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**Episode35_Policy_&_Advocacy_in_Action_-_VI-SPDAT_for_Survivors_of_Domestic
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>> Kathy Moore: Welcome to Policy & Advocacy in Action, a channel of NRCDV radio. I'm Kathy Moore and today I'll be talking with Heather McCauley, one of the authors of a paper in our special series on coordinated entry and domestic and sexual violence. Dr. McCauley is an assistant professor in the school of social work in Michigan State University. Before we launch into the interview with Dr. McCauley, allow me to provide a bit of context and clarify a few terms you'll be hearing in our discussion.

First, Dr. McCauley talks about research she conducted as she and her colleague, Taylor Reid, prepared a paper for the Domestic Violence and Housing Technical Assistance Consortium. The consortium is an innovative, collaborative approach to providing training, technical assistance and resources at the critical intersection of domestic and sexual violence, homelessness, and housing. As the consortium's five national technical systems providers carefully reviewed practices in the housing field, monitor their impact on survivors of domestic and sexual violence and seek to address disparities experienced by people who have been systematically oppressed. Based on what we've been seeing, the consortium is issuing a special series of papers intended to spark a deliberate shift in policies and practices toward a culturally responsive, trauma-informed and survivor-centered approach to allocating housing resources.

At present, local communities who receive federal funds, organize their work in what is called a continuum of care or COC. These COC's used particular tools and procedures to assess, prioritize and match ppl experiencing housing insecurity with available housing services. People in need of housing assistance are moved through coordinated entry, also known as CE which is a process administered by local continuums of care. When well-designed, coordinated entry is intended to streamline and centralize housing assistance. To protect against bias, to make access to housing assistance less subjective and more equitable. Many local communities have adopted a screening tool called the The Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool or VI-SPDAT for short. This tool and it's limitations is the focus of Dr. McCauley's paper and our discussion in this podcast. One other term you'll hear mentioned in the podcast is HMIS which stands for Homeless Management Information System. It essence, each HMIS is a database where local communities collect information about individuals and families accessing housing assistance.

That's a brief outline of some of the terms and concepts we'll be discussing in this podcast,

with so without further ado, let's hear from Dr. McCauley.

So, your paper focuses on the VI-SPDAT tool, and that's an acronym for The Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool, and the VI-SPDAT we know is used in many communities to triage, screen, and prioritize individuals and families for various types of housing assistance, so I'm hoping you can tell us a little bit about what you've learned about the development of this tool and what the original intention was behind its creation.

>> Heather McCauley: The Vulnerability Index, the VI was developed by Community Solutions based on the work of Boston's Health Care for the Homeless Program to assess and individual's risk for mortality and that informed decisions about prioritizing scarce housing resources. So, it's first important to understand that the tool was developed to assess needs among the chronically homeless. In this early work, we found that factors associated with heightened risk included things like multiple hospitalizations or ER visits, being over age 60, cirrhosis of the liver, etc. In other words, the tool was not intended to assess risk among survivors of domestic and sexual violence. So the second part of the VI-SPDAT, the service prioritization decision assistance tool was developed by Oracle Code Consulting as a more in depth assessment tool to further consider the socio-economic status and psychosocial risk factors related to homelessness. And these tools were combined to create the VI-SPDAT, designed for a rapid, interview style administration. The ultimate goal of the assessment is to move individuals and families into safe permanent and sustainable housing, but it's important to mention here that while HUD mandated COC's used a consistent assessment process, HUD did not mandate the VI-SPDAT specifically.

>> Kathy Moore: Okay. Thank you. That was really helpful overview there. In terms of the VI-SPDAT tool and breakdown the science for us in a sense that your paper you outlined some research that indicated there were some challenges and limitations with this particular tool, so can you explain your findings and tell us what does it mean? Why should we care about what you've learned?

>> Heather McCauley: the tool is an interview style assessment tool which has items across a number of domains, including history of housing and homelessness, risks, socialization and daily functioning, wellness and family. And then they created GlobalScore, which is used to compare people's needs. It's determined by those questions and today only one published study has examined the reliability and validity of the VI-SPDAT to assess whether it's performing as desired, so for those of you who aren't trained in research methods, reliability is how consistently a tool is working. In this case, how consistently the tool is measuring risks within Individuals over time, consistency across those doing the scoring and consistency across COC's nationally for that matter. Validity is whether the tool is measuring what we think it is measuring, or how well the tool is measuring an individual or family's actual housing needs.

So, in 2018, Braun and colleagues published a study for data from a midwestern COC's HMIS database and it included almost 1500 single adults experiencing homelessness. They found that the tool had poor test/re-testability with most participants scoring higher the more times they were assessed with the tool. The researchers also found that the tool had poor inter-rater reliability, which means that the same client was scored differently depending on who was conducting the assessment. They also looked at how well the tool predicted reentry into homelessness services over time. I did not find that it performed well.

In addition to these factors from this one study, domestic and sexual violence advocates have pointed out that the tool's not particularly trauma informed and does not accurately capture the experiences of survivors that might shape their risk for homelessness. So, given all of these factors, if the tool is not performing consistently, then it's not really resulting in equitable decision-making about scarce resources.

>> Kathy Moore: Given these issues in terms of the consistency, what it's trying to measure and is it actually getting at the right concepts, many communities have turned to the VI-SPDAT because they're really seeking a simple, and a consistent way to try to assess individuals and families I think you just talked about some of those consistencies as problematic. But we know communities are really looking for an objective and an unbiased method to do this sort of assessment for getting people into limited housing resources. In your paper, you pointed out several ways that bias is still influencing how the resources are allocated even when people are using this VI-SPDAT tool, and operating system I think for communities it's a bit of a head scratcher. They're feeling like VI-SPDAT should be standardized and you've just talked about how some limitations with the way it's not very standard, but tell us how can there still be bias and subjectivity when a tool like this is really intended to streamline people's housing instability, situations and really trying to streamline it into a numeric score. I think there's a sense that a numeric score should be objectively-- should be objective, so tell us how there can still be bias and subjectivity in a tool like this.

>> Heather McCauley: Absolutely. I think we think that if we are all asking the same questions, we are getting the same information from clients and making the same decision and why understanding the reliability and validity of a tool is so important is because it helps us understand that that's not actually the case, so when a tool doesn't have strong reliability and validity, it opens up the door for potential bias to shape how resources are allocated. Even when that's not the intention, because none of us go into this work thinking that we're going to make different decision for different people. A recent study from Oregon, Virginia, and Washington found that black, indigenous and people of color were 32% less likely than their white counterparts to receive a high prioritization score despite their over-representation in the coordinated entry system, so this could be related to unconscious or conscious bias of the interviewer. It's also shaped by community priorities, funding decisions and federal mandates. Together these findings suggest that the implementation of the VI-SPDAT has the potential for coordinated entry assessment to exacerbate inequities and homelessness, especially for communities of color.

>> Kathy Moore: You just focus some of the science finding that the VI-SPDAT isn't trauma informed and doesn't capture survivor's experience as well. You mention that there are also some other problematic aspects about how communities they're using VI-SPDAT and things that are related to how it's administered, so what are some other critical considerations for communities who are weighing the concerns about whether they should continue with the VI-SPDAT scoring tool or move on to something else?

>> Heather McCauley: Thanks for that great question. The limitations of the VI-SPDAT are compounded by potential challenges with implementation. Providers are trained to administer the tool, but turnover and in staff, caseload, and other factors might shape how the assessment is conducted. Moreover it's different to have a trauma-informed conversation if the questions providers are expected to ask are not trauma-informed themselves. There's also variability in funding models across the United States, and this is something I learned when I started speaking with providers in different regions of the country about how they use the VI-SPDAT. And these funding models shape how risk assessment translates to connecting survivors to needed services.

So, for example, in some communities, like Multnomah County in Oregon, they're dedicated resources for domestic and sexual violence survivors, so assessment happens in the DV agencies and team comes together to help match survivors to needed housing. In other communities that don't have those separate funding streams, survivors are compared against other populations seeing housing. So, depending on community priorities and how the assessment process happens, this might disadvantage survivors if the tool doesn't accurately capture their unique vulnerabilities and needs for housing. So, your unique vulnerabilities for survivors might include problems with credit, because an abuser has run up a credit card bill or things like that that are unique to survivors experiences.

>> Kathy Moore: I think we've covered a great deal around this particular tool and the different limitations, the ways that bias is still very much prevalent in its application and also some of the implementation challenges with it, so some of these limitations are pretty well documented at this point and I'd like to turn our attention to other sorts of tools that communities could use to assess risk and help prioritize survivors for housing, and so in your paper, you talked about a couple of other approaches being used in some communities. Could you give us a quick sketch about those other approaches?

>> Heather McCauley: The Danger Assessment is the nickname for a tool that's often used to supplement the VI-SPDAT and it was initially developed in 1986 for health and social service providers to initiate safety planning and promote survivor empowerment by identifying risk for intimate partner homicide, so there have been studies showing that the tool does moderately predict future harm, but it was not designed to inform decisions about housing and that's really important here. Sometimes service providers assume that survivors need to leave their home, but that's might not be the best choice or the choice that makes sense for every survivor. So, a more in depth assessment to truly understand the constellation of risk survivors experience would be helpful.

Another study, a very recent study, introduced a tool called the Survivor's Achieving Stable Housing Tool and it included a self-referral form which took about 30-45 minutes to complete, so it's certainly more extensive than the VI-SPDAT. And a referral to be completed by a domestic and sexual violence advocate. This tool emerged from concerns about the VI-SPDAT but it's lengthy and the outcomes are really dependent on the provider.

Multnomah County, which I mentioned earlier also has a more extensive tool that captures a constellation of survivor experiences though to my knowledge and careful research hasn't been conducted to really understand the tool's ability to predict housing outcomes. But a big question that comes from these more extensive tools is how they're woven into funding models that compare survivors to others with housing needs to make decisions about allocation of resources. So, there's certainly a need to reconceptualize assessment, but also in the context of conversations about broader funding structures.

>> Kathy Moore: You've also seen the first paper in our special series which suggests using a decision tree as an alternative to the VI-SPDAT sort of scoring tool, so I'm curious to hear from you in what ways does this alternative process, this decision tree, in what ways does this address some of the shortcomings that are inherent in the VI-SPDAT scoring tool?

>> Heather McCauley: From my perspective, the decision tree really highlights the power of having more in-depth conversations with our clients about their experiences to

truly understand their needs. So, let me use my experience in the healthcare system as an example. In that space, we've shifted from a screening model for domestic violence to an assessment model. In other words, instead of going through a checklist to determine what support the survivor might need, we open up the door for a broader conversation rather than pushing for disclosure, because it takes survivors time to feel comfortable sharing their experiences and this is not like anyone who is experiencing homelessness. So, an assessment approach helps build trust between the client and the survivor and that allows the potential to see if other resources might keep someone housed and it really helps the provider have as much information as possible to make a truly informed decision, so I'm very excited to see the same approach applied to housing.

>> Kathy Moore: Thank you. That was really helpful to help us frame this shift that we are proposing. The shifting from screening to an assessment approach. As you know, we've received a couple questions from some of our partners who are involved with our organization, the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence. We're involved with the Domestic Violence and Housing Technical Assistance Consortium and so a couple questions from our partners have come in and I just want to read these to you and get your thoughts.

One of our partners asked or mentioned there's a tension that exists for programs that are funded by HUD, the Housing and Urban Development Department and this tension that programs that are funded by HUD that they focus on data and measurement of priority need and it comes up in local communities coordinated entry processes and also when they apply for competitive funding where they have to demonstrate success and how they've allocated their previous housing resources. So, given that local programs feel this tension and this need to focus on data and measurement, what measure do you think we can use to show that a particular survivor should have the one and only housing unit available at a given time? How would you address that?

>> Heather McCauley: I really appreciate this tension and right now there's no one measure or tool that will address all of these challenges. Braun's paper from 2018 highlights that the VI-SPDAT is not successful in predicting housing outcomes and predicting success and honestly this is where we started with this project with the VI-SPDAT. We were interested in creating a more trauma-informed tool, but it became very apparent that we couldn't simply swap out the tool without addressing broader structural issues in the system. We will need to work together. Domestic and sexual violence advocates, housing experts, to think about the system comprehensively to get at your very question. I keep thinking about other additional funding models that can help ease this tension. I know this is not a satisfying answer, because even in other areas, in healthcare for example, providers ask me what is that one question that I need to ask my clients to understand what they're experiencing? And there isn't one question. And so that's why I think moving to an assessment and really starting to more comprehensively understand their client's experiences will help us make decisions that are equitable across the system.

>> Kathy Moore: Well thank you for giving kind of a really direct and honest response to that and that underscores, I think, the challenges and what it brings up for me is the sense of this fallacy of us trying to predict success when we're talking about complex human beings and complex sorts of needs, so I think that's point well taken.

Another question that we received from one of our partners is similar, but it gets at how might a guided conversation like the decision tree that we recommended and that you just spoke about, how might a guided conversation such as the decision tree be codified and its

results documented in order to provide justification for a housing match? Can you talk about that?

>> Heather McCauley: What's so interesting to me about the guided conversation is in many ways you gather similar information you would have if you proceeded with a screening tool, but you gather the information in a more trauma-informed way, and let it be clear that even if clients aren't accessing the system through domestic and sexual violence agencies, it doesn't mean they haven't experienced trauma, so I do think it's important to think about how anyone that we're working with who is seeking housing resources might have experienced trauma and this process is certainly exacerbating what they've experienced, so having these in depth conversations are more trauma-informed and it really opens up the door for problem-solving that might allow us to identify other alternatives than housing. Perhaps they need, you know, I've heard my colleagues talk about flexible funding. That might provide survivors or others with the ability to address some of their short-term needs that will allow them to stay in their homes and so having these independent conversations helps us identify some of those alternatives and I'll defer to the team who led the development of the decision tree regarding the recommendations for scoring, but I do recommend investing in future research to understand how a broader assessment of risk can predict housing outcomes. I'm very encouraged and excited to think about how this decision tree can help us make decisions.

>> Kathy Moore: This isn't highlighted a whole lot in your paper, but I know that you did learn some interesting things about different funding models that are used in different communities across the country, and so hoping you can share a little bit about these different approaches to funding and how they shape the coordinated entry process and the implications for assessing survivor's needs.

>> Heather McCauley: Yeah, this really came up when it became very clear that we couldn't just swap out a tool and address all of the needs of survivors and other clients seeking housing. I spent time in Portland, Oregon speaking with the Multnomah folks about their model which does have separate funding for survivors who need housing, and so because we know that there is not enough supply to meet the demand, this separate funding streams prevented the system from kind of pitting one person against the other, so pitting survivors against others who were also seeking housing, and so I think it allowed for more in depth assessment of their trauma histories and connecting them to resources, but, in many places around the country, those funding models don't exist, so everyone is competing for those scarce resources and it became difficult to think about swapping out a tool or using a tool that is just focused on trauma in some of those models where everyone is being considered for those scarce housing resources, and so that just underscores the need for us to come together. Those who do work with domestic and sexual violence and those who are housing experts to think about how we can work together to create a trauma-informed system that addresses all the needs of our clients.

>> Kathy Moore: Okay. Your paper concludes with a brief discussion of how to start moving forward and we know because we hear from lots of communities all across the country that their eager and they're ready to adopt new tools and new processes, like many folks understand the limitations of the VI-SPDAT and I think your paper really adds to their knowledge around that and strengthens their resolve to shift to something else. We've talked about how we can't just immediately jump to some other scoring process because it's not trauma-informed and for all the reasons you've talked about so help us talk to those communities who are ready to change. We know that the way that they go about this and the conversations that they're having are super important, so what guidance do you have

for them? What should communities keep in mind as they really explore and think about new and improved approaches to assessing risk and prioritizing housing resources?

>> Heather McCauley: As I mentioned, I think it's exciting to think about the possibility of us coming together and I know that this work that you all are leading is already happening and it's really been an honor for me to come to the table and work with others in the housing community and those who are experts in that particular area to think about these challenges together, so I think we need to be thinking about this from a structural perspective, so not only recognizing the limitations of the tool and thinking about how we do assessment, but having those conversations at the same time that we're having questions about the funding models and the implementation concerns that I mentioned earlier, so we can't just create a new tool without thinking about how it is implemented in the community, how training occurs, and how our systems unintentionally might exacerbate inequities, so I think now is the time to be having those conversations and to think about some of the ways that research can help answer those questions. One of the things in doing a review and understanding and getting to know the VI-SPDAT is really recognizing the limitations in research that has been done with the tool so far. There just isn't a lot out there, and so this is also from my researcher hat on, this is a call to researchers to do more in depth assessment of these tools to help inform evidence-based decision-making.

>> Kathy Moore: Thank you. I'm really hearing from you that since we can't just press one lever, we can't just try to solve the scoring issue, that as you pointed out, we need to look at this in the context of all the structural aspects of coordinated entry and housing resources and looking at funding and implementation and racial bias and inequity, so I think we can be mindful that we can't just tweak one thing and expect it to have better results.

>> Heather McCauley: Exactly. And recognizing the power and need for taking a trauma-informed perspective to the work broadly. Even if we don't think we're working with survivors, we are. There's so many experiences that clients that we work with have never shared with us, and so I think I'm always a proponent of thinking about how a system as a whole can be more trauma-informed so I look forward to those conversations as well.

>> Kathy Moore: Okay. Well, thank you.

>> Heather McCauley: Thanks so much.

>> Kathy Moore: Yeah. Thank you. It was nice talking with you again. I appreciate the work and the way you've laid it out and the way that you've made it accessible to folks who are really wanting to take a critical look at this. So thanks.

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Thank you for joining us today for another episode of Policy and Action at NRCDV Radio podcast production. Gratitude as well to our guest Dr. Heather McCauley. To learn more about the intersection of domestic and sexual violence, homelessness and housing, visit the Consortium's website safehousingpartnerships.org. You can also access other resources on gender-based violence by going to the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence website NRCDV.org. And you can follow us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram at NRCDV. Policy and Action is an NRCDV Radio Podcast production brought to you by the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence. Support is provided by the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau, US

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