Findings from the Wisconsin DVHF Pilot Program

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Mariel Barnes, PhD, Assistant Professor of Public Affairs, La Follette School, UW-Madison

Evaluation Team



Dr. Mariel Barnes
Assistant Professor
La Follette School of Public Affairs
UW-Madison



Makenzie Peake
Research Scientist
La Follette School of Public Affairs
UW-Madison



Dr. Kate Walsh
Professor
Psychology, and Gender and Women's Studies
UW-Madison



Dr. Kaitlyn Sims
Assistant Professor
Josef Korbel School of International Studies
Denver University

What is Domestic Violence Housing First (DVHF)?

- Threat of homelessness keeps families violent and abusive situations
- Adapts Housing First philosophy - the prioritization of safe and stable housing – to DV survivors
- Includes:
    1. Trauma informed care
    2. Mobile advocacy
    3. Flexible financial assistance

What is Domestic Violence Housing First (DVHF)?

- **Trauma-informed care:** provides advocacy to DV survivors that prioritizes establishing emotional safety, restoring choice and control, supporting positive coping mechanisms, and accounting for survivor's context
- Essentially, "meeting survivors where they are"

What is Domestic Violence Housing First (DVHF)?

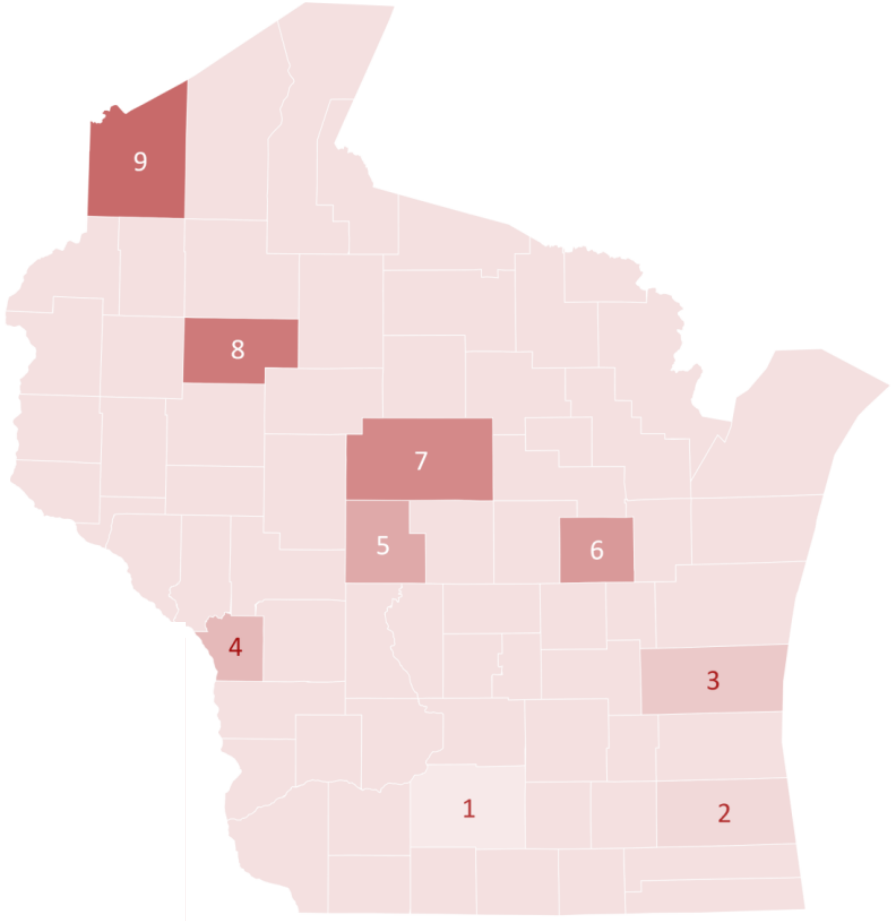
- **Mobile advocacy:** meeting survivors in locations that are safe, convenient and comfortable for them to lower the logistical and emotional barriers that prevent survivors seeking support
- Meeting at libraries, coffee shops, parks, client homes

What is Domestic Violence Housing First (DVHF)?

- **FFA:** financial support to reduce barriers in achieving safe and stable housing
- Could include (but not limited to):
    - Payment of rent, security deposit, or rental arrears
    - Utility bills
    - Moving expenses
    - Childcare
    - Transportation including gas, bus/taxi fare, car repair
    - Medical bills
    - Home safety systems and repairs

Domestic Violence Housing First Pilot Program

- Nine domestic violence organizations across Wisconsin were provided ARPA funds for program
- Eight sites received approx. $200,000/year in funding
    - One site received $90,000/year (by choice)
- Located across the state in rural and urban locations



Evaluation Design



Annual site interviews

- Design survivor survey

- Understand implementation including mobile advocacy, landlord relationships, approach to FFA



Site administrative data

- Permission to contact and any language or other accommodations

- Amounts and uses of funds



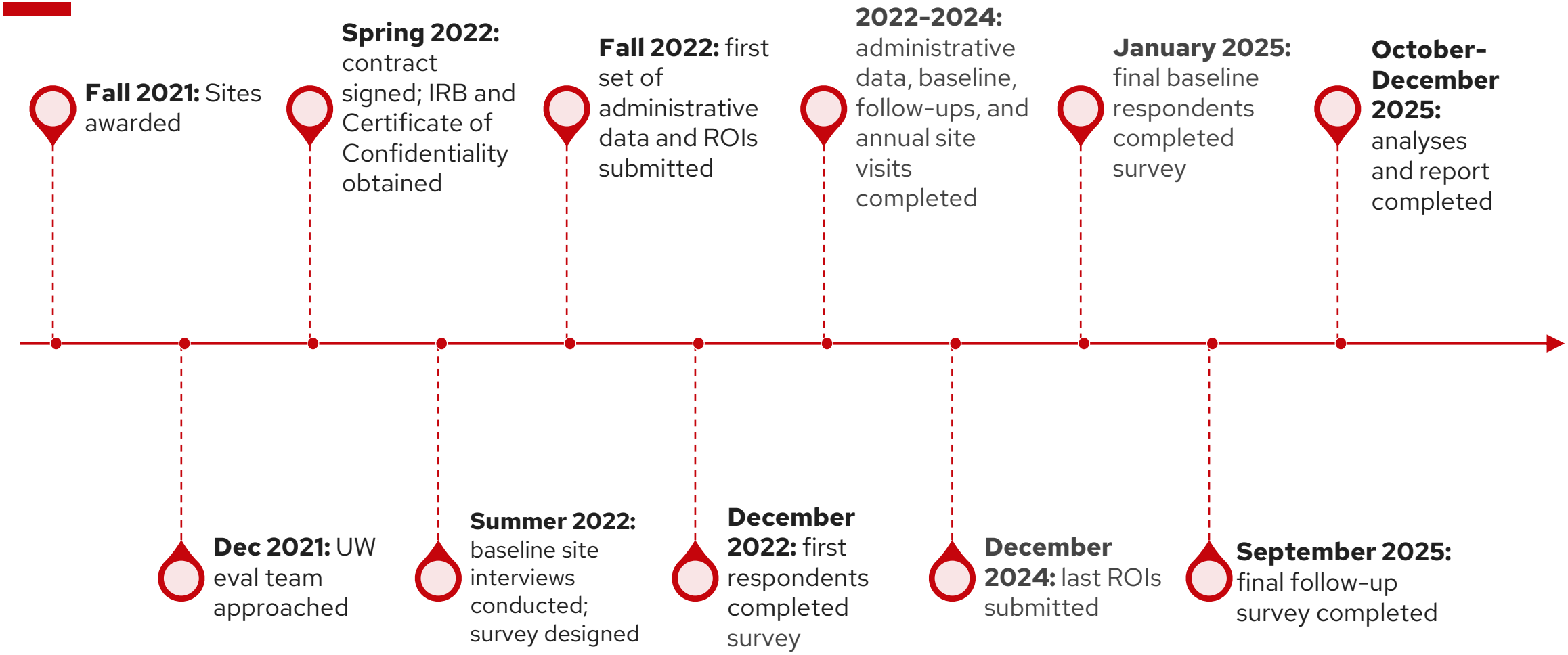
Survivor survey

- 4 times over course of year

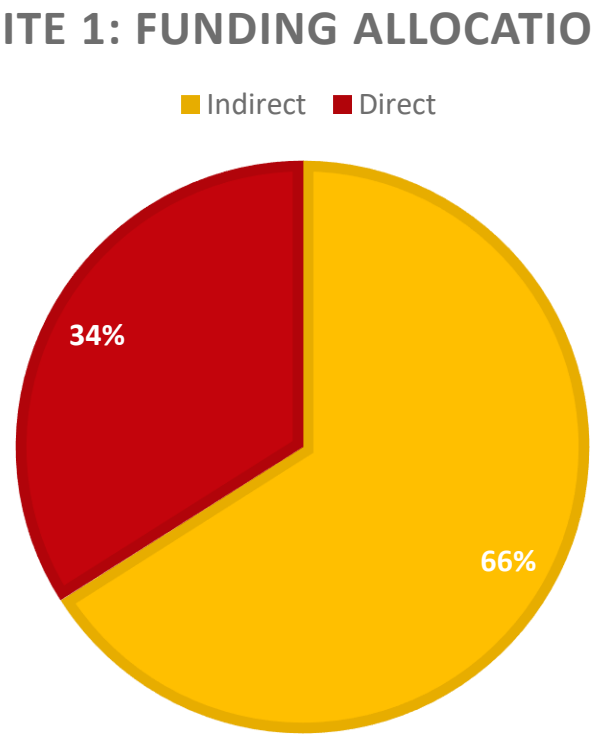
- Asks about housing stability, exposure to further DV, personal and family well-being, employment and financial well-being

2022-2025

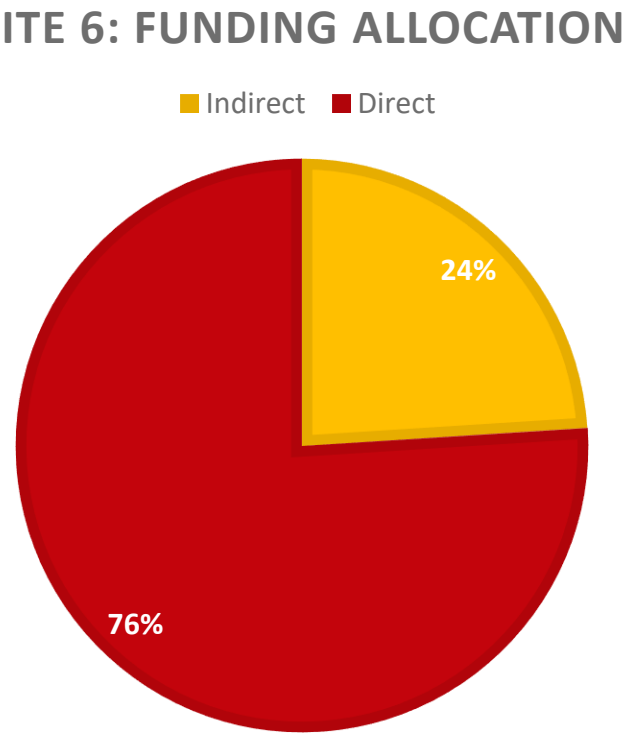
Timeline of the Evaluation



Administrative Data: Direct vs Indirect Cost Examples



Rural site who needed to hire a housing navigator

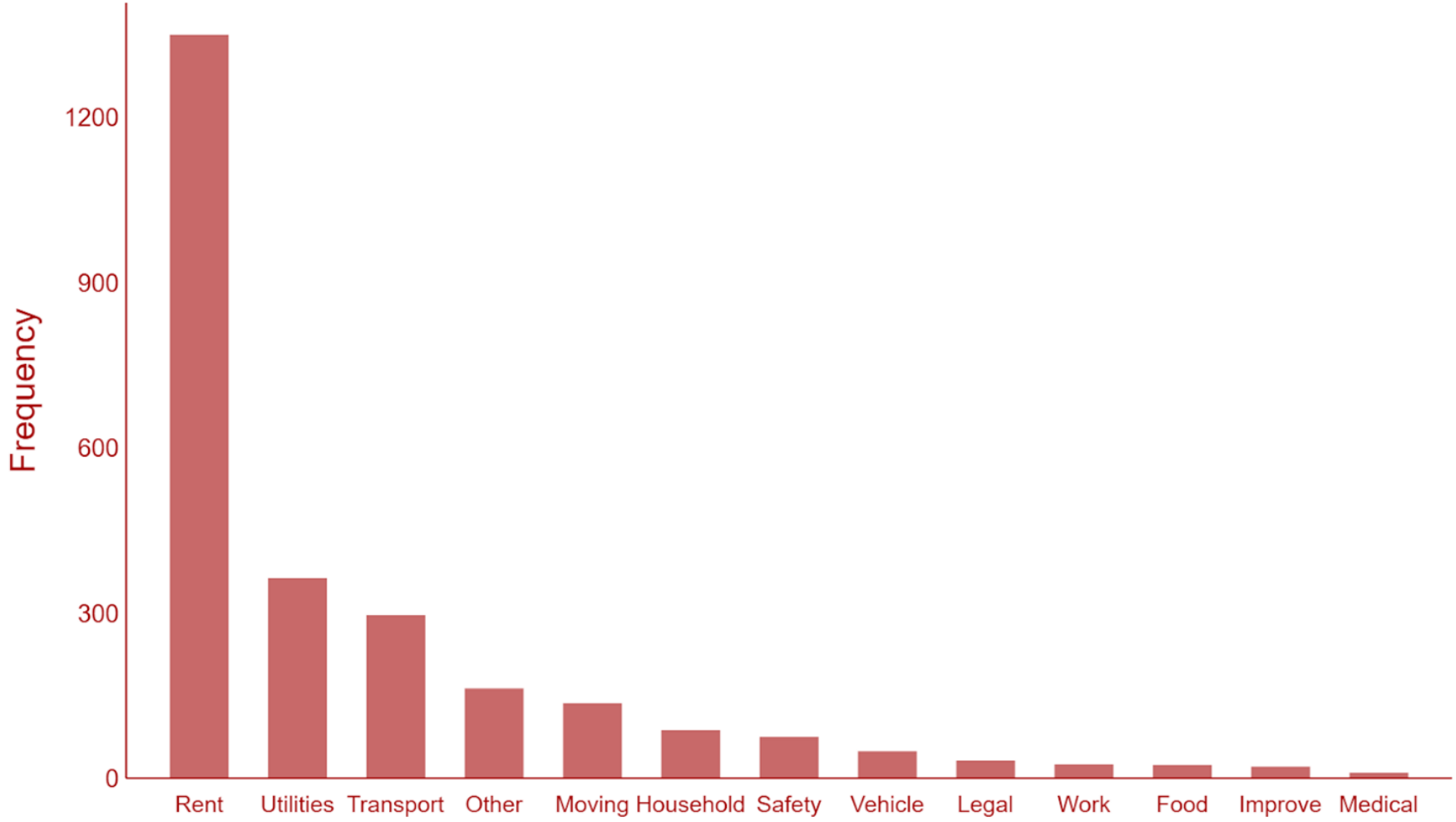


Urban site with numerous direct service partners

Administrative Data: Overall Expenditure

- Number of unique households: 1,587*
- Distributions to clients from Sept 2022 to June 2025:
    - Average amount: $2,139

Administrative Data: Spending Categories



Research Questions for Survey Data

- **RQ1:** Is the amount of DVHF funding received associated with reductions in violence and improvements in survivor outcomes?
- **RQ2:** Is the frequency of assistance (one time vs ongoing) associated with reductions in violence survivor outcomes?
- **RQ3:** Is the category of DVHF expenditure (e.g., rent, utilities, transportation, paying past-due expenses, etc) associated with reductions in violence survivor outcomes?

DVHF: Survivor Surveys

- 108 DVHF recipients participated in a longitudinal study over course of a year
- Survivors completed 4 30-minute surveys for $50 gift card plus $20 bonus

Analyses focused on:

- Further DV exposure
- Housing stability
- Economic well-being
  - Employment
- Health & well-being
  - Posttraumatic stress
- Family well-being
- Perceptions of DVHF program

DVHF Funding Amounts, Frequencies, and Expenditure Types

Amount of funding

- Mean amount of funding received by clients in the survey sample was $3450.97 (range = $20 to $18547)
- Amount of funding received was dichotomized at the median of $2376.50

Frequency of support

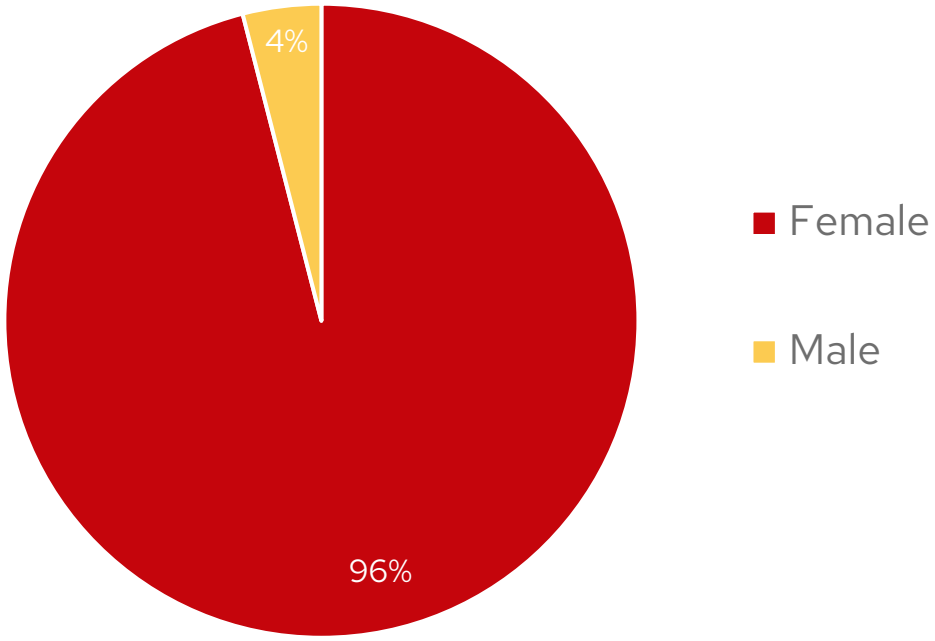
- Receipt of one-time funds (i.e., support during a single month 31.5%; *n* = 34) vs ongoing support (i.e., receiving two or more months of support (68.5%, *n* = 74)

Expenditure type

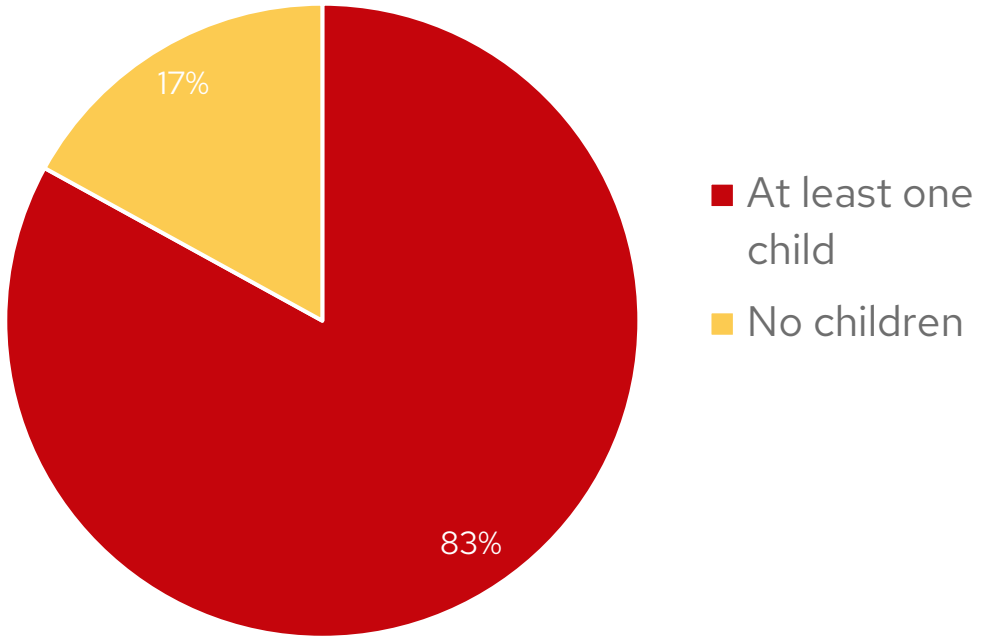
- Rent or security deposit (84.3%, n = 91) vs only receiving another expenditure type

Results: Respondent Demographics (N = 108)

Gender

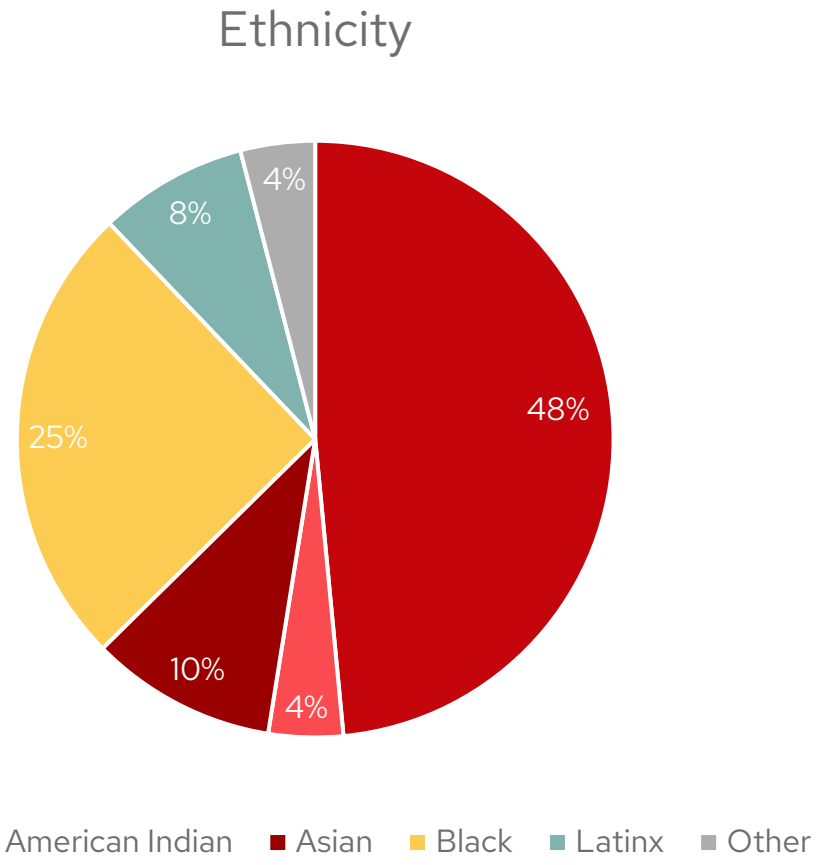


Children

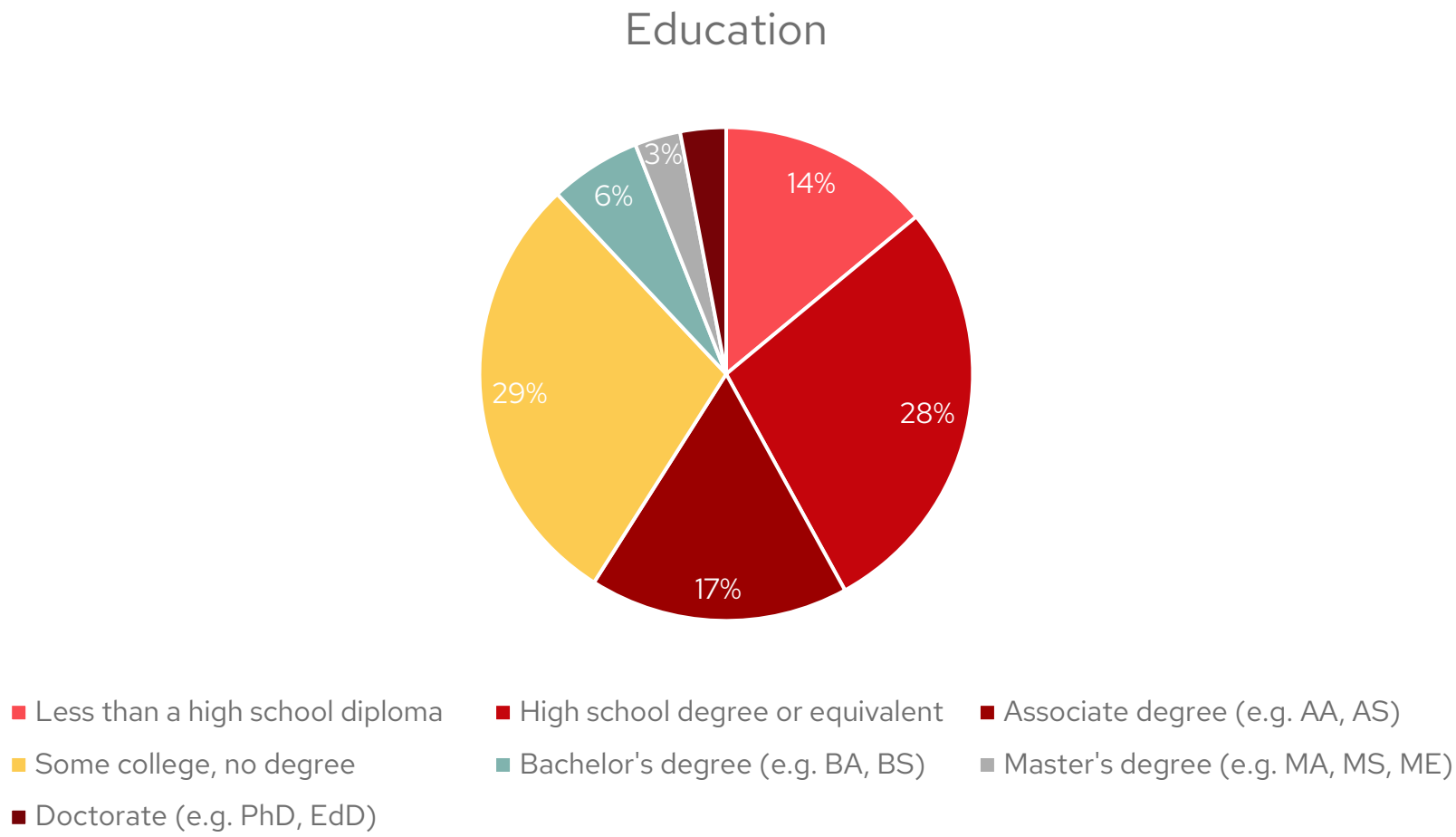


Mean number of children = 2.8 (range = 1-9)

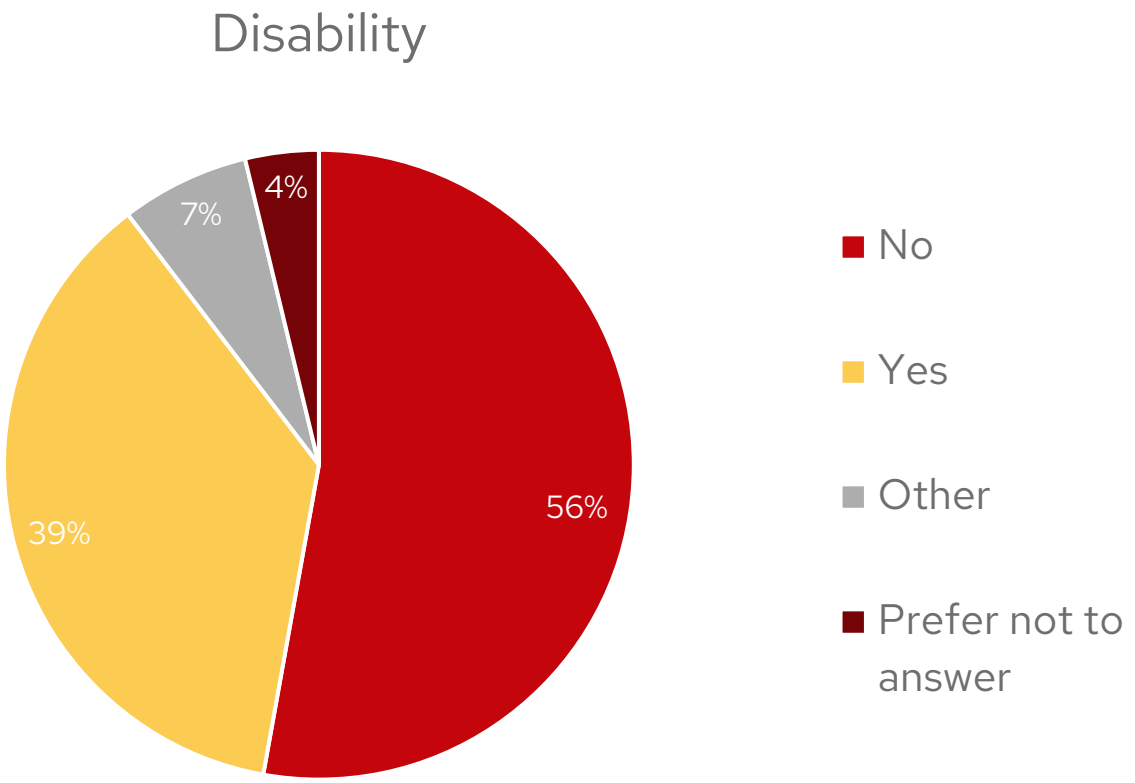
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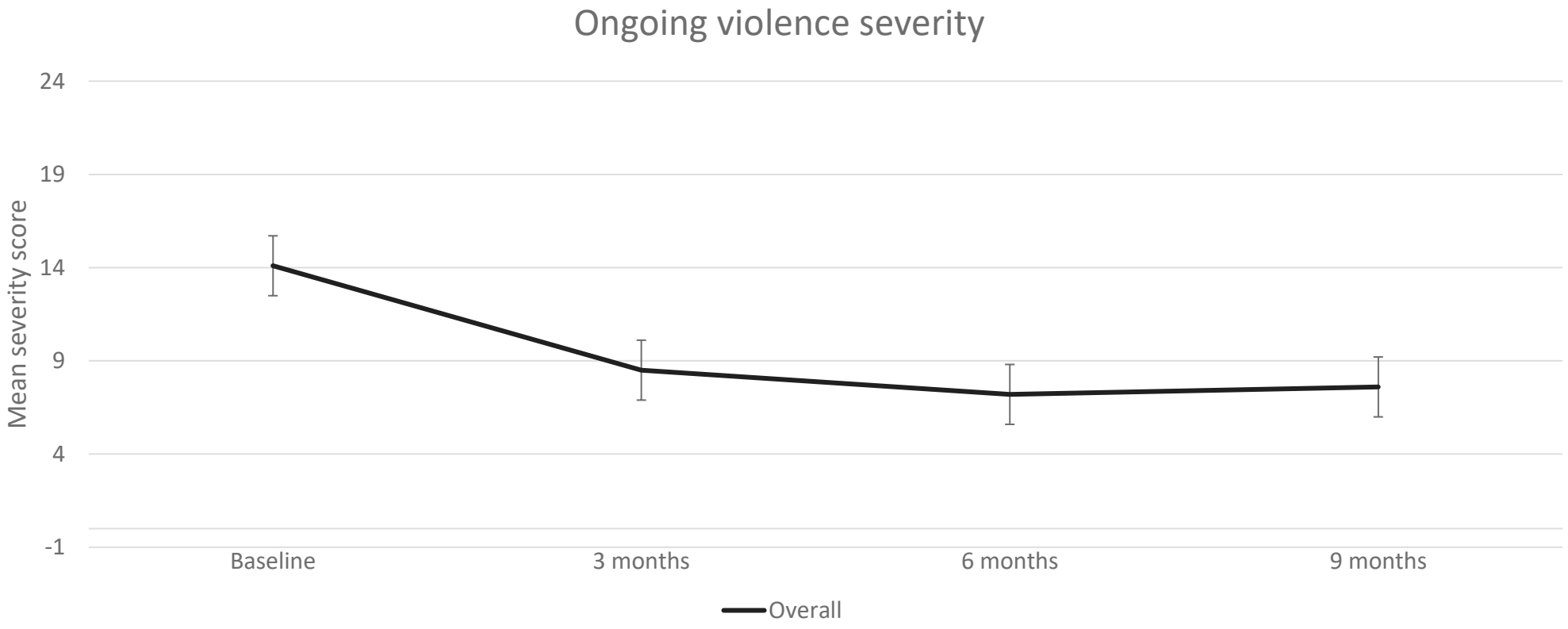


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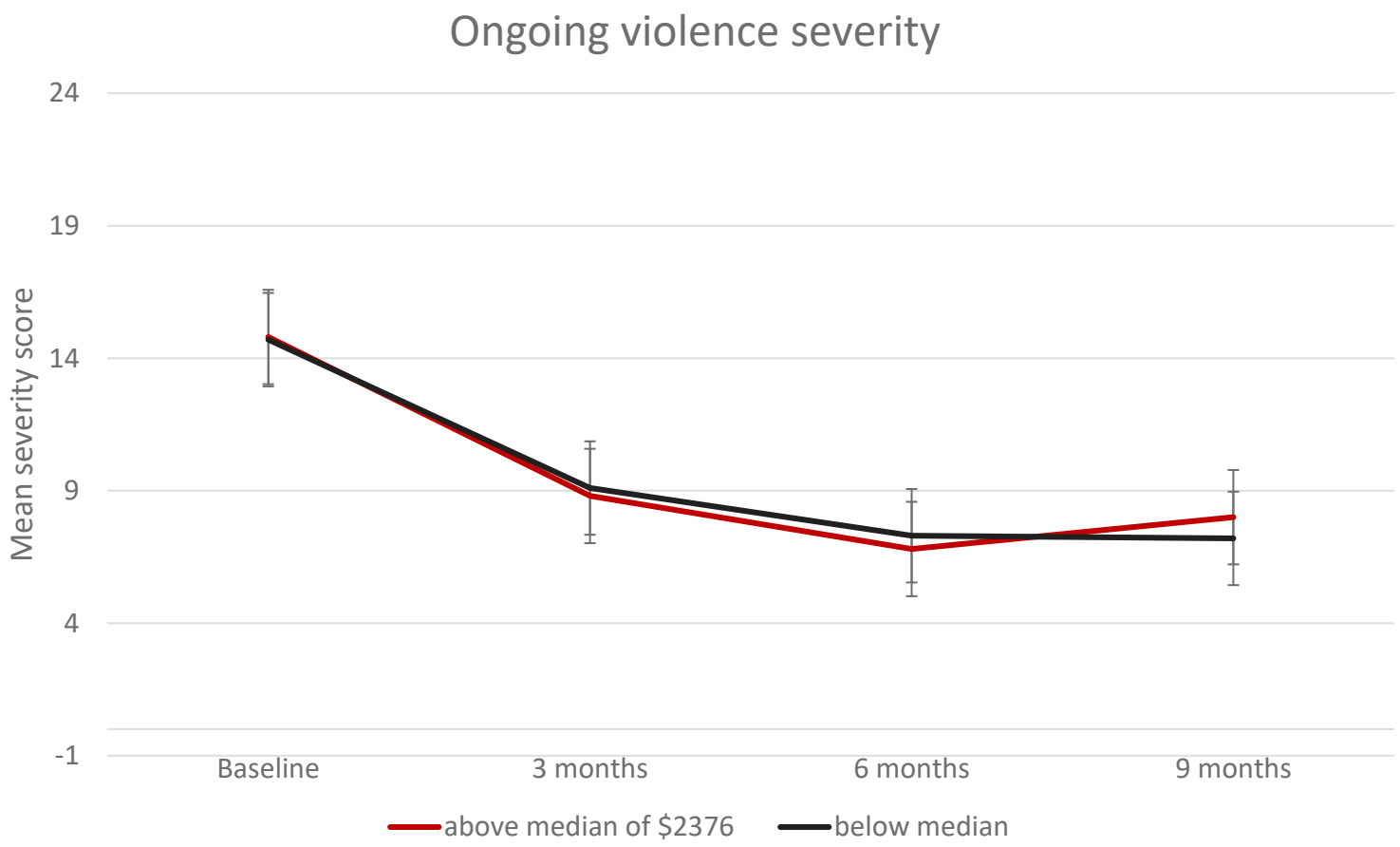
Results: Exposure to Further Domestic Violence

- There was a significant decline in violence severity over the study



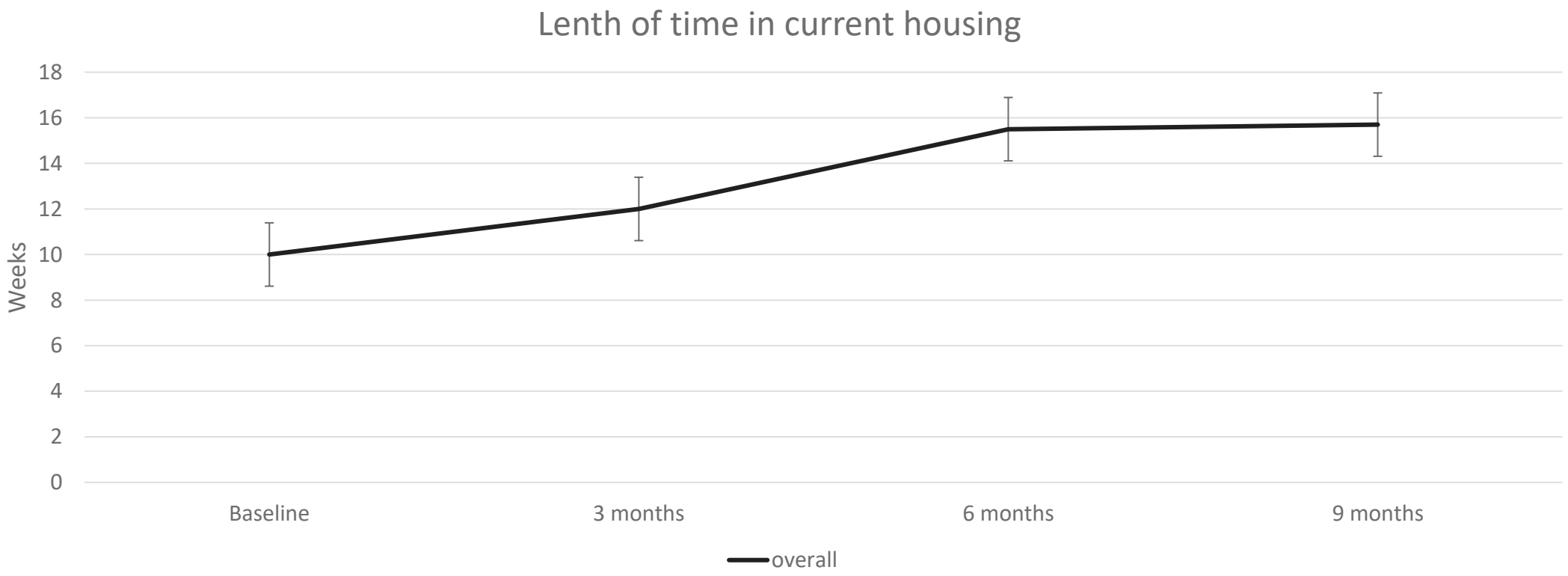
Results: Exposure to Further Domestic Violence

- BUT not associated with:
  - Amount of support
  - Frequency of support
  - Expenditure type



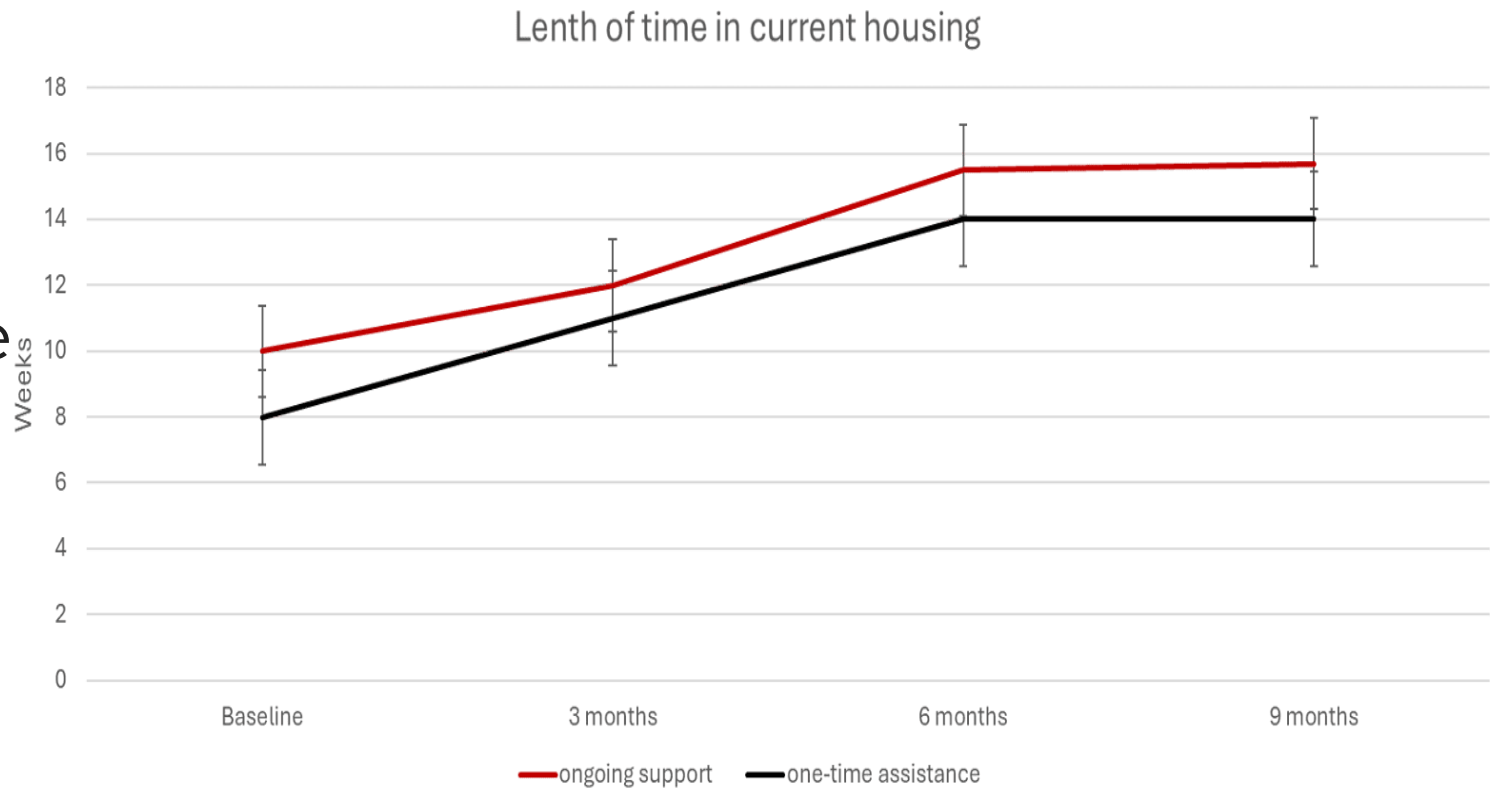
Results: Housing Stability

- Length of time in current housing increased overall



Results: Housing Stability

- Amount of funding and expenditure type were not associated with housing stability
- There was a trend for those who received ongoing support to be in housing longer at each assessment



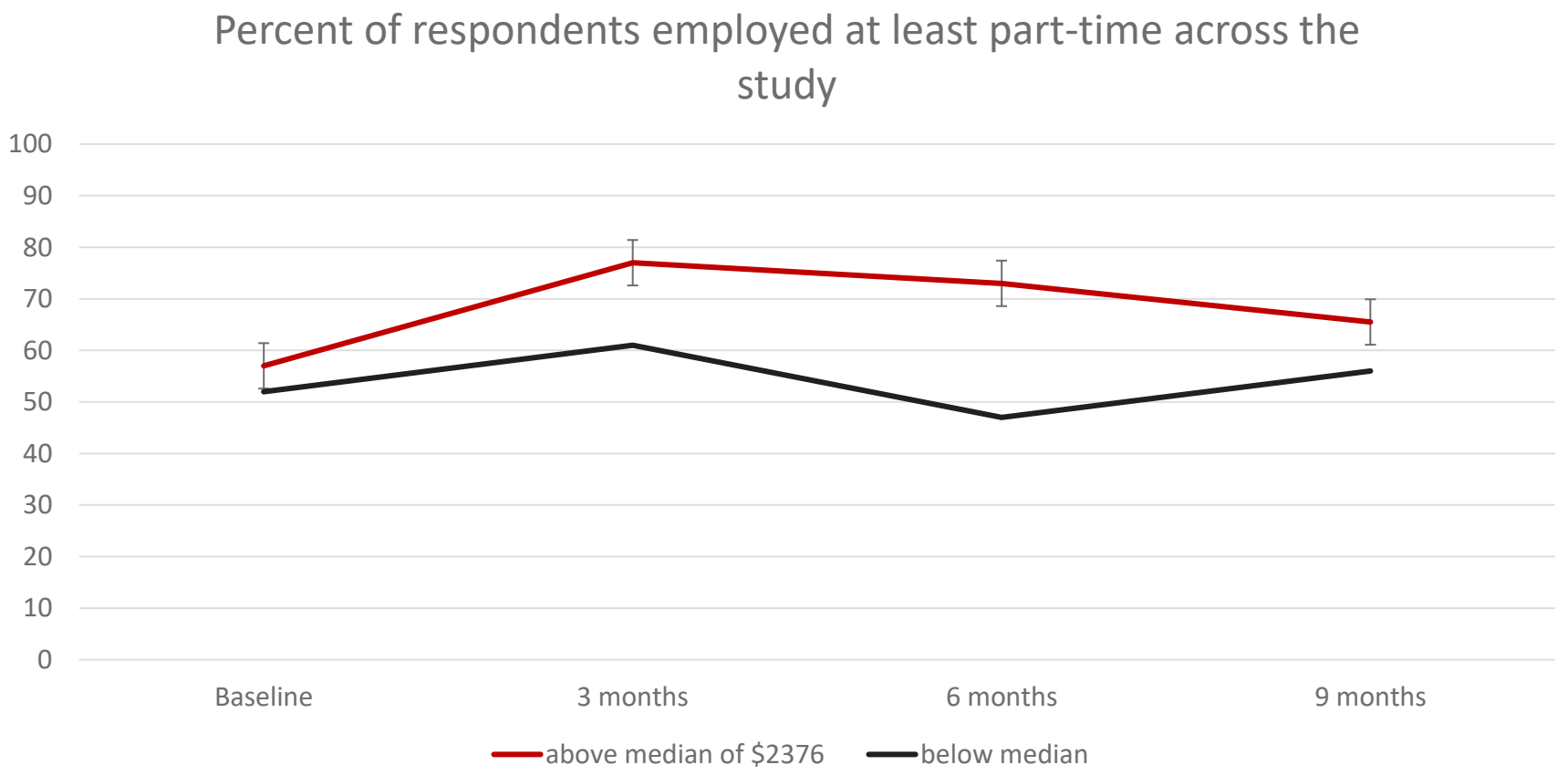
Results: Economic Outcomes (Employment)

- Employment did not increase overall on average



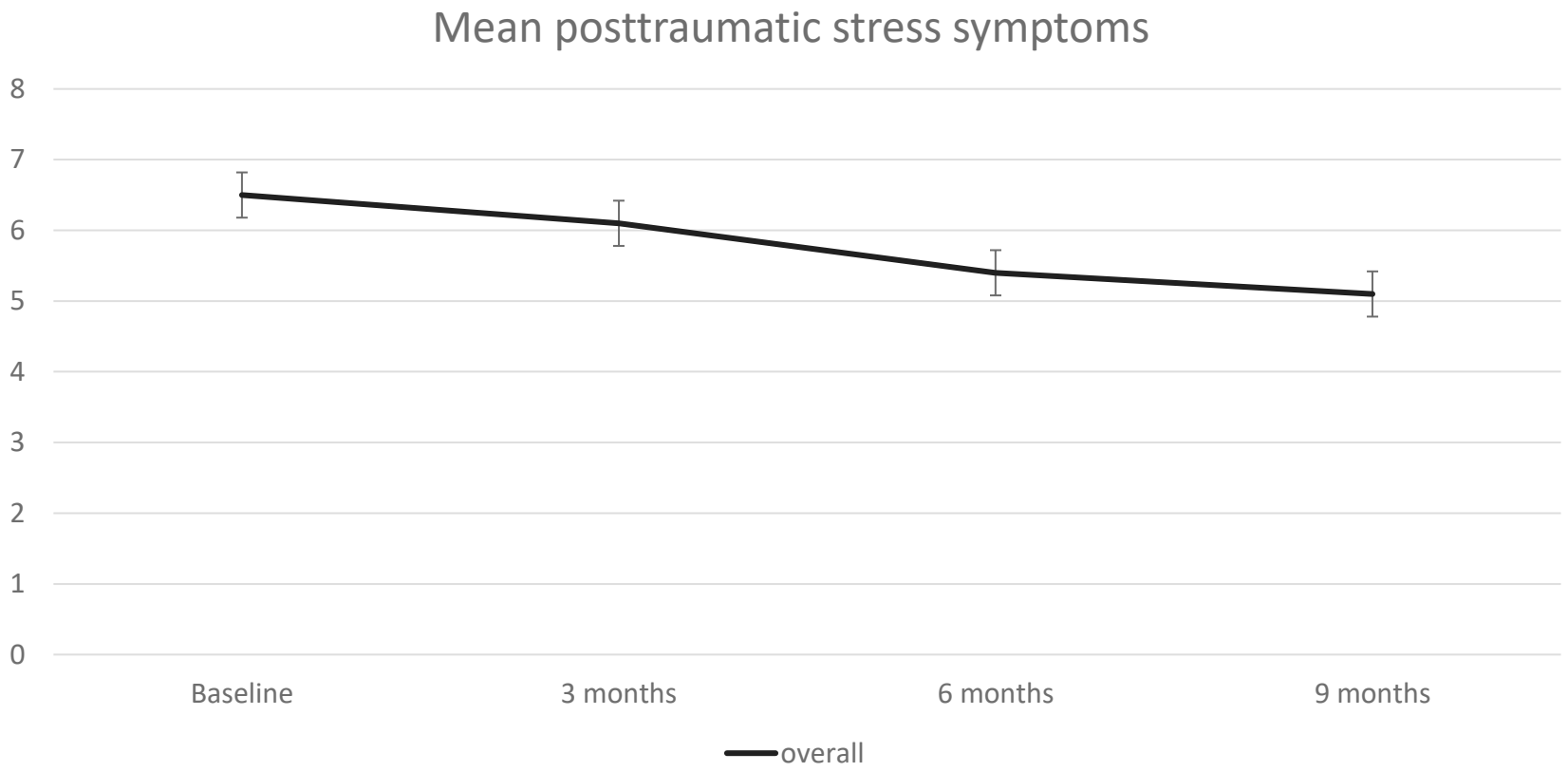
Results: Economic Outcomes (Employment)

- Frequency of support and expenditure type were not related
- BUT there was a trend for those who received more funding to be employed



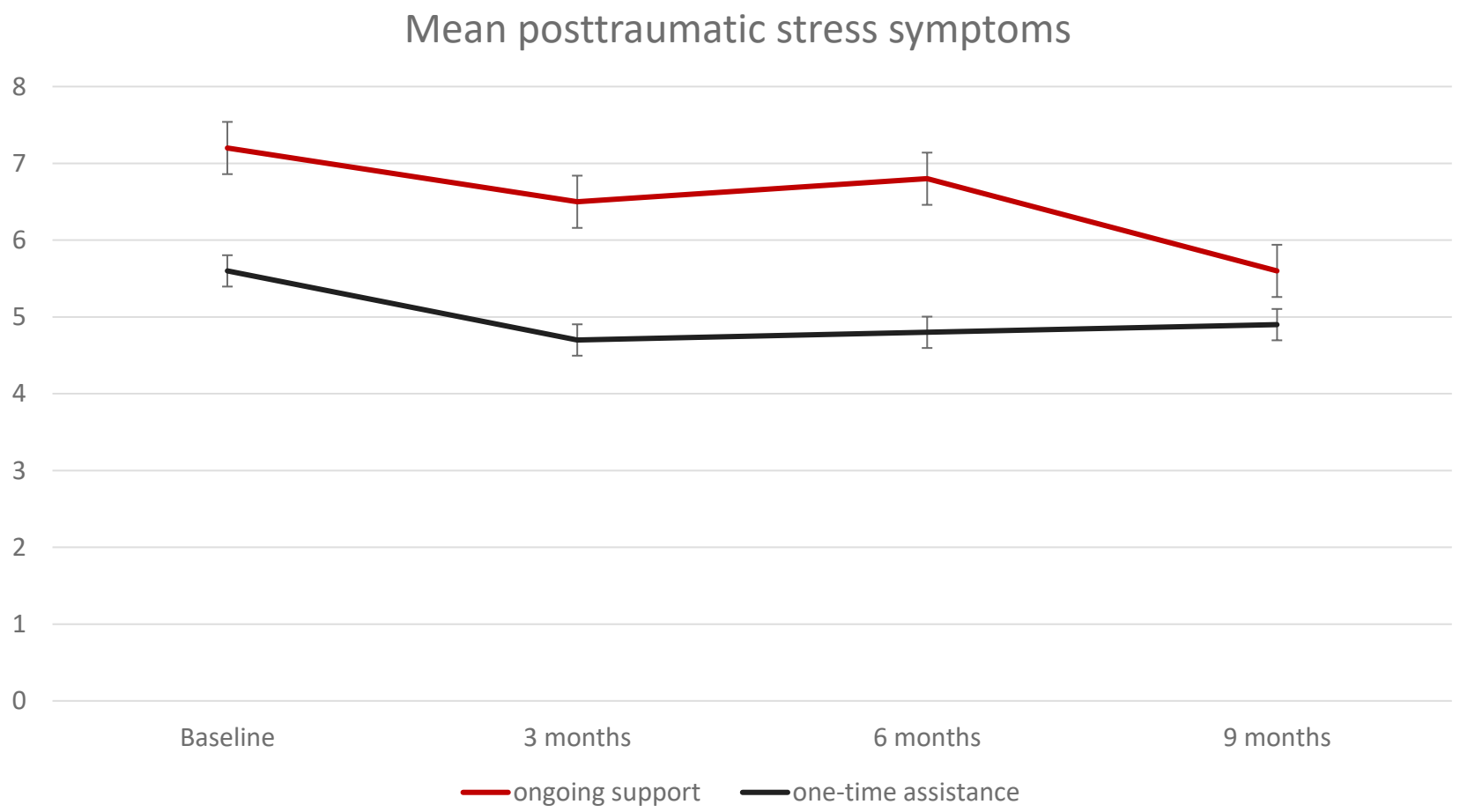
Results: Well-being(Posttraumatic Stress)

- Posttraumatic stress declined significantly over the study



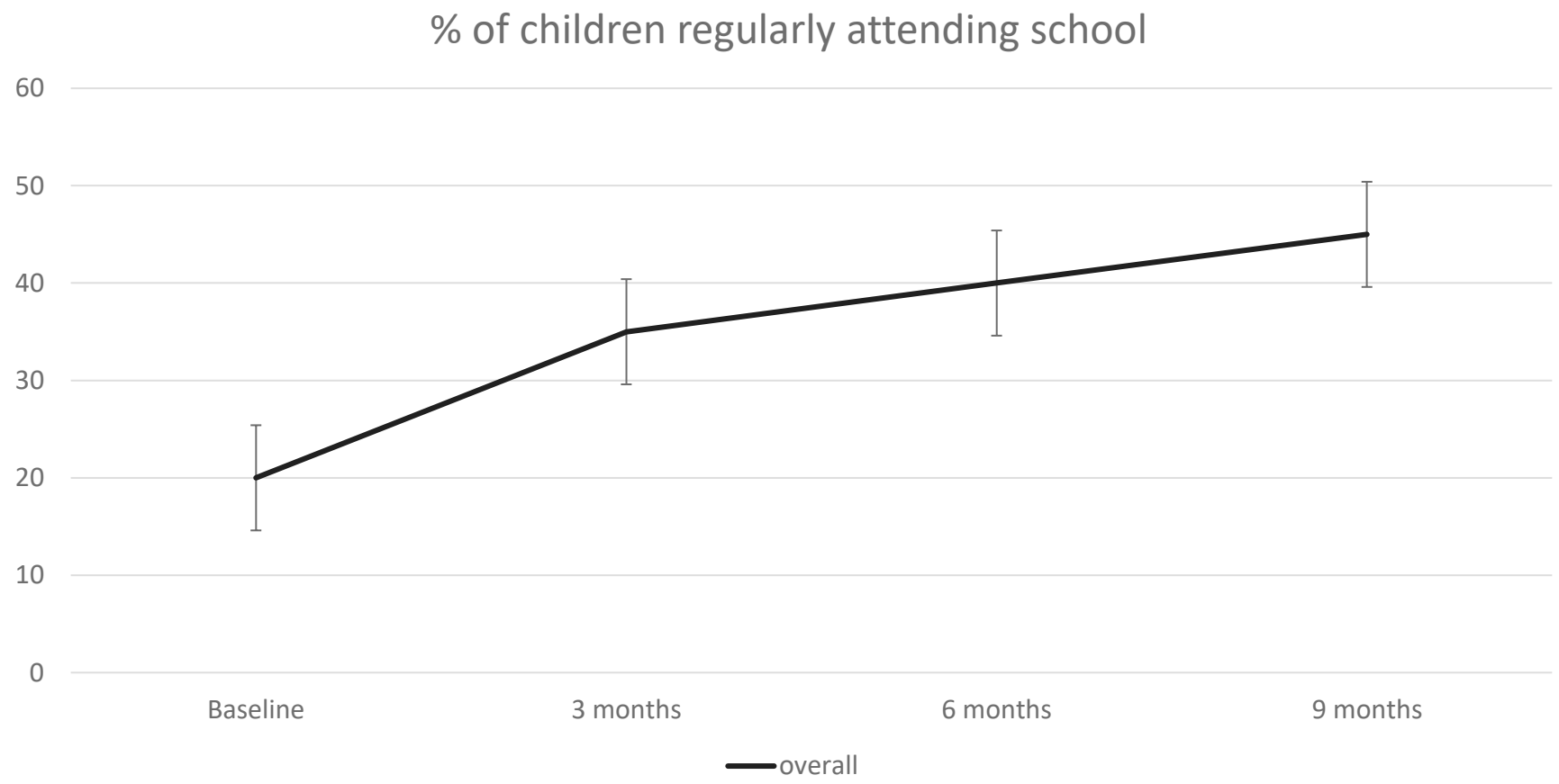
Results: Well-being(Posttraumatic Stress)

- Amount of funding and expenditure type was not associated with PTS
- However, there was a trend for those who received ongoing support to have higher PTS than those receiving one-time support



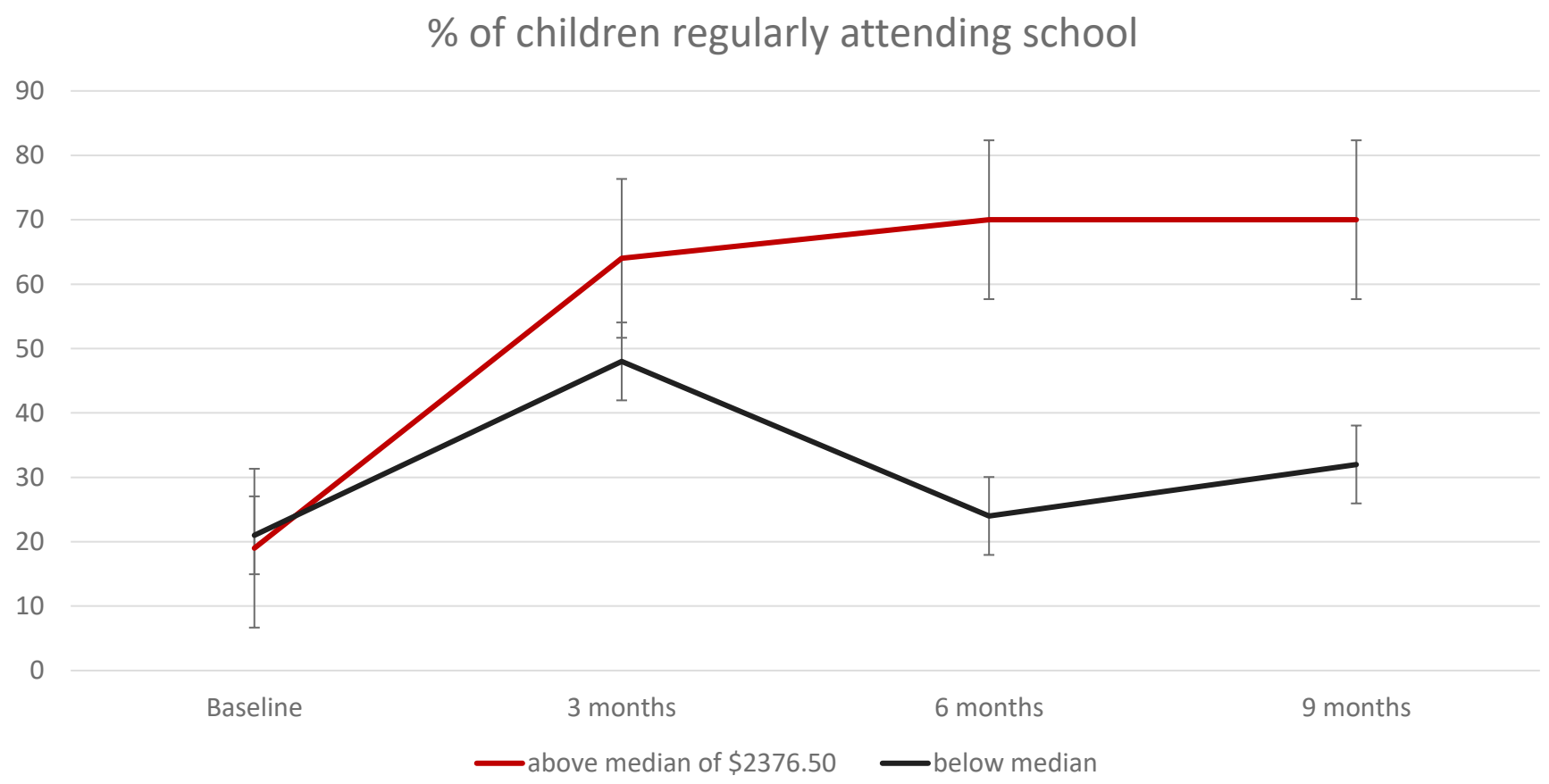
Results: Child/Family Well-being (school attendance)

- Child school attendance increased over time



Results: Child/Family Well-being (school attendance)

- Frequency of funding and expenditure type was not associated with school attendance
- **Children from families who received more funding were significantly more likely to regularly attend school over time**



Qualitative program satisfaction data

"It has been such a blessing to have had the assistance to get out of a toxic marital house and into my own apartment that my children and I call HOME! We are filled with gratitude for all the help we have received! Thank you to all the efforts to allow this program to assist those like us, in our time of need."

"This saved me from completely losing myself and my children. Gave me the stability to get sober and learn to live without the toxic codependent abusive relationship"

"The program has helped me financially. I hope it will continue past the year of help or I will be struggling again."

"Saved my life literally and helped me reunite with my kids."

"My kids and I would be on the street or back in a situation that would expose us to more domestic violence if we didn't have housing first help"

" I wish the housing support I received was longer than one month. I was very stressed at that time and finding housing was difficult and wish I had more time to find a home."

"It is a very helpful program, I wish there was more ways to get more help though"

Conclusions

- Observed reductions in violence severity and posttraumatic stress alongside increases in housing stability and child school attendance among those receiving DVHF funding
- Some markers of economic well-being (e.g., employment) did not change during the study
  - DVHF as administered here may not have addressed all challenges

Conclusions

- Differences in outcomes by amount, frequency, and type of expenditure were inconsistently observed (see full report)
  - Possible power concern
  - More likely that advocates are largely doing well in identifying needs and responding well to them

Conclusions

- Trends for:
    1. Those who received more funding to be more likely to be employed
    2. Those who received ongoing support to be in housing for longer
    3. Those who received ongoing support to have higher posttraumatic stress symptoms across the study than those who received one-time support

Conclusions

- **There was a significant and robust association for those who received more funding to report improved child school attendance over time**
  - Suggests that increased support for housing has positive impacts on child outcomes

Limitations

- Hoped to recruit a matched comparison sample from non-DVHF pilot sites.
  - Only 1 of the 4 sites we formed agreements with provided data (n = 8)
  - Limited participation due to funding cuts (e.g., VAWA) cuts
- Hoped to recruit more like 400 participants across the 9 sites
  - Variability in site buy-in may have limited the contacts we received
  - Reduce delay in initial contact for clients who agree
- Sample size for analyses was smaller than anticipated and findings may not be representative of all WI-DVHF recipients

Overall Conclusion

- WI-DVHF played a critical role in providing housing support to DV survivors in Wisconsin and was associated with improvements in safety and mental health, along with positive educational outcomes for the children of survivors

- WI-DVHF did not address all problems (e.g., economic security)
  - Other supports (affordable and flexible childcare, more affordable housing in the community, access to affordable mental health care + childcare to address these needs) could be important for improving these outcomes

Recommendations for WI_DVHF

- **General**
    1. Clarify flexible financial assistance boundaries
    2. Require sites to participate in standardized training about the model and expenses that are allowable and to commit to funding those expenses

Recommendations for WI_DVHF

- **Policy-specific**
    1. Consider allowing expenses to pay for assets (mortgage payment) to build financial security
    2. Develop other complementary resources (support affordable housing efforts, affordable and flexible childcare support, etc)

Future Steps

- Complementary resources:
  - Teaching life skills was a not insubstantial component of advocates' work
  - Example: UW's RentSmart program
  - Current project: Revise and develop modules to make program more trauma-informed and relevant to DV survivors

Thank you!

Mariel Barnes
(mariel.barnes@wisc.edu)

https://widvhf.lafollette.wisc.edu

Final Report:

Summary Brief:

A Creative Solution

Serving more survivors in our rural community

- In 2018, average length of stay increased by 36% compared to previous years
- Wisconsin Rapids Family Center 1st Received DVHF Funding through a local foundation in 2019

FINDINGS & RESULTS

The model worked for survivors and for WRFC

- Shelter stays reduced by just under 40%
- Doubled the number of families served in one year
- Applied through DCF in 2021

ADAPTING THE MODEL

Built to Flex

Meeting the needs of rural survivors

- DVHF model creates flexibility needed in rural area
- Focus on moving from shelter to housed
- Survivors sustained housing for longer

Advocacy in Action

Implementing Domestic Violence Housing First Across Wisconsin

The advocate's perspective: why survivors need this funding, the barriers they face, and what it takes to deliver flexible, trauma-informed support statewide.

Presented by: Wisconsin Rapids Family Center

This is what it takes to make it happen from the advocate's perspective.

01



Why survivors need DVHF

The link between housing instability and staying in danger

02



The barriers they face

Financial, systemic, and emotional obstacles to safety

03



DVHF in practice

What trauma-informed, mobile, flexible support looks like day to day

04



What implementation really takes

The advocate's role, and the challenges of doing this work well, statewide

Housing Instability Is What Keeps Survivors Trapped

Leaving an abusive relationship almost always means losing housing, and the fear of homelessness keeps many from leaving at all, or forces them back.



38%

of domestic violence victims experience homelessness at some point in their lives



58%

of unmet service requests nationwide were for shelter and housing (NNEDV, 2025)

Abusers frequently control finances, leases, and credit; leaving survivors with no independent path to housing. Shelters are full: nationally, most unmet requests for domestic violence services on any given day are for shelter and housing.

Without a bridge to stable housing, many survivors face an impossible choice between homelessness and returning to danger.

Economic abuse follows survivors long after they leave.

Economic abuse

Abusers often control bank accounts, run up debt in the survivor's name, or sabotage employment; leaving little to draw on when leaving.

Damaged credit & rental history

Joint leases, evictions tied to the abuser, or unpaid utility accounts follow survivors and make landlords hesitant to rent to them.

No accessible savings

Even survivors who work often have no independent funds for a deposit, first month's rent, or moving costs on short notice.

Gaps in employment

Abuse frequently disrupts jobs, through stalking at work, missed shifts, or relocation, thinning out income history and references.

Systemic & Logistical Barriers

The systems meant to help can become obstacles of their own.



Waitlists & Scarcity

Affordable units and housing vouchers are scarce statewide; wait times can stretch months, well beyond a shelter stay.



Transportation

Rural survivors especially may have no reliable way to reach housing appointments, work, childcare, or court.



Childcare

Finding safe, affordable childcare while job-hunting or apartment-hunting is often the barrier that stalls everything else.



Paperwork & Eligibility

Gathering records, verifying income, and proving eligibility can delay help when a survivor needs it most.

The hardest barriers to see are often the hardest to overcome.

- **Fear of retaliation:** Applying for housing, a protective order, or benefits can escalate danger if the abuser finds out.
- **Shame and self-blame:** Survivors often internalize blame for the abuse, which can make asking for help feel humiliating.
- **Distrust of systems:** Past experiences with courts, landlords, or other agencies that didn't believe or help them make survivors wary of trying again.
- **Attachment & complicated loyalty:** Love, hope for change, shared children, or community ties can pull a survivor back even when housing is secured.
- **Isolation:** Abusers often cut survivors off from family and friends, so there is no informal safety net to lean on while rebuilding.

Trauma-Informed Care, on the Ground

Advocacy that centers emotional safety, restores a survivor's choice and control, and meets them on their own terms and timeline, never with an ultimatum.

Why it's hard to implement

- It takes more time per client than a transactional intake, caseloads don't always allow for that
- Advocates must accept a survivor returning to an abuser without treating it as program failure
- New staff often need real training (and supervision) to unlearn a "fix-it" instinct

What it looks like for an advocate

- Letting the survivor set the pace and define what "safe" and "stable" mean for them
- Offering options rather than directives; and respecting a "not yet"
- Creating safety plans to allow for survivors to prepare to leave safely
- Revisiting the plan as circumstances (and danger) change, without judgment

Advocates go to libraries, coffee shops, parks, and client homes — wherever lowers the logistical and emotional cost of asking for help.

Why it matters

- Many survivors can't safely receive calls or mail at home
- An office visit can require a car, gas money, and childcare they don't have
- Meeting on neutral ground can feel less intimidating than an agency intake

What it requires of advocates

- Flexible schedules; including early mornings, evenings, and weekends
- Reliable transportation and mileage support for staff
- Judgment calls about safety in public meeting spots

The strain it creates

- Driving time cuts into caseload capacity, especially in rural counties
- Coverage gets harder with a small team
- Burnout risk rises when "office hours" stop being a real boundary

Flexible Financial Assistance: Advocate Discretion in Action

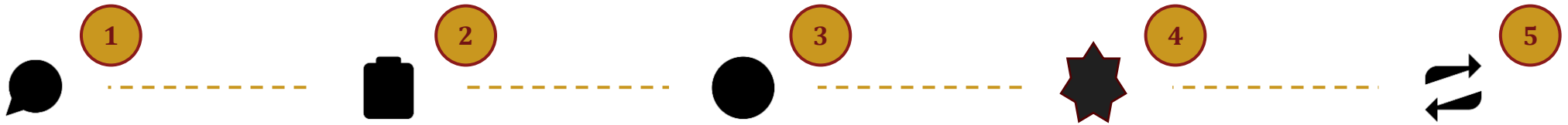
FFA covers whatever removes a specific barrier to safe, stable housing, decided case by case, not by a fixed rulebook.

- Rent, deposits & arrears
- Utility bills
- Moving expenses
- Childcare
- Transportation & car repair
- Medical bills
- Home safety repairs

The advocate's judgment call

- *How much moves this person closer to stable housing right now, versus a one-time patch?*
- *Is this a one-time need, or will ongoing support serve them better?*
- *What does this specific household (not just the client) actually need?*

A simplified view of how one household's support actually gets built:



Build trust

Initial contact, often in crisis; advocate listens before assessing

Assess needs & risk

Lethality assessment, housing barriers, safety concerns, strengths

Co-create a plan

Survivor sets goals; advocate maps funding, resources, and steps

Coordinate & advocate

Landlords, courts, benefits offices, employers, other providers

Reassess & adjust

Plans shift as circumstances, danger, and needs change over time

This isn't linear in real life; a family may cycle through these steps several times, and a single advocate is often running this process for 15–25 households at once.

Navigating Systems and Partners

DVHF success depends on relationships an advocate has to build and maintain outside the walls of the agency.

Landlords & property managers

Negotiating around credit and rental history, sometimes advocating for a chance the paperwork alone wouldn't earn

Courts & legal system

Coordinating around restraining orders, custody, and eviction proceedings that intersect with housing safety

Benefits & housing agencies

Helping survivors navigate Section 8, W-2, FoodShare, and other eligibility systems under time pressure

Other service providers

Warm hand-offs to mental health, employment, childcare, and medical providers so support doesn't stall

DVHF's strength is discretion. Grant administration asks for documentation and consistency. Advocates live in the space between.

What flexibility enables

- Funding that fits the household
- Fast response; same week, sometimes same day
- Advocates using professional judgment

What it demands of programs

- Clear internal guardrails so "flexible" doesn't mean inconsistent
- Documentation that satisfies funders without slowing the help down
- Training so every advocate applies judgment the same trustworthy way

Capacity, Rural Reach & Burnout



Rural distance

Some counties cover enormous geography with one or two advocates mobile advocacy can mean hours of driving per visit.



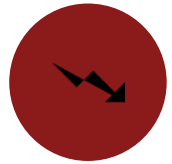
Small teams, no backup

A single vacancy or leave can mean no one is available to answer a DVHF call for days.



Secondary trauma

Sustained exposure to survivors' crises, without enough supervision or time to process, wears advocates down.



Turnover

Burnout and modest pay drive turnover, which costs programs institutional knowledge and continuity for clients.

~2,000

survivors served statewide in a single day

~200

requests for help still went unmet

On a single survey day in 2025, Wisconsin programs came close; but capacity ran out before need did.

DVHF's early funding was time-limited. Sustaining this model means confronting what happens when a grant period ends.



1. Nine sites statewide, time-limited federal relief dollars
2. Broader victim-services funding has also faced cuts, straining the whole system at once
3. Programs pursue OVW Transitional Housing and other federal grants to sustain the model
4. The goal: funding stable enough that advocates can plan multi-year support, not just react

Every funding gap is a household waiting on a rent payment, a security deposit, or utility bill being paid, and behind every gap is a family counting on us to close it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

What Advocates Need Going Forward

Standardized training

A shared statewide model for trauma-informed care and FFA decision-making, so quality doesn't depend on which county a survivor lives in.

Sustained, flexible funding

Multi-year commitments that let programs plan ahead instead of managing from grant cycle to grant cycle.

Staffing built for the job

Caseloads and pay that account for mobile advocacy, on-call coverage, and the emotional weight of the work.

Stronger cross-system partnerships

Formal agreements with housing authorities, courts, and landlords to reduce the friction advocates negotiate case by case.

Complementary supports

Affordable, flexible childcare and accessible mental health care alongside housing dollars DVHF funding alone can't close every gap.

THE TAKEAWAY

Funding is the tool. Advocates make it work.

Behind every statistic is an advocate who built trust, found a landlord willing to take a chance, and stayed flexible enough to meet a family exactly where they were. Sustaining DVHF means investing in that work, not just the dollars that fund it.

Where These Numbers Come From

Domestic violence & homelessness — the 38% figure (slide 5)

Baker, C.K., Cook, S.L., & Norris, F.H. (2003). “Domestic Violence and Housing Problems.” Violence Against Women, 9(7), 754–783 — as cited by the American Bar Association and the U.S. Administration for Children & Families.

Services delivered & unmet requests — 58% for housing/shelter; Wisconsin ~2,000 served and ~200 unmet in one day (slides 5 & 15)

National Network to End Domestic Violence (2026). 20th Annual Domestic Violence Counts Report — one-day census, September 10, 2025. Washington, DC. nnedv.org/domestic-violence-counts

Domestic Violence Housing First (DVHF) model & trauma-informed practice

Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WSCADV) — Domestic Violence Housing First program and evaluation. wscadv.org

Federal funding context — VAWA, VOCA, FVPSA, and OVW Transitional Housing grants (slide 16)

U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) and Office for Victims of Crime (OVC). justice.gov/ovw

What the Acronyms Mean

DVHF — Domestic Violence Housing First

FFA — Flexible Financial Assistance

ARPA — American Rescue Plan Act (federal relief funding)

VAWA — Violence Against Women Act

VOCA — Victims of Crime Act

DCF — Department of Children and families

FVPSA — Family Violence Prevention and Services Act

OVW — Office on Violence Against Women (U.S. Dept. of Justice)

NNEDV — National Network to End Domestic Violence

W-2 — Wisconsin Works (state welfare-to-work program)

Section 8 — Housing Choice Voucher Program (federal rental aid)

WRFC — Wisconsin Rapids Family Center

Questions?

Thank you• Tricia Fancher and Desiree Irmischer• Wisconsin Rapids Family Center