

Questions and Answers with La Casa de las Madres

Why and how did the organization get involved in responding to and preventing gender-based violence?

La Casa de las Madres, California's first shelter dedicated to women and children escaping domestic violence, was formally established in 1976. However, the dynamic coalition of San Francisco Bay Area women instrumental in its founding began to organize in late 1974. Active in the various social justice movements of the day—raising awareness and fighting against normalized rape, discrimination, and oppression—they coalesced around common outrage that women were being beaten by their partners with nowhere to turn and no real protections in place.

La Casa de las Madres' (Home of the Mothers) name reflects several facets of the organization's founding. It welcomes mothers because, in particular, the founders felt that women with children had few options for safety. It also signifies the safety, nurturing, and unconditional acceptance found within; the arms of a mother represent the refuge we all seek in a time of crisis or to heal from trauma. Finally, it honors the many women lost to violence, among them our mothers and sisters, including one of the founders' mothers, who was brutally murdered by her husband in 1957.

In 1975, an expanding group of women laid the groundwork for La Casa de las Madres. They amassed research, interviewing local law enforcement and survivors, and La Casa's initial conceptualization as a safe haven for Latinas quickly transformed into a space for all women. Generating interest in this "new" social problem of battering, they developed a volunteer-led organizational model inspired by Erin Pizzey's work founding shelters in the U.K, built allies, and organized with San Francisco Mayor-elect and California State Senator George Moscone to testify at hearings in San Francisco's City Hall.

Finally, in December La Casa de las Madres found its first home. Funded by activists and volunteers, the doors opened on January 15, 1976. Word of mouth was electric. Accessing the home's new and unpublished number, the first resident family called from a payphone and came to safety the very next day.

In a letter to the Van Loben Sels Foundation dated October 13, 1976, La Casa de las Madres reported:

We have handled over 700 crisis calls; we are currently averaging 150 calls per month, five per day. Our 30 beds are always filled; there are usually a number of women and children waiting to come because there are virtually no other emergency housing facilities for women and children in San Francisco or the wider Bay Area.

What are some challenges and successes the organization have experienced in doing this type of work?

La Casa de las Madres is continually challenged to bridge gaps in survivor resources. The existing safety net is inadequate, and survivors continue to be isolated amid communities

normalizing or minimizing domestic violence. Our success is balanced against the many and varied practical challenges that survivors trying to rebuild lives free from the cycle of violence continue to face. The recent recession and mounting affordable housing crisis amidst San Francisco's rebounding economy continues to stoke vulnerability—both immediate and long-term—among local women and girls in abusive homes and partnerships. It's hard to envision a new beginning or a different kind of life when there is a sense of scarcity. The social narrative underscores obstacles for low and middle-income residents, as well as the real, tangible hurdles to safely and stably beginning again.

But most critically, our message of hope, safety, and options has not saturated every corner and community. Survivors continue to suffer in silence, isolation, fear, and shame because they do not understand that they are not alone and that no one deserves to be abused. They do not realize that there is a community ready to embrace them, believe them, and empower them, regardless of their backgrounds and identities.

Conversely, La Casa has also had numerous successes. Many of its successes are rooted its ability to break down historical barriers, work with outside organizations, and sustain effective cross-sector partnerships. In 2000, our Teen Program began to work with teachers and administrators across the San Francisco Unified School District to bring teen dating violence education and healthy relationship workshops into high school classrooms. Today, these conversations are common place, incorporated into curriculum, and reinforced through district-wide messaging about domestic and dating violence. Additionally, La Casa continues to offer young survivors accessible, tailored intervention and prevention programs in high school, middle school, and upper elementary settings. In 2003, La Casa formalized a partnership with the San Francisco Police Department. La Casa works side by side with department personnel and leadership in funded and unfunded roles to provide resources for officers, victims, and law enforcement response systems. In 2006, La Casa's Safe Housing Project began to systematically address the critical intersection between domestic violence and housing stability for low income families and survivors. The project provides training and consultation for subsidized housing sites across San Francisco, their property managers, and support service providers, while reaching out to residents about their rights and building connections to empower community resources.

What does the organization consider the most important aspect of its work/advocacy?

The most important aspect of La Casa de las Madres' work is changing public perceptions about domestic violence, which is central to the organization's current and future success. La Casa works daily to dispel myths, elevate public discourse about the complex dynamics of domestic violence, and encourage the perception—and reality—that San Francisco will not minimize or tolerate abuse. Building knowledge and awareness creates innovative solutions by bringing new partners to the table, as well as making survivors feel safe enough to reach out for help and empowered to demand consideration and respect. De-stigmatizing the experience and issue of domestic violence paves the way for creating systems and policies that hold batterers directly accountable for their choices and behaviors, while simultaneously relieving the survivors' burdens to demand the foundational safety and protection they deserve.

What would a violence-free world look like to the organization?

La Casa de las Madres envisions a society in which diversity is celebrated, and all individuals and families have equal access to basic resources and asset-building opportunities. In this future, safety and respect in intimate relationships are the norm. All relationships—partner-based,

parent-child, employer-employee, consumer-provider, etc.—are rooted in integrity and respect. In order to actuate this change, society must empower individuals through providing knowledge, skills, and support systems that encourage healthy relationship behaviors and choices. Additionally, systems of control, enforcement, and distribution should become firmly rooted in expectations of self-determination, accountability to others, and opportunities for reflective restoration. La Casa tries to foster these changes by creating a community where violence against women and children is not tolerated.

How can others get involved in preventing gender-based violence?

Others can get involved in preventing gender-based violence in several ways. Talk about domestic violence. Talk about the qualities of healthy relationships with your children, your friends, and your partners. Take a stand when you witness a manipulation of power and control in intimate relationships. Express your concern to a potential abuser or a potential victim. Listen. Offer non-judgmental support and connection to professional resources.

Connect with an anti-domestic violence service or advocacy organization. Offer your time, expertise, and professional networks to build a critical mass of knowledgeable community members and appropriately responsive policies and systems. Domestic violence affects people from all backgrounds and in every aspect of their lives; it's affecting survivors and the society at-large in the workplace, through health care systems, in criminal justice settings, and at home. Together, with collaborative energy and mutual accountability, we will disrupt the cultural and intergenerational transmission of attitudes and behaviors enabling abuse as well as systemic and policy responses that marginalize victims, ignore domestic violence, and perpetuate the cycle of violence.