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New Federal Rules Gather Data About Battered Women

By James Dao

WASHINGTON, Oct. 7 – Domestic violence groups around the country are protesting new federal rules that require detailed information on tens of thousands of battered women to be collected on centralized computers, potentially making sensitive data accessible to resourceful batterers, they say.

Such information has traditionally been kept confidential by domestic violence agencies out of concerns that the identities and locations of the women could be discovered by their abusers. Placing it on centralized computers would make it accessible to a wide range of authorized and potentially unauthorized users, the groups argue.

“Once you put this stuff out there, the possibilities are very scary,” said Nancy Neylon, executive director of the Ohio Domestic Violence Network. “I don’t know that any head count is worth a life.”

But the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, which developed the rules, says such concerns are overstated. It contends the data bases, which are intended to provide more detailed information about the homeless, can be made secure against unauthorized users.

“I don’t want to minimize peoples’ concerns,” said Brian Sullivan, a HUD spokesman. “They are real, we share them. But this is already working in parts of the country.”

Such assurances have not satisfied advocacy groups, who are lobbying to have victims of domestic violence exempted from the reporting rules, which took affect Oct. 1. The rules apply to any agencies – from shelters to food pantries to counselors – that receive HUD financing and serve the homeless. Victims of domestic violence are counted among the homeless when they seek shelter.

Some organizations for domestic violence victims have said they plan to disregard the requirements and will forgo federal financing if ordered to comply. A few groups have also said they have been told they will lose federal money if they do not comply with the rules.

HUD officials said there are no plans to withhold money from groups that do not share information, though they could not rule out the possibility of future sanctions. HUD is a major source of grants for homeless and domestic violence programs.

In Chicago on Thursday, 70 people protested outside HUD's offices downtown, wearing signs that read, "HUD, don't put lives at risk," and "Help me don't track me."

One volunteer for a Chicago domestic violence program, Tamme Price, 28, said her former boyfriend repeatedly beat her several years ago, sending her to the hospital twice. He worked for a law enforcement agency and might have had access to the new computerized data base if it had existed then, she said.

"I can assure you I would have been much more reluctant to seek the help had this been in place," Ms. Price said.

It is not clear what kind of access law enforcement officials would have to the new data bases, experts said. Some advocates said the new HUD rules do not prohibit the information – which includes names, dates of birth, Social Security numbers and some medical information – from being shared with criminal investigators and other authorities.

HUD developed the new system in response to a Congressional mandate to develop a more accurate picture and count of the nation's homeless population. More detailed information will help the government allocate money more efficiently, federal officials argue. It will also help avoid double counting homeless people who might use multiple agencies.

Federal officials say the housing department will not have access to the files of specific clients, only to reports that provide aggregate information about the homeless populations in specific regions.

Domestic violence advocates say the goals of the new system are laudable. But they contend the information can be collected in ways that protect the anonymity of victims. And they argue that placing sensitive personal information on centralized computers will make it possible for information to leak out.

"A batterer with access to the system could just punch in a woman's date of birth or Social Security number and find out what programs she is using," said Amy C. Sousa, policy specialist with the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Cindy Southworth, director of technology with the National Network to End Domestic Violence, said abusers could work for nonprofit groups with access to data bases. Computer hackers might also be able to break into less secure systems, she said.

"Unfortunately, these systems won't have C.I.A.-level security," she said. "Nonprofit groups just don't have the money or training for that."

Her group estimates that a third of the 1,000 domestic violence programs nationwide receive HUD money and thus are required to follow the new reporting rules. More than 40,000 women seek shelter from those HUD-financed programs each year, while tens of thousands more receive other kinds of services.

Not all domestic violence groups are protesting the new rules. Michelle Budzek, an administrator with the organization that coordinates homeless services in the Cincinnati area, said concerns about the rules have been exaggerated.

She said her group has been collecting information from domestic violence shelters for two years without incident. The system has safeguards that have allowed only a small number of service providers to see the information. Law enforcement agencies cannot review the files without court orders, she said.

“This gives us the ability to have a really good handle on where the people are, what their needs are and what are the gaps in services,” Ms. Budzek said.

Gretchen Ruethling contributed reporting from Chicago for this article.

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