A Report on Women and Homelessness

March 1, 2011
Welcome

Why is it that sociologists, scholars, data analysts, policy makers and even homelessness service providers reduce a diverse population of women, elderly, disabled people, veterans, the mentally ill, children, mothers, fathers, and runaway youth to a single, faceless, amorphous, dehumanized group known as “the homeless”? No other group of disenfranchised and underserved Americans is referred to this way.

Policy makers and others who are responsible for allocating funding to address the needs of homeless Americans lack up-to-date information about the diversity of the homeless population, especially regarding single women. They tend to fund shelters and services based on a stereotype - a homeless man with multiple problems - the faceless “homeless” they believe need shelter. Although women have emerged as a growing, seriously underserved and undefined sub-population of “the homeless,” little thought has been given to providing shelter beds for them, and very few resources have been directed to establishing female-centered shelters that focus on the special needs of women.

How many single adult women are in our shelters? Is it a growing population within the larger context of people experiencing homelessness? We simply do not have adequate data to answer the question. In Rhode Island, the number of individual homeless women has grown by 65% since 1998, while individual males increased by only 5% during the same time period. The 2009 Shelter Board report does not indicate how many adult individuals were women. Nonetheless, reports from service providers all over the country tell us that their shelters are overwhelmed by unaccompanied adult women who need a place to stay, but there are few beds in our state, or anywhere else, designated for women.

Unfortunately, there is a long history in our country of ignoring and even punishing women who are homeless, blaming them for their condition. In the February 2011 edition of The Foster (RI) Home Journal, Viola Ulm, a town historian, recounts the story of Sarah Mathewson, an 18th century Scituate woman who “found herself without means of support,” and went to Foster to try to find work, but was “warned back into Scituate.” When she couldn’t find work in Scituate, she went back to Foster, where the town fathers “tied her to a whipping post and gave her 40 lashes.”

Given the history of ignoring the diversity that exists within the homeless population and blaming the women themselves for becoming homeless, we are not surprised that policy makers, scholars, and people in control of funding programs for “the homeless,” have failed to provide adequate care for women. Women are one of the fastest growing segments of the “hidden homeless” - women who live itinerantly with friends, relatives, or in homeless encampments and other places they consider safer than congregate shelters, where they often experience violence and victimization. When the annual counts of people in shelters occur, few women will be there to count. And, even if they were counted, they would not be “women” - they would be genderless, faceless “individuals,” who are lumped into the annual “homeless” counts.

It is my hope that this report will stimulate thought and conversation amongst members of our community regarding these issues.

Sincerely,

Anne Nolan
President Crossroads Rhode Island
Different, But The Same: Diversity And Poverty Within “The Homeless”

In December 2009, HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan stated very simply “As diverse as our homeless population is, there is one thing that everyone who is homeless shares: a lack of housing they can afford.”

At first glance, this appears to be a very simple, almost obvious statement. But upon further review it touches upon two overwhelming themes regarding this country’s homeless: the diversity within the population and the impact that poverty has on the individual.

Although referred to as diverse, national, state and local reports about homelessness often give us only cursory information about certain sub-populations and their demographics. Except for women with children who are included in families, all other adult women are simply “individuals.” There is a clear distinction between a family and an individual, but data goes no further to offer insight into the obvious diversity that exists between homeless men and women. This report intends to focus on those single (or unaccompanied) homeless women and identify challenges providers face in serving this unique population.

Poverty

The fact of the matter is that poverty is the root cause of homelessness. According to the US Census Bureau’s most recent statistics, the 43.6 million Americans currently living in poverty is the largest number ever recorded in its 51 year history. Census Bureau figures for 2009 calculate that 55% of those living in poverty in the United States are women. Furthermore, there has never been a single year on record when women living in poverty did not outnumber their male counterparts (Chart1.1).

According to the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (NLCHP), millions more Americans are at risk to fall into poverty, and potentially homelessness, as they pay consistently more than 50% of their income on rent, versus the recommended 30%. The NLCHP goes on to say: “The face of homelessness has become diverse. It has come to include mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, and racial and ethnic minorities” and “to end homelessness new policies must be implemented.” Discrimination, the frequency of domestic violence, a proven history of inequity in pay, and a stereotype of gender roles make women more susceptible to poverty.

Of the 43.6 million Americans currently living in poverty, almost 25 million (55%) are women.
Reporting On Unaccompanied Homeless Women

“The Changing Face Of Homelessness

More than three decades ago, as urban renewal projects engaged in rebuilding run-down areas in our large cities, large numbers of low-income people turned to living on the streets or in so-called “missions” because the cheapest housing was no longer available to them. Most of these people were men with alcohol and/or addiction problems, disconnected from their families, penniless and often suffering from mental illness and other disabilities. The image of the wino living on Skid Row took hold in the popular imagination and that became the face of homelessness - a stereotype that endures even until today and obscures the true picture of homeless Americans - men, women, children, youth, elderly, veterans, and disabled people who have no home and no resources.

Leslie Foster, Director of The Gathering Place in Denver, Colorado believes part of the problem is systemic. “In the mid to late ‘80’s, when a lot of services were started for the homeless, women were only 10% of that population. Now women are estimated to be close to 40% of the homeless population. Despite this obvious rise in the number of unaccompanied women needing services, programming designed to address this changing dynamic has failed to keep pace.”

Reporting On Unaccompanied Homeless Women

We Need to Know More

When we look for recent studies on the status of single, unaccompanied women who are homeless, there is little information to be found. Few studies available go farther than mentioning the gender or number or percentage of women experiencing homelessness. Most sub-populations - unaccompanied women, homeless female youth, female LGBTQ, elderly women, chronically homeless women or female veterans are included as genderless “individuals.” The most recent Annual Homeless Assessment Report (2009) and the Homeless Pulse Reports, prepared by HUD, tell us how many families and individuals were homeless during specific time periods, but nothing about the people themselves. The AHAR provides only bare-bones descriptions of America’s homeless residents: adult women, including unaccompanied females and those in families, comprise about 37% of the total homeless population. Two-thirds of the entire homeless population are individuals, of which 25% are reported to be females, but nothing further is touched upon.

“It’s hard starting over at this point in my life.”

Norma, a guest in the Women’s Shelter at Crossroads Rhode Island represents a new face of homelessness.

After losing her job of 15 years, she realized she didn’t know how to look for employment. Norma participated in the intensive pre-employment program to attain skills to be independent again.

To protect the privacy of our clients and residents, we have changed some of the names and details of their stories.

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- Leslie Foster
The Gathering Place
Nationwide Trends

Even though we lack adequate research that sheds more light on the characteristics of lone women in our shelter system, we have anecdotal information from all over the country that shows homelessness is a growing problem for women, and their unique needs are not being met. The AHAR cites examples in Seaside and Monterey Counties in California where it reports a rise in older single women accessing homeless services due to divorce, violence and loss of jobs/income, but “locally, there are few services dedicated to serving senior homeless women, and providers that typically serve individuals struggle to accommodate their needs.”

HUD tells us that, in Phoenix and Maricopa County (Arizona), providers have seen a significant increase in single adult female homelessness and that this trend is likely to continue into the next year.

An article in the Christian Science Monitor (12/20/10) states that in Los Angeles, “Women are the fastest-growing group of people facing homelessness.” According to a December 10, 2009 Editorial in The Denver Post, “…though services for homeless men and for women with children have been built up over decades, the number of single women – among society’s most vulnerable population – has spiked in recent years, and experts who work with homeless women in Denver say many nights pass without enough shelter beds to go around for these women.” The 2009 Metro Denver Homeless Initiative point-in-time survey reports the number of unaccompanied women has tripled since 2007, from 552 to 1,606. Currently, there are only 241 shelter beds available to women in the city of Denver.

In 2004, a paper published in the Journal of Community Psychology by Carol Zuzaga looked at the characteristics of 162 homeless adults in shelters located in Central Florida. The paper noted a rapid growth in the number of women using the shelter system, and concluded that single adult women were more likely than men (or women in families) to have experienced significant stressful life events before becoming homeless (breakup of long-term relationships, family separation, violence, divorce, loss of income, childhood physical or sexual abuse, foster care). The study affirms that homeless women need specialized care as they transition out of homelessness to housing and economic stability.

The Hidden Homeless

Further complicating the issue is the fact that women are more likely than men to be among the “hidden homeless” because they often seek refuge with friends or family for extended times before entering a shelter. In a three year period from 2008 to 2010, 30% of clients who entered the Crossroads Rhode Island Women’s Shelter cited “living with friends or family” as their place of last residence - often the last resort before becoming homeless. In addition, women, especially those who have experienced instances of domestic violence, are at times fearful of utilizing shelters which are co-ed, often the only option. Because women may be accepted more readily into homes of relatives or friends than homeless men, and because there are so few shelter beds anywhere for women, annual shelter counts are unlikely to capture data that describes the true extent of homelessness for women.

In 2008, Gender Issues published an article, “Invisible Mothers: Parenting by Homeless Women Separated From Their Homeless Children,” in which the authors focus on homeless women who no longer have custody of their children. Most of the younger women were still trying to parent but faced many obstacles to reunification with their children. Reports place the percentage of sheltered women separated from their children between 80% - 90%, and more often than not child reunification is not addressed by service providers.

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It is possible that city and state planners for homeless shelter programs have underestimated the need for shelter beds for women, especially those who are on their own, based on the prevailing stereotype of “homelessness = men” and have not planned adequately to provide for those women who are not part of a family unit. In most communities, there are more programs in place to assist women accompanied by their minor children or women fleeing domestic violence than there are resources targeted to the lone, homeless woman. Women require different kinds of services than their male counterparts, and providers are not meeting their needs.

### Homelessness And Rhode Island

Many of the prevailing issues related to counting and providing for unaccompanied homeless women on the national level also ring true on the state level. After reporting for much of the past decade on the numbers of individual homeless women residing in the Ocean State, the 2009 Rhode Island Food and Shelter Board Report no longer specified the gender data of homeless individuals. Despite such challenges, amongst Rhode Island’s service providers, state agencies, and advocates, there is one thing we can agree upon: the number of homeless in Rhode Island has been trending upward for well over a decade.

The 2010 *Homeless in Rhode Island* report states unequivocally in the first line of their report: “Rhode Island is currently experiencing the highest levels of homelessness in the state’s history.” The April 2009 *HousingWorks RI* Issue Brief echoes this sentiment, stating “Over the past 18 years, there have been significant increases in the number of individuals and families experiencing homelessness in Rhode Island.”

Similarly, Rhode Island’s homeless population often mirrors national demographics. The Rhode Island Coalition for the Homeless estimates the 2010 Rhode Island homeless population to be made up of 39% families and 61% individuals, roughly equivalent to the national average.

Unfortunately, also similar to national reporting, state data often does not give us any more insight into the unique plight of unaccompanied homeless women. Emphasis on the distinctions between a family and an individual are clear, but there are no such distinctions made between the male and female sub-populations of individuals.

While the number of total homeless in Rhode Island has risen steadily, statistics show the number of unaccompanied females has skyrocketed. Using yearly statistics from *The Rhode Island Emergency Food and Shelter Board’s annual reports* a stunning trend reveals itself as we move through the start of the 21st century. In a ten year period from 1999 – 2008 (which was the last year single women were reported on separately) the total number of unaccompanied men rose by 5%, while the total number of unaccompanied women rose by 65% (Chart 1.2) The actual number of unaccompanied homeless women went from 665 in Rhode Island in 1999 to 1,096 a decade later. In short, the increase in homeless female individuals in Rhode Island is far outpacing that of males and shows no sign of slowing. Furthermore, the 33% of females in Rhode Island is a significantly higher percentage than the 25% national average.

![Chart 1.2 - Percentage Growth of Homeless Individuals by Gender in Rhode Island](chart1.2.png)
The Impact Of A Struggling Economy

Until a few years ago, most women became homeless as a result of violence. More recently, the ongoing economic downturn, foreclosures, lack of adequate resources for mental health/primary care, erosion of safety net supports and a severe lack of affordable housing in our state have impoverished many women and forced them into homelessness.

HUD Secretary and Chair of the US Interagency Council on Homelessness Shaun Donovan, noted the impact of a struggling economy is immense: “One of the most tragic consequences of our housing and economic crisis are those who fall into homelessness as a result – whether through foreclosures, evictions, layoffs, or other financial problems.”

At the end of 2010, Rhode Island had the 5th highest unemployment rate in the country, at 11.5% (Bureau of Labor Statistics). In addition, 42% of state households were paying more than 30 percent of their income for housing, a figure that “is not sustainable for families, so it is no surprise that Rhode Island is seeing such high rates of first-time homeless,” according to Nellie M. Gorbea, Executive Director of HousingWorks RI.

As could be expected in such an economic climate, Rhode Island’s emergency shelters have experienced a drastic increase in the numbers of homeless clients. Aggregate data from service agencies throughout the state have shown shelter use up 43% in February 2009 from that of February 2008. Over a two-year period from 2008 to 2010, the percentage of people utilizing emergency shelters across the state rose by 33%.

Why Are More Women Becoming Homeless?

It is often difficult for individual women entering a shelter for the first time to pinpoint exactly where things went wrong and how they ended up homeless, but reasons given for shelter use clearly reflect the impact of the current economic crisis. Over the last 8 years, statewide data reflects the two most reported reasons for homelessness have been high housing costs and having no income. Citing the Rhode Island Homeless Management Information System, the 2009 HousingWorks RI Issue Brief noted a 300% increase in foreclosures being the reason for using a shelter. Additionally, job / income loss and eviction rose 32% and 19%, respectively.

These trends are also being seen at the agency level, as the main reasons given by unaccompanied homeless females accessing Crossroads Rhode Island emergency shelters were unemployment and the inability to pay their rent / mortgage. In a departure from past history, domestic violence accounted for only 13% of women’s main reason for becoming homeless. (Chart 1.3)

The 2009 Housing-Works RI Issue Brief noted a 300% increase in foreclosures being the primary reason for using a shelter.

“’It’s not the end of the world, it’s the beginning. I got my life back here!’”

Laurie is one of many women that have been forced into homelessness by an unforgiving economy. She came to the Women’s Shelter at Crossroads after her business closed and she could no longer afford the mortgage on her home.

She credits the support at Crossroads Rhode Island with helping her get past the trauma of becoming homeless.
Where Are They Coming From?

As the face of homelessness has changed, so has the backdrop. The May 2009 issue of *The Economist* notes that “traditional ‘urban problems,’ such as poverty and affordable housing, are now regional problems.” Data collected from Crossroads Rhode Island Women’s Shelter illustrates this trend. Of the 650 women sheltered since opening in 2008, nearly every community in Rhode Island has been identified by women as a last residence. These women, who are often experiencing homelessness for the first time, come from economically and socially diverse communities throughout the state. HUD statistics tell us that these are not the ‘chronically homeless’ women we were seeing previously.

What Is Currently Being Done?

When Rhode Island’s largest homeless shelter, Welcome Arnold, closed in March 2007, approximately 40 beds designated for women were assigned to service-enriched First Step Shelters across the state. By the end of 2007, it was obvious that there were far more women seeking shelter than beds available. By early 2008, Crossroads Rhode Island was accommodating an overflow of up to 60 women nightly because there was no other place to go for safe shelter.

In response to this crisis in April 2008, Crossroads Rhode Island opened a 41-bed service-enriched Women’s Shelter. From the beginning, the Women’s Shelter at Crossroads has operated beyond capacity, accommodating up to 60 women almost every night. In the winter of 2010, in response to the continued growth in demand for women’s shelter beds, Crossroads Rhode Island was forced to begin using dining room space to accommodate the additional shelter need.

Service providers throughout the state such as Amos House, House of Hope, the Urban League, as well as many others provide various programs and services for homeless women. Programming includes domestic violence shelters and counseling, addiction recovery, and mental health services, to a name a few. The Amos House Mother Child Reunification Program can accommodate up to 13 formerly homeless mothers, but is not able to meet the extraordinary need of the 80% - 90% of sheltered women who have children. Overall, these programs help women become self-sufficient, but resources are limited.

At Crossroads Rhode Island, women have access to an entire continuum of care, which includes crisis intervention, case management and counseling services, education, job training and employment programs, and an array of housing options from emergency shelter to permanent supportive housing - but it is not enough.

Particularly, intensive case management is a very effective approach to supporting people who are experiencing homelessness, and helping them return to and maintain permanent housing. The Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP), which partly focuses on the newly homeless uses the intensive case management model. The US Conference of Mayors has praised this program as “fundamentally changing the way communities provide services to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.”

Clearly, good work is being done, yet the extent of the available services is woefully inadequate in comparison to the demand.

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“I want to be a good mom for my daughter. I want her to be proud of me.”

Loren is utilizing Crossroads Rhode Island’s Vocational Services programs to help her gain employment and stabilize her family. She credits Crossroads Rhode Island with helping her get past the trauma of becoming homeless.
What Else Is Needed?

What we do know is that women make use of, and benefit from, services if those services are available to them. As mentioned, there are programs in place to help homeless women, but we also recognize that there is much room to expand and improve services. In order to do so the following is recommended:

Quality Data
HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan, when asked about the annual Point-in-Time Count (when demographics of the nation’s homeless are collected on a single day in January) responded: “We are urging every community to participate, because good data is essential to measuring what works, what doesn’t, and what we need to do better.” In a July 2008, *Washington Post* commentary, Martha Burt, a leading expert on homelessness in America, states: “Government needs real time knowledge. Today’s data system provides shockingly little information - and does even that awkwardly.”

There just is not enough timely, gender-specific data at this point in time to plan most effectively for the unique needs of unaccompanied homeless women.

Research
Answering the questions ‘Who are these unaccompanied homeless women?’ and ‘What are their unique needs?’ is paramount to serving this segment of the population effectively. Understanding the nuances and trends of this population will take time, but in order to move forward, we must engage in advocacy to encourage HUD, scholars, and sociologists to conduct more research on the status of homeless women.

Improved Coordination of Care
Service providers, community resources, state and local agencies, regardless of whether or not they are geared towards homeless individuals, often have existing programs that can address specific needs. At times, to respond effectively to the needs of homeless women is as simple as making them aware of the programs that are available to them. By increasing access to mainstream resources such as mental health, addiction and recovery programs, health care, benefits, employment, affordable and/or supportive housing, we can leverage existing resources to provide solutions.

Female-Centric Programming
At the rate that the female homeless population is growing, we need to pay more attention to their unique needs. We need guidance from experts in trauma-informed care to help us meet the needs of the large percentage of women who have suffered trauma from family separation, violence and abuse. Increased focus in shelter programs on intensive female-centered case management, counseling, and support services is necessary to help homeless women develop work, parenting and family skills that improve chances of reunification with their children. Additionally, today’s economy mandates that we provide ample opportunities including affordable housing, job-training, and comprehensive services for women seeking a better future for themselves and their children.