



## SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness and sexual violence are inextricably linked. Homelessness places women, men, children, and teens at risk of sexual violence. For many victims, sexual violence can lead to homelessness or substandard housing. Many victims have to make impossible decisions: stay where they are and endure sexual abuse or run away, live on the streets, and face further victimization. Individuals cannot begin to heal from sexual violence if their basic needs, such as housing, are unmet.



- ◆ In 2005, Pennsylvania's rape crisis centers served 40,000 victims of sexual violence and their significant others.
- ◆ Pennsylvania's rape crisis advocates estimate that up to 80 percent of victims seen at rape crisis centers in Pennsylvania do not earn enough money to meet their basic needs.
- ◆ Ninety-two percent of homeless women have experienced severe physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup>
- ◆ Sixty-five percent of chronically homeless women report childhood sexual abuse.<sup>2</sup>
- ◆ Between 21 and 42 percent of homeless youth report being sexually abused prior to leaving home and up to 38% identify sexual abuse as a reason for leaving home.<sup>3</sup>
- ◆ In 2002, 32.3 percent of homeless women, 27.1 percent of homeless men, and 38.1 percent of homeless transgendered persons were sexually or physically assaulted while on the streets.<sup>4</sup>
- ◆ Twenty percent of homeless adolescents sell sexual favors for food or shelter.<sup>5</sup>

### Homelessness in PA

An estimated 3.5 million people are homeless each year in the United States.<sup>6</sup> While homelessness can affect anyone, "the population includes more women, families with young children, unaccompanied teens, and members of racial and ethnic minorities."<sup>7</sup> Homelessness is not just an urban problem; it exists in rural America as well, especially in areas that are primarily agricultural or dependent on mining, timber, or fishing industries.<sup>8</sup> Many homeless people are among the working poor who do not make enough to meet their basic needs in life.

In Pennsylvania, an estimated 90,000 people are homeless each year.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, in 2005, sixty-four percent of Pennsylvania agencies had to turn away people in need of emergency shelter because they did not have enough beds for everyone in need.<sup>10</sup> As it stands, more than 50,000 of our Commonwealth's individuals and families are on waiting lists for affordable apartments in Pennsylvania.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The National Center on Family Homelessness, 2005

<sup>2</sup> Bassuk et al., 2001

<sup>3</sup> Administration for Children and Families, 2005

<sup>4</sup> Kushel, 2003

<sup>5</sup> Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Johnson, 2002

<sup>6</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2005

<sup>7</sup> Bassuk, Perloff & Dawson, 2001

<sup>8</sup> National Coalition for the Homeless, 2005

<sup>9</sup> National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness, 2005

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania, 2005

## Barriers homeless face in receiving services

Individuals who are both homeless and victims of sexual violence face significant barriers when trying to access services. Many homeless victims of rape go without the critical services they need due to:

- ♦ Incapacities as a result of mental illness, addiction, or trauma
- ♦ Lack of information about services
- ♦ Lack of health insurance
- ♦ Lack of reliable and affordable transportation
- ♦ Lack of safety to pursue services
- ♦ Double social stigma attached to sexual violence and homelessness
- ♦ Competing demands on time and resources
- ♦ Fear of deportation or punishment
- ♦ Language barriers
- ♦ Lack of culturally sensitive services

Many victims find themselves in a social services scavenger hunt when trying to meet the requirements and demands of many systems simultaneously. The courts may mandate drug and alcohol treatment. Child protective services may require the victim to find safe housing for his or her children. The welfare system may place more stringent work requirements and limitations on the victim without providing adequate childcare dollars. Drug and alcohol treatment may require the victim to attend intensive therapy three times a week for the better part of the day. This leaves many victims without the time and resources they need to heal from sexual violence.

## What rape crisis centers can do to meet needs of the homeless

- ♦ Collaborate with local homeless providers, public assistance personnel, faith communities, veteran service providers, substance abuse providers, and other community allies; apply for grants or other funding; jointly educate the community about your issues and their interconnectedness; advocate for public policy changes; and advocate on behalf of homeless victims across systems.
- ♦ Engage in cross-trainings with local homeless providers. Educate them about sexual violence, your services, philosophy/approach, and how sexual violence and homelessness are linked.
- ♦ Create media campaigns that reach individuals across literacy levels.
- ♦ Canvass streets with flyers/brochures, post flyers/brochures in churches, community centers, food pantries, homeless shelters, public assistance offices, emergency departments, drug and alcohol treatment centers, counseling/mental health centers, etc.
- ♦ Provide information about sexual assault services to residents and staff of homeless shelters, participants of food stamps and other public assistance programs and recipients of food pantry services.
- ♦ Provide services in homeless shelters or other areas accessible to individuals who are both homeless and victims of sexual violence.
- ♦ Advocate for the housing and other basic needs of victims you serve. Ask what their needs are and assist them in accessing resources.

## Resources on homelessness and sexual violence:

- ♦ Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape: [www.pcar.org](http://www.pcar.org); 1-800-692-7445, ext. 115
- ♦ Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania: [www.housingalliancepa.org](http://www.housingalliancepa.org); 215-576-7044
- ♦ Pennsylvania Coalition to End Homelessness: 717-233-3072
- ♦ Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare's Homeless Assistance Program: [www.dpw.state.pa.us/LowInc/ProgHomeless/003670183.htm](http://www.dpw.state.pa.us/LowInc/ProgHomeless/003670183.htm)
- ♦ Pennsylvania Legal Services: [www.palegalservices.org/map\\_of\\_pa.htm](http://www.palegalservices.org/map_of_pa.htm)
- ♦ United Way of Pennsylvania: [www.uwp.org](http://www.uwp.org)
- ♦ Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency's Affordable Apartment Locator: [www.phfa.org/pal/](http://www.phfa.org/pal/)
- ♦ National Coalition for Homeless Veterans: [www.nchv.org/veteran.cfm](http://www.nchv.org/veteran.cfm)
- ♦ US Department of Housing and Urban Development: [www.hud.gov](http://www.hud.gov)