
PRELIMINARY GAPS AND NEEDS SURVEY REPORT

A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF THE DEEP ROOTED CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS AMONG
WOMEN AND CHILDREN AND THE CHALLENGES FACED BY HOMELESS SHELTERS NATIONWIDE

By: National Women's Shelter Network, INC and Sundari Foundation, Inc. dba Lotus House Women's Shelter, Miami, Florida. (2023).

Executive Summary

Designed by the National Women's Shelter Network, INC. (NWSN) and the Lotus House Women's Shelter, Miami, Florida (Lotus House), this preliminary report of findings of the Gaps & Needs Survey provides insight into the special needs and challenges encountered by women's homeless shelters and the women, youth, and children they serve. Shedding light on a profoundly misunderstood population, the questionnaire sets forth the adversities confronted by the most vulnerable members of our nation and the ever-present deficiencies of systems intended to support them.

The comprehensive Gaps & Needs Survey includes 133 questions with a mix of multiple choice and written response questions where the shelters who have participated provided general information on who they serve and how, and their unique perspectives, challenges, needs and feedback on a wide range of topics related to the task of sheltered women, youth and children who are amongst the most vulnerable in their communities, large and small. Of the 50 shelters who participated in the survey, the majority identified as emergency or homeless shelters serving both women and children, ranging from ages 0-25+.

Demographically, the majority of shelters reported serving women of minority backgrounds, of which Black or African American represented the largest group - up to 75% of the population served annually. The latter is parallel to the experience of Lotus House, the largest women's shelter in the country, where over half the women served identify as Black or African American. Other ethnicities which were reported to make up a significant component of the population served, accounting for 0-25%, include Hispanic/LatinX, Native American or Alaskan Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

Following a detailed and extensive analysis of the Survey results, the top key takeaways – outlined below – are in alignment with the national objectives set forth by the NWSN:

- The Intersection Between Gender-Based Violence and Homelessness

- The Unresolved Effects of Trauma and Homelessness
- The Need for Enriched Therapeutic Services in Shelters
- The Lack of Access to Mental Health Supportive Services and Homelessness
- The Lack of Affordable Housing and Homelessness
- The Lack of Affordable, Extended Hours, Quality Childcare Services and Homelessness
- The Lack of Access to Health Care Services and Homelessness
- The Importance of Shared Best Practices Addressing the Gender Specific Needs of Women and Children Across the Country
- The Need for Increased Funding for Shelter and Holistic Supportive Services
- The Need for Deeper Service Driven Research

The de-identified information collected from this Survey will be utilized to help develop a deeper understanding of the root causes of homelessness among women and children and highlight the challenges faced by women's shelters nationwide. The above-mentioned is not an exhaustive list of reasons or causes of homelessness, but rather the most customarily reported lived experiences, needs and gaps within the shelter system.

By way of background, our team conducted in-depth research on shelters and shelter programs around the United States that serve women, youth, and children. Following months of research, over 1,200 shelters and shelter programs were identified in all 52 states, Washington D.C., and Puerto Rico. To narrow down our findings to exclusively women's shelters and shelter programs, our team conducted over 2,000 phone calls and identified 304 women's shelters and shelter programs. Of these, 236 were verified to be in operation. Connecting with each and every shelter, the NWSN set out to build a network that would unify women's shelters and their leaders with a shared mission towards building resources to support women and children across the country.

With the aim of understanding more deeply gaps and needs on the ground in shelters across America, the NWSN team also traveled over 10,000 miles on the road, from North to South and coast to coast, visiting women's homeless shelters and shelter programs, meeting with shelter leaders, talking with executive directors and program directors, frontline team members and those they shelter to better understand the condition of their shelters, supportive services, challenges and solutions. There were times, our team departed speechless, shocked by the overwhelming burdens so many faced with so little. We were humbled time and again by the warm embraces of the dedicated shelter teams we met everywhere we went. We heard the resounding message of hope and prayers for more resources for women, youth and children in transition and the shelters struggling to empower them to blossom into who they were meant to be.

We hope this Report deepens our collective understanding of the needs of women, youth and children who survive by being invisible in this country and the shelters serving as their last and final safety net. We want to acknowledge the deep impact of the pervasive, historic and current racial, ethnic, social, and gender-based inequities and discrimination faced by women and children across

our nation, particularly Black and Latinx women and children who are over-represented in our shelter systems. The NWSN recognizes that the solutions to ending homelessness are founded on racial, social and gender equity for women and children and an engine of social and economic prosperity for all, where every woman and child, regardless of race, creed, color, religion, age, or special needs, will have a safe home and in times of transition, a trauma-informed safe haven with deep protective factors.

It should not go without mention that we encountered extraordinary expertise and innovation in the many shelters visited across the country despite their meager resources, boundless compassion for the suffering of women and children they served, and unfailing dedication by staff and volunteers alike. We hope this report paves the way for more resources for women, youth and children in transition and the shelters that answer their cries for help, quietly saving and changing lives. They are all unsung heroines. We learned every step of the way. With adequate resources, we can transform shelters into windows of opportunity for women, youth and children in transition to heal, learn, grow, thrive and build the foundation for safer, brighter futures.

Introduction

Emerging as an initiative of the Lotus House Women's Shelter, the largest women's homeless shelter in the United States, the NWSN is a growing, first of its kind, network of women's homeless shelters and programs from across the country. To date, the NWSN includes over 200 women's shelters - and counting. The NWSN aims to bring this often overlooked and deeply resource-constrained community of shelter providers together for collaborative action, establishing the foundation for a future where every woman, youth and child will have a safe home and in times of transition, a trauma-informed safe haven with deep protective factors to help them heal, reclaim their lives, and enjoy safer, brighter futures.

With the rate of homelessness on the rise and an increasing need for shelter beds, shadowed by overcapacity and lack of resources, the NWSN scoured the country, coast to coast, seeking to join forces with shelters serving women, youth and children in hopes of raising public awareness of their special needs, advancing trauma informed supportive services and resources for women and children and the shelters that serve them, and advocating for policies and funding to prevent and end homelessness. Throughout this journey, the NWSN visited 50 shelters across America in over a year and a half. Overwhelmed and under-resourced, it became clear that shelters are a vital and life saving safety net of last resort in communities large and small. Inundated by a seemingly endless stream of women and children in need, shelters everywhere faced challenges from poor living conditions and financial constraints. In short, the last and final safety net of shelters and safe havens for women and children in need are themselves struggling to keep their doors open, forced to turn away traumatized women and children experiencing homelessness, many with unmet needs and multiple layers of victimization. Grossly underfunded, they, like those they serve, are surviving on charity with little help from their Federal, state and local governments.

In an effort to better understand the status of shelters serving women and children, the NWSN developed a comprehensive Gaps & Needs Survey (Survey) to identify trends, challenges, needs, gaps in services and resources across the continuum. Fifty shelters have completed the Survey to date. The NWSN Inaugural Conference, September 5-8, 2023 in Miami, Florida, convened the leaders of over 70 women's homeless shelters and programs to: showcase best practices, research, and innovation; identifying gaps and needs; build their organizational capacity; advance public awareness and education; and driving resources and solutions to end and prevent homelessness; and elevating the voices of women and children with lived homeless experience and those who serve them. Those shelters that have not yet completed the Survey are invited to do so, in our aim to obtain the feedback of over 100 shelters before completing this Report.

Misinformed policies and negative stereotypes have created a deeply misguided understanding of the root causes of homelessness, resulting in an anti-homeless sentiment which rejects the complexity, personal challenges, and humanity of people experiencing homelessness. The NWSN aims to raise awareness of the root causes of homelessness and best practices to address the special needs of

people experiencing homelessness, particularly the gender specific needs of women and their children – many with high-special needs requiring multiple levels of intervention and wrap-around supportive services - and the shelters that struggle to serve them.

Without the safety, stability and support of a family or home, the tragic consequences of homelessness often bring despair in the form of further victimization, mental health problems, substance use, trafficking, and unsurmountable barriers to education and employment opportunities. Failing to provide wrap-around services, resources, and interventions to our most vulnerable only perpetuates cycles of violence, abuse, poverty, homelessness, and even worse – the loss of many lives.

The NWSN aims to transform the trauma of homelessness into windows of opportunity. Though shelters may be a last resort, they can also be a stepping stone to safer, brighter futures. Ensuring that shelters operate to their full potential can open the door for millions of women and children experiencing homelessness to an abundant array of life-changing resources and services to heal, grow, thrive, and blossom into who they are truly meant to be. The NWSN establishes a crucial, long awaited platform to bring heretofore inconceivable opportunities for collaboration, linkages and recognition by and amongst shelters and providers. This Report will contribute to an enriched platform for information sharing, advancing best practices and a collective voice for change informed by the work of those who are in the field.

In preliminary form, the Report will shed light on the oftentimes overlooked needs of shelters and their significant contribution in the fight against homelessness.

Gaps & Needs Takeaways

Women and children are the most vulnerable population of people experiencing homelessness. With systemic barriers, discrimination, and violence against women ever present, women, and consequently their children, are some of the fastest growing populations to experience homelessness in the United States. Annually, there are approximately 1.2 Million women¹ and 2.5 Million children² – of which more than half are under the age of six³ – experiencing homelessness nationally. For women and children, domestic or intimate partner violence, the lack of affordable housing, and the lack of access to trauma-informed mental health services are among the leading causes of homelessness. Nevertheless, the causes of homelessness are numerous, multifaceted and complex, calling for adequately resourced multi-sector, comprehensive, coordinated systems of care providing wrap-around supportive services, enriched, therapeutic trauma-informed services and resources, and comprehensive solutions.

In efforts to provide a safe and welcoming space to help advance the status of women and children experiencing homelessness, women's homeless shelters around the country have committed their limited resources to serving our most vulnerable. Without access to resources and services that address their distinctive and essential needs, people experiencing homelessness are at high risk of remaining in a cycle of homelessness which contributes to rising inequalities and prevention of social sustainability.

Corroborated by the results of the Gaps & Needs Survey, the key takeaways presented in this paper will further explore the linkages between the root causes of homelessness and the crucial role of shelters in providing sanctuary, support and life-saving resources.

The Intersection Between Gender-Based Violence And Homelessness

The intersection between gender-based violence, including domestic or intimate partner violence, and homelessness is undeniable. Survey results demonstrated that up to 75% of the women, youth, and children served by shelters have histories of gender-based violence and victimization. The majority of shelters cited domestic or intimate partner violence to be one of the leading causes of homelessness, as well as the main type of trauma experienced by the women and children they serve – parallel with sex trafficking, childhood sexual abuse, neglect, physical, emotional and psychological

¹ The combined number of reported women who enter shelters, both homeless (172,855) in addition to domestic violence shelters (930,627) in addition to unsheltered women (77,154) equals 1,180,636. Many women on the streets are never counted, as regular point in time counts are well recognized as understating the true count of unsheltered persons; this is particularly so for women experiencing homelessness whose very survival hinges on their invisibility. See "Number of People Using Domestic Violence Shelters by State."

<https://www.domesticshelters.org/data-center/state-reports-and-rankings/people-using-domestic-violence-shelters-by-state>; see also de Sousa, Tanya, Alyssa Andrichik, Ed Prestera, Katherine Rush, Colette Tano, Micaiah Wheeler, and Abt Associates. "The 2023 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress." AHAR Reports | HUD USER, December 2023. <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/ahar.html>.

² National Center on Family Homelessness. American Institutes for Research. (2018, September 27). <https://www.air.org/center/national-center-family-homelessness>.

³ "The State of America's Children 2020 - Housing and Homelessness." Children's Defense Fund, February 18, 2020. <https://www.childrensdefense.org/policy/resources/soac-2020-housing/>.

abuse, as well as witnessing domestic and/or family violence as a child,⁴ in addition to adult physical and sexual assault. Consistent with this data are the 57% of women experiencing homelessness nationally who report domestic violence to be the immediate cause of their homelessness.⁵

These results reflect the life experiences and extensive histories of trauma and gender-based violence experienced by the women, youth, and children served at Lotus House. At the time of this report, by way of example, Lotus House had served year to date 1,091⁶ women, youth and children, of whom 872 (80%) were victims of crime or trauma. A staggering 532 (61%) women, youth and children reported to have experienced domestic and/or family violence; 294 (34%) experienced adult physical assault; 292 (33%) witnessed domestic violence; 256 (29%) experienced childhood physical abuse or neglect; and 237 (27%) experienced childhood sexual abuse/assault. The present data demonstrates an overwhelming number of women and children who have endured consistent and prolific adverse life experiences, and the clear correlation between gender-based violence and homelessness – which impacts all areas of life, undermining the health, safety and security of women and their children.

In the face of compound stressors, such as, but not limited to, financial insecurity, loss of/inability to secure employment, on the job stress, health challenges, and many others, domestic or intimate partner violence can become exacerbated. Such factors often ignite or magnify unhealthy and abusive home environments, forcing women to escape their homes to seek safety for themselves and their children. Children who witness and/or are victims of abuse and violence face life-long effects which can gravely impact a child's brain development, increase emotional stress, anxiety and health risks. In addition, children who witness domestic violence growing up are three times more likely than their peers to engage in violent behavior, and more likely to be in an abusive intimate partner relationship or continue the cycle of violence for the next generation.⁷

As cases of domestic or intimate partner violence increase, so does the rate of women and children who experience homelessness. Demonstrably, 80% of women with children who experience homelessness have been a victim of domestic violence.⁸ In the absence of shelter, many women are forced to remain in abusive situations, with the potential to escalate and become lethal. Often faced with little to no options, emergency shelters and wrap-around gender-specific supportive services are nothing short of life saving.

⁴ Roos, Leslie E, Natalie Mota, Tracie O Afifi, Laurence Y Katz, Jino Distasio, and Jitender Sareen. "Relationship Between Adverse Childhood Experiences and Homelessness and the Impact of Axis I and II Disorders." National Center for Biotechnology Information, December 2013. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3969113/#:~:text=The%20most%20prevalent%20childhood%20adversities,also%20experienced%20childhood%20sexual%20abuse.>

⁵ New federal policy proposals will hurt survivors of domestic violence. (2019, October 23). Retrieved from <https://endhomelessness.org/new-federal-policy-proposals-will-hurt-survivors-of-domestic-violence/>

⁶ These numbers reflect year to date data beginning January 1, 2023-July 31, 2023, and are expected to increase by the end of the year, December 31, 2023.

⁷ "Children Exposed to Violence." Office of Justice Programs, 2020. Retrieved from [https://www.ojp.gov/program/programs/cev#:~:text=Being%20the%20victim%20of%20a,Nofzinger%20%26%20Kurtz%2C%202005\).&text=A%20number%20of%20studies%20have,any%20specific%20type%20of%20exposure.](https://www.ojp.gov/program/programs/cev#:~:text=Being%20the%20victim%20of%20a,Nofzinger%20%26%20Kurtz%2C%202005).&text=A%20number%20of%20studies%20have,any%20specific%20type%20of%20exposure.)

⁸ "The Intimate Relationship Between Domestic Violence and Homelessness." Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, October 27, 2018. Retrieved from [https://www.icphusa.org/commentary/the-intimate-relationship-between-domestic-violence-and-homelessness-2/.](https://www.icphusa.org/commentary/the-intimate-relationship-between-domestic-violence-and-homelessness-2/)

Despite these alarming figures, the link between homelessness and domestic or intimate partner violence, and the pervasiveness of these issues, is one which encounters little public awareness. Policies enacted on a federal and local level have not provided the necessary resources to address the gender specific needs of this highly vulnerable population. By prioritizing this public health issue and providing the necessary and appropriate resources and services to address the specific needs of women and children who are victims of abuse, domestic violence and lethality can be prevented.

The Unresolved Effects of Trauma And Homelessness

Growing up, children require a safe and stable environment where they are nurtured and surrounded by positive and consistent early-childhood experiences. However, the majority of women, youth, and children who experience homelessness have had long and complex histories of instability, trauma, and adverse life experiences since childhood.⁹ As reported by shelters in our Survey, domestic/family violence or intimate partner violence is the main type of trauma experienced by the women, youth, and children they serve. The highest reported forms of crime victimizations include childhood neglect, sexual abuse, physical abuse and/or psychological/emotional abuse; sex trafficking; and sexual assault, rape and/or other gender based violence.

Children who experience homelessness have often been raised in environments that expose them to compound stressors such as poverty, violence, abuse, neglect, substance abuse and socio-economic status – not to mention the trauma of experiencing homelessness itself – which negatively affect a child's development, and social and emotional well-being. Experiencing homelessness adds layers of stress, uncertainty, risk, and inequity – all too heavy a burden for children to bear. Particularly impactful for infants, when neural development is at its highest, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can have all encompassing health effects, affecting a person mentally, physically and emotionally.¹⁰ ACEs foster behavioral problems, mental health issues, social and educational delays, substance use, chronic diseases, developmental challenges, and strained parent-child relationships.

Consistent exposure to traumatic experiences increases the likelihood of children continuing and repeating the cycle of trauma and homelessness into adulthood and future generations, if left unresolved. With the right tools, resources, and education that promote trauma resolution, it is possible to break intergenerational cycles of violence, abuse, and homelessness, and pave the way to a life filled with opportunity and fulfillment. Significant to this journey are the shelters which have embedded trauma-informed policies and resources to create an informed and welcoming space for

⁹ “Homelessness Resources: Trauma.” Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, April 22, 2022. <https://www.samhsa.gov/homelessness-programs-resources/hpr-resources/trauma>.

¹⁰ “Effects of Poverty, Hunger and Homelessness on Children and Youth.” American Psychological Association, October 2022. <https://www.apa.org/topics/socioeconomic-status/poverty-hunger-homelessness-children>.

the women and children they serve.¹¹ Possessing a deep understanding of the unresolved effects of trauma on childhood development, and consequently adulthood, uniquely positions shelters as a refuge to help transform the experience of homelessness and trauma into one of stability and success.

The Need For Enriched Therapeutic Services in Shelters for Women, Youth and Children

For women and children experiencing homelessness to repair, heal, and break generational cycles of violence and abuse, restoring broken bonds of attachment, evidence-based interventions and prevention are key. To adequately address the effects of trauma, it is essential for homeless shelters to provide their sheltered guests a safe space with enriched therapeutic services and holistic supports that are trauma-informed. Nevertheless, of all shelters surveyed, less than ten reported being able to offer evidence-based screenings and therapies for children and families, with the majority of shelters providing off-site referrals. Barriers to accessing off-site referrals increase substantially the likelihood that children needing such services the most will be unable to do so.

These results illustrate a dire need for enriched therapeutic services within the shelter system. The significance of evidence-based therapies to identify and address the special needs of sheltered children has been trivialized. Understanding the dearth of research surrounding women and children experiencing homelessness, Lotus House and their research partner, Florida International University, have conducted extensive service driven research into the needs of sheltered children and advancing evidence-based, effective therapies.

Despite the transitory nature of this population, since the inception of this project – currently in its second phase – Lotus House has provided therapeutic services to over 1,000 children and implemented a range of evidence-based interventions and assessment protocols to determine the most appropriate one for families experiencing homelessness. A literature review utilizing a racial, equity, diversity, and inclusion (REDI) lens was conducted to determine the optimal assessments and interventions to implement with families experiencing homelessness from diverse backgrounds.¹²

Following the first four years of research, Lotus House published the first in-depth research paper of its kind, *Addressing Mental Health and Trauma-Related Needs of Sheltered Children and Families with*

¹¹ Spiegel, Jamie & Paulo A Graziano, Emily Arcia, and Shana K Cox. “Addressing Mental Health and Trauma-Related Needs of Sheltered Children and Families with Trauma-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT).” Springer, July 22, 2022. https://link.springer.com/epdf/10.1007/s10488-022-01207-0?sharing_token=YZ9SUWZCr8EuuREcXNli_c4RwlQNchNByi7wbcMAY7Hez_oz3DsoLz9hTcr3GNQRoViu7u6uKzYyddzUxXNbqZqsP6ZIKr81l_uhq8na3lQe1dlQ5QqV0sLDfk46EVK_SWmCVyK_o7-nJFapVawgLu_j82H5ZXqzOGmp3bHUfQ; see also Graziano, Paulo & Jamie A Spiegel, Timothy Hayes, Emily Arcia, and Sundari Foundation. “Early Intervention for Families Experiencing Homelessness: A Pilot Randomized Trial Comparing Two Parenting Programs.” American Psychological Association, April 2023. <https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/ccp-ccp0000810.pdf>.

¹² Hare, Megan M, Taylor D Landis, Melissa Hernandez, and Paulo A Graziano. “Mental Health Prevention and Treatment Programs for Infants Experiencing Homelessness: A Systematic Review.” Mental Health America, January 31, 2023. <https://www.mhanational.org/issues/prevention-and-early-intervention-mental-health>.

Trauma-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT),¹³ by the Journal of Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research. This publication underscores the high level of mental health needs of sheltered children and effective therapeutic interventions to reduce the symptoms of trauma and identify early potential developmental problems. The early provision of evidence-based interventions and assessments reduces parenting stress, the trauma and impact of adverse childhood experiences, and improves behavior and mother-child relationships.

Most recently, Lotus House published their second children's research paper, *Early Assessment and Intervention for Families Experiencing Homelessness: A Randomized Trial Comparing Two Parenting Programs*,¹⁴ by the American Psychological Association. The objective of this publication was to document externalizing behavior problems (EBP), trauma symptoms and developmental status of children experiencing homelessness; and explore the effectiveness of Child Parent Psychotherapy (CPP) and Parent Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT), two evidence based therapeutic interventions, to better support high needs sheltered children and families. The study demonstrated the effectiveness of each intervention in reducing trauma symptoms in children who had evidenced high rates of externalizing behavior problems, trauma symptoms and developmental delays.

As exemplified by the Lotus House service driven research, deep protective factors and therapeutic interventions, tailored to the child's and mother's clinical needs, are critical for the healthy social and emotional development of sheltered children, reducing trauma symptoms and the behavioral issues that often result from adverse childhood experiences. Without it, children face life-long adverse consequences in their mental health, cognitive development, and their ability to learn and thrive in school, health, and life. Enriched therapeutic services are life changing. Increased funding sources that support the implementation and provision of therapeutic services in shelter settings can advance child and family wellbeing, school readiness, and prospects for life long success in mitigating the impacts of trauma.

The Lack of Access to Mental Health Supportive Services and Homelessness

Access to mental health care, or lack thereof, has been a major contributor to the public health crisis surrounding homelessness in the United States. Overlooked structural conditions, such as deinstitutionalization and inadequate planning for suitable mental health treatment and rehabilitative community facilities, remains a primary, and often neglected, issue for those experiencing complex compound adversities, like severe mental health and homelessness.¹⁵ The shortage of community

¹³ Spiegel, Jamie A, Paulo A Graziano, Emily Arcia, and Shana K Cox. "Addressing Mental Health and Trauma-Related Needs of Sheltered Children and Families with Trauma-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)." Springer, July 22, 2022. https://link.springer.com/epdf/10.1007/s10488-022-01207-0?sharing_token=YZ9SUWZCr8EuuREcXNli_c4RwlQNchNByi7wbcMAY7Hez_oz3DsoLz9hTcr3GNQRoViu7u6KzYyddzUxXNbqZqsP6ZIKr81l_uhq8na3lQe1dlQ5QqV0sLDfk46EVK_SWmCVyK o7-njFapVawgLu_j82H5ZXqzOGgmp3bHUfQ

¹⁴ Graziano, Paulo A, Jamie A Spiegel, Timothy Hayes, Emily Arcia, and Sundari Foundation. "Early Intervention for Families Experiencing Homelessness: A Pilot Randomized Trial Comparing Two Parenting Programs." American Psychological Association, April 2023. <https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/ccp-ccp0000810.pdf>

¹⁵ Yohanna, Daniel. "Deinstitutionalization of People with Mental Illness: Causes and Consequences." Journal of Ethics | American Medical Association, October 1, 2013. <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/deinstitutionalization-people-mental-illness-causes-and-consequences/2013-10>.

mental health care facilities has exposed the most vulnerable members of our communities to life without shelter, support and security.

Reported by the overwhelming majority of shelters as one of the leading causes of homelessness for approximately 26-100% of the women they serve, untreated mental illness, resulting from extensive trauma, is one of the greatest barriers to independence. Without access to specialized care, supportive services and case management, women experiencing homelessness with severe symptoms of mental illness are unable to properly address or identify their needs and receive adequate treatment to ensure greater quality of life, leading to chronic homelessness – when a person has experienced homelessness for at least a year or occurring repeatedly.¹⁶ Consequently, women who experience chronic homelessness with untreated mental illness are less likely to break the complex cycle of homelessness.

Regrettably, shelters are not equipped with the necessary tools, resources, and capacity to help address the very specific and extensive needs of mental illness. Untreated mental illness requires deeper levels of supportive services for which the current shelter system is almost universally underfunded to provide. Cited as the most challenging need of their organizations, shelters identified mental health care to be a top needed supportive health service which they do not have the ability to offer on-site.

The lack of access to mental health supportive services has created a perpetual cycle of housing instability and precariousness.¹⁷ Women experiencing chronic homelessness are highly vulnerable and susceptible to further victimization, such as violence, crime and abuse in the form of sexual and physical assault, rape and human trafficking, robbery, fraud and other crimes, resulting in aggravated compound, complex trauma. By reducing barriers to access to mental health care facilities, and increasing coordinated care, our critically mentally ill are provided with an opportunity for recovery and stabilization in a safe space that adequately addresses their diverse and intricate needs. Too often, shelters have become de facto mental health facilities in this country but lack the resources to properly support those seeking their help to make successful transitions.

The Lack of Affordable Housing and Homelessness

The overwhelming majority of shelters reported a decrease in the supply of low cost, truly affordable housing, resulting in increasing homelessness. The lack of affordable housing stems from many factors, such as the decline in federally supported public housing, the growth in public housing waiting lists, cost of housing, zoning restrictions, and more have contributed to the absence of affordable housing and consequently, the intractability of and increase in homelessness, particularly for women and children who are already vulnerable. Survey results report approximately 76-100% of

¹⁶ “How Is Chronic Homelessness Defined? ” HUD Exchange, n.d.

<https://www.hudexchange.info/homelessness-assistance/coc-esg-virtual-binders/>.

¹⁷ “Behavioral Health Services for People Who Are Homeless.” Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration , 2021. <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/pep20-06-04-003.pdf>.

the women, youth, and children served by shelters have identified the lack of affordable housing to be a leading cause of their homelessness.

Today, the inadequate supply of low-cost housing is considered to be the universal cause of homelessness.¹⁸ This shortage of affordable housing has disproportionately impacted communities of color and middle and low-income households, particularly for seniors, individuals with disabilities, and those with children.¹⁹ Frequently neglected, other marginalized groups, like women, have historically also been excluded from housing options. Limited opportunities, such as inequitable access to land, property, employment opportunities, and financing, have constrained women's mobility and adequate access to housing.

Furthermore, women with children who experience homelessness are often their children's sole providers. Nationally, approximately 30% of families make-up those experiencing homelessness, and according to the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, women represent over 77% of the adults counted as experiencing homelessness in families with children.)²⁰ – statistics inline with the data reported by shelters. Facing pervasive historic and current discrimination in the job sector, women earn less than their male counterparts, inherently establishing a cycle of underpaid head of households resulting in housing instability and/or homelessness.²¹

Counterproductive to equality and principles rooted in basic human rights, the defunding of affordable housing has been and continues to be the fundamental cause of the rising rates of homelessness across the nation. Policies that ensure the development and preservation of affordable housing, increased funding for housing programs, rental regulations and subsidies, and eviction protections, promote access to affordable housing for all and encourage long-term solutions. Essential to their dignity, health, wellbeing and prosperity, children and families in our community must be able to transition safely into a secure, stable, and affordable home.

The Lack of Affordable Childcare Services and Homelessness

One of the greatest barriers for women in the workforce, particularly single mothers,²² is the lack of access to truly affordable, extended hours, quality early education and childcare services.²³ Historically, women have been their families predominant caretakers, and when faced with the

¹⁸ "2010 Update: Western Regional Advocacy Project Without Housing." Wrap Home. Western Regional Advocacy Project, 2010. <https://wraphome.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/2010%20Update%20Without%20Housing.pdf>.

¹⁹ "State of Homelessness." State of Homelessness | United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), December 19, 2022. <https://www.usich.gov/fsp/state-of-homelessness/>.

²⁰ "Homelessness in America: Focus on Families with Children ." United States Interagency Council on Ho, September 2018. https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Homeslessness_in_America_Families_with_Children.pdf.

²¹ Araújo, Carolina. "Gender Pay Gap in U.S. Hasn't Changed Much in Two Decades." Pew Research Center, March 1, 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/03/01/gender-pay-gap-facts/#:~:text=The%20gender%20gap%20in%20pay,%2D%20and%20part%2Dtime%20workers>.

²² Schochet, Leila. "The Child Care Crisis Is Keeping Women Out of the Workforce." Center for American Progress, March 28, 2019. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/child-care-crisis-keeping-women-workforce/>.

²³ Rice, Douglas, Stephanie Schmit, and Hannah Matthews. "Child Care and Housing: Big Expenses with Too Little Help Available." Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, April 26, 2019. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/housing/child-care-and-housing-big-expenses-with-too-little-help-available>.

decision to make a livelihood, they, more often than not, find themselves unsupported. Having to choose between taking care of their children or seeking employment, many mothers struggle to make ends meet and are driven into homelessness. The intersection between needing to care for their children and the lack of affordable child care²⁴ has become a direct contributor for women and children experiencing homelessness.

The majority of shelters, as corroborated by survey shelters, do not have the ability or licensing to offer childcare services onsite. This creates additional barriers for women experiencing homelessness who are faced with little to no family support and are unable to afford to place their children in daycare. The need for public, extended hours, quality early education and childcare is critical for women to sustain employment, education, and other resources that are necessary to ending homelessness.

The stress and anxiety associated with caring for children while experiencing homelessness leave mothers in an untenable position. They need to work to end homelessness while juggling limited childcare options. Shelters with embedded childcare centers reduce the burden of accessibility on mothers who are solely trying to survive and support their children the best they can. Seeking stability and a roof over their heads, mothers experiencing homelessness with children report that access to affordable, high-quality care can help them transition into their new and awaited lives.

The Lack of Access to Health Care Services and Homelessness

Access to healthcare services proves to be one of the greatest disparities experienced by marginalized communities.²⁵ Inevitably linked, poor economic conditions, such as high healthcare costs, in combination with rising housing costs, unemployment rates, and stagnant wages have exposed already burdened populations to greater vulnerabilities. Further marginalized, people experiencing homelessness encounter added barriers to access - often enduring higher rates of illness.²⁶ When left untreated, minor impairments could lead to longer-term disabilities and may require ongoing treatment or urgent care, resulting in an increased demand for emergency services and hospitalizations - a direct byproduct of inconsistent access to healthcare services.²⁷

To foster overall physical, mental and emotional prosperity, barrier free access to specialized, trauma-informed and preventative services including, but not limited to, eye, dental, vision, ob-gyn, and pre- and post-natal care, is vital. In shelter settings, on-site and readily available free of cost services enrich a community's resources and support its most vulnerable; yet, the majority of shelters are unable to offer comprehensive health services due to limited funds and capacity, having to rely

²⁴ Gould, Elise, and Tanyell Cooke. "High Quality Child Care Is Out of Reach For Working Families ." Economic Policy Institute , October 6, 2015. <https://files.epi.org/2015/child-care-is-out-of-reach.pdf>.

²⁵ Bedmar, Miguel A, Miquel Bennasar-Veny, Berta Artigas-Lelong, Francesca Salva-Mut, Joan Pou, Laura Capitan-Moyano, Mauro Garcia-Toro, and Aina M Yanez. "Health and Access to Healthcare in Homeless People." National Center for Biotechnology Information , February 18, 2022. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9282039/>.

²⁶ "Homelessness & Health: What's the Connection? Fact Sheet." National Health Care for the Homeless Council , February 2019. <https://nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/homelessness-and-health.pdf>.

²⁷ "Disparities in Health Care for the Homeless." Institute for Health Policy Leadership, March 11, 2021. <https://ihpl.llu.edu/blog/disparities-health-care-homeless>.

on linkages with off-site community providers, as reflected by the survey results. For women and children experiencing homelessness, off-site services are a barrier to care. Accessing comprehensive healthcare for our most vulnerable is frequently a task faced with constraints such as limited access to transportation, health insurance, juggling work and child care, and financial support.²⁸

Recognized domestically, and around the world, the right to health is a basic human right which women and children experiencing homelessness are not exempt from. Breaking down barriers to healthcare services provides significant reductions in homelessness and hospitalizations, while increasing housing stability, and improving wellbeing and mental health. Medical resources, education, and care are a vital component to building a healthy community and improving the socio-economic determinants of health.

The Importance of Shared Best Practices Addressing the Gender Specific Needs of Women & Children Across the Country

United by a shared mission to end and prevent homelessness, shelters from across the country have felt unsupported and disregarded. Without critical financial resources, feeling limited shelter capacity and effectiveness, there are noteworthy gaps in the system. Seeking synergy and solutions, shelters surveyed expressed a desire to join forces and share best practices in support of advancing the status of women and children experiencing homelessness.

From protocols and procedures to trauma-informed practices, and shelter operations to certifications, information sharing regarding best practices creates an opportunity for shelters to forge relationships, bridge gaps, and determine the most efficient approach to a common solution. Identifying and implementing practices which have proven to be effective, within the context of each organization, reduces uncertainty and increases outcomes. By encouraging collaboration and capacity building, the role of shelters in society can be redefined and innovated.

The value of sharing best practices across the continuum is supported by the shelter members of the NWSN. When asked in the Survey, the majority of shelters expressed the sharing of best practices to be the top most valuable byproduct of the NWSN, followed by advancing solutions to ending and preventing homelessness. Eager to learn from each other, the benefits of collaborating with leaders of other women's shelters can propel effectiveness and amplify impact.

The Need for Increased Funding for Shelter and Holistic Supportive Services

Indisputably, shelters are under-resourced and underfunded. The majority of shelters cited additional funding to be the most helpful resource to advance their organization's effectiveness and impact. As rates of homelessness and domestic violence continue to rise, alongside the costs of operations, many shelters across the nation are struggling to survive, keep their doors open and serve women and children desperately in need in their communities. Restricted in their capacity to provide

²⁸ "The State of Healthcare for the Homeless." Renaissance Social Services, June 2, 2023. <https://www.rssichicago.org/single-post/2019/09/27/the-state-of-healthcare-for-the-homeless>.

wrap-around services, shelters endeavor in many cases to outsource to outside organizations. Creating linkages within the community is crucial to advancing the status of women and children experiencing homelessness; however, off-site referrals are fraught with additional barriers to access.

Shelters are a safe haven for countless women and children transitioning out of homelessness. It is critical to create consistent, adequate streams of life-saving funding to guarantee the provision of and access to onsite services, including, but not limited to enriched therapeutic and supportive services, including social services, child and family therapies, individual counseling, access to medical and mental health care, educational supports, job readiness training and employment assistance, and other enrichment programming for all ages.

Appropriate financial funding for shelters will help assure they are safe, well-equipped and staffed to maintain ongoing operations and have the capacity to serve those in need in their communities. As noted by shelters, additional staff work space, maintenance and facility renovations, as well as increased employee benefits are vastly needed by their organizations. Many shelters do not have the funds to sustain or increase staffing levels and require added layers of support. The recruiting and retention of staff is key for the smooth and safe operation of a shelter. The urgency for greater funding opportunities is reflected in the feedback provided by women's shelters across the country, demonstrating consistency and urgent need.

Shelters are the last resort and safety net for millions of women and children experiencing homelessness each year in our country. Their contribution to society is imperative and transformative. Ensuring that these safe havens remain open and operating is not a matter of why but how. Additional funding sources for shelters can create generational change for our most vulnerable communities. The financial ability to embed as many resources as possible in a shelter facility can truly enhance the shelter experience while also generating space for growth and stability. For women and children experiencing homelessness, shelter funding provides a real opportunity to increase self-sufficiency that will allow them to transition into safe independent living, as they heal, grow, learn, thrive and achieve their promise of a brighter future.

The Need for Deeper Service Driven Research

Inundated with everyday operational tasks, the majority of shelters do not have the ability to extend themselves further, often sidelining one of the most important instruments in advancing the mission of ending and preventing homelessness – service-driven research. Narrowly, only about one-third of shelters reported to have conducted research to some extent or partnered with an academic institution. Significantly less reported to have published, authored or co-authored an academic article, field paper or report.

Service-driven research piloted by shelters offers an inside look into one of the least understood and most complex populations in our communities, shedding light on the hardships and unique conditions faced by women and children experiencing homelessness. Conducted to raise awareness

of our most vulnerable members of society, spark informed dialogue and identify effective solutions, research in community-based settings aims to promote equity and cultivate social change.

Solutions promulgated at the Federal and many local levels to ending and preventing homelessness have proven to be ineffective and fail to address the root causes of homelessness, as is evidenced by the growing numbers of people experiencing homelessness. To inform public and social policy, at all levels, solutions must be supported, shaped, and founded on research and community-based on the ground experience that will accurately speak to the special needs of women and children experiencing homelessness, the consequences of gender-based violence, health, racial, and socioeconomic inequities, and effective solutions.

The knowledge gained from conducting research will further improve the standard of care in shelter settings. Recognizing the diverse makeup of our communities, every woman and child served has distinctive and essential needs. Greater cognizance surrounding the special needs of women and children experiencing homelessness can help shelters better tailor the provision of their services and resources to ensure successful transitions out of the shelter system. Nevertheless, extensive research requires additional funding sources, which most shelters have voiced to be their greatest limitation.

Conclusion

The results presented in this Report remind us of the importance of service driven research in informing our nation's approach to ending and preventing homelessness. As a nation, we have failed to build and maintain the infrastructure, from adequate housing to trauma-informed shelter and supportive services, needed. Suffering decades of failed public policies at all levels of government, the last and final safety net for the most vulnerable in our country is itself at risk and shelters are consistently forced to turn away women, youth, and children in need.

More life saving funding for emergency shelters is required to build shelter capacity in communities all across our country and maintain effective, trauma-informed operations, provide meals, health care services, therapeutic supports, and the highest level of safety for women and children. Investing more deeply in our country's shelters assures a safe space in times of need. From gender-specific care to evidence-based therapeutic services, the provision of supportive wrap-around services give women and children experiencing homelessness a real opportunity to transform their lives.

Breaking down barriers and changing the narrative, shelters are an indispensable part of the process of transitioning into a secure and stable home. While the Federal government promotes its Housing First and Rapid Rehousing agendas to end homelessness, the numbers of women and children experiencing homelessness in our country continue to rise and for those of us on the ground, in reality - it is not actually housing first but shelter first and there is nothing rapid about Rapid Rehousing for any one who has ever administered these programs in communities that lack an adequate stock of affordable housing. It is the shelters that ensure women and children desperately in need secure housing in these Federal programs. As people exit to independent living, swift and successful transitions are expected by all, but lack of resources and funding continues to hinder the efforts put forth by shelters to achieve policies and truly address the grave issues women and children experiencing homelessness confront on a daily basis.

Women's shelters protect and empower our most vulnerable and marginalized populations in our country. With enriched funding and supportive services, shelters have the opportunity to transform the trauma of homelessness into windows of opportunity. It is hoped that the findings in this Report will help inform solutions to ending and preventing homelessness in our country, for the sake of vulnerable women and children everywhere, and our nation.