

[WE LEARN FROM HER]

She helps survivors *thrive*

Domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness for women. Activist Erika Sussman is helping abused women find their way to financial safety. BY JESSICA PRESS

From the time she was 4, Erika Sussman had a heightened awareness of the challenges faced by survivors of domestic violence: Her mother helped found their county's domestic violence shelter, a revolutionary undertaking at a time when these safe havens were rare. "I remember tagging along when she was working and playing

needs. "Material considerations—how will I pay the mortgage, feed my children?—rank as women's highest priorities when considering whether to leave," Sussman explains.

CSAJ has trained thousands of lawyers and advocates on how to better and more fully serve survivors. One example: "In the past, an attorney may only have thought about the physical safety that a protective order can give," says Krista Del Gallo, policy manager for the Texas Council on Family Violence. "Erika has given ideas about what to include to help these women be safer economically." In 2013, Del Gallo's organization became a partner in one of four CSAJ programs that facilitate collaborations between domestic-violence and consumer groups. "Now we have a plan and a network of sensitive lawyers in place to assist survivors who need this kind of help. It was Erika's partnerships that got us into circles where these resources lie."

Sussman has her sights set on making changes with help from even higher places. At the request of the White House, CSAJ has recommended federal policy changes, such as granting foreclosure relief without the cooperation of an abusive spouse. "As one lawyer working with CSAJ said to me, 'Before we can help survivors build up their lives, we've got to get them out of the quicksand,'" says Sussman. She won't give up until they're all on solid ground.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR HERO

In past months, the inspiring women we've featured here have taught us how to change lives with underwear (it's true!) and help girls rock at science. Tell us about a woman you know who is showing people new ways to make a difference. You could win \$500 for yourself and a charity, and she may be featured in an upcoming issue. Go to redbookmag.com/learnfromher for details.



"Women who live in poverty are more likely to face future abuse," says Sussman.

with the children at the shelter," Sussman says. That heritage became a mission. Sussman is now the founder and executive director of the Center for Survivor Agency and Justice (CSAJ), a groundbreaking nonprofit that enhances safety for survivors by helping them overcome the economic fallout of abuse.

"Batterers often use financial sabotage to maintain control over their partners," explains Sussman, 41, a Washington, DC-based lawyer. In one study, 99 percent of survivors reported experiencing economic abuse. "Abusers may interfere with their partner's ability to find employment, like destroying her work clothes before an interview. They might withhold bank account information so she has no money, or use her personal information to run up debt." For many battered mothers, leaving the relationship means being unable to meet their children's basic

3 EASY WAYS TO HELP

SPREAD THE WORD. "Like" CSAJ on Facebook and tell friends about their work—it can bring them to the attention of new supporters and partners.

DONATE at csaj.org/support-us to fund training, provide resources to survivors, and more. Sussman also suggests giving locally.

(Google your zip and "family shelter" to find an organization.)

VOLUNTEER. Depending on your skills and interests, you can assist with things like fund-raising, grant writing, community outreach, and pro bono legal work. Go to csaj.org/contact to request more information.