

When the Only Option is Homelessness

By Natalie Amend

One by one, they fall.

Identification. Medication. Toiletries. Money, if possible. When he's in a bad mood, she hides each object in her pocket, throwing them out the window one by one.

They accumulate on the porch throughout the day. When he becomes violent, she opens the door, grabs her pile of necessities, and runs.

She doesn't have a plan. She only runs, because anywhere is better than an unsafe home.

This is the story of a Madison woman who chose homelessness over domestic abuse. She eventually found a home at the World Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). According to Libby Tucci, Bilingual Housing First Case Manager at the YWCA, every domestic abuse case is unique, but this woman's story represents a commonality: desperation.

"When you're fleeing a violent relationship, you're not thinking about the big picture, which is why many [domestic abuse] survivors become homeless," Tucci said. "They want an escape from the violence, but each woman goes about it differently. It's a really personal situation."

According to the Network to End Domestic Violence, 63% of homeless women in the United States have experienced domestic violence as adults. Madison's 2012 annual report on homelessness shows that 14% of homeless single women are in shelter due to threat of violence. Sixteen percent are homeless due to "roommate/family conflicts."

According to the report, a "high number" of homeless single women who struggle with substance abuse and mental health issues also have a history of sexual abuse. Other physical and emotional effects, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, include battering, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, addiction, anger, and isolation.

Isolation is common among all violent relationships. According to Tucci, an abuser can isolate their partner to the point that they lose their job and rely on the abuser financially. Cecelia Goldschmidt, Bilingual Case Manager at Domestic Abuse Intervention Services (DAIS), believes isolation is why survivors choose homelessness.

"In abusive relationships, there's so much isolation. The abusive partner isolates the victim from their friends and family. When [survivors] need a safe place, they need their friends and family, but that connection is gone," Goldschmidt said. "We try help survivors understand what they

deserve and their support systems.”

DAIS is Dane County’s only emergency shelter for survivors of domestic abuse. Women can call the shelter and stay for a maximum of 30 days at a secure, undisclosed location. Services include mandatory case management, support groups, and meals.

Although safe, DAIS is not a comfortable space. It has 13 bunk beds and a tiny common area. Wait lists are long.

“A lot of women find it difficult to sleep on a bunk bed in a room with 20 people,” she said. “But they do find support in other survivors.”

DAIS’s new project, the Capital Campaign, hopes to eliminate space concerns. Since August 2012, the Capital Campaign has fundraised for a new DAIS shelter, which will open in August 2014. It will have 56 beds, double the number at its current location, and heightened security.

The new shelter will be a public location on Fordham Ave. Goldschmidt believes disclosing the location will encourage community involvement and dialogue about domestic violence.

“We hope disclosing the location helps survivors and the community feel comfortable with confronting domestic abuse,” she said.

If a woman needs additional support, DAIS refers them to transitional housing programs like the YWCA. YWCA has low-rent apartments for single women and families. Its case management services are optional, giving survivors control over their lives after homelessness, but in-depth, helping survivors with securing affordable housing, financial planning, and job searching.

According to Tucci, minimum-wage jobs are easy to obtain but don’t provide enough for housing and living expenses, especially for families.

“People find work, but their income won’t increase. When your income increases, your food share goes down, and your child care subsidy goes down,” she said. “Jobs are not flexible for single homeless mothers.”

Low-paying jobs also block the top priority for both homeless individuals and advocates: affordable housing.

“We believe housing is a human right, and this market is brutal for the homeless,” Tucci said.

Madison Gas & Electric’s quarterly report shows Madison’s rental vacancy rate at 2.05% in

2013's fourth quarter. The national rate was 8.2%, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

For a domestic abuse survivor, paying for housing is a major way to gain control of her life, which is what DAIS and YWCA encourage. Tucci and Goldschmidt both said statistics show a woman in a violent relationship will return to her partner an average of seven times before leaving.

DAIS and YWCA encourage survivors to not become a victim of this statistic by discovering support and feeling safe on their own terms. To not run from a dangerous home and pile their belongings whenever they feel unsafe, but to walk securely into their own home.

"A year later, maybe a woman went back to the relationship, but maybe she feels safe and has a better understanding of what she deserves," Goldschmidt said. "She knows that we exist."

Madison's Resources Out of Reach for the Homeless

By Natalie Amend

A homeless Madison man wakes up at Grace Episcopal Church, where he had to leave by 8 a.m. He has 10 hours before he can enter an overnight shelter. He doesn't have a car or a bus pass. In the winter, it is too cold to walk. But he has nowhere to go and errands to do.

First, he needs to check his mail at the Dane County Job Center, located over three miles from Grace Episcopal. After that, he should eat lunch. He can either go to First United Methodist Church for a peanut butter sandwich or eat a hot lunch at Luke House. Both are three miles away.

To do laundry, he goes to Project Bubbles, which is in the same building as a peanut butter sandwich or 1 ½ miles from a hot lunch. A shower would be nice, but it is only offered three times a week at the Catholic Multicultural Center, which is 2 ½ miles away.

Without one central location to complete daily tasks, the homeless spend their days in flux, moving around town to complete tasks that those with housing complete in minutes. Their dilemma is how to get around town.

According to Jennifer Wiegert, Transit Operations Supervisor of Madison Metro, low-income bus passes are a feasible option for the homeless to get around town.

The 31-day passes are \$27.50 to those who self-report being 150 percent below the national poverty line. According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, that is one person making an income of less than \$11,670.

"We want everyone to have a warm place," Wiegert said.

However, according to Wiegert, low-income passes "sell out instantly."

According to Madison Metro, a person must reapply for a pass each month. Only 400 passes are available, with 300 released on the first and 100 released on the fifteenth day of each month. They are offered at three locations and must be purchased in person on a first-come first-serve basis.

In March 2013, Madison Metro expanded its supply of low-income passes from 300 to 400 each month due to overcrowding. Wiegert says they do not plan to increase anytime soon.

"We don't see a current need," she said. "Budget permitting, it could be considered."

According to Brenda Konkel, Executive Director of the Tenant Resource Center, these regulations make bus passes an unfeasible option for the homeless.

“Bus passes are impossible to get,” she said.

According to Konkell, the majority of Madison’s homeless do not have bus passes and instead choose to walk or bike. Some shelters like Porchlight and Salvation Army offer van service, but space is limited each trip and they do not run on weekends

“Homelessness doesn’t stop on the weekends,” Konkell said. “A comprehensive day shelter is what we need to eliminate this problem.”

On April 3, Dane County approved the purchase of Porchlight’s Hospitality House, located at 1490 Martin St., for \$330,000 to refurbish as a comprehensive day resource center, according to a Dane County Executive press release. According to Konkell, its location is not ideal for the homeless, who need access to downtown amenities.

“On a good day, it will take 30 minutes to get there. That means weekends and holidays will be impossible,” she said.

She also has doubts about how comprehensive the day resource center will be.

“If we’re lucky, it will have storage lockers, showers, and meals, but it’s easy [to say that] when it’s a temporary plan,” Konkell said.

Tim Saterfield, Communications and Operations Manager of the Dane County Department of Health and Human Services, assures that the day resource center will be accessible and comprehensive for the homeless. He also says that while a downtown day resource center is ideal, it is not realistic for the county’s budget.

“Downtown is an ideal location”, Saterfield said. “But there’s a lot of sites that seem right for a day resource center that [the city doesn’t] want to sell to the county for \$600,000. They want a mixed-use development,” he said.

He also says that Bethel Lutheran Church, located a block from Capitol Square, offers free meals and computers and will continue to act as a spot for the homeless to “hang out” during the day. The day resource center on Martin St., operated by Shine 608, will offer storage, showers and laundry, which Saterfield identifies as “critical needs” that Bethel doesn’t offer.

The new day resource center will also be more accessible to homeless located in South Madison. Saterfield says that not all homeless would benefit from a downtown day resource center.

“It’s unrealistic to expect there to be one place to provide everything to the homelessness. The homeless are everywhere, not just downtown,” he said.

Shine 608's day center is expected to open in November 2014.