



PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT

Maggie Lorenz-Todd looks out from the bedroom of her Portland home. "We're going to do everything and anything we can to not be outside at night. It's survival."

Sex, lies and homelessness

Portland advocates for the homeless and women's rights join forces to tackle sexual assault on the streets

BY ALEX ZIELINSKI
STAFF WRITER

When DeWanna Harris first walked through the doors of Transition Projects five years ago, she was at the end of her rope.

"I was so, so tired of life just tearing me up," Harris, a Portland native, says.

Harris, who had been hopping between West Coast cities for a year, homeless and dealing with a sexually abusive partner, had finally found her way back to her hometown. And she was ready for a change.

The shelter assisted Harris with finding a home, a job and other social support, but at the time it lacked a service that had been overlooked nationally in homeless shelters for decades: sexual abuse screening.

"It makes sense. The first thing shelters want to do is get you housed and sober. Counseling wasn't a priority," says Harris, who now is a mentor at Transition Projects. says. "I didn't even realize how affected I was by my abuse at the time."

Although it's a national problem— and perhaps a leading trigger of homelessness — sexual abuse in the homeless community is a topic most have avoided tackling because of its complexity and financial hurdles. Until now.

After watching a constant stream of sexually abused homeless clients come

through Transition Projects, Director Doreen Binder is making the issue a priority, both nationally and locally.

"Over the years of working in both women's and homeless shelters, I've realized that there is a constant thread that runs through both communities," Binder says. "That core issue is sexual assault. And it's been ignored."

Binder says it's not the victim's responsibility to speak up, but society's.

"Many homeless people use sexual encounters to save themselves, whether it be for money or for mere warmth," she says. "And in most cases, it's not what they'd want to be doing if they weren't homeless. They don't have the choice."

So, when victims reach a homeless shelter, many don't bring up their past sexual encounters. To some, it may simply seem part of living on the streets, and something to forget.

For three years, Binder, along with Jessie Mindlin, a friend and director of training at the Victim Rights Law Center, has been working to combat Multnomah County's lack of attention to sexual abuse issues in the homeless sphere — a first-of-its-kind project.

Their approach is to create training videos for homeless shelter employees nationwide on immediately screening individuals for sexual abuse. This pre-admittance screening step could unveil an array of vital information on what causes

sexual abuse and how it can be curbed.

"We're addressing this more openly than we ever have before," Binder says. "It's time to bring this invisible war out in the open."

Although the pair's efforts will shine a needed light on the problem, why has it taken so long to get to this point?

There certainly isn't a lack of need to intervene to help victims. According to a National Alliance to End Homelessness study, "State of Homelessness in America 2012," 637,017 people experienced homelessness in 2011, with 17,254 in Oregon alone. A 2003 case study of the homeless population in San Francisco found an average of 32.5 percent of homeless people to be victims of physical or sexual assault. Additionally, a 2010 National Conference of State Legislatures fact sheet showed that 17 percent of all homeless youth were victims of sexual abuse at home.

Portlander Maggie Lorenz-Todd's rocky journey through homelessness and prostitution echoes these numbers. At age 11, Lorenz-Todd ran away from her California home after being raped, an incident her single mother refused to believe. Within months, Lorenz-Todd was working as a prostitute for abusive pimps; she was addicted to an array of drugs and regularly tossed in and out of juvenile hall.

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