

ABC 7 (Chicago)

Protesters Say Housing Regulation Puts Domestic Violence Victims at Risk

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October 7, 2004 — Some victims of domestic violence are concerned their safety may be compromised because of new federal regulations. The Department of Housing and Urban Development has new guidelines requiring personal information, but advocates for victims of domestic violence say those details could end up in the wrong hands.

The government realized the number of people homeless in this country was being undercounted, so HUD came up with system that would input personal information about anyone seeking assistance from social service agencies.

A HUD spokesman says the information for domestic violence victims is encrypted, but some say that's not enough when lives are at stake. It's rare that survivors of domestic violence want attention. But a loophole in a new federal system has them and people who work in the field scared about too much information that could give abusers an advantage.

"We know the consequences of unintended disclosure and that is death," said Vickii Coffey, Chicago Metro Battered Women's Network.

Those who work with victims of domestic violence are fighting a federal system designed to track homelessness. The system would store personal information and anyone working in a social service agency would have access. For those fleeing abusive spouses they're worried this could lead to abuser to the victim.

"Victims go to food pantries, homeless shelters, resource centers, mental health and substitute services for help. When they seek these services they also want confidentiality and safety," said Theresa DuBois, Family Rescue.

"Without her knowledge her data is entered into a statewide data base and shared across the state or country or city for seven years," said Cindy Southworth, National Network to End Domestic Violence.

A woman who we'll call China does not want to be identified.

"My right side of my mouth was real big and the inside was real bad. I couldn't even eat for two months. I was purple and blue in the face and he told me it was my fault. I made him do that to me," said China.

After nine years of abuse, her husband was sent to jail. She's moved her and her children several times fearing her husband's release and she fears this federal tracking system will make it easier to be found.

"It was a nightmare. To me it would be another nightmare if the information is released," said China.

A state law protects the confidentiality of victims so the City of Chicago says it's committed to that, but the city also receives federal money for some programs.

"This places the city in the quandary of having to balance the HUD mandate and the legitimate claim of service providers," said Leslie Landis, Chicago Office on Domestic Violence.

Chicago is being asked to be one of the first city's to use the system. The HUD spokesman says they share the concern of those who work to protect women and children and that they want to gather critical information while protecting the privacy of victims. Victims' advocates fear women won't seek help if they know their information is accessible.

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