

SHELTER, from page 8

have no other option than to keep a weapon for protection. Kate kept a knife, and now keeps a taser. Another anonymous woman currently taking shelter at SAFES kept multiple knives and pepper spray when she was sleeping on the streets.

In the city's survey, almost half of homeless women reported being affected in some way by domestic violence. In addition to the emotional toll, it leaves women actively fleeing domestic violence situations vulnerable to their abusers.

"A lot of these women have abusers and not good histories going on, and sometimes those histories kind of show up in the neighborhood," SAFES Program Manager Anna Cale said. "Community safety is something that we really try to talk to the women about and support them with."

These histories are one of the reasons SAFES is staffed almost exclusively by women.

"I think it's important for them to have women help them to show them that they can achieve and they can overcome as well," Basilio said. "Women can be independent, successful and self-sufficient in our community."

Basilio and the team at SAFES is actively celebrating that image, raising the profile of not only the shelter services, but the lives and potential in the women themselves. In a shift from the hushed environment of years past, today, YouTube videos and social media posts celebrate the poetry and humanity of the women under their roof.

Still, sometimes simply the label of "homeless" creates barriers for women.

When Sandra, who slept at SAFES for two months, sought emergency shelter there and didn't have access to a locker, she had nowhere to store her things.

"I had to sleep with my belongings tied to me," Sandra said. "There's a lot of theft. You can't leave your suitcase there and expect it to be there 12 hours later. How are you supposed to go to a job interview carrying a backpack and suitcases? 'Hi, I'm homeless.'"

The stigma associated with homelessness disadvantages these women in myriad ways



STREET ROOTS PHOTO
SAFES Executive Director Bernadette Basilio stands in one of the new permanent supportive housing rooms at the Salvation Army Female Emergency Shelter. The 42 new rooms are expected to open later this month.

— from difficulty getting a job to loss of self-esteem. Crystal says she has seen the stigma against homelessness growing since she first experienced it and largely blames the way homelessness is depicted in the media.

"People that aren't on the street treat us like we have a disease or something," said a woman who currently uses SAFES's services.

Sandra — who said she never thought she'd be homeless "in a million years," is now grateful for the experience because she can understand it and wants to do something to change it. She believes the misconceptions the general public maintain about homelessness are rampant and deeply damaging to the homeless population.

"I didn't meet anyone who was homeless by choice," she said. "And as far as being lazy goes, oh my gosh. See how much work it is trying to survive carrying all of your belongings on your back?"

Many of the people on the streets have what is labeled a disabling condition — according to the 2013 Point-in-Time Count, more than half. This could mean anything from a physical disability to a mental health problem to substance abuse. These conditions make finding shelter that much more difficult.

For Kate, who uses a wheelchair, the increased difficulty is physical. Women who possess a disabling condition are exponentially more vulnerable.

"Alone, female, in a wheelchair — it kind of doubles the risk," Kate said.

Another woman using SAFES's services has HIV/AIDS. A shelter holding 50 women — as the regular dormitory at SAFES does — who could have anything ranging from a cold to a more serious illness, is clearly not a safe place for her.

And SAFES's goal is to include as many women in its efforts as possible and protect the women who are especially vulnerable,

including those with addictions. So SAFES is a wet and low-barrier shelter, meaning that women will not be denied services if they are under the influences of substances and that the only qualification required to access SAFES's services is being an adult female.

"Women are already vulnerable on the streets, and if they're obviously under the influence of something they're not going to make the right judgment, so we definitely want to invite them in so they have a safe shelter," Basilio said.

Since Basilio took the helm of SAFES in April, she's instituted a slew of new programs, including Arts and Crafts, a Narcotics Anonymous group, a Depression and Anxiety group, Rent Well classes, Sewing class and Community Clean Up.

And SAFES's new building has a wealth of untapped potential — many rooms reaching up to the fourth floor and down to the basement are unused, or used only for storage. Basilio hopes that the new single-room occupancies are just the start, and that with more funds and some much-needed renovations, SAFES will be able to greatly expand its services. Basilio hopes, in the future, to have an indoor garden, a computer room, job and financial training, and more respite care.

Sandra hopes that some of this space will be used to expand the emergency shelter to a year-round option. SAFES's emergency shelter was the only thing between her and the streets the day she was thrown out of her nephew's home with no warning, and she knows multiple other women who faced similar situations.

SAFES's 50-bed dormitory currently has a waiting list of 200 — four times its capacity.

"I'm obsessed with this, I really am," Sandra said. "Because I will never forget the looks on the faces of the people who were getting kicked out. They didn't know where to go."

You can view more about the SAFES program at www.youtube.com/watch?v=nzt4Xt0eIvk

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