

**City of Los Angeles Comprehensive Homeless Strategy
Downtown Women's Center Feedback
January 27, 2016**

Introduction

We are heartened by the recent stakeholder engagement process and subsequent Comprehensive Homeless Strategy released by the City of Los Angeles – the increased attention and efforts towards addressing homelessness in our city is desperately needed. We also applaud the City's openness to collaborating with the County and to including service providers in the planning process. We are pleased to see that the strategy grounds efforts in nationally recognized models and best practices in critical areas such as housing, health and support services, social enterprise and workforce development, and city-county coordination.

However, the lack of recognition of unaccompanied homeless women as a subpopulation¹ with specific vulnerabilities and service needs is glaring and troubling. Data² tells us that the characteristics and vulnerabilities of homeless women are unique, and thus require specific attention and services. However, a woman experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles currently enters a service system designed by and for the majority. These services often fail to appropriately address her higher likelihood of having survived violence, her unique healthcare or job-training needs, or the ways in which her goals for her future may vary from those of a homeless man.

At this tipping point in our city's approach to homelessness, we have the opportunity to make a significant leap forward. Just as with youth and veteran homelessness before, a commitment to and success in addressing a subpopulation opens doors to increased community will, resources, and visibility for the greater population. We urge the City to lead the nation by example in addressing the needs of homeless women. If you design for the majority, the minority falls through the cracks – the homeless women of greater Los Angeles deserve to be seen.

Topline Recommendations

1. Recognize women as a vulnerable subpopulation among homeless individuals.

Just as (very rightly) veterans and youth have been identified as subpopulations with unique vulnerabilities, so too must unaccompanied women be recognized. DWC's experience tells us that homeless women are a tremendously resilient population in the face of staggering hardship.

¹ 100,184 individuals (28 percent) of the nation's homeless population are *unaccompanied* women (*Annual Homeless Assessment Report, 2015*), meaning adult women who are not accompanied by children or dependents and who do not qualify for family services. 8,102 individuals (32 percent) of the city's homeless are women, and 13,587 (33 percent) of the county's homeless are women (*Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count, 2015*).

² The US Conference of Mayors (*National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2012*) states that 44% of the cities surveyed identified DV as a major cause of homelessness. Half of all homeless women and children have reported experiencing physical violence, and 92% of homeless mothers have reported experiencing physical or sexual assault. Among women in Skid Row, 61% have experienced domestic violence, and 38% of survivors came directly to Skid Row after suffering abuse. Half of women in Skid Row have experienced sexual assault; 14.5% experienced sexual assault in the last year. Nearly one third (31.5%) have felt the need to perform a sexual favor in exchange for food, protection, cash, or other needs (*Downtown Women's Needs Assessment, 2014*).

However, they deserve services that address the prevalence of trauma in their lives, which is often compounded by the relative lack of safety they experience in shelters and on the streets.

Recommendations

- We recommend that unaccompanied women be recognized within the city strategy as a subpopulation with specific needs, such as Transition Age Youth and LGBTQ youth. We urge you to include strategies specific to unaccompanied women included in the plan.
- We recommend that data on women's homelessness be prioritized and made publicly available. A first step would be de-aggregating the 2016 Homeless Count by gender across data points.
- We recommend that there be more dedicated funding streams for unaccompanied women, just as the plan lays out dedicated strategy for youth housing. One example at the county level is the \$2 million in funding recently granted to the Department of Health Services for rapid rehousing for women.
- We recommend that the City attach specific metrics and targets to reducing homelessness among women, as has been done for veteran and youth homelessness.

2. Ensure women's needs are being fully met through housing and services in LA City.

We know that 8,102 of the city's homeless population are women, yet beyond this basic data, there is a dearth of information on how services and housing are meeting the needs of this particular subpopulation. Having data on homelessness de-aggregated by gender is an essential step to knowing whether women's needs are being met, and to developing targeted and thereby effective approaches to ending homelessness for women.

Recommendations

- We recommend that LAHSA track housing assignments by gender in the Coordinated Entry System (CES), to see if women are accessing housing at a proportionate pace to men. The Downtown Women's Center is a CES entry point for SPA 4. In 2015, we entered 150 women into CES and 27 were matched to housing (18%). Since the start of CES in 2013, we have entered 599 women and 62 have been matched to housing (10%).
- We recommend that the housing available through CES be expanded to include more permanent supportive housing and low-income units set aside specifically for women.
- We recommend that the City, County, and LAHSA add to their criteria for funding decisions the need to demonstrate how applicants are effectively addressing the unique needs of unaccompanied women experiencing homelessness.

3. Require that Trauma-Informed Care be implemented across all service provision.

Among the service models critical to ensuring long-term success in ending homelessness for all individuals is Trauma-Informed Care (TIC). This best practice recognizes the traumatic impact of homelessness on an individual's physical and mental health, and hinges on asking, "What happened to you?" rather than, "What is wrong with you?" Given the level of training and outreach outlined in both the City and County plans, it is crucial that TIC be applied at all levels of service provision. When implemented throughout service delivery, TIC leads to more long-term health and housing outcomes for survivors of trauma (*Shelter from the Storm: Trauma-Informed Care in Homelessness Services Settings, 2010*). In particular when ending homelessness for women, we need a service delivery

system that recognizes and is sensitive to the prevalence of past and ongoing trauma in individuals' lives.

Recommendations

- We recommend that TIC be made a grant requirement for homeless service providers funded through the City, County, and LAHSA. We believe utilization of the model would ensure the strongest outcomes and the greatest likelihood of ending the cycle of homelessness not just for women, but for all homeless individuals.
- We recommend that TIC be integrated into all the outreach and engagement strategies e.g. CES intake managers, "C-3" Teams, LAPD.

4. Ensure that Workforce Development programs address women's specific job needs.

Workforce development and job readiness programs within homeless services have traditionally been geared towards men. If we want to encourage success in ending homelessness for women, we must invest in long-term solutions that serve their job needs. This includes programs that serve older populations re-entering the workforce and programs that recognize and support the ancillary benefits of workforce training (health and wellbeing, community building) in addition to standard metrics such as increased income.

Recommendations

- We recommend continued regional advocacy for federally-funded programs such as LA:RISE (administered through the Los Angeles Economic and Workforce Development Department), that specifically address hard-to-reach populations and are designed to meet the job readiness needs of this under-supported population.
- We recommend more direct collaboration and alignment between employment and workforce development and homelessness sectors in creating opportunities for high-barrier individuals (including women).
- We recommend that recognition that employment programs be both about the health and well-being of individuals as well as increased income

5. Continue to look at the bigger picture – and fund the solutions.

The City's plan takes an unprecedented look at the coordination and strategy needed to end homelessness, including addressing challenges with the CES, supporting landlord engagement and incentives, and better coordination of housing location services. This top-level thinking and focus on long-term solutions is critical. So, too, is a dedicated revenue source to pay for this most sustainably. We support full funding for the Affordable Housing Trust Fund and the establishment of a new Homeless Services Trust Fund.

Recommendations

- We recommend calling for a motion to seek out a dedicated funding source, such as the new Homeless Services Trust Fund.
- We recommend not waiting for the dedicated revenue source to shift budgets, and making sure the annual investment laid out in the plan is included in the 2016/2017 city budget.

Next Steps

The recommendations made above by the Downtown Women's Center are not heavy-cost items, and funding these strategies will ultimately result in savings down the line. Once the plans go into implementation, governance will take on great importance. Continuing to engage service providers



Homelessness ends here.

and individuals with lived experience will be crucial to ensuring accountability and success of the plans. The Downtown Women's Center looks forward to continuing to work with the City on implementation of their strategies to end homelessness for good.