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HOME

EDITORIAL

When home becomes hell

Reducing domestic violence would relieve a primary contributor to homelessness

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Today's Opinion stories

Life on the streets is humiliating, dangerous, unhealthful, exhausting and more. But for a substantial fraction of Lane County's homeless population, life at home is worse. These are the people, usually but not always women, who become homeless because of domestic violence or abuse — they lose their homes when they leave emotionally or physically damaging relationships. There is a safety net for these people, but the mesh is wide.

Some of the statistics are imprecise, but the connection between homelessness and domestic violence is strong. Domestic violence is the immediate cause of homelessness for between 22 percent and 57 percent of all homeless women, according to Rachel Collins, volunteer and engagement manager for Womenspace in Eugene. Thirty-eight percent of domestic violence victims become homeless at some point.

If evidence of the depth of trauma inflicted by domestic violence is needed, this is it: For many, it's better to be homeless than to stay with an abuser.

The trauma doesn't necessarily end once a victim of domestic violence closes the door behind her. Collins says that an "overwhelming percentage" of homeless women become victims of physical assault or sexual violence — they exchange an abuser's systematic cruelty for the random terror of the streets.

And the door swings both ways: Sometimes a victim of domestic abuse will return home because the hardships of homelessness are too much to bear. "Too often, we

are unable to sustain that bid for independence,” Collins says. Many other victims won’t leave home in the first place. The prospect of homelessness is a powerful instrument of control in the hands of abusers.

Womenspace, which celebrates the 40th anniversary of its founding this year, exists to support victims of domestic violence. In 2015 Womenspace took nearly 4,000 calls on its 24-hour crisis hotline (541-485-6513, or 1-800-281-2800), and served many more through its walk-in service at 1577 Pearl St. in Eugene. In emergencies, Womenspace provides shelter for women, and sometimes men, who flee an abuser. The Siuslaw Area Women’s Shelter in Florence (541-997-2816) offers similar services.

The Womenspace shelter can accommodate no more than seven victims and their children, usually for no longer than two weeks. The shelter often doesn’t have space for everyone who needs it. Women-space will often tell victims to go to the Eugene Mission, which offers shelter and meals — but the Mission is not an option for some, Collins says, because their abusers would know to look for them there. In those cases, Collins says, counselors may find themselves saying things like, “OK, let’s safety-plan around you staying in your car,” or advising victims about places they can sleep outside in relative safety.

Those who can be accommodated in the Womenspace shelter must soon move on — it’s a crisis intervention service, not a housing program. Some stay with friends or relatives. Others have the financial resources to find housing on their own — Collins stresses that abusers and their victims are found on every rung of the economic ladder. Affordable housing is increasingly scarce, but the staff at Womenspace can sometimes find independent living arrangements for victims.

Victims who have children have a few other options. The First Place Family Shelter program operated by St. Vincent de Paul of Lane County can provide refuge to low-income people who have children during the school year, and gives priority to referrals from Womenspace. The state Department of Human Services has a program that provides up to \$1,200 in cash assistance to low-income victims of domestic violence who have children or are pregnant.

These are meager resources — so many victims of domestic violence end up homeless.

The scarcity of resources is compounded by the nature of domestic violence. Abusers tend to isolate their victims, cutting them off from family and friends. A

victim who flees abuse will often have severed the social connections she might ordinarily be expected to rely upon. The isolation extends to financial affairs — victims may have no access to savings or credit cards, and leave an abusive home with no more than they can carry. Abusers steadily chip away at their victims' self-esteem, so that by the time they escape victims often lack confidence in their ability to fend for themselves. Isolation, poverty and learned helplessness are all ingredients of a recipe for homelessness.

Collins says Womenspace could use two things: More funding, and more affordable housing. The agency has a \$1.7 million budget made up of money from governments, foundations, the United Way of Lane County and private donations. With more money it could expand all its services — shelter, counseling and education. More affordable housing would allow Womenspace to give victims places to go after they leave an abuser.

There's a third thing Womenspace could use: A culture that will not accept domestic violence — a culture that believes and supports victims, that intervenes against abusers, that breaks the intergenerational cycle of abuse.

Such a culture would have less trauma, and also less homelessness, especially among women and children. The two problems are so tightly stitched that working on one requires working on the other.

Editor's note: This editorial is part of a Register-Guard project focusing on productive responses to homelessness.