



Far left: Rebecca Darr, CEO of WINGS, and two graduates of the WINGS program.

Safe and Sound

For more than 30 years, the WINGS domestic violence program has given refuge to Chicago-area women fleeing abusive partners, and then helped them restart their lives.



Contributing to our community

EVERY THREE SECONDS, a woman somewhere in the United States is assaulted by her partner. On a typical day, domestic violence hotlines across the country receive more than 20,000 calls from victims in distress. Many children are adversely affected as well, either directly as victims, or as witnesses to the abuse of their mothers. Nationally, intimate partner violence accounts for 15% of all violent crime.

The physical and emotional suffering experienced by these families also carries an economic cost, as abused women miss more than 8 million workdays annually and in many cases lose their jobs as a result of constant disruption and anxiety in their home lives. This perpetuates their inability to escape a cycle in which they're often trapped because of financial need and a lack of support systems, not to mention the

crippling effect of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other forms of psychological damage.

Since 1985, a pioneering program called WINGS has been helping women escape the trap of chronic abuse in Chicago – a city where domestic violence is the number one reason for 9-1-1 calls and the principal cause of homelessness among women and children. Although the organization's original plan was to locate affordable housing for homeless women and children, WINGS is now the largest provider of domestic violence housing and services in Illinois, with two emergency shelters, various walk-in community centres that offer support and counselling, and 31 homes and apartments where victims and their children can begin making the transition to new lives.

15,000

Nights of shelter provided to over 800 guests at the WINGS Safe House in 2015.

Breaking the cycle

“When you provide options for going forward, that changes the whole game,” says Rebecca Darr, who has led WINGS since 1999 as Executive Director (and more recently as CEO). “People think a woman who is being abused should be able to leave easily, despite having no access to money and no help from the police. That’s just not the case. Having an advocate by your side makes something that felt impossible suddenly seem possible.”

Many women fleeing abusive situations seek refuge with family members. But that can be dangerous, as their partners can easily track them down. That’s why access to a secure, confidential emergency shelter is so important. Once a woman is safely in a shelter, she can contact the police and get a judicial order of protection in place. She can also seek counselling for the most common outcomes of abuse, PTSD and depression.

WINGS differs from most emergency domestic violence programs in that it also provides post-shelter housing. Women escaping abusive relationships tend to be financially vulnerable, and in many cases are at risk of becoming homeless. “The dynamics in these relationships are about power and control,” Rebecca explains, “and men often control the money.” All too frequently, women return to violent partners simply because they can’t afford to stay on their own – and the old pattern of abuse soon returns.

Women who qualify for WINGS transitional housing pay a percentage of their rent and receive all the essentials of life, including clothing, food, furniture, counselling, guidance and training at no cost. The two-year stay with WINGS gives women the time they need to get back on their feet, so they can focus on restoring their emotional health, resolving legal issues, going back to school (if desired), and saving money for the future. For those who complete the full two-year stay in WINGS housing, the program has a 100% success rate: they emerge self-sufficient and don’t go back to their abusers.

The WINGS program also takes care of children from abusive homes, which increases the number of clients threefold.

Journey to Freedom

In 2005, Jami Lynn left her abusive husband, taking their 18-month-old son with her. With no income, she was forced to live in a car. Then she found the help she needed to reinvent her life.

“I basically came to WINGS with nothing. I’d lost our home, our car, our dog, most of our belongings. I had no family in Illinois, and that left me with no real support structure or way out. I received immediate assistance from the shelter: housing, food and a safe place to be. This help was crucial.”

“I came from a history of childhood abuse, so I’d normalized terrible behaviour for so long, I had to do a lot of unlearning and learning again. What stands out to me, when I look back on my journey, is that they gave me a new view on life. Peace, a different way of doing things. A place where I was not judged. Somewhere I could start again, a free woman.”

“I received counselling over many years and worked on my issues. I grew to love myself and be a successful mom, a career woman and a loving partner to my guy of almost 10 years. We have a real life, one that’s enjoyable and free. My kids get to grow and enjoy their freedom and see an example of a happy, engaged mother who’s not caged by her abuser. Someone they can model themselves after.”

“WINGS gave me an opportunity to grow, to believe I was someone more than who my abuser shaped me to believe I was. Without that opportunity, I truly shudder to think how long my journey to freedom could have taken... if I could have found freedom at all.” 😊

▼
1,400+

Residents getting a new start in life at WINGS transitional housing in 2015.

“For children, going to a shelter is confusing and scary, so stability is essential,” Rebecca says. “Many of the kids are very stressed out. We create a calm, safe environment where they can just be children and not worry about what’s happening to their mom.” WINGS helps with counselling, school and transportation, creating stability at a critical point in these children’s lives. “The earlier we can help kids, the greater the chance they won’t grow up to be victims – or abusers themselves.”

Taking responsibility

In February 2016, WINGS opened the first new emergency domestic violence shelter in downtown Chicago in more than a decade. Among the corporate donors that helped to make the new shelter possible was BMO Harris Bank. For more than 20 years, BMO has supported WINGS with financial donations, volunteer outreach efforts and strategic advice. Both directors and executives of the bank have collaborated with the WINGS board and Rebecca’s leadership team on fundraising initiatives, as well as ongoing efforts to raise the organization’s profile with clients, colleagues and a wider circle of corporate and private donors.

“We rely on private companies for money, but also for expertise and support,” Rebecca explains. “BMO has been our most hands-on corporate partner in terms of helping us grow the organization.” Such partnerships are especially important when government funding can be uncertain – to the point where some shelters have had to close. Adding to the fundraising challenge is the fact that many consumer-facing companies aren’t comfortable associating their names with the painful topic of domestic violence.

“We’ve known that we can continue to count on BMO for support every year,” says Rebecca. “This is essential for an organization like ours.” Having led WINGS through 17 years of steady growth – from a 10-person team with annual funding of \$400,000 to the current staff of 46 with a budget of \$6.3 million – the veteran counsellor and caseworker sees where corporate responsibility aligns with the broader social good: “As a society, we have an obligation to help people out. But domestic violence also carries a huge economic cost in terms of social services, hospital care and people missing work. So by helping to stop the cycle of abuse, we’re benefiting the whole community.” ☺

Investment Opportunity

For Ellaine Sambo-Reyther, a BMO Private Wealth Advisor in Chicago, early exposure to domestic violence fuels the conviction she brings to her role as a WINGS board member.

“When I moved to a new job in suburban Chicago in 2005, I saw that it was a very community-oriented area, and that inspired me to volunteer with WINGS. Time is valuable, and I wanted to spend mine on something that was near and dear

to me. I joined the board three years later.”

“To take a tour of the WINGS Safe House, seeing the women there and hearing how their lives have changed – it’s amazing. It keeps me coming back, because I want to hear more good stories.”

“I’ve been involved with a number of non-profits, and WINGS people really are doers. From their donor relations to their operations, they’re working so hard – and thriving. The staff is phenomenal.”

“Everyone on the board donates their expertise, so WINGS doesn’t have to invest as much in senior leaders. In my case, I review budgets and offer advice

on the business model. But my main function is creating awareness for this amazing organization. When I talk to people in the community, it’s not that different from when I’m sitting down with clients. You have to understand what matters to people, and gear the conversation toward them.”

“It’s important to help better the communities where we work. That means we have to be involved in those communities. And it means making sure we’re giving people in organizations like WINGS the opportunity to better the community as well.” ☺