Homeless

Continued from Page 1A

single-parent households are headed by women, according to U.S. Census data.

Women also tend to defy other demographic stereotypes for homelessness.

According to the homeless data for Marion and Polk counties, the majority of the local women surveyed were between the ages of 35 and 44 and white. More than 1,100 reported having a disabling condition.

Of the women surveyed, about 37% identified as chronically homeless — defined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development as a person with a disabling condition who has been continuously homeless for a year or more, or who had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years.

Multiple factors can thrust people into homelessness. Local homelessness experts point to a lack of affordable housing, mental health, substance abuse or addiction and loss of a job due to the COVID-19 pandemic as some of the reasons.

But when asked, they were unable to say why homeless women outnumber their male counterparts in this area of the country. Local homeless advocates did say they believe women, in general, may be more likely than men to report that they need assistance.

"The road from sheltered to homeless has never been shorter. There are so many different variables that could thrust somebody into homelessness just like that," Robert Marshall, program manager for ARCHES, said.

'I was just scared'

After leaving an abusive home as a teenager, Nickole Diaz struggled with drug addiction for more than a decade. She lost her home and her relationship with her kids.

"I just hit rock bottom, and I was staying on the streets in my car," she said.

Born and raised in Salem, Diaz kept working while she was homeless.

As a woman, she felt particularly vulnerable to violence while homeless. When she slept, she parked outside Salem Hospital, surrounded by other cars so she felt safer. Other times, she tried to stay in groups.

"There were times where I would put myself in dangerous situations because of not wanting to be alone," she said. "Because I was just scared, there were many nights where I was around people I shouldn't have been around. The fact was, there was a group of people and it was better than being alone in my car, especially at night for a female."

While the exact reasons why homeless women outnumber men in the area remain unclear, there is broad agreement that domestic violence is a significant contributor. According to the homeless survey, 67% of women in their coordinated entry system are domestic violence survivors.Of those, 18% are actively fleeing domestic violence.

"One of the leading causes of homelessness for women and children is domestic violence," Jayne Downing, executive director of Center for Hope and Safety, Salem's only domestic violence shelter, said. "Unfortunately, that has been true for many, many years."

Breezy Aguirre, ARCHES associate director, said this group also tends to experience longer lengths of homelessness, possibly because leaving domestic violence often also means leaving friends and other individuals in their support network.

Abuse from partners, parents and other family members can leave massive trauma. And those leaving abusive households are often left with nothing. Every year, hundreds of people, mostly women but not entirely, seek refuge at Center for Hope and Safety.

The center doesn't solely offer shelter services, but most people seeking help need temporary or permanent housing.

Downing said those recovering and fleeing from violence are often part of the invisible homeless community. Some are staying with family and friends. Some are sleeping in cars. Others return to their abusers after struggling on their own.

Last year, they had more than 33,000 contacts to their program. The need increased during the pandemic, when closures trapped some people at home with their abusers. Downing said in the early days of the pandemic, they saw an 83% increase in requests for shelter.Every bed was full, and some families doubled up.

The center itself has about 40 beds. They do not have a waiting list system and use motels in emergency situations.

"We have filled up quickly, even with the motel, and have been at capacity recently," Downing said. "We always try and figure out a safe option with survivors, even if our shelters are at capacity."

Downing said abuse can also leave lasting emotional trauma, leading some to struggle to stabilize enough to move out of homelessness. It also puts women at increased risk of being abused again.

Homeless and targeted

Living outside can make people targets of violence.

"Women are especially vulnerable to sexual assault if they are homeless," Downing said. "They are even being recruited for trafficking — trading food or lodging for sex."

Aguirre said they are seeing a lot more aggression towards women who attempt to live outside in the larger encampments. Unsheltered women have reported being sexually assaulted, robbed and attacked.

Many seek out places like the ARCHES day center and SafeSleep United shelter, for protection from both the outside elements — rain, snow and cold — and violence.

The ARCHES Project, part of the Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency, offers referrals, housing placements and basic services to individuals experiencing homelessness and housing instability.

SafeSleep United, part of United Way of the Mid-Willamette Valley, is an overnight shelter that provides a secure place for women to sleep and eat. The shelter partners with Inside Out Ministries and is open every night from 6 p.m. to 7:30 a.m. The shelter can accommodate up to 19 women. As of April 13, 18 women were at the shelter. Beds are available on a first-come, first-served basis.

"They're seeking out services such as ARCHES as safe-havens," Aguirre said.

ARCHES has seen an uptick in the number of women they serve, a trend she partially attributed to their outreach efforts.

By diversifying their staff and putting more women, BIPOC and bilingual staff out in the field, they are able to connect with people they never would have reached before, she said.

"Fear has paralyzed this population, fear of being vulnerable, fear of being victimized, fear of the unknown," Aguirre said.

Diaz remembered hearing about Simonka Place, the Union Gospel Mission's women's shelter in Keizer, from someone she was using drugs with. When she first got there, she still had a job and her drug addiction. She shrugged off suggestions to enroll in Simonka's recovery program.

But when she lost her job, staff questioned her: Now that you've lost your job, what's holding you back?

She didn't have an answer. She enrolled in counseling, fellowship and other classes to help her move past addiction and homelessness.

Diaz found a job providing adult and mental health care. She lived at Simonka for another year to pay off $18,000 in debt. She's been sober for three years and is almost entirely debt-free, and moved into an apartment in March.

"From the day I walked into this place, I felt seen," Diaz said. "People call me by my name. Not many people on the streets knew my name."

'We have older and older women becoming homeless'

Lynelle Wilcox, who manages SafeSleep United, said women who end up homeless due to an illness, mental disabilities, injury or death of a loved one also often go unnoticed in the community. And in many cases, these are older women.

"Any of these could happen to any of us ... and if you don't have the means to earn enough money to get a room or a place of your own and the support you need, you just end up in this gap," Wilcox said. "If a woman is often struggling to make ends meet, any little thing, like a car repair, sets you back."

Pennie Vandewarkerhansen lost her part-time job at Intel in Hillsboro after breaking her arm. She moved into a 55 and older mobile home community in Beaverton.

Vandewarkerhansen is deaf.Her daughter, Jeana, moved in to take care of her after her arm injury. But the pair were kicked out due to Jeana's age and struggle with a methamphetamine addiction.

With no prospects for affordable housing, Vandewarkerhansen, 62, shuffled between friends' couches and living in her car before ARCHES rented her a room at the Shilo Inn Suites Hotel in Salem in February 2021.

Vandewarkerhansen transitioned to SafeSleep in June when a bed became available.

Vandewarkerhansen eats breakfast at the shelter and is out by 7:30 a.m. During the day, she goes to Riverfront Park or Fred Meyer grocery store. And when it gets cold, she spends time at her friend Barbara's house in northeast Salem. She spends much of the day video chatting from her phone with friends who also use sign language.

Vandewarkerhansen typically packs her own lunch: lunch meats, yogurt and apple sauce. She feeds her service dog, Ricki, dog food from a collapsible Tupperware container and returns to the shelter by 6 p.m. for dinner.

In early April, Vandewarkerhansen temporarily moved out of the shelter and into her car because of a struggle to breathe due to a cat allergy. SafeSleep allows pets. But she returned to the shelter about a week later because of the cold spell in the Mid-Valley.

Vandewarkerhansen said all she wants is a place to call her own — a home to take care of Ricki and work on beading projects, a hobby she's been doing since age 17.

"That's my dream," she said. "I want a place to live very badly so I can do my favorite craft again."

Vanderwarkerhansen is working with ARCHES on housing options and is currently on a waiting list to get connected to potential housing programs in the area.

She lives off her social security, pension, as well as her deceased spouse's-benefits. But with costs, including her phone bill, storage and bills from when she was hospitalized with COVID-19 last November, she said it's hard to get ahead.

According to the homeless survey, an estimated 266 women living unsheltered in the Mid-Willamette Valley are over the age of 55 — about 20% of the total population of homeless women in the area.

Wilcox sees many of these women at the shelter.

The goal of SafeSleep is to give women a place to sleep safely without being afraid of getting assaulted. The shelter also offers some additional assistance, including helping women get IDs, birth certificates and write resumes.

But Wilcox said there is not enough support for aging women in the community, particularly caregivers or other support to help them live independently.

"We have older and older women becoming homeless," she said. "It's understandable if your loved one dies and they were the breadwinner, if violence happens and you can't stay anymore. That can happen at any age."

Living on the brink of homelessness

The rising cost of living can push those on the fringes into homeless — and keep those living unsheltered from moving out of it.

Multiple service providers pointed to the region's housing crisis as a hurdle to women facing homelessness.

The tight housing market has pushed up rents to record highs. Rents and home prices are increasing faster than wages.

In the past decade, Salem has climbed from being the 85th most affordable housing market nationally to the bottom of the ranking — 213 out of 238 cities. When comparing home prices to wages, Salem has become less affordable than even Portland.

Most landlords require tenants to earn three times their rent, plus pay significant deposits and application fees. Women may face additional barriers coming up with that money.

The gender wage gap has remained steady for the past decade. According to Pew Research Center analysis, women earned 84% of what men earned in 2020.

Child care continues to be scarce and expensive. Marion and Polk counties are child care deserts, with more than three children for every child care slot. Infant and toddler care can cost more than college tuition.

Abusive partners can leave survivors addicted to drugs, with criminal records, eviction histories or obliterated finances. This means even once people leave, they can struggle to qualify and afford their own apartment.

Even those with government assistance like disability or social security can struggle to make ends meet. Marshall said people over 55 who don't have savings typically get $800 to $1,200 a month in social security. When rent averages about $1,000, those funds won't cover the cost of living.

"People who are on a fixed income, it's almost impossible for them to get ahead," he said.

Almost 4,000 people are waiting for affordable one-bedroom apartments with the Salem Housing Authority, and many more linger on similar waitlists for housing in the city.

The wait time for these lists range from 18 months to eight years.

More services, like rental assistance and affordable housing, are becoming available, Downing said. The Center for Hope and Safety is set to break ground later in April on a 20-apartment Hope Plaza affordable housing complex in downtown Salem.

"I think we're moving in the right direction, but there's just not enough yet," she said.

Staff at St. Francis Family Housing, which provides shelter, transitional housing and rental assistance for families with children under age 18 in Marion and Polk counties, said the pandemic highlighted how close to the brink of homelessness many families were. The pandemic led to losses in income, shuttered businesses and unreliable and unaffordable childcare that could quickly spiral into unpaid rent and eviction.

"Once that disruption is there, it creates this gap," Jill Tucker, St. Francis's development director, said. "They really are never able close that gap. They hold on as long as they can. But once the gap really becomes an unreachable chasm, they're unable to make that jump and fall into homelessness."

The tents people see downtown, Tucker said, are a systemic failure by federal, state and local governments 40 years in the making. And the people camped outside are only a more visible sign of the homelessness crisis.

"I think it's important to mention that the women with children, you don't see them," Tucker said. "They're the invisible homeless. They're not on the corner with a sign. They're not pushing a cart."

They are doubled up, sometimes in unsafe places, doing what they have to do to keep their kids indoors at night, she said. They are working and sleeping in their cars. They are waiting for a housing voucher or shelter space.

Kim Lemman, St. Francis's executive

See HOMELESS, Page 4A