

The Houston Area Women's Center: Providing Shelter and Services

By Lena Craven



Members of the Houston Area Women's Center, Women Against Violence Everywhere (WAVE), and other organizations participate in a march in Hermann Park during the 1990 G7 Economic Summit in Houston.

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Ellen Cohen remembers the public perception surrounding the Houston Area Women's Center (HAWC) when she joined its board in the early 1980s. "I always say that people thought we were a group of wack-eyed, crazy, radical feminists, you know, who smoked funny cigarettes and did some weird things — and we did some strange things," she mused. Four decades later, the center's headquarters stands at the corner of Waugh Drive and West Dallas Street as an established institution.¹

GAINING TRACTION

When HAWC was founded in 1977 as a small resource center to provide relief for survivors of domestic and sexual violence, no one could have envisioned the immense growth that followed.² Although HAWC's shelters and capacity have evolved, the confidentiality of its location has remained constant. The center opened its first shelter in 1978 with space for fourteen people, becoming the first of its kind in Houston. Two years later, HAWC opened a new shelter

that housed thirty survivors up to three weeks for free if they helped maintain the facility. This allowed them time to begin the recovery process and evaluate their next steps. Sometimes they chose to return to their partners, sometimes they did not — either way HAWC was there for them. In 1983, the shelter expanded to house forty-five individuals, and two years later opened a shelter in Montgomery County.³

In 2002, HAWC constructed a new shelter with 120 beds and a school on site, operated within the Houston Independent School District, to ensure children had access to education in a protected location. Ellen Cohen views this shelter as her most significant accomplishment as HAWC's president and CEO. She envisioned building it around an atrium with "as much light as possible because women had lived in darkness for so long." Previously, HAWC members had taken pride in minimizing spending of donated funds, but Cohen believed that when "we [use] secondhand stuff, we're telling our clients that they're secondhand." Thus,



Ellen Cohen, left, listens to Representative Debra Danburg, right, who served in the Texas House from 1981 to 2003.

HAWC purchased all new furnishings for the new facility.⁴

Originally located in a one-room office at 6905 Bertner Avenue, HAWC's headquarters relocated to Number 4 Chelsea Place in 1981. The Women's Club of Houston gave HAWC this new building to use for several years at no charge.⁵ In 1990, the headquarters relocated to 3101 Richmond Avenue before moving five years later to its current location at 1010 Waugh Drive.

HAWC provided many of its services by merging with existing organizations. Women in Action founded the Women's Information and Referral Exchange Service (WIRES) in 1977, which provided hotline services for HAWC. In 1980, several volunteers with the Houston Rape Crisis Coalition resigned due to loss of autonomy, as the organization merged with HAWC and became the Rape Crisis Program (RCP). Nevertheless, by 1982, RCP advocates from both organizations began accompanying survivors to hospitals, police departments, and courts. Two years later, RCP initiated a partnership with People Against Rape and Abuse in Clear Lake. It then extended its accompaniment program to that area, and a 1985 contract between HAWC and Humana Hospital in Clear Lake required hospital staff to offer these services to all survivors in a "non-judgmental

and non-threatening manner." Additionally, RCP began working with Citizens Against Sexual Assault in Fort Bend County in 1984, opened a satellite program in the Humble area the following year, and developed a program to help child survivors in 1993.⁶

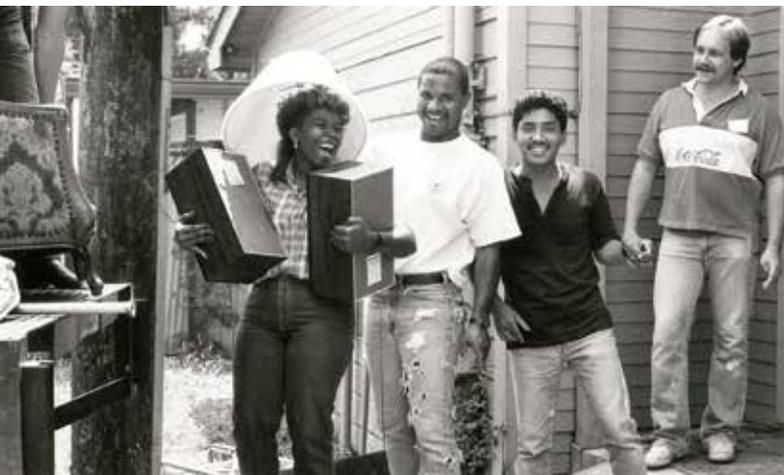
HAWC has also grown in terms of its volunteers and funding – two vital components of the organization. In 1981, 250 volunteers helped operate the center. Nearly forty years later, about 2,115 volunteers lent their support. In its early years, the center struggled to fundraise. Nikki Van Hightower, HAWC's first executive director and former City of Houston women's advocate, mentioned the organization's financial difficulties in her correspondences. In a 1978 letter, she apologized for late payments of the shelter's \$400 monthly rent and admitted HAWC previously lacked sufficient funds to hire employees, but it was beginning to receive grants and had raised \$20,000 in contributions. It soon received funds from United Way, the City of Houston, the State of Texas, and other agencies. HAWC now brings in almost \$3 million annually in donations alone, nearly \$4 million in funds from government sources and United Way, and close to \$1 million from other sources.⁷

Sonia Corrales, HAWC's current chief program officer who has been with the organization since 1992, points out that economic empowerment and economic justice are "critical, critical, critical pieces of the work that we do." HAWC aims to help survivors overcome barriers to financial resources, education, childcare, and legal services. For example, the shelter has a career development program that helps survivors set and achieve goals for employment or education. HAWC's shelter also operates a legal clinic with volunteer attorneys who help with matters such as divorce or child custody. Other services include match-savings programs and financial education.⁸



Sonia Corrales poses for a photo in 1995, three years after she moved to Houston and began working with HAWC.

Corrales explains that "you can't do this work without providing awareness." HAWC has collaborated with institutions such as the University of Houston–Clear Lake and Rice University to raise awareness about sexual violence. Cohen recalls HAWC implementing teen dating violence programs in high schools to prevent domestic violence by educating young people on warning signs and working the topics into history or literature classes. The center encourages schools to develop trauma-informed methods to respond to dating violence or sexual assault within



HAWC staff and volunteers cheerfully assist with the move to the center's new headquarters at No. 4 Chelsea Place.



HAWC members and students at the Art Institute collaborated to create a coloring book to address domestic and sexual violence against children.

members. However, the board of directors was formed with primarily white, heterosexual, cisgender women. In 1980, the RCP director stated, “We were turning into a center which only helped middle-class white women.” The following year, HAWC’s shelter denied service to a domestic violence survivor because she was blind. Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, HAWC members pushed to address racism, ageism, ableism, heterosexism, and ethnocentrism.¹⁰

Kimberlé Crenshaw, the legal scholar who coined the term intersectionality, explains, “Women working in the field of domestic violence have sometimes reproduced the subordination and marginalization of women of color by adopting policies, priorities, or strategies of empowerment that either elide or wholly disregard the particular intersectional needs of women of color.” Black women leaders in HAWC interviewed in 1991 noted that “while the Women’s Center’s services are in theory available to women of all racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the mechanics of this inclusion have not been examined.” The report pointed out that the center, where counseling sessions were held, was located in a white area of Houston. It also noted the lack of bilingual literature at the center and called for a bilingual director since nearly a quarter of shelter residents identified as Hispanic. Furthermore, the board tended to operate “on the concept of [w]hite

their student bodies. Additionally, HAWC presents multiple times to school groups if possible because “the higher the dose, the more impact that it makes,” Corrales contends.⁹

CONFRONTING FOUNDATIONAL PROBLEMS

Women of color and queer women have always been involved with HAWC, made significant contributions to the organization, and been instrumental in its progress as board members, staff, volunteers, and community

middle class America,” and some board members expected HAWC staff to prioritize gender over other important and inseparable parts of their identities such as race and class.¹¹

Additionally, HAWC’s annual suffrage celebrations centered on the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment without acknowledging that many women of color continued to be disenfranchised long after 1920. Although multiple women of color within HAWC addressed this for several years, the board continued to hold the celebrations until 1990. Consequently, HAWC formed the Task Force on Race Relations. Task force meeting reports prepared by co-chairs Leticia Turner, Yolanda Gutierrez, and Vivian Bradford listed “tokenism, oppression, classism, insensitivity to minorities, difference in values among cultures and the lack of Spanish materials” as problems within the organization, as well as a “lack of credibility and lack of commitment by HAWC” in communities of color.¹²

Task force documents, which critiqued board members for their meager participation in meetings, pointed out it was inadequate to have a “primarily white top staff position and Board of Directors reach out to Communities of Color and ask them to join without being included in participation in vital decision-making or ownership.” Other materials emphasized the need to “integrate an analysis on racism, sexism, [and] homophobia” and “drop assumptions of heterosexism.” Recommendations included mandatory training for HAWC personnel, regular discussions of racism in board meetings, surveys about racism, education of HAWC personnel doing outreach in communities of color, improved board support, collaboration with communities of color, and a reevaluation of board member selection processes.¹³

HAWC responded by expanding the board to increase its representation, recruiting staff and volunteers of color, and implementing outreach programs. In 1988, Hispanic Women in Leadership (HWIL) began working toward opening a shelter. In the meantime, HWIL matched funds with



HAWC began printing promotional and informational materials in multiple languages in the 1990s in an effort to reach more diverse communities.

HAWC to hire Dora Alejandro in 1991 as their Hispanic outreach coordinator to recruit bilingual volunteers, create informational materials, and raise awareness. The following year, the center developed programs in Spring Branch and Southwest Houston to provide outpatient support in Spanish. HAWC created training programs in Spanish for volunteers in 1998 and for community educators in 2000.¹⁴

In 1988, HAWC received state funds for outreach in Black and Latino/a/x communities. Ada Edwards, a longtime activist and future city council member, and Arturo Eureste, a community activist and attorney, led community meetings to develop a plan for this project. This initiative created contracts with Latina- and Black-woman-owned businesses to develop television segments, public service announcements, and printed materials. In 1994, HAWC implemented outreach initiatives in Black communities and set up programs in Kashmere Gardens and Sunnyside.¹⁵

In 1993, HAWC formed a “pan-Asian task force” with Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, Pakistani, Indian, Cambodian, and Filipino community members. HAWC initiated outreach in Vietnamese communities that year, followed by outreach in Chinese communities in 1995, and the hiring of a program coordinator three years later. HAWC added hotline services in Vietnamese, Cantonese, and Mandarin in 1996, while South Asian women founded Daya to help domestic and sexual violence survivors in their communities. Daya members began volunteering with HAWC’s hotline to provide services in Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam, Punjabi, and Urdu.¹⁶

HAWC began reaching out to other groups as well. It hired a “disabilities specialist” for RCP in 1991 and connected a Telecommunication Device for the Deaf (TDD) to RCP’s hotline. Outreach to individuals with disabilities began in 1995, and to older adults two years later. In 1996, HAWC created groups for men who were survivors of sexual violence. Sonia Corrales explains that HAWC has always provided services for boys and men who have experienced or witnessed domestic and sexual violence, and it also focuses on “dispelling the myths around male survivors.” The same year, it developed groups for lesbian survivors of domestic violence and, in 1998, implemented outreach initiatives in queer communities. HAWC also has a close working relationship with the Montrose Center, an organization with programs focused on assisting LGBTQ survivors. By 2001, HAWC began working with immigration organizations to help noncitizen survivors of domestic violence self-petition for permanent residency under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 2000. Ellen Cohen began raising awareness in Jewish communities, and the shelter provided kosher “Shabbat boxes” for Orthodox Jewish women. In 2010, HAWC counselors began working with survivors in prisons.¹⁷

A study completed in 1999, after many of these initiatives were underway, stated that although HAWC’s staff was representative of the overall Houston population, “HAWC personnel do not mirror that of the clientele.” Furthermore,



Selena Quintanilla, a native Texan and the famous “Queen of Tejano Music,” joins HAWC outreach coordinator Betty Swinners at a rally in front of City Hall in the spring of 1994, just one year before she was fatally shot.

it found that “HAWC, to some degree, strives to be ‘culturally sensitive’” but, “unfortunately, sometimes these efforts fall short of the actual demands of the clientele.” The authors added, however, that given the recent implementation of “some of the more groundbreaking changes ... perhaps in a few years the effects of these changes will become more apparent.”¹⁸

HAWC’s website now states that it “embraces the feminist belief that all individuals should have equal access to political, legal, economic, and social rights” and aims “to create a community, especially for women, that embraces diversity, recognizes oppression, promotes empowerment and supports the right of all individuals to self-determination.” Furthermore, members of Incite! Women of Color Against Violence state that, “an alternative approach to ‘inclusion’ is to place women of color at the center of the analysis of and the organization against domestic violence.” Only those individuals working within the organization or utilizing HAWC’s services will ultimately be able to say whether these goals have been met.¹⁹

TAKING A PUBLIC STAND

HAWC has taken part in many demonstrations over the years that advocate for domestic violence and sexual assault survivors, abortion clinics, affordable housing, and other causes. Sonia Corrales explains that the center uses its public presence to raise awareness. HAWC has held multiple candlelight vigils where participants make a powerful statement by saying the names of individuals who have been killed. The center continues to engage in public demonstrations and uses social media campaigns to raise awareness on a larger scale.²⁰ Additionally, HAWC holds its annual Race Against Violence as a fundraiser with a five-kilometer race and children’s activities.



Cassandra Thomas addresses an audience in 1986. She held various positions including RCP director, HAWC senior vice president, and chief compliance officer, and president of the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

Cassandra Thomas spearheaded much of the battle against sexual violence on the local, state, and national level as part of HAWC from 1981 to 2019. She helped plan a 1989 demonstration after Houston Police Department (HPD) officer James Cebula received probation for raping a woman while on duty. Later that year, Thomas joined a justice committee led by community activists, including Ada Edwards and Rose Upshaw, after HPD officers murdered Black

Houstonians Ida Lee Delaney and Byron Gillum in separate incidents. In 1993, Thomas spoke against the sexual assault of Muslim Bosnian women at a demonstration organized by the Islamic Society of Greater Houston and HAWC. In 2014, her testimony before city council discredited transphobic arguments made by those opposing Houston's equal rights ordinance, explaining that "women and children are assaulted by, ninety percent of the time, men they know and trust" rather than by transgender individuals they encounter.²¹

WORKING THE MAINSTREAM CHANNELS

HAWC has also worked for reform within established institutions. In a 1982 hearing in Houston, a HAWC representative testified about rape-related issues before a task force formed by President Reagan. The next year, HAWC members participated in Women's Lobby Day in Austin, Texas, advocating for more shelters and new legislation regarding sexual assault. In 1984, following pressure applied by HAWC, local police departments assumed responsibility for carrying rape kits from hospitals to police labs, rather than requiring survivors to do so. In the mid-1980s, the center started training medical personnel on rape kit procedures and pushed for HPD to make arrests in domestic violence situations. Additionally, HAWC worked to establish a department within HPD focused on domestic violence in 1991.²²

Cohen recalls the center's lobbying efforts on behalf of

the VAWA of 1994 and other relevant legislation. HAWC, along with other women's organizations, promoted the VAWA, and Cohen was a volunteer appointee on the advisory committee that drafted the act. HAWC also helped pass state bills addressing stalking and marital rape. However, *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology* stressed in 2006 the importance of confronting state violence as well, noting that "by constantly shifting the center to communities that face intersecting forms of oppression, we gain a more comprehensive view of the strategies needed to end all forms of violence."²³

PAST REFLECTIONS AND FORWARD MOMENTUM

From Ellen Cohen's viewpoint, although HAWC was initially perceived as "rebel rockers causing problems that didn't exist," it made Houston aware of the issues of domestic and sexual violence and showed the city that something could be done. Houstonians "finally realized this wasn't a women's problem, it was a community problem."²⁴

Without HAWC, Sonia Corrales observes, the number of deaths would be much higher, and issues like domestic and sexual abuse and sex trafficking would rarely be discussed. She believes HAWC has impacted Houston by amplifying "the voice of survivors, which is ... one of the most important voices that you will ever hear," and asserts that "without the survivor voice, then you can't really create meaningful change in our community."²⁵

In 2020, as cases of COVID-19 soared in the United States, the need for services to help those in abusive situations grew greater than ever. Chau Nguyen, HAWC's chief public strategies officer, says that "home is not always the safest place during a pandemic ... calls to our domestic violence hotline have surged." She adds, "We need survivors to know that help is available, they're not alone."²⁶

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Staff at the residential campus line the staircase during Sexual Assault Awareness Month in April 2020.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Area Women's Center.