

Kansas City Star

October 12, 2004

Editorial: A Misguided Rule

Women go to domestic violence shelters to hide. The last thing they want is to post their whereabouts, along with their dates of birth and Social Security numbers, on a computerized database.

Unfortunately, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, in an otherwise worthwhile project to gather data about the extent of homelessness, is requiring domestic violence shelters that receive federal funding to participate in the count.

They should be exempted, and quickly. HUD cannot guarantee that its databases are secure. Women may remain in life-threatening situations if they suspect a promised haven could be penetrated.

“I can’t even fathom what the implications would be,” said Sharon Katz, executive director of Safehome, in Johnson County. “Any time we reveal a person’s identity, one never knows who might end up finding out and telling someone where they’re at.”

Safehome receives at least \$75,000 in HUD funding, and is subject to the reporting rules. Some shelter operators have said they would forgo federal money rather than compromise their clients’ safety. Katz said she hoped HUD would exempt domestic-violence shelters from the count.

The reporting rule, which took effect Oct. 1, applies to emergency and transitional shelters, food pantries, counseling services and any agency that serves the homeless. HUD ordered the data to comply with a congressional mandate to come up with a more accurate count of the nation’s homeless population.

The data, used properly, could help the government and nonprofit groups allocate resources more wisely. But information also can be misused, and the safety of domestic violence victims shouldn’t be compromised for the sake of a head count.

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