

2017 DC WOMEN'S NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT—EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Women's Task Force of the District of Columbia Interagency Council on Homelessness

On a given night, 882 unaccompanied women are experiencing homelessness in the District of Columbia. Recognizing that their experiences differ from those of men or of women in families, the DC Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH) Women's Task Force, together with The Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness (TCP), led the first-ever survey research project to gain a deeper understanding of the characteristics, experiences and needs of these unaccompanied women who are homeless. The women's community including women's homeless services providers, victim's services providers, advocates, and a range of other stakeholders engaged in the design and implementation of this project. Highlighting the trauma and violence faced by women, the *2017 DC Women's Needs Assessment Report* will inform policy and resource planning by the District's ICH.

This brief summarizes the findings of the *2017 DC Women's Assessment Report*. The full report provides the assessment methodology as well as a complete overview of the outcomes of the full survey research conducted in the homeless services and domestic violence systems that serve unaccompanied women in DC.

What Do We Know about Unaccompanied Women who are Homeless?

The survey research results are consistent with Point-in-Time Count 2017 data and offer a more detailed description of women who are homeless.

- **Black/African American women make up the largest share of women who are homeless (75%),** a rate disproportionate to the DC population where they are only 52% of the adult women. This statistic ties to the *National Women's Law Center's* work showing that African American women in DC also experience the highest rates of poverty (25.9%) as compared to women overall (18.2%).
- **The median age of women is 52 years;** women at the higher end of the age range face greater barriers for securing income through employment, with half or less currently looking for and/or applying for jobs.
- **Approximately 20% of women identified as LGBTQ+.** This rate is high when considering that the total LGBTQ population in DC is 10.7%. The survey did not include a question about gender identity, but was designed to capture information from any person who identifies as a woman and experiences homeless services as a woman regardless of sex at birth and from those who were unsure or questioning their gender identity.
- **Almost one-quarter (24%) of the women surveyed are unsheltered or in unsafe housing.** While there are women across all ages not currently in homeless or domestic violence programs, the highest rates are among young women under 24 or senior women over 62.

- **Women are experiencing high rates of chronic homelessness with 72%** having been without housing for a year or longer or having had a least four episodes of housing loss in last three years.

What Specific Findings have Implications for the Homeless and Domestic Violence Systems?

The *2017 DC Women's Needs Assessment Report* points to several issues requiring immediate attention if we are to address women's most critical needs.

- **Nearly one-third of women in the study indicate that violence is the cause of their homelessness or housing instability.** This is almost three times the rate reported in the 2017 Point-in-Time Count. *The Domestic Violence Counts 2015: A 24-hour census of domestic violence shelter and services report* issued by the National Network to End Domestic Violence notes that on just one day in 2015 over sixty-three percent (63%) of the unmet requests by women fleeing domestic violence were for housing. "Emergency shelter and transitional housing continue to be the most urgent unmet needs for domestic violence survivors."
- **Women are extremely vulnerable to continued violence while they are homeless. Almost two-thirds (63%) of women with histories of violence and trauma also report at least one act of violence against them during this current period of homelessness or housing instability.** This suggests that there is not a significant distinction between women fleeing violence and seeking housing through either the domestic violence or homeless services systems. Women's experiences of violence or threats to their safety include domestic and intimate partner violence (emotional, physical or sexual abuse), violence perpetrated by a parent, guardian or other relative (emotional, physical or sexual abuse), dating violence or stalking.
- **Mental illness (72%) and substance abuse (31%) are primary challenges for women.** While many women are engaged in mental health treatment, 41% of women with current substance abuse are not receiving treatment services.
- **There are direct links between experiences of violence/trauma and mental illness and substance addiction.** Eighty-six (86%) of women with mental illness report past experiences of violence/trauma. Of women reporting substance abuse, 87% of them are also survivors of violence/trauma. Women's historic and current experiences of violence indicate the critical need for trauma informed care training and standards as well as specific trauma services for women.
- **Women experiencing homelessness have higher odds of engaging in survival sex than the population at large.** Twenty-nine percent (29%) of women surveyed have engaged in survival sex during their lifetimes. Additionally, 28% report being forced, threatened or pressured into performing a sex act with another person, and 36% of those women have been trafficked.

- **When women reflect on what they need, the list includes less crowding and more availability of shelter and housing as well as safer and healthier conditions in housing programs.** They express a desire for gender specific services – particularly for health care, day program/services, and mental health services. These broad concerns for safety tie to the trauma and violence experiences noted above.
- **Women are actively engaged in ending their homelessness** with sixty-five percent (65%) looking for housing and fifty-nine percent (59%) having applied for housing. Half of the women are seeking employment and approximately 20% are waiting on their eligibility determination for benefits. Access and regular use of health services is high, likely a result of good availability of health insurance in DC.

Conclusion

Women are clear about what they need. They need safe housing that better meets their specific challenges of trauma, mental illness, and/or substance abuse. Housing options must include emergency shelter for when they are fleeing domestic violence or facing immediate homelessness as well as service-enriched transitional housing and permanent supportive housing to support their efforts to end their homelessness. Programs must work from a trauma-informed model and need to provide specific trauma services. To gain sustainable income, women need access to employment and training opportunities. To build solid and healthy futures, they want access to mental health services, day programs, treatment services and health care where they feel safe. Housing and services must be designed to meet the needs of all women including women of color, young women, senior women, lesbian and bisexual women, transgender women and non-binary and gender nonconforming individuals.

Without additional resources to address these critical needs, women will continue to be highly vulnerable to violence and trauma and long bouts of homelessness. This report points to real opportunities to strengthen women's homeless and domestic violence systems, offering women chances to make important changes in their lives and elevating the effectiveness of our whole system.