



DOWNTOWN **WOMEN'S** CENTER  
Every woman housed

**House Financial Services Committee: Field Hearing on Homelessness Testimony**

**August 14, 2019**

Good morning members of the House Financial Services Committee. My name is Erika Hartman and I am the Chief Program Officer of the Downtown Women's Center. For over 40 years the Downtown Women's center has been providing housing and vital services to women in the Skid Row area of Los Angeles, and today serves over 4,000 women per year County-wide. In recent years we have seen homelessness in Los Angeles rise to unprecedented levels, and according to the 2019 Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) Point in Time Count (PIT), in Skid Row, the number of women increased by 3%, while county wide it increased by 13%, reaching 18,337 individual women. Homelessness among women is increasing nationally as well, according to the department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) PIT 2017–2018, the number of women experiencing homelessness increased by 3%; across the Nation, on any given night 216,211 women are experiencing homelessness. Women comprise 39% of individuals experiencing homelessness, and 106,871 (49%) are women experiencing homelessness as individuals and do not qualify for services for families (HUD PIT 2017–2018).

The Downtown Women's Center exists because we recognize that women are a subpopulation of people experiencing homelessness and have corresponding unique needs. Homelessness is a dangerous and traumatic experience for women. Women living on the streets are a uniquely vulnerable population requiring specific attention and resources. For this reason, we continue to advocate for HUD to officially recognize women as a unique subpopulation. Over the past few years, the federal government has worked to address the unique needs of specific subpopulations within the overall homeless population, including, veterans, families, youth, and the chronically homeless. Data has shown that this targeting of resources, is much more effective in reducing numbers than a "one-size-fits-all" approach. One group that has not been identified as a subpopulation is unaccompanied women. Unaccompanied women are individuals who are not accompanied by children or dependents and who do not qualify for family resources. By not distinguishing unaccompanied women as a subpopulation we continue to see insufficient funding allocated to effectively address their homelessness, and to ensure that their unique needs are factored into service delivery. As examples of the unique

vulnerabilities faced by unaccompanied women, across both the sheltered and unsheltered population, individual women were over four times more likely to be chronically homeless and nearly twice as likely to have a mental illness, compared with women in families (LAHSA PIT 2018).

We are calling on our elected officials, as well as the administration of HUD, to classify unaccompanied women as a recognized subpopulation within the overall homeless population, and to provide appropriate guidance and resources to communities to deal with this large and growing population, including requiring the use of evidence-based practices such as Trauma-Informed Care.

Making this distinction could play a pivotal role in moving the needle on the issue of women's homelessness, most notably by 1) increasing data and research; 2) targeting services and housing towards women; and 3) requiring that gender competency, and program evaluation, be a criterion to receiving funding for housing and service provision:

- 1.** Having national data on women's homelessness is an essential step to developing targeted, and thereby more effective, approaches to ending homelessness. A first step would be to require Continuums of Care to track and report data on women, including:
  - a. Tracking and reporting data disaggregated by gender in the PIT Homeless Count
  - b. Disaggregating by gender data from the demographic surveys conducted alongside the PIT Homeless Count
  - c. Adding questions specific to women and their experience of trauma and services in the demographic surveys conducted alongside the PIT Homeless Count
  - d. Reporting on gender parity of housing placements using the Homeless Management Information System data
  
- 2.** Ensuring housing and services are being targeted toward women is critical to reducing homelessness among this subpopulation. Acknowledging the unique vulnerabilities faced by women, such as exposure to violence, could be included into the vulnerability scoring of individuals entered into the Coordinated Entry System (CES), for example:
  - a. Gender alone could be factored into vulnerability scoring
  - b. Gender paired with a past experience of trauma or violence could be factored into vulnerability scoring

3. Requiring communities to strategically address women's homelessness would result in improved and increased services to this undeserved population, and should be factored into funding decision. HUD could require applicants to demonstrate how they are effectively addressing the unique needs of unaccompanied women experiencing homeless, as part of their criteria for funding decisions. A sample question for inclusion in funding applications could be, *"How does your project or program address gender-specific needs?"*

At the Downtown Women's Center, we serve anyone who identifies as female or was identified female at birth, and for this reason, we are strong advocates for maintaining the Equal Access rule without changes; but would otherwise support House Bill H.R. 3018 - Ensuring Equal Access to Shelter Act of 2019. In the data gathered in the 2016 Downtown Women's Needs Assessment, spearheaded by the Downtown Women's Center, we found that women experiencing homelessness on Skid Row identify as LGBTQ+ at a rate of 15.4%, with 7.8% identifying as transgender, compared with 3.4% of American adults who self-identify as LGBTQ+, according to the Williams Institute. For this reason, we feel strongly about the importance of ensuring equal protections to all individuals in accessing homeless services.

In the Downtown Women's Needs Assessment, we also found that more than 90 percent of women residing in Skid Row had experienced some form of violence during their lifetime, including 68% who had experienced child abuse, and 55% who have experienced domestic violence. Data taken from Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool scores, from across the country between 2015-2018, and analyzed by the California Policy Lab, found that 80% of unsheltered women report that abuse or trauma is the cause of their current spell of homelessness, which is over 40% higher than the sheltered population of men and women, as well as over 40% higher than unsheltered men. This same data set found that, unsheltered Latinas are especially vulnerable and are 10%-15% more likely than other races or ethnicities to be impacted by negative relationships, legal barriers to housing, and risk of exploitation.

For this reason, we support H.R. 6545 - Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2018 to provide vital protections and programs that support survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, stalking, and human trafficking. The House Financial Services Committee's support of H.R. 6545 advances the enactment of new improvements, including, strengthening housing protections for survivors, supporting expansions of prevention and education programs; and closing loopholes to reduce gun violence related to domestic violence; all of which are of critical importance to homelessness prevention and intervention for women. We are also advocating for the release of additional funds from the Victims of Crime

Act Fund (VOCA): Over 4,000 agencies rely on VOCA to provide services to nearly 4 million crime victims annually. We urge Congress to release \$2.6 billion from the VOCA fund.

As we know, women in the military experience high rates of sexual harassment and assault, making them vulnerable to retaliation and targets for “Other than Honorable” (OTH) discharges. 10% of homeless veterans have received OTH discharges, and while they are eligible for Supportive Services for Veteran Families and Grant Per Diem, which focuses on short-term, crisis intervention when providing homelessness prevention and rapid rehousing, they are not eligible to receive Housing and Urban Development – Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD- VASH) program vouchers, “which provides permanent supportive housing assistance for homeless veterans, prioritizing chronically homeless and highly vulnerable veterans, who have a high level of housing and service needs, such as those with high barriers to employment and self-sufficiency” (National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH)). For this reason, we ask for the House Financial Services Committee’s support in advancing H.R. 2398 – Expanding Eligibility for HUD-VASH to Military Personnel Discharged with an “Other than Honorable” Basis.

Even with the level of risks that we know women face on the streets, according to the 2019 LAHSA PIT count, 64% of women experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles City were unsheltered, meaning they are sleeping on the streets, in parks, vehicles, and in other places not fit for human habitation. In the 2019 Housing Gap Analysis, a new report produced by the Downtown Women’s Center, in collaboration with the City of Los Angeles and University of Southern California, which surveyed women experiencing homelessness across Los Angeles City, to assess their demographics, housing status and most urgent service needs, we found alarmingly low rates of available shelter. Of the 4,842 women across Los Angeles seeking emergency shelter each night, just one in every 12 is able to access a shelter bed. Currently, the existing supply of shelter beds is inadequate to house even a small fraction of this subpopulation that experiences violence and life-threatening conditions on a regular basis. In Los Angeles City, there are an estimated 799 emergency shelter beds available to individual adults, of those, only 405 total are available to individual women. Unsheltered women are more likely, at a rate of 57%, to have experienced domestic violence, compared with sheltered women, who report exposure to domestic violence at a rate of 37%. Additionally, VI-SPDAT data has also shown that on average, unsheltered women remain without stable housing for 14-16 years, compared to an average of 5 years for unsheltered men. For this reason, we must address the problem of homelessness by both providing more shelter and increasing access to affordable housing, with targeted attention to the unique needs of women.

It is not surprising that health and mortality rates are significantly impacted by homelessness. Women who are unsheltered age close to 20 years faster than their housed counterparts. Since

2014 homelessness in Los Angeles County has increased by 39%, but the rate at which homeless people are dying on the street has increased by 76%. According to an analysis of county coroner data by Kaiser Health News, in Los Angeles County, between 2014-2018 the number of deaths among homeless women more than doubled. While the life expectancy for women is typically longer than for men, in California in 2016 life expectancy for housed women was 83 and 79 for housed men, women experiencing homelessness have a shorter life expectancy than men. In 2016, in Los Angeles County, the average age of death for women experiencing homelessness was 48, compared with 51 for homeless men. For this reason, it is crucial that H.R.1978 – Fighting Homelessness with Services and Housing Act, receives the necessary support from the House Financial Services Committee, to ensure that the Health Resources and Services Administration department provides grants that address the need for comprehensive health care for homeless individuals. We also hope to see more House Members cosponsor and move forward with H.R. 3272 – Services for Ending Long Term Homelessness Act to provide much needed resources through grants from the Department of Health and Human Services, to serve people with “physical or mental health conditions or substance use disorders,” and provide health care and supportive housing.

A lack of housing affordability, and unemployment or underemployment is the most significant driver into homelessness in Los Angeles (2019 LAHSA PIT Count). The 2019 LAHSA PIT count found that among individuals experiencing homelessness, 53% identified “Economic Hardship” as the cause of their homelessness. In Los Angeles, since 2013, we have seen rents increase by over 30% during the same period of time that income has gone down by 3%. Income inequity bares especially hard on women who even in 2019 continue to make only \$0.79 for each dollar earned by men. Women of color are most significantly impacted by income inequity and earn on average \$21,000 – \$26,000 less per year compared to White men. The 2019 LAHSA PIT count highlighted the vast disproportionality by race of individuals experiencing homelessness, with 33.3% of homeless individuals in Los Angeles County identifying as African Americans, compare to 8.3% of the general population County-wide. We know that disproportionality in homelessness is not a coincidence and is the result of institutional racism: people of color are paid less and offered fewer jobs, putting them at greater risk for housing instability, and also experience significant discrimination in the criminal justice system. The lack of off-ramps from incarceration and into jobs and housing have left many people of color unable to exit the cycle of homelessness. African American women are the most significantly impacted by histories of incarceration when seeking employment. The Prison Policy Initiative reports that unemployment for African American women in reentry is 43.6%, compared with 35.2% for African American men, 23.2% for White women, and 18.4% for White men. People of color have fewer opportunities to access a quality education or quality healthcare due to systemic divestment from their communities. All of these factors contribute to the crisis of homelessness. We must be explicit in our discussion of the racial dimensions of homelessness for women if we are to address the disproportionate rates at which people of color are falling into homelessness. Although more could be revealed about the experience of homeless women

of color and those facing housing instability, through existing data collected by the HUD required Homelessness Information Management System, currently, no national breakdown based on race or ethnicity for women experiencing homelessness exists.

We do know that individual female households are more likely to be “rent-burdened” (paying more than 30% of their incomes on housing costs) and “extremely rent-burdened” (paying more than 50% of their incomes on housing costs), compared to other renter households. Additionally, nearly 70% of households comprised of women living alone were considered to be, at a minimum, rent burdened in 2016, meaning more than 30% of their income went toward housing (2019 Housing Gap Analysis).

Women comprise a significant portion of single parent households and stand to be impacted by the HUD proposed changes to the Mixed Status rule, forcing families to choose between their loved ones and homelessness, based on the individual immigration status of their family members. For this reason, in the event that HUD moves forward with the proposed change to the Mixed Status rule, we support H.R. 2763 - Keeping Families Together Act, to prevent 25,000 households (11,000 of which are in Los Angeles) from facing imminent eviction.

Homelessness is a matter of resources, and individuals with resources are better equipped to surmount the primary drivers into homelessness and have a better chance of being able to exit. For that reason, ongoing support of H.R. 3163 – Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act 2020 is essential to ending homelessness; we need at least \$3 billion dollars for Homeless Assistance grants for fiscal year 2020. In a similar vein, H.R. 1856 – The Ending Homelessness Act of 2019 would provide vital resources to communities working to address the homeless crisis. The rate at which people are falling into homelessness is outpacing the rate at which they are exiting, and the \$2.65 billion investment over five years would significantly increase the likelihood that organizations serving the homeless will have the opportunity to get ahead of the curve in meeting the need.

Permanent Authorization of HUD’s McKinney – Vento Act and elimination of the sunset clause for the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness are important steps towards ending the homeless crisis. We are at a point where we can no longer rely on “discretionary” spending and need to protect our progress and gain more ground through “mandatory” spending, with the flexibility to meet the unique needs of Continuums of Care. The House Financial Services Committee’s support of this bill has moved us in the right direction to solidify this critically significant legislation and we hope to see more “House Members cosponsor this bill, as an indication of support for funding effective homeless interventions to the scale needed” (NAEH).

At the Downtown Women’s Center, we envision a Los Angeles with every woman housed and on a path to personal stability. It is our mission to end homelessness for women in greater Los Angeles through housing, wellness, employment, and advocacy. We will push to end women’s homelessness and ensure that every woman is housed, by continuing our work to improve

access to both short- and long-term forms of supportive housing and services across every neighborhood of Los Angeles County.