

LOTUS HOUSE PROGRAM FOR WOMEN ONLY

Understanding the Needs of Women and Our Research-Driven, Evidence-Informed Program Design

The Intersection of Vulnerabilities in the Homeless Woman's Experience

In the United States, female adults, youth and children comprise 38.7%^[i] of those experiencing homelessness, with adult women and female youth making up 29%^[ii], nearly one third. While families with children are recognized as a distinct population with discrete needs, unaccompanied women have remained the most invisible subgroup, only recently receiving formal recognition in the hope that their special needs will translate into specific and sorely needed programming and funding.

Homeless women and female youth exist at the intersection of a host of vulnerabilities, including but not limited to:

- Domestic violence
- Racism
- Poverty
- Gender inequalities
- Employment discrimination
- Housing and food insecurity
- Lack of Access to Health and Mental Health Care and Substance Use Treatment

Women young and old, who are homeless and alone survive by being invisible. Staying awake through the night out of fear, they sleep on buses and in airports, hospitals, abandoned buildings, backyards and alleyways in a desperate attempt to find shelter each night without being detected. Finding food in garbage cans and behind restaurants, women avoid panhandling because doing so makes them a highly visible target for crime. They bathe in public restrooms, desperate to go unnoticed. But of course, they cannot hide forever, especially from predators.

Physically vulnerable, *homeless women and female youth are at heightened risk of sexual assault*, human trafficking and violence in its many forms. On the streets,

homeless men, drug dealers and pimps prey on women by offering protection. Gender neutral shelters may be just as risky for women who are alone, especially those who have high special needs and are medically fragile, suffering from mental health issues, pregnant or victims of trauma. So often, the “protectors” become abusers. The story of one woman at Lotus House is the story of many. When she refused to trick her so-called protector, she was beaten to within an inch of her life, permanently losing the sight in one eye as a result of the head injuries she sustained. Sadly, her story is all too familiar for those who seek refuge at Lotus House.

Not only is the experience of homelessness by women gender specific, so too are many of the reasons they experience homelessness.^[iii] The overwhelming majority of the women we serve at Lotus House are victims of physical or sexual abuse, domestic violence, trafficking, violent crime or other severe traumas, with a third experiencing violence and/or molestation in childhood. Childhood trauma unaddressed can impair the cognitive and social/emotional development of a child, her educational and work success, and lead to lifelong struggles with depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health conditions, including substance abuse as a form of self-medication, putting her at risk of further violence. Women fleeing domestic violence and other forms of abuse are forced to give up homes, jobs, support systems and more to escape, too often only to find themselves at equal or greater risk of danger in homeless shelters and on the street. Violence leads to homelessness and women who are homeless remain at risk for further violence and victimization. Childhood abuse, domestic violence and homelessness can become an endless cycle without access to the support and resources needed to heal broken bodies, minds and spirits.

For some women and youth, simply being pregnant means a loss of schooling, employment and apartment, at a time when they are most vulnerable and in need of resources for themselves and their infants. For women diagnosed with breast cancer, the inability to work, mounting medical bills and prolonged treatment make homelessness yet another harsh consequence of their illness, compounding a woman’s fears, hopelessness and depression. To be sure, women who are medically fragile, developmentally delayed, or suffering from serious mental health issues are at the greatest risk of harm on the street or in crowded emergency shelters too strained to answer their calls for help with the time. More than shelter, women

experiencing homelessness need a comprehensive support system and access to multi-faceted resources to truly break the cycle of abuse and homelessness.

COVID-19 Inequities

In addition, COVID-19 related job losses are impacting women disproportionately and domestic violence rates are reported to have increased during the pandemic.^[iv] The health related vulnerabilities of women experiencing homelessness puts them at greater risk for COVID, as well as more serious morbidity and mortality from the virus. Coupled with the medical/psychological effects of domestic violence and increased poverty levels, it is clear that women in our country are at greater risk than ever for homelessness and a host of co-occurring trauma and tragedies.

Trauma Informed, Gender Specific Solutions for Women

Since opening our doors in March 2006, Lotus House has listened with love to the cries of countless women experiencing homelessness, their struggles, and their hopes and dreams for a better way of life. We understand that their experience of homelessness is uniquely gender-specific, exacerbated by physical vulnerability, mental health issues and complex layers of trauma. They have survived, if at all by being invisible, in the shadows of alleyways, hospital hallways, public restrooms, transit systems, abandoned buildings and other places unfit for habitation. We know that violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and normative in their lives, often intimate and for many since childhood. We know their experience of homelessness is frightening, traumatic, and women are easy prey. Homeless women are in need of a safe haven and their lives are at stake.

Lotus House offers a trauma-informed sanctuary, sensitive to the gender specific, special needs of women and the traumas they have experienced, giving them time to heal, counseling and support services that make healing possible, education, empowerment, and the opportunity to truly break the cycle of homelessness. Our Safe Haven program welcomes women with *special needs* of all ages, including lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons, experiencing homelessness. By special needs, we mean women who are: victims of abuse, violence, trafficking and other serious traumas; medically fragile (including those undergoing cancer treatment, in need of surgery, or suffering from other serious medical conditions, such as HIV); suffering from mental health issues (e.g., PTSD – post traumatic stress disorder,

major depression, anxiety, bipolar, schizophrenia, addictions, and in some cases, multiple conditions); developmentally delayed or challenged; and/or elderly and unable to access family supports. In a respectful, non-stigmatizing environment that supports and nurtures, Lotus House lifts women out of homelessness with everything truly needed to allow them to heal, reclaim their lives, and build the foundation of a safe, healthy and happy future.

Utilizing an innovative holistic format based on principles of education and empowerment, Lotus House is designed to uplift women with support, tools and resources to truly break the cycle of abuse, violence and homelessness many have known their entire lives. In addition to shelter, clothing, nourishing meals and basic human services, Lotus House provides coordinated, multi-faceted, wrap-around support, arranging health care, access to life saving medications, mental health screenings and treatment, intensive individual and group therapy and support groups, life skills enhancement, and a host of enrichment activities (such as acupuncture, yoga, music, dance, poetry and more) that provide alternative pathways to healing. Counselors and resource coordinators serve as advocates to ensure every woman receives benefits to which she is entitled. Life skills coaching, adult education, job readiness training programs and employment specialists assist women in preparing for and entering the work world when they are ready, budgeting and saving their nest egg for the future. Housing coordinators and rental assistance programs provide that extra needed support to assure stability as they prepare to transition to their new homes. When women are ready to move, our affiliate Lotus House Thrift helps set up house with donated furnishings, linens, kitchen necessities and more. Upon completion of our Safe Haven Program, Lotus House continues to serve as a resource for its "alumni" to provide stability and a sense of family and community long after they have moved on.

In comprehensive, multi-faceted programming and support services, Lotus House helps women emerge from the shadows, give voice to their dreams, and build the foundation for a healthy, safe and brighter future. Your support empowers these amazing and courageous women to blossom into who they are meant to be. Thank you!

For mothers with children ages 0 to 5 and women who are homeless and pregnant, our [Children and Families Program](#) is designed to provide a nurturing wrap around support system for both mothers and mothers-to-be and their children, together with the added support of evidence based and informed child therapy, child-parent therapy and parenting education, to ensure these fragile families can look forward to a happy and healthy fresh start to their new lives together. Our [Youth Program](#) serves homeless, unaccompanied high school age youth, seeking to complete their high school and/or vocational education to build the foundation for a brighter future.

[i] Lakham, Eliane. April 2020. [Georgetown Institute for](#)

[Women, Peace and Security](#). At the Intersection of Vulnerabilities: The Plight of Women and Girls Experiencing Homelessness During the Global Coronavirus Pandemic.

<https://giwps.georgetown.edu/at-the-intersection-of-vulnerabilities-women-and-girls-experiencing-homelessness-during-the-global-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

[ii] Calmatters. September 2020. 'Unaccompanied women' experiencing homelessness in L.A. are being left behind.

<https://calmatters.org/commentary/my-turn/2020/09/unaccompanied-women-experiencing-homelessness-in-l-a-are-being-left-behind/>.

[iii] Prescott, Laura et. al. 2017. A Long Journey Home: A Guide for Creating Trauma Informed Services for Mothers and Children Experiencing Homelessness". The

National Child Traumatic Stress Network. National Center on Family homelessness.

<https://safehousingpartnerships.org/sites/default/files/2017-01/Trauma-Informed-Services-Guide.pdf>.

[iv] Lakham, Eliane.