

Courier - Journal (Louisville, KY)

July 3, 2005

Exposing Battered Women's Whereabouts Denies Them the Shelter They Need

By David Hawpe

It's tough enough to get battered women to ask for help. Many are afraid to call police or seek refuge in a domestic violence shelter.

After all, they've been battered. In many cases, that means they've been beaten or belted. Their bodies often have been bruised, their bones sometimes broken.

It's no surprise that many are afraid to complain, lest their attackers take revenge for having been exposed.

When they do reach for help, they want to be sure it's in a safe place.

Unfortunately, according to the National Network to End Domestic Violence, "shelters and transitional housing programs across the country are being forced to share detailed information about their clients, placing victims in danger of being found by their abusers."

Is this an issue here?

"Yes, and a very frightening one," says Sherry Currens of the Kentucky Domestic Violence Association.

Agencies that get funding from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development are under pressure to implement something called the Homeless Management Information System, which the national domestic violence group describes as "collecting, tracking and sharing personally identifiable data about individuals who use services for the homeless, including victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking."

Among those feeling the pressure is Louisville's Center for Women and Families, which serves more than 30,000 people each year in 14 Kentucky and Southern Indiana counties. The challenge, according to president Jan Burks, is "finding a way to protect privacy while providing HUD the information they need to track the homeless."

Keeping the whereabouts of abused women secret from their attackers is made especially difficult by the fact that, as Burks noted, “they may be turning to shelters six times before they exit a shelter permanently.”

In Kentucky, state law may help provide protection. Here, HUD’s pressure to put information into computer banks runs up against state law that appears to bar doing it.

For those who provide a safe haven, the priority is, understandably, safety.

It shouldn’t be too difficult to see the problems inherent in entering information about battered women who are hiding. As Currens notes, “We have gone to an elaborate effort to get them in a safe place. To then put their information in a national database is a problem.”

Week before last, Kentucky advocates visited area lawmakers in Washington to discuss their dilemma, hoping to win support for HR 2695, the SHIELD Act, sponsored by Reps. Gwen Moore, D-Wis., and Katherine Harris, R-Fla.

It hasn’t got the kind of attention that Congress reserves for, say, the funding of roads, bridges, water lines, sewer systems and beautification projects. But it should.

It would exempt domestic violence victims from the reporting requirements, and let shelters provide the information that’s needed in a safe way.

Advocates also are working with Attorney General Greg Stumbo to clarify state law, because they believe Kentucky’s privacy rules trump the federal requirements.

Like most journalists, I’m a relentless supporter of open records and government transparency, but I agree that protecting women and children against retribution from domestic thugs takes priority.

Currens is clear about her priority: “I really think we’re placing women in danger, and one of our primary responsibilities is not to do that.”

Our local members of Congress should add HR 2695 to their list of priorities. None of them is among the 21 co-sponsors of the legislation.
Yet.

David Hawpe’s columns appear Sundays and Wednesdays on the Editorial page. You can read them online at www.courier-journal.com.

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