

CENTER FOR SURVIVOR AGENCY & JUSTICE

Survivor Centered Economic Advocacy

A Multilevel Approach to Enhancing Survivors' Economic Security

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Introduction

As advocates, we strive to work in partnership with survivors for restoration, justice, transformation, and social healing – as defined, prioritized, and directed by survivors themselves. We've all heard the old proverb, "give a [person] a fish and they'll eat for a day; teach a [person] to fish and they'll eat for a lifetime." While this seems like helpful advice, there is little explanation of how to "teach" a person to fish. Do we just hand them a fishing pole and bait and say, "fish!" Or do we get up at dawn with that person, show them how to bait a line, identify the best fishing spot, and fish together with them for a morning – showing all of the small yet key fishing tricks – and

after the fish is caught, teach them how to fillet and cook the fish? These two approaches would give very different results.

The purpose of this advocacy brief is to offer a framework and strategies for transformative and survivor centered economic advocacy. It is meant to help integrate survivor centered economic advocacy principals at multiple levels within advocates' work, given the environment, resources, and even the barriers we may face in doing so. The information and strategies presented here were informed and developed from voices of survivors and the perspectives and work of advocates in the field.

An Advocacy Brief for Advocates & Programs

For more, see CSAJ's webinar trainings:
[A New Approach to Safety & Doing the Work](#)

This project is supported all or in part by Grant No. 2014-X1109-MD-TA awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in the publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

Overview

This advocacy brief first reviews the framework of survivor centered economic advocacy (SCEA). Then, it is structured in three parts to describe the Individual, Organizational, and Systems levels of survivor centered economic advocacy. At each level we review:

- Foundations: Why practice survivor centered economic advocacy? What does SCEA at this level allow us to do?
- Reflection & Principals: Questions to help you approach the work in your context.
- SCEA In Practice: Examples, practical strategies, and what other advocates have to say about the work

We also offer perspectives from advocates doing the work and more resources to go deeper.



Towards Transformative Advocacy

Safety

Let's start from the beginning: **What is "Safety"?** In general, "safety" is defined as being free or protected from danger, risk, or injury. In the domestic violence context, additional concepts of safety often include reducing risks of violence and maintaining basic human needs (Davies & Lyon, 2014).

- **What does safety look like for survivors?**
- **How do survivors view their economic and safety priorities?**

What is survivor centered advocacy?

Survivor-centered advocacy is partnership between the survivor and service provider that accentuates survivors' choices, starts with the belief that the survivor's perspective, lived experiences, and knowledge of their own situation is paramount, and pays attention to the context of the survivor's life (Davies & Lyon, 2014; Goodman et al., 2014).

- **What risks are survivors facing? What are their strengths?**
- **What are their immediate priorities? Long-term goals?**
- **What strategies have survivors used?**
- **What do we offer survivors? What's our role?**

In Their Own Words: Linking Safety & Advocacy

From trainings, interviews, and technical assistance, advocates have told us that safety is complex and varied. In their own words, "safety" means:

- Freedom from: danger, fear, harm, threat, worry, insecurity
- Safety must include: feeling secure, having choices, being able to act on choices, financial independence

Advocates describe that their advocacy works across multiple levels:

- Provide safety, resources, housing, and economic or financial support.
- Make sense of programs and services for each survivor's experience of violence or what it means move towards safety.
- Help stabilize and mitigate harm, and provide choices and the tools to act on choices and priorities for safety and economic security.

What is economic advocacy?

Simply, economic advocacy accounts for the material and financial resources and other basic needs in safety planning and strategies.

- **How do we ensure survivors' economic needs and resources are connected to their safety and their experiences of abuse?**
- **Do we offer economic literacy classes? A standard budgeting form? A resource manual? Or...**
- **Do we dig deep with the survivor; asking questions to understand how to connect to resources, explore all relevant economic justice strategies, and then work to create change within systems impacting survivors?**

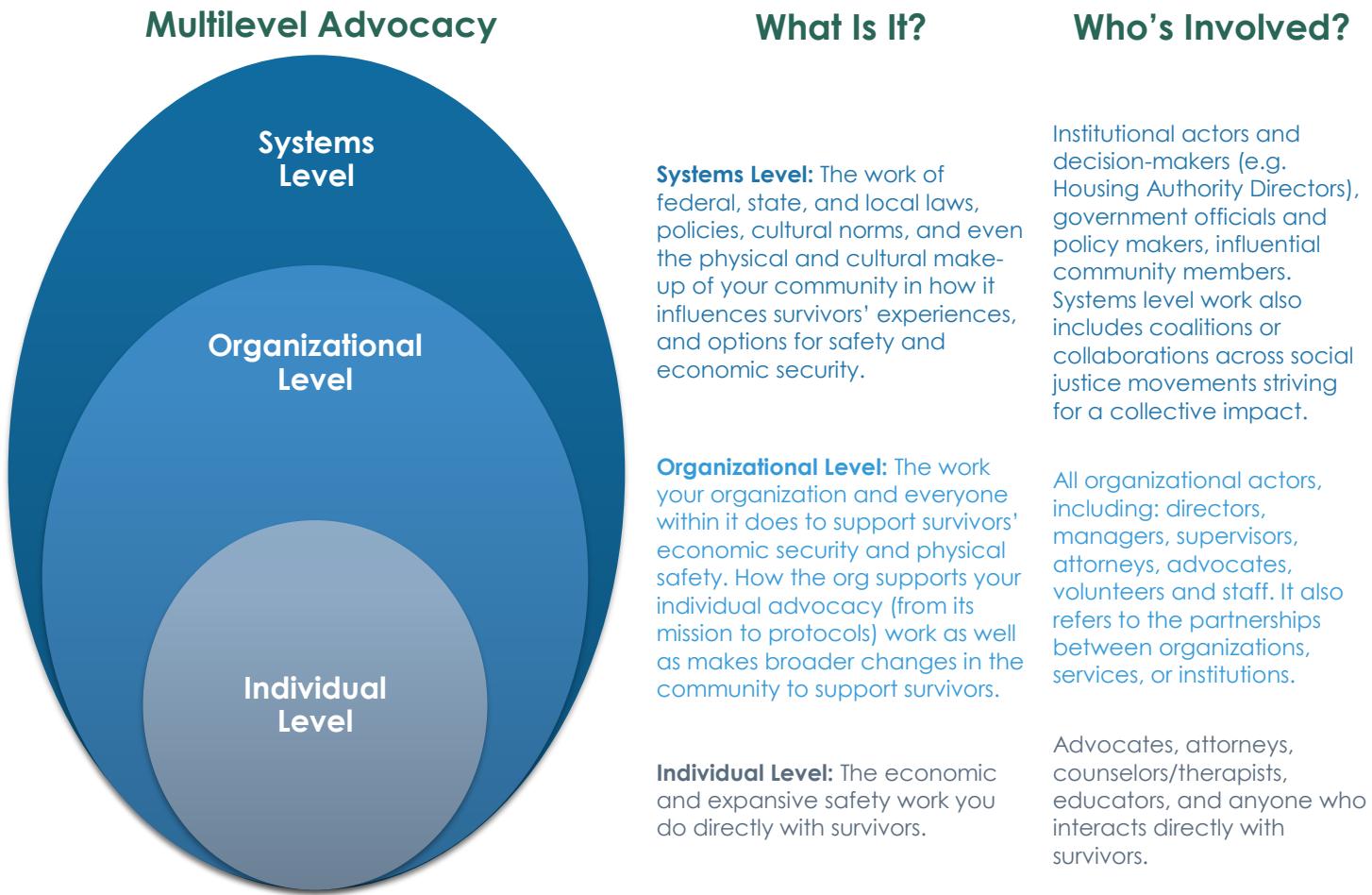
Taken together, what is Survivor Centered Economic Advocacy?

Survivor Centered Economic Advocacy (SCEA) is an alliance between survivors and advocates that addresses both the physical safety **and** economic safety needs of survivors through reviewing and developing creative strategies on the survivor's current, past, and future priorities. SCEA builds on the survivor's strengths and uses the advocates knowledge and experience to enhance the survivor's comprehensive safety plan.

- **How do we actually do survivor-centered economic advocacy?**
- **How do we adapt SCEA to the unique makeup of our organizations and communities?**

The Framework

The SCEA “alliance” extends beyond the advocate-survivor partnership, and occurs at the individual, organizational, and systems levels.



What are the challenges to SCEA at each level?

Individual Level

- Demands on time;
- Role specialization;
- Organizational philosophy;
- Lack of resources, lack of training/support for economic work, lack of supervision to support survivor's in long-term economic work;
- There is no formula, SCEA requires creativity and new ways of looking at issues;
- Long-term work is time consuming;
- SCEA challenges traditional definitions of “the lawyer or advocate as the expert.” Here, both the advocate and the survivor are experts.

Organizational Level

- Many of us work in agencies with compartmentalized legal services;
- Structure of organizations (hours of operation, accessibility) do not fit with survivors' daily lives;
- Organizational capacity of social service organizations is often restricted; Caseload levels can make organizational changes hard to implement in meaningful ways;
- Many organizations have been built on outcomes success being “survivor's who leave and don't return to abusive partners” however, survivor centered economic work is sometimes slow, long term, and does not focus on leaving but focuses on “starting where the survivor is, understanding her risk analysis, understanding her strengths”

Systems Level

- Systems are “not built for” people living in poverty, or marginalized by race, ethnicity, citizenship, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other socioeconomic factors or identities;
- The physical safety risks of survivors shape current policies and inform the purpose of systems;
- Advocate capacity and organizational infrastructure makes collecting data, meeting with systems or institution leaders, time consuming and exhausting;
- Funding requirements may make it challenging to do in-depth economic work.



The Advocate's Dilemma

Given the need for SCEA, but also understanding advocates' day-to-day reality, often tasked with "putting out fires," how do we start thinking about and actually integrating SCEA? Acknowledging the realities and challenges in the Advocate's Dilemma is key:

Advocates deal with and manage real life challenges and demands at each level within SCEA.

Read the survivor's story below and consider possible concerns that arise at the individual, organizational, and systems levels.

Bettina lives in a two-bedroom apartment with her boyfriend Steve and their four-year old daughter, Savannah. They moved a few months ago to be in a better school district when Savannah begins school next fall. It's a quiet neighborhood and a lot of the tenants in the building tend to keep to themselves. Their neighbor across the hall, however, seems irritated with every little thing and has yelled at Savannah to, "keep it down!" on several occasions. Steve and Bettina have been together for a little over five years, and in the course of their relationship, Steve has become increasingly short tempered and jealous regarding Bettina. Bettina is tired of Steve's controlling, jealous behavior and has started talking with an advocate at the local DV program. Steve found out about Bettina's involvement with the DV program and retaliated by taking Bettina's ATM card. He was so angry, he screamed at Bettina, pushed her hard against the wall, and threw dishes at her. The neighbor called the police to the apartment, and although the police did not make an arrest, the next day their landlord notified Steve and Bettina that if the police are called to their home again, he'd have to evict them. He explained the local nuisance ordinance required landlords to pay a fine if police are called out three times to the same property. Today, Bettina comes home late after stopping to get dinner with Savannah and running into a friend. As soon as she opens the door to the apartment, she knows she's in trouble. Steve is furious, yelling, and threatening. Bettina tries to quiet Steve down, but that angers him further and he hits Bettina repeatedly in the stomach. Savannah is screaming too, and in the midst of the chaos, Bettina hears the police sirens. Bettina's fear heightens as she worries about her safety, her home, and her daughter.

If Bettina reaches out to you for advocacy, what may she need?

- Why would a survivor centered economic advocacy approach be important? How would you approach this?
- What partnerships within and between organizations could you leverage to address Bettina's primary concerns?
- What systems changes are needed? How would systems level advocacy be informed by Bettina's situation?

The following pages review the Foundations, Reflections, and Practice of survivor centered economic advocacy for you to consider at each level.

Survivor Centered Economic Advocacy to Enhance Individual Advocacy



If Bettina reaches out for services, why would using survivor-centered economic advocacy be important? Using a service-defined model, we may automatically refer her to get an order of protection. However, listening to Bettina's fears, strengths, and goals more fully, an advocate may learn that Bettina has different goals related to staying in her apartment and increasing her economic choices.

Foundations

Why use survivor centered economic advocacy? Working one-on-one with a survivor, SCEA allows us to:

- Partner with the survivor to better understand, celebrate and build upon the survivor's strengths, capabilities, and choices.
- Tap into our creativity by challenging advocates to think beyond standard resource lists and to craft strategic plans with the survivor.
- Educate survivors about meaningful and appropriate resources and strategies
- Create more efficient, tailored, and effective advocacy strategies in the long term (which in turn relieves burnout and compassion fatigue!).

Reflections & Principals

Questions to help you approach this work:

- What are you currently doing to address the economic needs of survivors? What has worked well?
- What specific challenges do you face in doing survivor centered economic advocacy?
- What do you want to know about the survivor's safety?
- What do we want to know about the survivor's strengths?
- What do you want to know about the survivor's financial situation? How is it linked to their safety options?
- What can you do to assist?
- What information do survivor's need?
- What tools can you provide?

Survivor centered economic advocacy requires:

- Full and open assessment of financial situation;
- Attending to the economic situation in the face of safety;
- Building a strategic alliance with the survivor to assess current, past, and future economic and safety situation;
- Flexibility and willingness to suspend judgment.

In Practice

What does survivor centered economic advocacy look like in action? Some possible questions to enter into SCEA with a survivor include, but are not limited to the following (Note: these questions are part of broader relationship building, assessment, and safety planning):¹

- What do you hope to get out of our time together?
- How does your partner react if you bring-up financial topics?*
- Tell me more about your financial situation. Is it connected to or does it change anything we've already talked about?
- When it comes to money, what do you do well?
- What are your biggest worries about money right now?
- When you've had financial concerns in the past, what have you done? What has worked? What hasn't worked?
- What do you hope your life looks like in a year? What do you have (friends, family, personal attributes) that will help you get there? What do you need to help you get there? What do you think may be obstacles?

Survivor Centered Economic Advocacy to Reform Our Organizations



Individual level SCEA requires open assessment, reflection, and building alliances with survivors. Supporting this work across an organization requires similar coordination of expertise and partnership building.

Foundations

Organizational survivor centered economic advocacy allows us to:

- Build and strengthen partnerships within and between organizations that can enhance capacity and build community.
- Develop ways to get regular survivor feedback and engagement on process; use survivor's voices to assess and inform their services.
- Serve a diverse array of survivors with a broad range of safety needs.
- Equip advocates with the autonomy to seek effective remedies for well-identified problems.
- Create protocols, policies, and practices that are supportive of, and informed by, individual SCEA work.

Reflections & Principals

Questions to approach this work:

- What things within your own organization could assist survivors?
- What types of partnerships between organizations could enhance economic security for survivors?
- How do you utilize current partners?
- How can you leverage partnerships to forge new relationships?
- What can staff advocates and attorneys bring to enhance organizational change?
- Have you sat down to think about un-tapped resources, assets, or partnerships?

How may organizational SCEA impact Bettina's situation? Organizational SCEA could:

- Encourage advocates to develop and maintain strong relationships with housing and legal organizations that could help advocate on Bettina's behalf, including educating landlords.
- Organizational training on nuisance laws.
- Protocols regarding informing housing or other systems level advocates about challenges regarding nuisance law.
- Support for Bettina's advocate to practice SCEA with Bettina to create detailed, fluid, long term advocacy strategies and supervision to assist the advocate in processing Bettina's complicated situation.
- Convene a community forum or present nuisance laws and survivor access to housing to task forces or other community collaborations.

In Practice

Everyone Plays a Part

- **Advocates can:** present at staff meetings, talk with supervisor about protocols, develop resource lists & points of contact, provide cross-training, document consistent issues, partner in systems advocacy.
- **Attorneys from outside organizations can:** establish referral process or case coordination process, provide services onsite or cross-training opportunities, request regular meetings to discuss trends, make introductions between systems actors and the DV organization, partner with advocates to identify new legal and non-legal strategies.
- **Program leaders can:** update organizational policies based on SCEA principles and individual work, evaluate survivor feedback of services, assess economic needs, establish work groups or task forces on an issue, meet with potential partners, organize systems advocacy, educate funders on importance of economic security and organizational capacity, provide meaningful SCEA supervision and training to advocates and attorneys.



Survivor Centered Economic Advocacy for Systems Change

Systems level advocacy targets changes in institutional protocols or administration (e.g. court docket scheduling), policies and laws (from the local to federal level), to changes in the community environment (e.g. availability of services and resources).

Systems level survivor centered economic advocacy allows us to:

Foundations

- Discover opportunities for coalition building.
- Ensure technical systems fixes become long-term systems culture.
- Mobilize individual advocacy around the immediate effects of policy change.
- Inform policy makers, institutional leaders, and other decision makers of the context of poverty and IPV (become long term allies).

Questions to approach this work:

Individual level advocacy can inform systems-level advocacy, and systems changes should inform new and changing opportunities in advocacy. Think about:

- What institution or system changes could assist survivors?
- What types of policy or legislative changes would support survivors' economic security?
- What access points do you have to City or State Institutions? How could they serve survivors better?
- Who/what is available to assist devising alternative strategies (in the face of bad policy)?
- What, if any, engagement is being done to inform policy makers about survivor experiences?

Reflections & Principals

Are you seeing trends or common needs related to any of the following issues? What are the economic implications for survivors in trying to address these issues?

- Tax
- Housing
- Childcare
- Debt & Credit
- Employment
- Criminal Records Barriers
- Banking & Financial Services
- Utilities
- Transportation
- Medical

In Practice

How would systems level SCEA be informed by Bettina's situation? Use Bettina's story to inform housing organizations and local decision makers about how the local nuisance policy differentially impacts survivors of DV. Possible actions to increase housing protections for survivors include:

- **Advocates can:** Familiarize themselves with housing options and policies in your area/state, develop relationships with professionals in housing systems, volunteer to participate in state coalition work on housing policies
- **Attorneys can:** Train DV organizations on the implications of policies, participate in task forces to develop policy or legal recommendations, meet with advocates to identify alternative legal remedies to address housing barriers.
- **Program leaders can:** Initiate conversations with local housing authorities, form a coalition with homeless services, work with state coalitions to collect data on housing needs among survivors.

What other systems advocacy opportunities can you identify? Given your role in the organization, how could you contribute to systems advocacy that is informed by and responsive to Bettina?



Doing the Work: From Individual to Systems Advocacy

During trainings and meetings hosted by CSAJ, we asked advocates about their work, organizations, and ideas for systems change. The following multi-level advocacy strategies reflect their insights in their own words.

Economic & Consumer Issues to Explore

Do you see any of the following appear in your work with survivors? Do you need more information about any? Will you need to educate survivors on certain economic issues? Do you work with others who know or do a lot around these issues?

- Housing: eviction, mortgage, foreclosure, lease transfers
- Employment: benefits, workplace rights and protection.
- Tax rights and responsibilities
- Cost of living plan (budget)
- Discuss safety issues
- Discuss financial strengths
- Credit reports and credit repair
- Coerced debt
- Survivor rights and responsibilities for debt collection
- Identity theft
- Economic impact of safety options (i.e. order of protection)
- Banking, credit, loans, and mainstream financial institutions
- Transportation
- Public Benefits (welfare, food stamps, financial assistance)
- Medical health insurance

Strategies for Organizational Change & Partnership Building

During CSAJ trainings, we asked advocates how their organization could support broad survivor centered economic advocacy. This is what they had to say:

Linking Individual to Systems Advocacy

There are scores of creative examples of advocates engaging their organizations and communities in effecting broad changes critical to survivors' economic security. We asked advocates what systems and policy changes could support their economic advocacy and survivors' economic agency:

- staff and between specialties (especially DV and consumer law).
- Include economic justice into assessments.
- More internal referrals and coordination (between legal specialties).
- Education and advocacy along with one-time subsidies (e.g. providing one month's rent, but also discussing strategies to pay rent in the future).
- Training to increase staff comfort discussing economic issues.
- Adjust hours for needed services.
- Partner with job developers for work opportunities.
- Cross-train on DV and employment issues.
- Communicate and cross train with City and County systems.
- Partnerships with consumer law, credit unions, banks, divorce attorneys.
- Start measuring and reporting needs as well as economic advocacy activities and outcomes.
- Redo budgets to include funds for needed resources for survivors.
- Send advocates to trainings.
- Partner with banks and credit unions for safe checking and savings accounts.
- Establish transportation resources.
- Ban credit checks for job applications
- Provide job training grants
- Living wage and minimum wage increases
- Sliding scale and free childcare or daycare
- Work with judicial process to address economics (e.g. include economic protections in protection orders)
- Ban criminal background questions on school applications
- Community organizations to provide no and low-interest loans
- More accessible contact information protections (e.g. blocking address)
- Debt reduction provisions for survivors
- Prioritize survivors in affordable housing
- Expand and enhance Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) (matched savings accounts to help low-income individuals save towards a financial goal, such as a home)
- Include safety provisions around child support
- Increase collaboration with financial welfare resources



Conclusion

SCEA integrates the best qualities of advocacy and allows advocates to use their vast supply of skills and knowledge to work on long-term safety strategies as allies with survivors. And, research evidence shows that SCEA is an effective model of service. Survivors who work with advocates using survivor-centered models:

- **Have less difficulty obtaining community resources over time (Allen et al., 2013).**
- **Experience less violence over time (Allen et al. 2013).**
- **Report higher quality of life and higher levels of social support (Allen et al., 2004).**
- **More satisfied with systems ranging from police and justice system to residential and community based IPV programs (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2010).**
- **Report fewer depressive symptoms and greater quality of life over time and reduced repeat abuse (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2010).**
- **More optimism and “internal tools”; survivor “knows what [their] path forward is and can do what is needed to move ahead” (Goodman et al., p. 15, 2014)**

The long-tradition of dv advocacy supports “teaching a person to fish” in the supportive, creative, alliance of SCEA and now we have research and anecdotal evidence that SCEA works to increase long-term safety and well-being for survivors.

Whether you are embarking a new journey or SCEA or enhancing your SCEA strategies, keep in touch with CSAJ. Let us know what is working for you, ask questions that arise in your journey, use our resources, and let us know your challenges. We are here to support SCEA and you, amazing advocates on this exciting adventure!

In Their Own Words Multi-level Advocacy for Multiple Impacts

Individual Work

- “I was able to work with a survivor who had bad credit history due to financial abuse to get into housing and did advocacy and education with the landlord about financial abuse. Got them to accept information on impact of financial abuse in lieu of a credit report.”
- “I’m able to advocate with survivors depending on what they want (prioritize), rather than the usual practice.”

Organizational Change

- *“Advocates and attorneys have come together as a team to broaden our understanding of the economic needs and long term affects to survivors while inspiring organizational response.”*
- *“We’ve seen improved assessment of economic abuse, increased knowledge of resources, advanced system advocacy, and development of new partners to address the need”*

Policy Reform

- *“Leadership development of grassroots advocates and survivors amplifies the community connections (and resources/support therein), enables policy reform, and helps build movements.”*

~ CSAJ Partner, Women of Color Network, Inc. on the outcomes of lifting up advocates of color

Additional Resources



Tools to enhance individual level advocacy

- [Building Partnerships to Enhance Consumer Rights for Domestic Violence Survivors: An Assessment and Resource Tool for Attorneys and Advocates](#)
- [Consumer Rights Screening Tool for Domestic Violence Advocates and Lawyers](#)
- [A New Approach to Safety](#), webinar training by Katie VonDeLinde and Erika Sussman
- Guidebook on Consumer & Economic Civil Legal Advocacy for Survivors (forthcoming)

Resources to reform organizational practice

- Building Partnerships for Economic Justice: A Report on CSAJ's Innovative Pilot Projects: [Report](#) | [Webinar](#)
- [Building Partnerships to Enhance Consumer Rights for Domestic Violence Survivors: An Assessment and Resource Tool for Attorneys and Advocates](#)
- [Doing the Work: Survivor Centered Economic Advocacy in Organizational Context](#)
- [Contact CSAJ](#) for individualized technical assistance to

Strategies for systems change

- [Housing Policy and Systems Advocacy for Domestic Violence Survivors](#)
- Samples of Systems Advocacy:
 - [Advocacy Brief: The National Consumer Assistance Plan](#)
 - [Public Comments to U.S. Department of Education on Student Loans for Married Borrowers](#)
 - [Comments to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau on Amendments to the 2013 Mortgage Rules](#)
 - [Comments to CFPB to strengthen payday lending regulations](#)

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