



Testimony for the Committee on Housing Budget Hearing

March 31, 2023

Good afternoon, Councilmember White and members of the Housing Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to share our testimony with the committee today. Our panel of four speakers represents the coalition, Women's Housing Providers. **Our four nonprofit organizations – Calvary Women's Services, House of Ruth, New Endeavors by Women, and N Street Village – provide over 90% of the housing and support services available to women experiencing homelessness in our city.**

Each of us will provide a brief introduction as we move through our four areas of testimony today.

- **Kris Thompson, CEO, Calvary Women's Services:** Calvary Women's Services provides housing, health, education, and employment programs for women in D.C. Calvary works at the intersection of homelessness and domestic violence, providing six housing programs designed to respond to women's needs.
- **Sandra Jackson, CEO, House of Ruth:** House of Ruth empowers women, children, and families to rebuild their lives and heal from trauma, abuse, and homelessness. We offer comprehensive support, a continuum of service-enriched housing for families and single women, trauma-informed daycare for children, and free counseling to empower anyone, regardless of gender, who is a survivor of trauma and abuse. Our programs provide individualized support to rebuild safe, independent, and sustainable lives.

- **Wanda Steptoe, Executive Director, New Endeavors by Women:** New Endeavors by Women (NEW) is guided by a mission to partner with women experiencing homelessness to create new futures for themselves and their families. NEW transforms lives and works to end the cycle of homelessness by providing housing, fostering the development of life skills, and promoting education and employment. Since opening our first women's-only transitional shelter in 1988, NEW has expanded to serve both women and children through seven housing programs – one transitional program and six permanent supportive programs. In the long term, our vision is to end the cycle of homelessness for every woman and family we serve – so that they may enjoy the same opportunities as all residents of Washington, D.C.
- **Kenyatta Brunson, CEO, N Street Village:** N Street Village supports women experiencing homelessness in Washington, D.C. by offering a broad spectrum of services, housing, and advocacy in an atmosphere of dignity and respect. We partner with women to achieve stability and make meaningful gains in their housing, income, employment, mental health, physical health, and addiction recovery goals.

As D.C.'s Women's Housing Providers, we are deeply committed to seeking effective solutions for chronic homelessness among women in our city. We believe that D.C. should increase its investments in gender-specific, service-enriched housing that expands the full continuum of care for women from emergency shelters to transitional housing to affordable housing.

As hypothermia season ends and the District discontinues COVID-related services for those experiencing homelessness, we are facing a serious shelter and housing shortage for single women. In a recent conversation with family services administration staff at the Department of Human Services, we learned that they anticipate needing bed space for 100 women. We are committed to working closely with the DHS FSA team to solve this challenge. We urge the city to prioritize funding for women's gender-specific, service-enriched housing in response to this crisis.

We also urge the city to use a data-driven approach to address the needs of women, one that is informed by regular reports on rates of D.C. women experiencing domestic violence and experiencing homelessness. Data on homelessness is already effectively collected by The Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness (TCP) and could be modified to specifically address women. Data on domestic violence could be sourced from other partners including the Office of Victims Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG) and the DC Police Department. Additionally, a Women’s Needs Assessment, like the one completed in 2017, should be conducted annually.

As the dual crises of homelessness and domestic violence continue to intensify in Washington, D.C., now is the right time to recommit to gender-specific, service-enriched housing - and specifically transitional housing - for all who experience homelessness as women.

As experienced leaders of women’s housing programs in D.C., we believe there are three priority principles we must follow as a community to best empower and support women experiencing homelessness in D.C.

- First, gender specific housing is vitally important for providing safe spaces for women to overcome their homelessness. Nearly half of women experiencing homelessness in D.C. today have also experienced – or are currently fleeing – domestic violence, and this number is increasing year-over-year. Further, women are uniquely vulnerable to continued violence while they are experiencing homelessness. A trauma-informed approach should guide the D.C. government to continue a commitment to gender specific housing. *(According to Psychology Today, a trauma-informed approach is one that accepts the pervasiveness of trauma, recognizes its many personal and societal implications, anticipates how trauma survivors may respond to words and actions, and endeavors to avoid further harm. Additionally, trauma-informed means fostering growth, resiliency, and healing as well.)*

- Second, the current number of D.C. shelter beds and housing units dedicated to women is insufficient. Women make up about a third of the people experiencing homelessness D.C., but only 4% of the city's housing capacity is dedicated to women. That mismatch should be addressed, and the number of shelter beds and housing units dedicated to women should be increased.

It's important to remember that when we invest in housing and wrap-around services for women experiencing homelessness, we also improve abilities to identify and address mental health issues, ultimately saving government money and resources by avoiding costly hospital stays and other interventions.

- And third, as housing and services designated for women are increased, they must be designed to be welcoming, safe and inclusive, meeting the needs of all who experience homelessness as women including lesbian, bisexual women, transgender women and non-binary and gender nonconforming individuals.

Let us share some the facts of the current housing crisis for women.

Unaccompanied women make up about a third of the D.C. population experiencing homelessness.

- According to the 2022 Point-in-Time data from the Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness, on any given night in D.C., approximately 990 women are experiencing homelessness.

Women in D.C. are trapped in a cycle of chronic homelessness and housing instability.

- According to the 2022 Point-in-Time data from the Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness, over 30% of the women experiencing homelessness in D.C. right now are chronically homeless - without housing for a

year or longer or having had a least four episodes of housing loss in last three years.

Despite the relatively high number of women experiencing homelessness, only about 4% of D.C.'s total number of shelter beds and housing units are dedicated to women.

- As of the 2017 Point-in-Time Enumeration for D.C., resources specifically allocated for women included: Just 6% of emergency shelter beds, 12% of transitional housing beds, 4% of permanent supportive housing, and .2% of rapid rehousing units.

Taken together, that is just 4% of D.C.'s total capacity for shelter beds and housing currently dedicated to women. And, as we noted earlier, this leaves **hundreds** of women without safe emergency, transitional, or permanent housing options.

- Further, even the limited designated resources are not always available. In FY2017, one-quarter of the emergency shelter beds dedicated to women were only activated during hypothermia season (Nov. '16 - March '17).
- When women make up a third of the people experiencing homelessness and only 4% of the city's housing capacity is dedicated to women, the allocated resources do not fit the need.

Gender specific housing is important for protecting women, both in avoiding retraumatizing women who have a history of domestic violence and safeguarding women who are uniquely vulnerable during periods of homelessness.

- According to the 2022 Point-in-Time data from the Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness, over 40% of women experiencing homelessness have also experienced – or are currently fleeing - domestic violence. This is a troubling increase from the rate reported in the 2017 D.C. Women's Needs Assessment Report.

- Women are also uniquely vulnerable to continued violence while they are experiencing homelessness. The 2017 Needs Assessment Report found that nearly two-thirds (63%) of women with histories of violence were also subjected to at least one act of violence during their current period of homelessness or housing instability.

Women experiencing homelessness are more likely to have engaged in survival sex and are more likely to be victims of trafficking, according to the 2017 Needs Assessment Report.

- When women experiencing homelessness are asked about their needs, as they were for the 2017 Needs Assessment Report, they expressed broad concerns about their safety as well as a desire for gender specific services.
- The unique histories and traumas of women who are experiencing homelessness should be considered in the DC government's commitment to gender specific housing.

Gender specific housing is important for LGBTQ+ individuals who are experiencing homelessness.

- According to the 2022 Point-in-Time data from the Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness, about 1% of the current D.C. population experiencing homelessness identifies as transgender.
- The same data find that 14% of women currently experiencing homelessness identify as LGBTQ+. This number is high when compared to the percentage of LGBTQ+ individuals in the city overall, estimated to be about 10%.
- Research done by the national level consistently shows that LGBTQ+ individuals experiencing homelessness are at a heightened risk of violence, abuse, and exploitation. Data from DC's Continuum of Care indicates that transgender residents of shelter and transitional housing are disproportionately affected by domestic violence, with 43 percent reporting experiences with domestic violence.
- It is important that gender specific housing and programs be designed with safety and inclusivity at their core to meet the needs of all who experience homelessness as women.

In closing, we would like to summarize our request.

We ask that:

- The Council recognize that women experiencing homelessness are underserved within our current homeless services system and that the shortage of safe housing is leaving women even more vulnerable to violence. Creating gender-specific, service-enriched housing must be a priority for the Department of Human Services.
- The budget include funding that would allow The Community Partnership to complete a Women's Needs Assessment each year (similar to the one completed in 2017 and the annual Point-in-Time and Youth Counts).

Attachments:

- Women's Needs Assessment 2017
- Gender-Specific Housing is Vital for DC Women Experiencing Homelessness
- Women's Stories & Testimony