

Women's eNews

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Women's Shelters Refusing to Surrender Client Info

By Sandy Kobrin, WeNews Correspondent

(WOMENSENEWS) – A recent change in the reporting standards for the Housing and Urban Development Homeless Management Information Systems has, according to women's advocacy groups, placed at risk the lives of women taking refuge at battered women's centers across the country.

In response to a Congressional mandate to obtain an unduplicated count of homeless people in the United States, Housing and Urban Development has asked service providers, including homeless and domestic violence shelters, food banks, housing authorities and law enforcement, to input critical client information into the Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS) database.

In August, HUD, a federal agency, requested information including name, date of birth, social security number, and temporary residence from domestic violence shelters for the database. Then in October, HUD issued a clarification for domestic violence shelters, noting that they did not have to submit client names or social security numbers to a central location operated by their local community or "continuum of care." A continuum of care consists of numerous locally operated programs, such as domestic violence shelters, homeless shelters and food banks, in a community that provides services for the homeless and are grouped together and funded as a unit by HUD.

Instead, domestic violence programs could use a proxy, coded, encrypted or other unique identifiers that would protect the confidentiality of their clients. The identifiers will allow local continuums to produce an unduplicated homeless count while providing critical information to better serve people who are homeless and report their aggregate data to HUD.

But women's rights advocates are still concerned that women who are in domestic violence shelters could now be at risk of having their locations known to their batterers, due to the fact that computers can be hacked into and encryptions decoded.

"The main component of our work is confidentiality and this makes no sense at all," said Rita Smith, executive director of the Boulder, Colo., based National Coalition against Domestic Violence. "All battered women who access shelters will be put into the system and easy to track. This places them in danger. Many batterers work in law enforcement or have friends in law enforcement and they will be able to access where these women are through a computer."

Brian Sullivan, the public affairs director for HUD, said HUD is sensitive to the issues of domestic violence shelters, but also has a mandate from Congress to track the homeless population. “The domestic violence shelters don’t have to enter specific information, but they need to find a way that distinguishes one woman from another. A Jane Smith could be entered as Lady X and there is a complex security system in the HMIS computers with 8 levels of security including firewalls,” he said.

System Called Not Good Enough

Smith believes that the internal security system is not good enough and “abusers often go to great lengths to find their victims.”

“Computers get hacked all the time,” Smith said adding that having any data on file that could be broken in to or decoded puts women at risk. “We can not be reporting any identifiers at any time,” Smith said. “Women know they are coming to the shelters anonymously. If there is any hint all their information is not confidential or can be tracked, it might prevent women from coming.”

In 2001 Congress directed HUD to develop a better way to document homelessness, rather than the head counts taken seasonally. These one-day, point-in-time snapshots tended to over-represent homeless persons with the most chronic problems, while under-representing those facing situational crises. Congress mandated the new documentation system start at the end of fiscal 2004.

“It’s a challenge for us to do this,” Sullivan added, “because it’s important for us to protect the safety of the women and families that are victims of domestic violence.”

The penalty for domestic violence shelters who do not comply could be a loss of HUD McKinney-Vento funding, which supported 3,700 local homeless service programs around the country last year at a cost of \$1.1 billion, Sullivan says.

Refusing to Report

The refusal of domestic violence shelters to provide any reporting data often pits one community service against another.

For a community services agency to receive funding, HUD is asking all the local service providers to participate. Smith says that a delicate balance needs to be created between local homeless shelters who are giving full data and domestic violence shelters that refuse to comply.

“This issue has put us a little at odds with our community, but we’ve refused to report anything,” said Barbara Niess, executive director of SAFE House, a domestic violence shelter in Ann Arbor, Mich. “Our information will remain confidential. I’ve written to HUD to try and do something about this but we won’t give up the names of these women.”

To address the issue of data reporting, Niess noted that the community had put together a “batterer’s panel” of men who had battered their domestic partners and had gone through a rehabilitation program.

These men were asked that if they had known that a database of these names existed if they would have made an attempt to hack into it. The answer, according to Niess, was “absolutely yes.”

“We’ve been in talks with our local HMIS representatives and the people who run our local homeless coalition and walked through the program and are trying to find a way where we can help them but there is no way under any circumstances will we give out the names of the women or breach any confidentiality,” said Kelly Otte, director of Refuge House in Tallahassee, Fla. “Our funding has not been jeopardized yet but we can not and will not comply.”

Sullivan said that HUD is trying to work with the shelters for now. “We have allowed domestic violence shelters to delay entering data into HMIS until they are satisfied,” Sullivan said. “We are bending over backwards.”

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence along with the Washington, D.C., based National Network to End Domestic Violence are providing information to local programs on the HMIS reporting standards and are asking that they send letters to Washington to ask for an exemption. The groups have sent letters to President George W. Bush and HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson requesting that HUD reconsider the HMIS standards and return the exemption for domestic violence programs.

Smith is still in shock over the HUD decision. “I can’t believe HUD thought it was a good idea,” she said, “People shouldn’t have to worry about being tracked. This whole thing feels way too much like Big Brother.”

Sandy Kobrin is a Los Angeles based writer who specializes in writing about women’s issues and criminal justice.

For more information:

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development – Homeless Management Information Strategies (HMIS): <http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/homeless/hmis/index.cfm>

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