

NOWHERE TO HIDE

How Portland's rental market is making a bad situation worse for domestic violence survivors

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

Portland's cutthroat rental market is forcing an increasing number of domestic violence survivors to make a tough choice: stay in an abusive relationship or become homeless, according to local advocates who specialize in assisting survivors in crisis.

"We've got moms with 4-month-old babies living on the streets. In that instance, I recognize that person chose to do that because of what they were facing in their own home," said Becky Beier, YWCA's Yolanda Project supervisor. "I would not blame the person who stays because that's terrifying. But people are choosing between those realities all the time."

As it becomes more difficult to house domestic violence survivors in Portland's competitive rental market, advocates said new counseling approaches have emerged. Beier said she's attended training sessions where advocates learn how to tell survivors there aren't any shelter beds or housing resources available.

One woman seeking services at the YWCA recently told Beier that when she felt the tension building in her home, she'd drive to a remote parking lot and sleep in her car while her partner calmed down.

"As I'm sitting there listening to her," Beier said, "I know that what she's doing to keep herself safe every night - I don't have something better for her right now. There isn't any shelter space, and I can't tell her, 'You don't have to sleep in your car anymore.'"

Beier said that previously, she might have used a hotel voucher to keep a roof over the woman's head while she looked for an apartment, but that isn't an option anymore because the hotel stay would likely be months long.

"My program can't absorb thousands of dollars in hotel costs," Beier said.

A timeline compiled for Street Roots by Multnomah County's Domestic Violence Coordination Office shows a parallel between average length of stay at local domestic violence shelters and the increase in fair market rent.

In fiscal year 2010, the fair market rate of a two-bedroom apartment in Multnomah County, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, was \$839 per month, while the average length of stay at a domestic violence shelter was 47 nights. Five years later, that same apartment is valued at \$944 per month and the average length of stay at a domestic violence shelter is 70 nights.

The fair market value, however, does not reflect the reality of what's actually available in Portland's rental market, where rent increased more than 10 percent in the first three quarters of 2015. A query of real

estate website Zillow.com for a two-bedroom apartment between \$0 and \$944 per month - the fair market value according to HUD, yielded only two results, and both were east of Interstate 205.

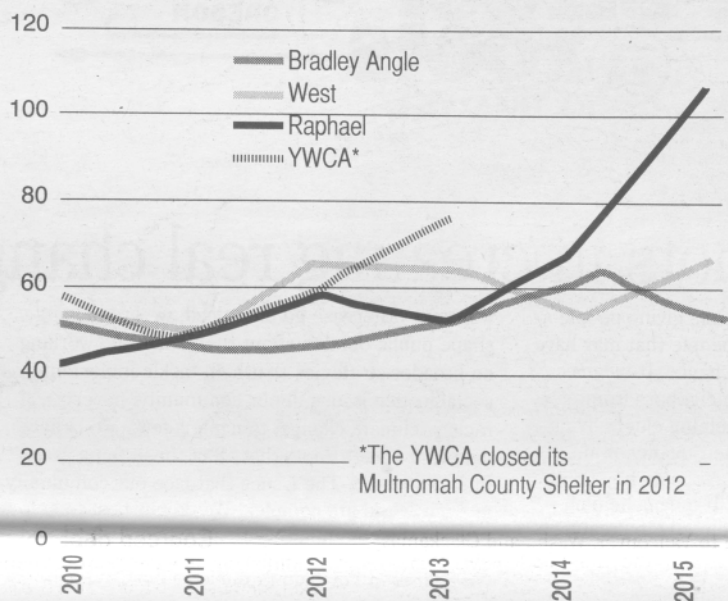
Additionally, Zillow Group, Inc. reports the median rental cost in Portland was \$1,765 per month in September - \$93 more than HUD's fair market value of a 4

bedroom unit, and Zillow was taking every rental unit into account, from studio apartments to large houses.

With many survivors looking for housing for not only themselves, but their children as well, the cost of securing an apartment and moving in is easily upwards of \$2,000. The longer survivors and their children stay in shelters while they try to secure housing

TIME IN SHELTERS HAS INCREASED ...

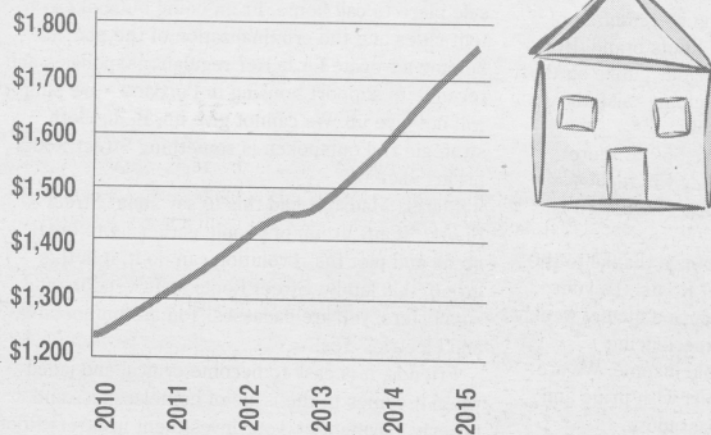
Average days in domestic violence emergency shelters



SOURCE: MULTNOMAH COUNTY DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COORDINATION OFFICE, SERVICEPOINT

... ALONG WITH RENTS

Median rent for all units in Portland



SOURCE: ZILLOW RENT INDEX BY ZILLOW GROUP, INC.

"Landlords at this point have jacked up their rents so high that they are way outside of the allowable expense for a voucher. If you're talking thousands of dollars to move in, then there's not a whole hell of a lot you can do."

BECKY BEIER
YWCA'S YOLANDA PROJECT SUPERVISOR

they can afford, the longer other survivors have to wait to get in.

When the YWCA closed its Multnomah County shelter in 2013 due to lack of funding, the county lost 19 domestic violence shelter beds.

Multnomah County has about 10 shelter beds per 100,000 residents while the national average for cities of the same size is 14 to 17 beds per 100,000 residents, said Annie Neal, director at Multnomah County Domestic Violence Coordination Office. She said the county has 33 household units for survivors and their children, with 78 beds spread across those units.

In the past several months, stays at the Bradley Angle domestic violence shelter have increased from eight weeks to 12 weeks, said Vanessa Yarie, emergency services manager. "We still continue to get about five to seven shelter requests a day that we cannot meet," she said, including calls from survivors who are with their abuser and can't leave because they have nowhere safe to go.

Raphael House, another local domestic violence shelter, recently doubled its maximum allowable length of stay from 60 to 120 days "and beyond," said Christina McGovney, shelter coordinator. "Stays are more like five to six months if there is to be a housing outcome at the end of the stay," she said.

In addition to a shortage of shelter beds, other factors are compounding what advocates are calling an already desperate situation.

The Temporary Assistance for Domestic Violence Survivors, or TA-DVS, program provides funds advocates use to purchase plane or bus tickets to get survivors somewhere safe or to make payments to hotels for temporary situations and to landlords for first month's rent or move-in fees. But Beier said these funds don't go as far as they once did.

The TA-DVS grant allows for \$1,200 over 90 days - an amount that hasn't changed since the program's inception in 1996.

Because this grant became available through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, it's available only to survivors who have minor children.

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