

Rocky Mountain News

October 22, 2004

Shelters Fear Breaking Word; Data Collection May Compromise Privacy, Victim Advocates Say

By Sarah Huntley, Rocky Mountain News

Domestic violence shelters nationwide are worried that they will have to choose between funding or the privacy of women who fear for their lives, as a result of a dispute with the federal government, advocates in Colorado say.

The conflict stems from a new requirement that shelters turn over information about victims who use their services to centralized computer systems.

The federal Department of Housing and Urban Development wants to use the information to analyze the nation's homeless problem and develop more effective programs. Victims who seek shelter to flee violence in their homes are included among the country's homeless.

Previous data-collection efforts depended solely on occasional head counts at locations where the homeless tend to congregate, said Brian Sullivan, a HUD spokesman.

"This kind of data isn't very telling about the true nature of homelessness," Sullivan said. "You tend to undercount some people and overrepresent others."

"What we really need is an unduplicated count of homeless people in Denver, and in America, and we need to understand who they are."

But advocates argue that the research undermines critical promises that they make to women in need: confidentiality and safety. Shelter workers fear that victims will stay in abusive situations or lie about their identities to find refuge.

"Victims are coming here to hide, not to go public on some federal database," said Vicki Lutz, executive director of Crossroads Safehouse in Fort Collins. "The chilling impact of this will sadly be impossible to know because you can't prove a negative. But if one battered woman dies in the name of data collection, that's one too many."

Domestic violence survivor Pamela Willer said she would be too afraid to seek shelter if she knew her information would be shared.

“I would be fearful,” said Willer, who escaped a violent relationship 25 years ago and is now happily remarried. “For them to say, OK, we’re a safe place; no one will know you are here except the federal government that just undoes everything we’ve worked so hard toward.”

The National Network to End Domestic Violence estimates that a third of about 1,000 domestic violence programs nationwide receive HUD money. The programs serve more than 40,000 women each year.

Lutz’s agency, which relies on \$26,000 a year in HUD-related dollars, has refused to participate in the data collection.

“No one has been able to prove to me that any system is hacker-proof. Batterers cannot be underestimated in their ability to locate their victims,” Lutz said. “I’m a shelter director. That’s my first obligation.”

Drafts of the federal rules didn’t specifically address domestic violence shelters when they were first circulated. But the final version, which took effect Oct. 1, does.

HUD has not threatened to yank the funding for programs that do not participate, Sullivan said. But data-collecting agencies will be awarded bonus points that could give them a competitive edge when they reapply for money.

HUD understands why the concept of sharing information worries advocates, Sullivan said.

“Their concerns are very real. We’re all on the same page,” he said.

But he said that all computers must have a minimum of eight levels of security. Several cities across the country are already collecting the data and are having success with encryption and other techniques.

On Friday, HUD officials clarified that domestic violence programs won’t be required to forward Social Security numbers if they can establish another form of identification that works.

Colorado’s system will permit shelters to create a 14-character code for each client, said Tracy

D’Alanno, of the state Department of Human Services. Even if someone infiltrated the system from a computer outside the shelter, they wouldn’t be able to access specific information.

“Domestic violence agencies and other special-needs programs really have legitimate concerns. But if I were a domestic violence person, I’d be more concerned about if I applied for food stamps or got a cell phone or a King Soopers card,” D’Alanno said.

But advocates say there is only one safeguard that would eliminate all risks – an exemption from the data-collection program.

“There is no firewall or encryption that will prevent an abuser from gaining access to these human tracking systems,” said Cindy Southworth, director of technology with the National Network to End Domestic Violence. “Abusers work in all fields – as system administrators, in housing authorities or nonprofit organizations. Victims must be exempt from these databases to ensure their safety.”

What they’re saying:

- Brian Sullivan, HUD spokesman: “What we really need is an unduplicated count of homeless people in Denver, and in America, and we need to understand who they are.”
- Vicki Lutz, executive director of Crossroads Safehouse in Fort Collins: “Victims are coming here to hide, not to go public on some federal database.”

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