

Home safe home: Why abuse often leads to homelessness

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A survivor called our 24-hour crisis line asking for emergency shelter. She was fleeing from her abuser, who had found her at her sister's house and assaulted her so badly she ended up in the hospital. "Unfortunately, we have no shelter space available, and she has nowhere to go."

These harrowing words came from a domestic violence service provider who was trying to help a survivor of domestic violence find her best option to safely leave her abusive partner.

For so many survivors like the woman mentioned above, the best available options may be deciding whether it's safer to stay in the abusive relationship or become homeless.

The dynamics of domestic violence make it clear why violence against women is a primary cause of homelessness. Often, abusive partners will isolate survivors from family and friends, leaving the survivor few resources for support. An abusive partner often knows, or can easily find out, where the survivor's loved ones live, making friends' and families' homes unsafe places to stay. The abusive partner often controls money and resources within the home, so a survivor may not have access to her bank account or her ID. Without these resources, it can be extremely difficult for a survivor to rent a new apartment or to even rent a motel room for the night. For survivors living at poverty levels already, the situation is even more dire.

Thankfully, Oregon has a strong network of domestic and sexual violence services that help people experiencing violence find safety and rebuild their lives through

shelter, safety planning, counseling, medical accompaniment, and legal advocacy. Each year, thousands of Oregon survivors and their children get on the path to safety and stability because they can access this vital support.

Unfortunately, each year there are still thousands of requests for services that cannot be met due to funding shortages. Domestic violence shelters in Oregon are almost always full to capacity. According to the 2013 Domestic Violence Counts Oregon Summary, on just one day in September 2013, survivors made 210 requests for safe shelter that couldn't be met because of a lack of funding. That equals almost nine unmet requests every hour.

When shelter beds and motel vouchers are unavailable, domestic violence service providers work with survivors to come up with the safest option possible. In Multnomah County, some domestic and sexual violence advocates have had no choice but to recommend that survivors and their children ride the MAX light rail all night or sleep at the airport. Programs in rural communities face similar challenges—not only to provide enough safe emergency shelter, but also to find resources to transport the survivor away from her abuser and out of danger. While domestic violence programs don't always know what decisions a survivor makes when services aren't available, many survivors tell programs what decisions they'll make. The 2013 Domestic Violence Counts Oregon Summary found that due to lack of housing, many domestic violence programs report that survivors are forced to return to their abuser, become homeless, or that the families are forced to live in their cars.

Fortunately, this grim situation has become a bit brighter thanks to smart budget decisions made during the 2014 legislative session. Legislators decided to

invest additional funding into the Emergency Housing Account and State Homeless Assistance Program, which provide short-term assistance to help prevent or end homelessness. This vital funding can be used by counties to help people who are fleeing domestic violence quickly enter safe, stable housing. Because of this funding increase, 1,300 Oregonians, many of whom are survivors of domestic or sexual violence, will have a safe place to stay.

These types of services are essential for survivors of domestic and sexual violence to begin rebuilding their lives. A domestic violence program in Multnomah County recently evaluated the effectiveness of safe housing and domestic violence support in helping survivors find and maintain safety and stability. The SHARE study found a substantial increase in survivors' safety after accessing services: prior to receiving services, 85 percent of women were assessed to be in extreme or severe danger, but after receiving services, less than 10 percent were reported to be in extreme or severe danger. At 18 months after receiving assistance, 82 percent of survivors were living in safe, stable housing.

Partnership for Safety and Justice was honored to support the Housing Alliance's efforts to increase funding to prevent homelessness during the 2014 session. We look forward to the day when all Oregonians have a safe place to call home.

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PARTNERSHIP FOR SAFETY and JUSTICE

Kerry Naughton is the director of the Crime Survivors Program for the Partnership for Safety and Justice. PSJ is a statewide, non-profit advocacy organization dedicated to making Oregon's approach to crime and public safety more effective and just.



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Multnomah County Chair Candidates Forum

When: Tuesday, April 1st, Noon-1:30pm

Where: Eliot Chapel, First Unitarian Church, 1011 SW 12th Ave.

Moderated by Kerry Tymchuk

Multnomah Districts 1 and 2 Candidates forum

When: Wednesday, April 16th, 6:30-8:30 pm

Where: Kaiser Permanente's Town Hall, 3704 N Interstate Ave.

Moderated by Maxine Fitzpatrick