

Engaging domestic violence shelter residents and staff in research: Lessons from the Environments Promoting Wellness and Resilience initiative

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Abstract

Between 2023 and 2024, NORC at the University of Chicago employed a participatory design model to evaluate the Environments Promoting Wellness and Resilience (EmPWR) initiative, aiming to identify implementation barriers and facilitators, as well as assess the initiative's impact on the mental health and well-being of domestic violence (DV) shelter residents and staff. NORC engaged shelter residents, shelter staff and leadership, and New York City (NYC) agency partners to design and conduct the evaluation. This Research Brief summarizes our approach and results that support replicating EmPWR and lessons learned for people working to promote the health, healing and wellbeing of people who have experienced DV who are living in residential shelter environments.

Keywords: domestic violence, interpersonal violence, built environment

EmPWR aimed to explore how built environments (i.e., the constructed areas where people go about their daily routines, including living, working, and enjoying leisure activities such as kitchens, gathering spaces, and outdoor play areas) promote healing and wellbeing for residents of DV shelters. EmPWR program implementation involved participatory engagement practices within nine DV shelters to 1) determine shelter readiness to participate, 2) assess each shelter's physical space, 3) plan for the re-design within each shelter, 4) install each shelter's proposed changes, and 5) sustain the design. The implementation was a collaborative effort between NYC Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity, NYC Health Department, and NYC Human Resources Administration (HRA).¹

In 2023, the NYC Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity funded NORC and our partners at the New York Academy of Medicine and Evaluation + Learning Consulting (collectively referred to as NORC throughout this document) to conduct a participatory, mixed-methods evaluation of the EmPWR initiative that aligned with the approaches used during implementation.

A participatory design model was used to engage residents and DV shelter staff throughout evaluation design, data collection, analysis, and culminated in writing a [final report to summarize findings for all stakeholders](#) and [Practitioner Implementation Guide](#). Evaluation findings support replicating the EmPWR to promote the mental health and well-being of other DV shelter residents and staff.

This Research Brief presents how the NORC team incorporated principles for inclusive research, and used the [Community Engaged Research \(CEnR\) Framework](#) (Ubri et al., 2023) in this evaluation to center community, promote collaboration, and work to advance research, policy, and practice by the following six key principles:

	Avoidance of Harm
	Shared Power in Decision-Making

¹ These organizations provided funding and oversight but were not involved in carrying out the implementation activities

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	Transparency and Open Communication
	Mutual Accountability and Respect
	Accessibility and Demonstrated Value
	Capacity Bridging and Co-learning

The introduction to each phase includes corresponding principles that were considered.

Phase 1: Assess Context and Needs



To facilitate a collaborative approach, we identified key interested parties, developed a community engagement plan, established a communication structure to accommodate the preferred engagement format and schedule from interested parties, and established ground rules for participation.



STRATEGY: IDENTIFY AND ENGAGE PARTNERS

- The NORC team identified two groups of interested parties: (1) NYC agency partners and (2) community partners (collectively referred to as partners throughout this document).
 - NYC agency partners included: NYC Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity), NYC Health Department, and NYC Human Resources Administration (HRA).
 - Community partners included: key points of contact from each participating shelter, architects, and designers. NYC agency partners reviewed and validated the list of community partners.
- The partner engagement plan aligned with strategies to engage EmPWR sites and community partners during EmPWR implementation and included synchronous (i.e., live) virtual engagement activities to reduce travel and work disruptions. Asynchronous options (i.e., options that allow for participation at different times, for example requests to respond to prompts on Google Jamboard, a virtual whiteboard and collaboration platform) were available for those who could not attend scheduled meetings to share

feedback. NYC agency partner staff were not present at meetings to foster a safe and open environment in which shelter staff could share their opinions without their funders and partners being present. All non-city staff (e.g., shelter staff, architects, and designers) were compensated for their engagement in evaluation planning and analysis activities (Bierer, 2021).

- The NORC team provided real-time status updates to all partners through emails and virtual discussions throughout the initiative. Establishing an expectation of open and ongoing communication allowed for information sharing, a deeper understanding of the needs and interests of partners, and transparency in the evaluation process.

Phase 2: Describe the Program

Before finalizing the evaluation plan, we collaborated with NYC agency partners to update the EmPWR initiative's preliminary logic model (showcased in the [final evaluation report](#)) using documentation from each shelter's implementation process.



STRATEGY: UNDERSTAND EMPWR ACTIVITIES AND OBJECTIVES



- We executed a Data Use Agreement with NYC agency partners to facilitate secondary data sharing. Secondary data included documents such as initiative logic models, notes and responses from resident and staff engagement activities during design planning, and architect and designer notes and plans.

- Secondary data enabled our team to understand shelter-specific interests and motivations for participating in EmPWR and decisions, challenges, and strengths related to the EmPWR initiative. This information included populations served by participating DV shelters, the scope and timing of activities, individuals engaged at each site, and the initiative's original logic model.
- NORC used this information to update the program logic model (included in [the final report](#)) and initiate and inform the development of the evaluation plan.

Phase 3: Focus the Evaluation Questions and Design



We convened all partners (identified in Phase 1) to review the evaluation questions, evaluation plan, and data collection tools, and requested asynchronous, post-meeting feedback to ensure that all data collection processes and tools used language and would be well received by participants. NORC tailored data collection tools to accommodate the unique operational context of DV shelters (e.g., emergency, confidential, and transitional residential settings), prioritizing confidentiality and safety. Additionally, we ensured that the final research questions would gather the

information necessary to convey the value of the initiative to partners and external audiences.

STRATEGY: COLLABORATIVELY SELECT A STUDY DESIGN

- We developed an exploratory, mixed-methods evaluation plan grounded in the [Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research \(CFIR\)](#). Given the number of interested parties and the innovative nature of this intervention, the initial list of potential research questions was expansive and extensive. CFIR provided the organizing framework for the five core evaluation questions, and research aims were defined and developed in collaboration with partners.

Evaluation Questions:

- EQ1. What factors (e.g., inter-agency/provider partnerships, organizational policies/rules and practices, funding, time to implement, COVID-19) impeded and facilitated EmpWR initiative implementation and how?
 - EQ2. How was the EmpWR initiative implemented across different shelters and shelter types?
 - EQ3. How did the participatory process contribute to the design and delivery of EmpWR?
 - EQ4. How did EmpWR influence mental health and wellbeing among residents and staff at participating shelters?
 - EQ5. What aspects of EmpWR are replicable to additional shelters or different settings?
- We consulted partners to ensure data collection methods protected confidentiality and minimized respondent burden. Partners guided the selection of optimal data collection approaches (described in more

detail in Phase 4), including virtual key informant interviews (KII) with community partners to maximize scheduling flexibility, Feelings Posters (i.e., publicly posted poster paper within shelters where residents could write or draw to share feedback if/when they felt comfortable), and on-site focus groups with residents. On-site focus groups reduced potential barriers to participation such as travel time and need to secure childcare.

STRATEGY: COLLABORATIVELY DEVELOP DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

- NYC agency partners facilitated introductory discussions between NORC and each shelter site, sharing evaluation goals and data collection protocols with the broader community of interest holders involved in and/or affected by data collection.
- Partners were instrumental in identifying shelter preferences concerning terminology (e.g., using the term “resident” instead of “survivor” to center the experience of living in the shelter rather than the experience of DV), data collection mode (e.g., onsite, in-person focus groups instead of virtual meetings with residents), and organizational policies (e.g., NORC team members that traveled to shelters signed confidentiality agreements to protect the location of each shelter).
- We drafted data collection instruments ([included in the final evaluation report](#)) and incorporated feedback through virtual meetings, emails, and a virtual whiteboard to ensure interviews and focus groups used clear, shelter-specific language (e.g., “shelter” vs. “site,” “renovation” vs. “installation”) and posed meaningful, direct questions aligned with the research goals.
- NORC created study materials, including recruitment materials and instructions following plain language guidelines, used non-stigmatizing language, and were translated into key languages spoken by shelter residents (e.g., Spanish, Arabic, Mandarin, Korean, Bengali, Creole, and French).



Phase 4: Gather Credible Evidence

Our team collected data through four main sources: journey maps, key informant interviews (KIIs), Feelings Posters, and focus groups. Each source prioritized respectful and harm-free participant engagement.

STRATEGY: CREATE SITE-SPECIFIC JOURNEY MAPS

- We reviewed documentation gathered by initiative staff throughout the implementation process (e.g., design workshop notes, site surveys, photos, design plans) to develop site-specific journey maps that visually represented the implementation process at each site. Maps depicted key implementation activities, input and perspectives gathered from shelter staff and residents and implementation challenges and opportunities organized by installation stages.
- We referenced site-specific journey maps before and during KIIs to review and validate assumptions about implementation sequencing, site-specific engagement efforts with staff and residents, and challenges and opportunities encountered. Interviewers used the maps as a reference tool and springboard for discussion to gather data from those who participated in the implementation.
- We updated journey maps following each KII to reflect feedback from interviewees.

EmPWR Implementation Journey Map

STAGE	1. MEET SITE AND ORANGE LEADERSHIP	2. GATHER SITE'S DESIGN NEEDS	3. DEVELOP DESIGN CONCEPTS AND PRIORITIES	4. INITIAL DESIGN PRESENTATIONS	5. FINAL DESIGN TO BE BUILT
TOUCHPOINTS What is engaged with at this phase of the process, and how?	Site visit	Initial design presentation	Design workshop	Design workshop	Design workshop
ACTIONS What key steps are undertaken at this phase?	Engage shelter leadership to create a community vision statement and identify key design priorities	Conduct site-specific design needs assessment and gather input from shelter staff and residents	Develop design concepts and priorities	Present design concepts to shelter staff and residents	Finalize design concepts and priorities
OBJECTIVES What are the primary reasons for these activities?	Identify key design priorities and create a community vision statement	Assess and capture preferences and needs for shelter design	Develop design concepts and priorities	Present design concepts to shelter staff and residents	Finalize design concepts and priorities
CONSIDERATIONS What factors or concerns were identified at this stage?	Identify key design priorities and create a community vision statement	Assess and capture preferences and needs for shelter design	Develop design concepts and priorities	Present design concepts to shelter staff and residents	Finalize design concepts and priorities
OPPORTUNITIES What mitigation strategies or solutions were presented? What lessons were learned?	Identify key design priorities and create a community vision statement	Assess and capture preferences and needs for shelter design	Develop design concepts and priorities	Present design concepts to shelter staff and residents	Finalize design concepts and priorities
PERSPECTIVES GATHERED What feedback did and from the site participants during this stage?	Identify key design priorities and create a community vision statement	Assess and capture preferences and needs for shelter design	Develop design concepts and priorities	Present design concepts to shelter staff and residents	Finalize design concepts and priorities

STRATEGY: CONDUCT KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (KII) WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS

- NORC worked with NYC agency partners to identify and connect with current and former shelter staff and architects who implemented EmPWR (i.e., engaging residents and staff in design planning, and supporting residents and staff during the installation process).
- We conducted nine interviews with current and former shelter leadership, shelter staff, architects, and EmPWR agency partner staff. Interviews focused on gathering individuals' reflections on community change practices in the design process, inter-agency collaboration (i.e., contextual facilitators/barriers), contextual information about their participating DV shelter (e.g., limitations of the redesign based on cost or structural challenges, challenges with staff turnover, the impact of COVID-19 on initiative timelines and activities), and their perceptions of the influence of the

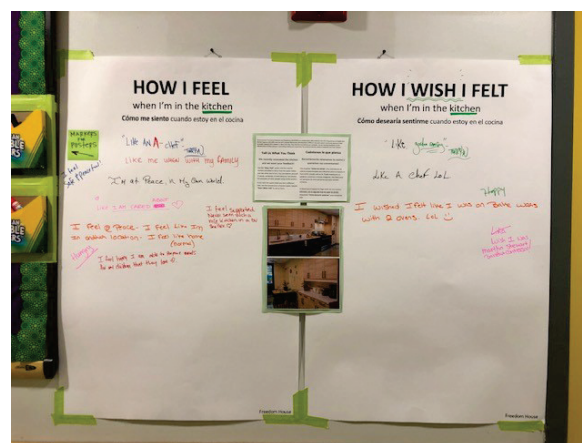
renovation process and finished space renovations' on resident and staff wellbeing. Participants were compensated for their time.

STRATEGY 4.3 ENGAGE SHELTER STAFF IN DATA COLLECTION WITH RESIDENTS

- NYC agency partners identified key champions at each shelter site (e.g., program and case managers, shelter leaders, and administrative directors) virtually to explain the evaluation and data collection activities and specifically highlight the purpose of the Feelings Posters and focus groups to ensure buy-in, and to answer shelter staff questions.

STRATEGY: GATHER RESIDENT FEEDBACK THROUGH FEELINGS POSTERS

- Feelings Posters were an interactive, hands-on tool that encouraged all residents and their children to engage in the renovated space, in their language, and on their own time, to reflect on their feelings on built environment design changes made because of the EmPWR initiative. Each shelter received poster paper and washable markers for all residents and their children to have an opportunity to write or draw reflections, feelings, and emotions related to the renovated space, specifically: 1) how the space currently makes them feel and 2) how they would like to feel in the space. Images of Feelings Posters from this evaluation are included in the final report.



To enhance accessibility, the Feelings Poster instructions were translated into key languages identified by shelter staff as spoken by current residents. Residents were also encouraged to write or illustrate in any language they preferred.

STRATEGY: CONDUCT FOCUS GROUPS

- Resident confidentiality is paramount. To maintain this confidentiality, we obtained verbal informed consent and did not collect any personally identifiable information. We designed a purposeful sampling approach to recruit residents at each shelter using a one-page flier and sign-up sheet, which was placed by shelter staff in a common, frequently visited place. Recruitment materials used plain and non-stigmatizing language, were at an appropriate reading level, and included informed consent details to outline focus group content, define expectations, and explain how the data gathered would be used.
- Focus groups were offered in English or Spanish with current shelter residents within each site to understand perspectives on the impacts of renovations, on-site policies and practices, and staff and resident wellbeing. Children were offered activities to allow their mothers to participate. The details shared on the site-specific Feelings Posters were used to identify shelter-specific questions and key themes in preparation for each focus group. The posters were shared during the focus groups to prompt discussion and request clarification.
- Each focus group participant was compensated for their time. Physical gift cards were distributed during the focus group, eliminating the need for any identifying information about the participants and maintaining the confidentiality of the space.

Study Limitation:

DV shelters are, by nature, fluid spaces where individuals transition in and out of the shelter on an ongoing basis. Due to resident confidentiality and safety considerations, we could not contact residents living in the EmPWR shelters during the initial initiative conceptualization and design planning. As a result, the team could not assess the initial residents' perspectives on the final installation to assess how they perceived the space over time.

Phase 5: Generate and Support Conclusions

We conducted participatory data analysis or sensemaking activities (referred to as “data parties”). Participatory analysis integrates participants and community members into the analytic process, and sensemaking gives meaning

to data based on people’s lived experiences to highlight structural and contextual factors (Jones, 2023). Data parties democratize data analysis, increasing the accessibility of findings.

STRATEGY: CONDUCT DATA PARTIES

- We convened virtual data parties to collectively analyze and interpret preliminary findings from the secondary data analysis, KIIs, Feelings Posters, and focus groups.
- The data party provided opportunities to triangulate findings from KIIs and focus groups to identify themes, commonalities, and variations across KII interviewee perspectives. Moreover, the data parties solicited participants’ feedback on preliminary analytic results using semi-structured group discussions, mirroring the dynamic feedback gathering during the shelters’ design planning workshops.



Phase 6: Act on Findings to Improve Service Delivery and Integrate and Sustain Best Practices

We convened a meeting with all partners to gather feedback on the Practitioner Guide. During the meeting, we asked partners to help us ensure its content and layout would resonate with teams that could potentially be interested in replicating a similar initiative in a residential, community and/or social service setting.

One of the objectives of the initiative was to identify replicable strategies to support implementation of EmPWR in additional settings. To increase the likelihood that practitioners with varying levels of resources and capacity can implement EmPWR, we designed the Practitioner Guide in a modular format. Implementation teams replicating the EmPWR model or using the Practitioner Guide may not have the support or resources available to incorporate all elements of the initiative. NORC designed implementation guides so that sites with varying capacity and resource constraints can still benefit from the core elements of the model.

STRATEGY: DEVELOP PRACTITIONER GUIDE

- In addition to the final evaluation report, we used findings from Step 4 to inform our initial draft of an implementation guide (called the “EmPWR Practitioner Guide”) to support DV shelter staff, leadership, board members, and key collaborators to implementing a similar initiative within their settings. The resulting

Guide provides actionable step-by-step guidance to enhance the built environment of communal spaces in various social service settings. The guide presents participatory design strategies and activities to ensure that staff, resident, and partner perspectives are included throughout various phases of the initiative, from determining readiness and site assessment to design planning, installation, and sustainability.

- We solicited input and feedback from EmPWR site staff through a virtual meeting and asynchronous document review to ensure the document was accurate and actionable.

Discussion

The participatory process was an essential feature of both the implementation and evaluation of the EmPWR initiative. The guidance shared in this document reflects the experience of working with nine shelters that could be applied to similar initiatives.

We hope that fellow researchers and community members can use this as a starting place for designing and implementing a participatory evaluation. Specifically, we advise that evaluators do the following:

- Design the evaluation to identify and engage partners in all evaluation phases to ensure buy-in, acceptability, appropriateness, and feasibility.
- Facilitate organic feedback in residential social service settings by employing Feelings Posters and additional activities described in the Practitioner Guide to authentically engage residents in creative solutioning.
- Encourage researchers working with those who have experienced DV to reflect on how their experiences influence the work and what they will do to protect residents' anonymity.
- Use person-centered language (e.g., people who have experienced DV versus DV victims) when conducting research and writing up results.

This document highlights the importance of participatory processes in implementing and evaluating initiatives like the EmPWR initiative, drawing on our experiences with nine shelters. It offers guidance for researchers, program partners, and community members to design evaluations that ensure stakeholder engagement, confidentiality, and creative participation, particularly in sensitive contexts.

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