical safety has always been at the forefront of our Emergency Shelter program but



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now we take that on in a different, critical way. Escaping abuse to a shelter — where bedrooms are private or semi-private but common areas are communal — is already stressful enough, but adding distancing, wearing a mask, and being careful about what surfaces you touch can feel completely overwhelming. However, our staff members and residents make it work every day. There is more cleaning and sanitizing. New processes and procedures have been added to ensure everyone's ongoing health and safety. But, there is also a steady adherence to creating a path to a new future through our regular work of safety planning, goal setting, case management, and emotional support. This is the essential work that cannot stop, even in the face of a global pandemic.

As an agency, we have also committed to honoring each other's emotional safety by addressing racism on all levels of the organization, from administration to programming. We have formed a Taking Action Against Racism group comprised of board and staff members in order to provide an open space for discussion and action. These conversations can be tough and at times, uncomfortable, but that is the only way to make change. From this understanding we hope to perpetuate a culture embedded in lasting change that informs all of our decisions and the way we do business. Racism and intimate partner violence are forms of oppression deeply rooted in power and control and we will use our collective voices to speak out and take action against both.

This has been a year unlike any other thus far, but somehow, acts of heroism, kindness, and faith in each other have propelled us forward. For now, we are holding out hope for better days ahead while appreciating the incredible strength of our clients and staff and the unrelenting generosity of our supporters. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Nicole Molinaro, President/CEO



Our mission is to advance the safety and wellbeing of victims of intimate partner violence and prevent and respond to intimate partner violence through social change.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AWARENESS MONTH 2020

Join Us for a Virtual Educational Lunch and Learn Series

Domestic Violence And...

Hear from WC&S' expert staff members as they share their perspectives and experiences on a wide range of topics and answer your questions. There is no cost to attend the virtual educational sessions but we ask that you register in advance. All sessions are being held from Noon until 1:00 p.m.

- Thursday, October 1
Domestic Violence and Identity
- Thursday, October 15
Domestic Violence and Families
- Thursday, October 22
Domestic Violence and Money
- Thursday, October 29
Domestic Violence and Men

Virtual Trivia Night

Stay tuned for details on a special virtual Trivia Night on **Wednesday, October 28**.

Sponsored by:



For more information on all of our DV Awareness Month activities, visit WCSCanHelp.org/DVAM2020.

STAND UP FOR STANDING FIRM — 2020 VIRTUAL AWARDS LUNCHEON

Honor the awardees, hear our keynote speaker, and join the pledge against violence!

Thursday, October 8, 2020
Noon to 1 p.m.

Register: <https://bit.ly/SU4SF2020>

Through the Eyes of Children

Even in the best of times, the world can be a scary place for children. When you add in trauma, a global pandemic, and horrendous acts of injustice followed by worldwide protests, all while temporarily living in a shelter, it can feel completely overwhelming.

That is why WC&S Children's Advocates have worked particularly hard to make adjustments in the children's space and in programming over the past six months. Overall, the goal of the Children's Program is to ensure that both moms and children have what they need to succeed in their healing journeys, including connections to vital medical, educational, and enrichment resources.



Children's Advocates began with decluttering and organizing parts of the space into more of a classroom environment as they realized it was going to be utilized differently in the coming months. They created a night-sky themed nursery and painted the furniture to make it more inviting for infants and toddlers. Recognizing that many teens staying in the shelter were unable to join local protests but felt the anger and pain of injustice, an activism wall was created as a way to channel that energy and recognize that while systems have failed, there are ways to become involved to create meaningful change. They also created a new Black Excellence wall to help resident children and teens to feel acknowledged in the space. It includes two mirrors within the wall to inspire residents and children to see

themselves as Black Excellence. The Children's Advocates chose to physically separate the Black Excellence wall from the activism wall so they can hold space for celebration and joy separately from pain and injustice.

As part of the Sanctuary Model, the team holds community meetings as a way for advocates to check in with children on their emotions in that moment or that day. The calm down castle is part of social-emotional learning and allows children and advocates to take a break together, rather than sending a child to "time out." The calm down castle includes books, sensory toys, coloring and now, our new fish, Astro! The rhythmic movement of fish is very soothing and calming to watch, which has made Astro a great addition to the space. Astro also provides opportunities for learning more about how to treat animals and take care of something fragile.

As many schools will be remote for the first few months of the school year, the Children's Advocates will continue to make accommodations and remain flexible to create a sense of normalcy and comfort for the children served by WC&S. ●



Together in Times of Crisis



Amidst global coronavirus lockdowns, people experiencing intimate partner violence in our communities are dealing with what is being called a "double pandemic." Worldwide, domestic violence was the single most reported category of violence from January to May 2020 (comprising more than one-third of all violent incidents). Countries including the U.S. have seen significant increases in domestic violence reports and requests for emergency shelter.

Because IPV is based on power and control, people who use abusive behaviors often try to exert even more power when they feel a lack of control. Due to job losses, illness, and stay-at-home orders, many feel they lack control over their lives right now. Moreover, many people experiencing IPV have been under constant surveillance by their abusive partners, making it much more difficult to contact programs like WC&S for help. Since Pennsylvania's stay-at-home order was put in place, WC&S' Hotline has received 20-43% fewer calls each month compared to last year.

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As a survivor myself, I cannot imagine how difficult quarantine has been for some of my peers. Sending love and strength.

— WC&S Donor

Through the chaos of recent months, WC&S doors have remained open. Our staff—with the support of generous volunteers and donors—has worked quickly to modify programming to meet the changing needs of survivors during the coronavirus pandemic.

We are redirecting part of our stimulus check to help with the increase in domestic violence due to COVID isolation. Thank you for the work you do. — WC&S Donor

We fast-tracked our plans for adding texting and online chat features to our 24-Hour Hotline to support those experiencing IPV during stay-at-home orders. Originally planned for a fall 2020 launch, these new features allow people to discreetly reach out for assistance. In less than three months, WC&S has already

provided crisis counseling 83 times on the new text/chat channels. Along with this, the batterer's intervention program facilitators have been calling participants to check in, since our MENS (Men Embracing Nonviolence and Safety) groups have been unable to meet in person. One recent participant shared with the group facilitator, "It's sad when I think of the things I lost and the people I hurt. Thank you for helping me better myself. I'm learning how to break the pattern of violence with education, support, and learning to be responsible for myself."

Our extensive outreach efforts in recent months have focused on ensuring that survivors know how to safely get help during the pandemic. We created a “COVID-19 Response & Resources” page on our website (wcspittsburgh.org/covid). In April, WC&S hosted a Virtual Town Hall Meeting that was attended by close to 70 people.

Around the same time, WC&S developed a postcard to inform residents that Allegheny County's IPV agencies remained open and ready to serve. We distributed 12,600 of these postcards at cash registers in 42 Giant Eagle grocery stores. We also had a similar flyer printed and placed in 10,000 of the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank's food distribution boxes. These print materials are available in multiple languages and are now being distributed throughout the county. A number of WC&S staff have delivered virtual trainings and participated in virtual panel discussions on addressing IPV during the pandemic.



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To offer immediate relief to non-resident clients, staff has put together care packages of essential supplies and dropped them off at clients' front doors. We are holding non-resident support groups for IPV survivors over video conferencing, which has been described by multiple participants as an important lifeline for them right now. One client participating in the remote support groups recently shared, "It is crucial to be able to get support during this time of uncertainty.

The fact that we are under stay at home orders makes this a time when we need support more than ever. I feel like I am moving backwards instead of forward. The capability to connect with our therapy group using Zoom has been a lifeline to keep me from feeling alone."

During local court closures, WC&S' Civil Law Project and Legal Advocacy staff collaborated with community partners to establish fully remote systems for processing IPV-related legal matters such as temporary Protection From Abuse orders.



At WC&S' main facility, frontline staff are reporting to work onsite and following guidelines from the Center for Disease Control in order to safely provide clients with Emergency Shelter, childcare, and other essential needs. WC&S has taken many other measures to minimize the chances of spreading the coronavirus onsite. All staff who can do their work remotely continue to do

so. When we accept families with immuno-compromised individuals for Emergency Shelter, we arrange for them to stay in nearby hotels to avoid putting their health at risk in a community living setting.

“My girls and I were victims of domestic violence. This place changed our lives and I want to give back.

— WC&S Donor

“Thank you to all WC&S workers during these challenging times. We appreciate your dedication to your clients! — WC&S Donor”

Typically, WC&S hosts more than 500 volunteers each year who serve meals in the Emergency Shelter, throw holiday parties for residents, and clean the facility. During the pandemic, instead of volunteering onsite, a number of generous community supporters have donated prepared meals for Shelter residents and frontline staff. The response from clients who have sought Emergency Shelter in recent months has been overwhelmingly positive. One recent resident mentioned she was "so thankful that [she and her] children are in Shelter and not at home right now."

The outpouring of support from the WC&S Board of Directors, individual donors, local foundations, volunteers, and community supporters has been humbling. We are deeply grateful to have received dozens of notes from donors in recent months like the ones quoted here. Whether you have dropped off a meal, provided us with emergency funds, donated supplies or a portion of your stimulus check, or sent us words of encouragement, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts. There will be more challenges ahead for WC&S, but we feel equipped to meet them because of the resilience of those we serve and the generosity of our community. ●





**Women's Center & Shelter
of Greater Pittsburgh**

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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.

How You Can Help During This Challenging Time

Visit WCSCanHelp.org/how-to-help to learn more. As always, we appreciate the love and support you've shown us these past months and throughout the year!



**Make a
Financial
Contribution**



\$50 can provide a night of safety in the WC&S Emergency Shelter to a survivor of IPV.

Make it Monthly — your monthly donation provides a reliable source of income during these uncertain times.

3rd Party Fundraising — host a virtual concert, talent show or trivia night with proceeds benefitting WC&S.



**Donate
a Meal**



Provide individualized meals for survivors staying in the Emergency Shelter.

Restaurant-prepared or catered meals are preferred. Support local businesses while supporting WC&S!



**Provide
Basic
Necessities**



Hold a drive or donate essential items such as gift cards, cleaning products, hand soap, full-sized personal care items or any items from our urgent needs list.