

## Findings at a Glance

### Environments Promoting Wellness and Resilience (EmPWR) Evaluation

#### Report Highlights Improvements in Domestic Violence Shelter Resident and Staff Wellbeing

Domestic violence (DV) shelters provide more than just physical accommodations. They offer critical support for survivors and their families, helping to address trauma, enhance coping skills, and promote self-sufficiency. New York City's DV shelter system, managed by the Human Resources Administration (HRA), is the largest in the United States, with 54 shelters. In 2023, New York City DV shelters served 10,845 people, including over 6,600 children.

**EmPWR** enhances the built environment of domestic violence (DV) shelters to promote the healing, wellbeing, and resilience of survivors and their children. Partnering with architects, EmPWR engaged shelter residents and staff in a participatory process to redesign communal spaces to support the social-emotional needs of survivors, fostering a trauma-informed environment that emphasizes safety, trust, and choice. Launched in 2019, EmPWR worked with nine DV shelters in New York City, leveraging research and best practices to create spaces that promote mental health and resilience.

Environments Promoting Wellness and Resilience (EmPWR) was managed by the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYC Health Department), in collaboration with HRA, and with oversight from the Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity). EmPWR was launched through an NYC Opportunity Collaborative Innovation award, which sought to improve government services by promoting greater collaboration between City agencies to improve outcomes for New Yorkers in need.

In 2023, NYC Opportunity hired NORC at the University of Chicago, which partnered with the New York Academy of Medicine (NYAM) and Evaluation+Learning Consulting (ELC) to conduct a mixed-methods implementation and outcomes evaluation of EmPWR. The goals of the evaluation were to understand whether built environment changes in DV shelters promoted the healing and wellbeing of residents and staff; determine best practices and challenges in the implementation of the EmPWR program; and develop a practitioners' implementation guide to disseminate learnings and support the replication of the EmPWR model.

#### Key Findings

##### **The redesign had a positive influence on residents' emotional wellbeing**

- Residents expressed that the renovated shelter spaces improved their emotional wellbeing, mood, and sense of safety.
- Both residents and staff highlighted the positive effects of the redesigned spaces, particularly for residents with children. They described the renovated spaces as welcoming, calming, and conducive to relaxation. Their 'homey' atmosphere has lifted the spirits of residents, and created a comforting and soothing environment.
- The renovated spaces have been meaningful to the staff, especially those with lived experiences of trauma. Understanding and empathy for the staff's experiences is crucial for the program's process and success.

## **Residents and staff were engaged early in the site assessment process to provide input on space selection and areas for enhancement**

- The evaluation highlights residents' and staff's successful and inclusive engagement in the design process, emphasizing the importance of early involvement and diverse input methods to create trauma-informed, long-lasting improvements.
- Inclusivity was emphasized, ensuring the process considered the needs of different groups, such as children, parents, and people of different ages and abilities.
- Residents were encouraged to consider how the design would benefit future residents, even if they might not be present when the installation was complete.

## **The pandemic significantly slowed progress and altered project plans**

- The COVID-19 pandemic limited workshop engagement, extended the project timeline, reduced the number of shelters involved from 15 to nine, and adjusted selection criteria to prioritize shelters that could accommodate socially distanced activities.
- Delays in the timeline led to frustration, confusion, and work stoppages at some shelters.

## **Recommendations for Future Implementation**

### **Support Enhanced Participation and Collaborative Decision-Making**

- Engage shelter staff early to secure their buy-in before involving residents.
- Prioritize in-person engagement to build trust and gather in-depth feedback, often lost in virtual settings.
- Address obstacles to resident participation, such as varying schedules, language barriers, and childcare needs to ensure equitable, meaningful participation in activities.
- Offer incentives such as gift cards and food to encourage participation.
- Seek compromise when staff and residents have conflicting visions for shared spaces.

### **Foster Clear and Consistent Communication**

- Maintain regular communication with shelter staff about project activities and manage staff and resident expectations, using multiple tools, including photos of design options and step-by-step explanations of the design process.
- Nurture close working relationships among shelter staff, architects, and external partners.

### **Ensure Design Changes are Meaningful and Sustainable**

- Consider the needs of all residents, including those with visible and invisible disabilities, in the design process.
- Design spaces that are multifunctional and flexible to accommodate various activities and think long-term to ensure the design can serve residents' needs well into the future.

## **Looking Ahead**

This evaluation and the accompanying practitioners' guide affirm the value of participatory processes. HRA is exploring opportunities to expand community engagement and participatory approaches throughout the DV shelter system and beyond, and the NYC Health Department will employ the practitioners' guide in other agency programming to jointly create inclusive spaces that support participants' wellbeing and healing.

## **Further Reading**

*Environments Promoting Wellness and Resilience (EmPWR) Evaluation*  
<https://www.nyc.gov/assets/opportunity/pdf/EmPWR-Evaluation-Report.pdf>

*Designing for Wellbeing: Community-centered tools for transforming shelter and other community spaces to promote mental health and healing* (practitioners' guide)  
[https://www.nyc.gov/assets/opportunity/pdf/Designing-for-Wellbeing\\_EmPWR-Practitioner-Guide.pdf](https://www.nyc.gov/assets/opportunity/pdf/Designing-for-Wellbeing_EmPWR-Practitioner-Guide.pdf)