



The State of Homelessness for Women in San Francisco

2024 Report

Prepared by:
SF Women's Housing Coalition & Partners

Letter from the Co-Chairs

Dear WHC Members and Friends,

The Women's Housing Coalition (WHC) is pleased to submit this comprehensive report regarding the status of homelessness for women in San Francisco. Too often unhoused women are an invisible population in an already invisible population. While collecting data on this population is difficult, The Women's Housing Coalition (WHC) believes an estimated 3,179 people identify as women experiencing homelessness in San Francisco, accounting for 41% of the total homeless population in 2023. We also know this population faces unique challenges and the current level of gender-specific services is lacking—with only 5% of San Francisco's shelter, transitional, and respite beds reserved for women.

The WHC co-hosted a historic retreat with the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing (HSH), Board of Supervisors President Aaron Peskin, and was joined by City Department Leaders on the status of homelessness for the women in our City. The commitments made and the solutions offered are tangible, impactful, and doable - this report will serve to synthesize the landscape regarding homelessness for women in San Francisco and the solutions that we can implement today, in six months, a year, and three to five years to end women homelessness in our City. Already, we have taken significant strides with our collective advocacy; including the passage of Proposition A and \$30 Million set aside for safe housing for victims and survivors of gender-based violence. We are grateful for our City partners who have helped lift up the needs and voices of this population.



While the status of homelessness for women is daunting, the WHC firmly believes that with concrete commitment to changes in policies and operating procedures from lawmakers and City officials, we will make homelessness rare and brief for San Franciscan women. Specifically, six suggestions were presented and discussed in detail at this gathering: Develop centralized coordination of women's services; investment in data collection specific to women's needs; safety for all genders across the system of care with a focus on marginalized genders; stabilizing existing women's programs; optimizing the system of flow; and allocate funds to fill these gaps.

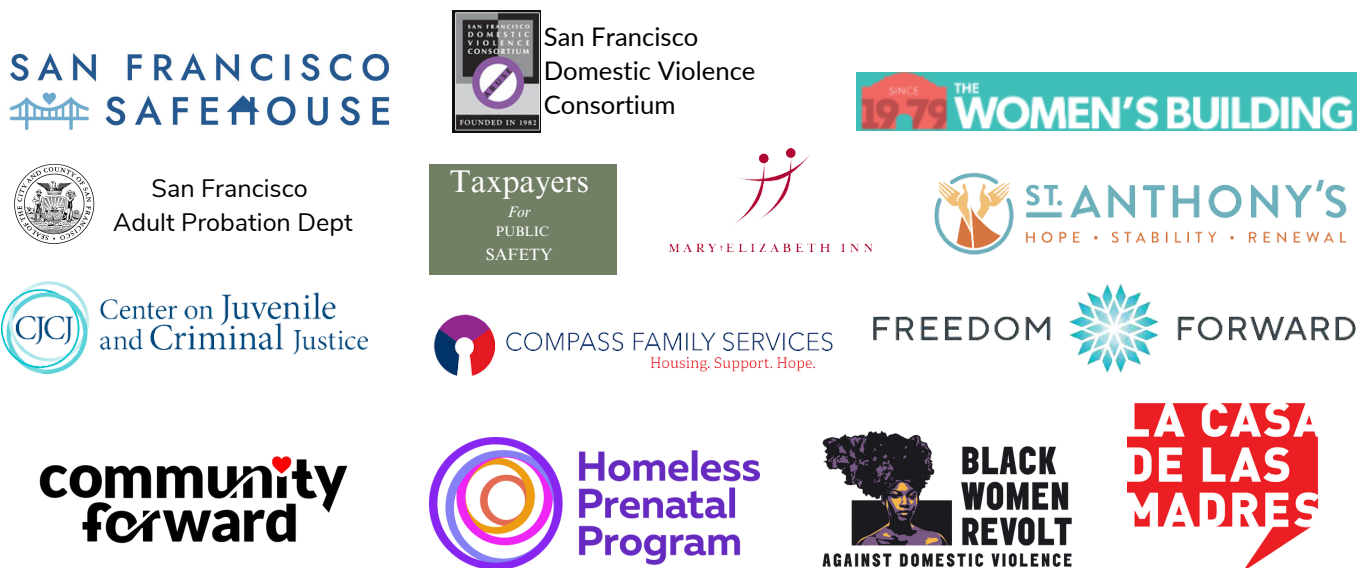
In addition to these broad objectives, we recommend changes that can be made immediately, in the short term, and long term. These include an easy-to-update list of current services, increased capacity to hire talent and for training, an audit on how much each City department spends on women, safety mandates in all gender shelters, and changes in funding streams. This report will delve deeper into each policy recommendation and its implications.

Ending women's homelessness in San Francisco is not only possible but also within reach with the collective commitment of City leaders, agencies, and stakeholders. We look forward to partnering with you to bring these solutions to life and make a meaningful impact on the lives of thousands of homeless women, providing them with peace, safety, and hope.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Jackson, Co-Chair, Women's Housing Coalition
Sammie Rayner, Co-Chair Emeritus, Women's Housing Coalition
Yves-Langston Barthaud, Co-Chair, Women's Housing Coalition

Our Members





Executive Summary

It is the goal of the San Francisco Women's Housing Coalition (WHC) to ensure that the unhoused women of San Francisco have their needs met. These include safe housing, updated resources, and public policy that reflect the worth of women and the values of the WHC and San Francisco.

This report is structured into two key sections: Problems and Solutions. The Problems section summarizes the unique challenges faced by homeless women in San Francisco. It highlights the gap in services, the prevalence of violence and abuse, the age and health-related challenges, and the intersectionality of race and gender identity that exacerbate their struggles. Additionally, it addresses the issue of inadequate shelter beds for women and the complexities of the current entry system.

The Solutions section is composed of recommendations to address housing and support accessibility, system care safety, stabilization of current women's programs, fixing circulation of care including the optimization of the system, and allocations of funds to bridge gaps in women's homelessness.

"It's really nice to be around all women. You feel a lot safer. And it's nice to have a whole bunch of women around to talk to - you feel like you have a family to talk to." -Eva, WHC Member Client

We are grateful to our members who have collaborated on this report. They have provided data, policy opinions, and client testimonials. Throughout this report, we will embrace this collaborative spirit and uplift the voices of unhoused women, like Eva's, that we serve.

Introduction

Homelessness is an enduring crisis that plagues many American cities, and in San Francisco, this issue takes on a particularly poignant dimension when it comes to women. While homelessness affects individuals of all genders, unhoused women face unique and often overwhelming challenges that demand the attention, allocation of resources, and empathy of elected officials, City departments, community-based organizations, and other stakeholders. The factors that contribute to and perpetuate women's homelessness are many: intersecting vulnerabilities including economic disparities, housing shortages, mental health struggles, domestic violence and sexual assault, and trafficking create particular challenges for women who are seeking to access and maintain safe housing.

Women experiencing homelessness often confront additional hurdles, such as limited access to healthcare and hygiene facilities, and interactions with child protective services, and are often the primary caregivers of their children. These hurdles make it even more challenging to break the cycle of poverty and despair.

“[Nationally] between 2020 and 2022, unsheltered homelessness rose by five percent among women and girls, and by two percent among men and boys.” -2022 Annual Homelessness Assessment (HUD)

As we delve deeper into the challenges faced by homeless women in San Francisco, it becomes clear that addressing this crisis requires not only an understanding of its multifaceted nature but a commitment to compassionate and comprehensive solutions. This exploration aims to shed light on the pressing issues surrounding women's homelessness and the urgent need for systemic change.

Part One: Problems

The Women's Housing Coalition has identified the following six problems women¹ face in their experience of homelessness:

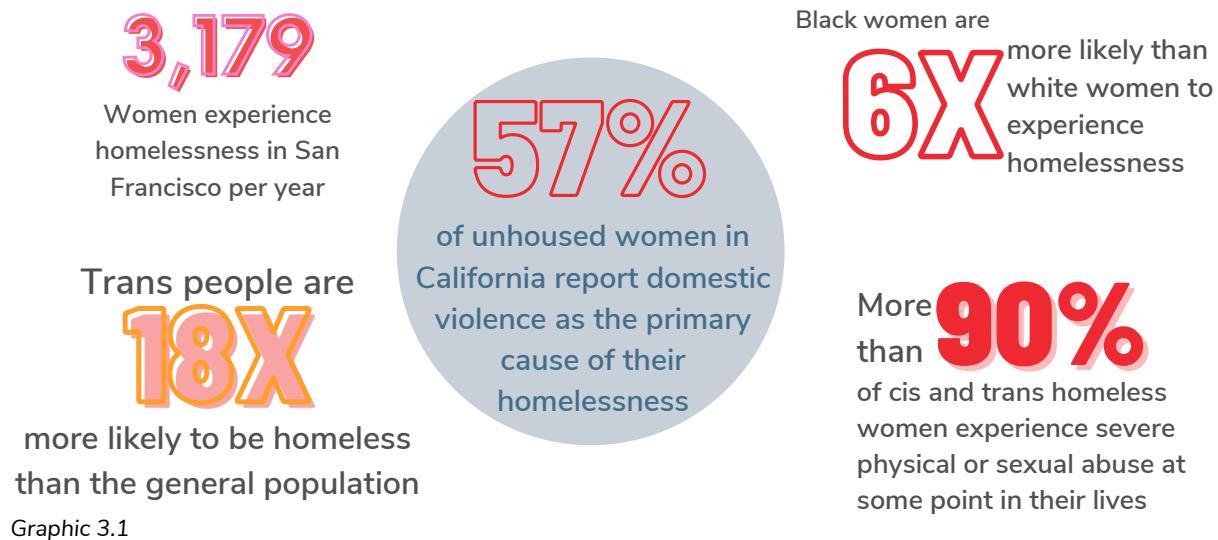
- 1) Unique challenges faced by unhoused women;
- 2) Lack of gender-specific services;
- 3) Violence and abuse in shelters and housing;
- 4) Aging and health-related challenges;
- 5) Intersectionality of race and gender identity; and
- 6) Lack of services in women-specific spaces.

Two realities cannot be ignored: women face unique challenges in their experiences of homelessness and the current response system does not do enough to address them. In San Francisco, there are 3,179 women experiencing homelessness (SF Point in Time Count); according to the HSH Safe Housing Community Needs Report, that number is an undercount. Because of the realities that unhoused women face, including violence, assault, and other traumas, women experiencing homelessness often avoid higher-risk locations such as living on the open street or in mixed shelter environments, which are the typical areas targeted by traditional service providers and data collection methods (such as the Point in Time Count). As a result, women's experiences are chronically underreported even within the already marginalized and often invisible group of unhoused people.

"(Finding help as a woman) feels like running around in circles."
-Quote from unhoused women given during outreach

The data that does exist makes it abundantly clear that the experience of homelessness for women requires a different approach. Most obvious is the prevalence of physical and sexual violence unhoused women face: 90% of women experiencing homelessness have endured sexual or physical violence. Oftentimes, this abuse takes place in the very shelters that aim to keep them safe – a recent study from the Los Angeles Women's Needs Assessment found that “the most frequently reported barrier was feeling unsafe [when accessing housing and services], with more than half of women citing this concern”.

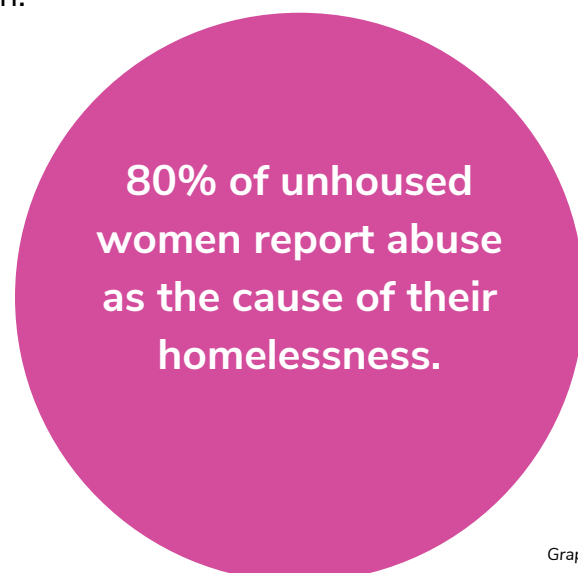
This population is also considerably aged, with 58% being over 50 years old (Community Forward SF Data), and faces considerable mental and physical health challenges as a result of their homelessness. While the average Californian woman lives to 83, women experiencing homelessness have an average life expectancy of only 48 (LA Times). While San Francisco has a robust system for addressing the health needs of its unhoused population, the aforementioned situations women face are not addressed in this system.



Finally, we cannot ignore the intersectionalities of race and gender identity which are pointedly felt when addressing women's homelessness. Black women are six times (SF Point in Time Count) more likely to experience homelessness than white women, and women with trans experience are 18 times more likely to experience homelessness than the general population.

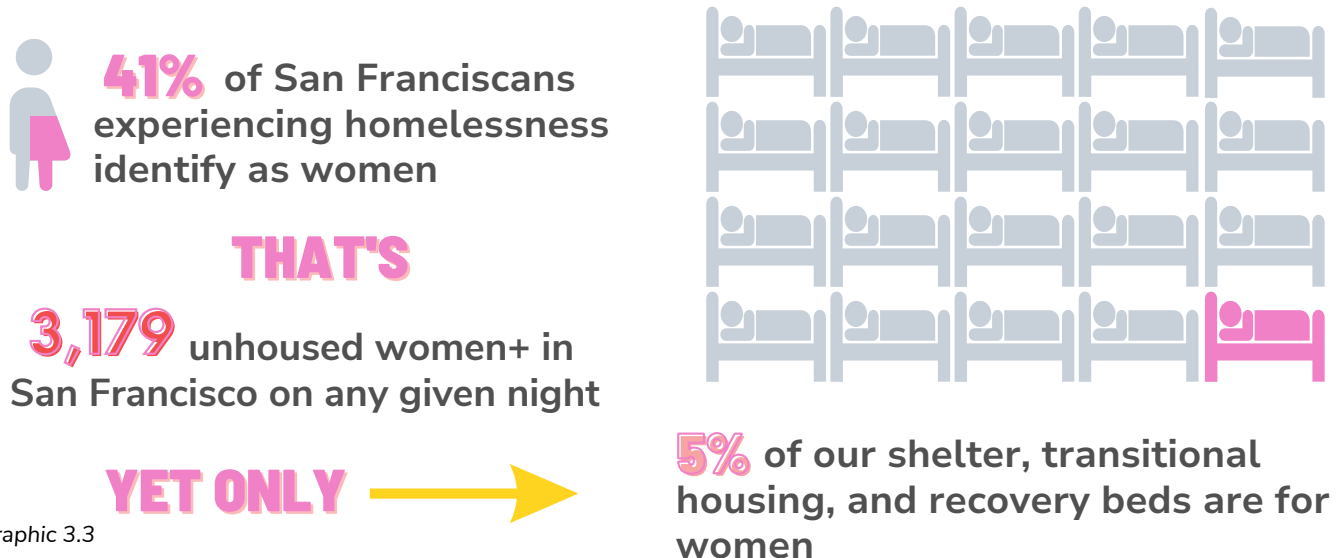
These intersectionalities create unique barriers and trauma in this population.

The coordinated entry system does not recognize women as a protected class, and therefore there is no mandate for services that cater to women experiencing homelessness' unique needs.



In San Francisco, only an estimated 5% of our homeless services are designed for the unique experiences of women (audit of Homeless Services, 2023). Most of these women-specific beds are designed for women fleeing domestic or physical violence, with very few designated for anyone solely identifying as a woman without other qualifiers (even though the data shows their experience of homelessness is often a cause of acts of violence against them).

Coupled with this lack of services for women are serious flow issues within the coordinated entry system, with many entry points not working well together, and a serious underfunding of DV access points. This forces anyone experiencing homelessness to not only deal with the traumas of homelessness but also to navigate a convoluted system with little to no support. This has long been recognized as an issue in the system, and we recognize the hard work that multiple stakeholders have taken to fix the flow issues and are excited to work in partnership to continue this transition for all unhoused San Franciscans.



Graphic 3.3

As we fix this flow, we cannot understate how important stability in funding for ongoing programs is, especially programs catering to women's needs. In the past decade, San Francisco's service landscape for women experiencing homelessness has shrunk, with multiple agencies scaling down their women's programming or shutting down programs altogether. The budget is the most accurate reflection of the value any government can make. While we understand there is a limited pool of resources, we implore City leaders to value women in future budget decisions.

Looking to the future in our solution to end women's homelessness, we should keep in mind legislative action taken at the state level which mandates Continuums of Care that receive state funding to address homelessness must include a plan to create specific systems that support unaccompanied women, those fleeing domestic violence, and families. While this mandate remains unfunded, the solutions presented here offer a viable pathway to create the support needed and would position San Francisco as a trailblazer in its response to women's homelessness both on the state and national levels.

The situation of women's homelessness is daunting, but not insurmountable. San Francisco has a wealth of knowledgeable and smart women's housing leaders who should be valuable resources when making change. By implementing the solutions offered, it is our belief that women's homelessness will become nearly nonexistent in San Francisco - allowing thousands of women to know peace, safety, and hope.



WHC inaugural retreat co-hosted with the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing (HSH), Board of Supervisors, and joined by city leaders and nonprofit partners.

Part Two - Solutions

The Women's Housing Coalition recommends the following six core solutions to address and end women's homelessness in San Francisco:

- 1) Develop centralized coordination of women's services;
- 2) Investment in data collection specific to women's needs;
- 3) Safety for all genders across the system of care with a focus on marginalized genders;
- 4) Stabilizing existing women's programs;
- 5) Fix the flow and make women a protected class in the coordinated entry system; and
- 6) Allocate funds to fill these gaps.

This list is neither exhaustive nor stagnant, and we welcome ongoing conversations, arguments, and suggestions to this list.

Develop centralized coordination of women's service

Presently, women's services exist as silos in the homeless services sector. City agencies and departments are not incentivized to collaborate and very often do not. In large part, this is why the Coalition came into existence. At the WHC Retreat on July 7th, there was consensus that a concerted effort needed to be made among the City and its nonprofit partners specifically in addressing women's services.

Grace lived in a U-Haul van after fleeing domestic violence. She desperately needed safe shelter, but there were almost no beds available at the access point she entered. Despite her need, there was no centralized list database of women's services, and staff at the access point were forced to turn Grace away. If a coordinated system was live and up to date, sharing where women could access services and where there were services available, Grace wouldn't have had to stay in her U-Haul. Instead, this coordination could have set her up for success.

The recommendations developed at the retreat will play a vital role in developing a safer more comprehensive support system for unhoused women. They include keeping an up-to-date database of women-only service providers and a referral process across the network of providers with the hopes of creating a collaborative system that is easy to access. One model to look at as a local leader in implementing a similar system is W.O.M.A.N. Inc.'s monitoring of open domestic violence beds throughout the City. In this model, however, the onus is on women's programs to self-report beds to W.O.M.A.N. Inc. in real time and for staff W.O.M.A.N. Inc. to do the



labor of maintaining an up-to-date referral list to assist callers to their hotline seeking shelter. This is a powerful example of how women's organizations have long banded together in order to fill the gaps in our broader system. Despite the success of such measures, we need the City's support to expand cohesive and coordinated systems, and resources to create a broader and more uniform solution. This will ensure that all openings and services are accounted for and reach a broader audience of unhoused women.

Notably, the Coordinated Entry system has recently rolled out Unit Level Inventory (ULI), which allows Access Point Housing Navigators to view and refer to open beds in the City's housing portfolio in real-time. We recommend expanding the ULI to include the forthcoming Coordinated Entry for Survivors (or DVCE) project and also feel that implementing a similar model for women's services could be a game changer in ensuring that women who seek help are connected to the correct resources and that every door is an open door. This will also go hand in hand with the fifth recommendation of fixing the flow.

Investment in data collection specific to women's needs

As addressed in the problems section, data on women's homelessness is sparse, incomplete, and anecdotal. Working in tandem with the other solutions offered, creating gender-specific metrics in our data collection allows for a more accurate picture of the experiences of homelessness and innovative solutions that address them. By leveraging and refining existing data systems while simultaneously expanding the methods and means of data collection, we can develop a more cohesive understanding of women's experiences.

One natural point of departure is drilling down into our Coordinated Entry System. In fact, the WHC knows that when we make women a subcategory in the Coordinated Entry System, the data that can be collected far exceeds what our current system allows. In 2020, the City of Los Angeles passed resolutions recognizing unaccompanied women as a unique subpopulation and instructed government officials to conduct the first county-wide needs assessment specific to women. The result of this was nearly 100 pages of data to inform and execute policy recommendations that can address unhoused women's needs and end women's homelessness in Los Angeles. It is our firm belief that San Francisco can follow suit and become a national leader in ending women's homelessness.

In addition to a recommendation to more intentionally leverage data through the Coordinated Entry System, another opportunity exists to refine existing data collection by broadening the Point In Time (PIT) count. While the PIT currently includes all emergency shelters and transitional housing sites, as well as street outreach, we would recommend a gender-specific task force to identify women's

services organizations that may not already be affiliated with PIT counts but may see unhoused women who are not already counted. This could involve smaller, grassroots organizations, women's medical and psychological clinics, and other places where marginally housed women may be connected outside of traditional shelter or street experience.

To compel and support change around experiences of violence and abuse we need more data on when these experiences occur throughout the City's continuum of care. One area we recommend expanding is the City shelter system's Critical Incident Report (CIR) system to always include reported sexual harassment, assault, bullying, and other gender-related complaints of discrimination or abuse, regardless if emergency services are requested. Currently, a CIR is required if police or emergency services are called to the site. This bar is not appropriate to gauge the level of violence and exploitation that women sadly face in co-ed shelters as we know that women often feel unsafe calling on these services. Instead, we recommend a CIR be filed whenever the above situations are reported informally to staff or through formal grievances. This will greatly increase the visibility of these incidents.

Relatedly, we encourage the expansion of routine, incentivized opportunities for women to provide feedback on their experiences navigating shelter and related systems of care through surveys, focus groups, gender-specific advisory boards, and working groups. A positive model in this area is the Coordinated Entry Redesign group, and we would love to see this consumer-forward model adopted more broadly throughout all systems of care.

Safety for all genders across the continuum of care

Women experience homelessness differently than their male counterparts, their experiences of violence are different, and the way they participate in the street economy is different. Women need different services than men. Wherever a woman enters the continuum of care, we feel it is vital that the services offered recognize this reality. Specifically, women need:

- 1. Safe Places;*
- 2. Time to Heal; and*
- 3. A Healthy Community of Support.*

Safe places - Women experiencing homelessness need to feel safe in the spaces they are in. Nearly 80% self-report trauma or abuse as their primary cause of homelessness. Experiences in all gender spaces included verbal, sexual, and physical abuse. With a focus on women's services, programs will be better able to identify

appropriate housing opportunities that will lead to long-term stability and success for clients.

Creating spaces that are safe for women requires intentional funding and planning. Examples of prioritizing the creation and expansion of safe space could look like grants to women's organizations for security improvements (security cameras, buzzer systems, PO boxes, etc.) and security staff. In places where staff already provide community security (such as Urban Alchemy), we recommend the development of a more comprehensive training protocol around the needs of women and gender-based violence as well as the incentivizing and prioritizing of hiring women into these roles.

Other ways of planning safe spaces that are accessible to women who have experienced trauma include increased units in the housing portfolio with private bathrooms that are then prioritized for survivors of sexual violence and others who may be retraumatized or fearful around shared bathrooms. Likewise, auditing the existing shelter and housing structures and making improvements through a trauma-informed lens would be the next step. As a resource, we could consult the National Women's Shelter Network, which is leading the way in recommendations around the design of physical space and recharacterizing the built environment to support the needs of women and trauma survivors

April, a trans woman, stayed in various shelters. There, she experienced violence as a result of her identity, and very little support from the shelters. She entered one of our member's transitional housing programs, but because of her past traumas - including those with the shelter system - her healing journey was slow. And while she eventually got a voucher for long-term supportive housing, it was for a site that was occupied by men. If it had not been for the skills she learned during her stay at gender-specific transitional housing, she likely would not have survived the one-and-a-half years of bullying and harassment she experienced. While she has since moved into independent housing, the lack of safe and supported housing designed to be gender-responsive has caused even more trauma.

Time to Heal - Women experience homelessness differently than men. They spend time hidden, isolating themselves and often refusing shelter in coed spaces. This isolation, coupled with the aforementioned traumas and abuses before and during homelessness, creates deep wounds and complex trauma that need time to heal. By allowing women time to heal, and tailoring services and programs to this time, we can ensure long-term successes.

In order to increase the time women have to access healing services, we recommend the expansion of longer-term programming options including transitional housing, rapid rehousing, flex pool, and other programs that allow for a longer runway to independent housing.



A healthy community of support - For women to transition successfully into housing, they first must stabilize in a healthy community that recognizes the many experiences and intersectionalities of women-specific homelessness. Without this key step, they will often continue to distrust any services offered. By relearning how to be vulnerable and comfortable in group settings, we can equip women with the tools to form positive community bonds wherever they go; social bonds we know are key in long-term housing retention and positive behavioral health outcomes.

We should stress these needs, and the way they are met, do not exist in silos. When designing programs and allocating funding for these programs, it is paramount we recognize that the journey for women exiting homelessness and the services needed are unique and should be tailored to their needs. As we continue to build more services for women and improve the quality of the existing ones, we must ensure that our response to the individual women and their experiences of homelessness takes into account these journeys and we ensure services to respond holistically.

Stabilizing existing women's programs

One of the hardest things for service providers is to not know if their funding will change, or even be taken away, from year to year. Budget season at City Hall can prove difficult, with organizations often vying for limited resources, rather than working collaboratively with the City and each other to provide solid services. To that end, we would recommend that budgets and contracts with women service providers not be annual, but instead more long-term to foster collaboration, growth, and impact.

This annualization of budget allocations has created a system where women's services are often the first cut in bad budget years. This has meant that existing women's services cannot focus on expanding and deepening their impact; rather, they must be concerned with looming budget cuts that, as has been proven, often deprioritize women first. For unhoused women to receive the care and support they deserve, the City must commit to ensuring that women's services are not the first cut in budget cuts and instead are protected.

Fix the flow and make women a protected class in the coordinated entry system

Of any recommendation, this will have the most profound impact on our ability to help women experiencing homelessness. By creating a protected class in the coordinated entry system, we will not only be able to gather the aforementioned data points but women, with their unique needs and experiences, will be separated from the general population experiencing homelessness and receive the specialized care they need and deserve. And this care will come from a multitude of nonprofit partners specializing in this service.

There has been great success in recognizing specific populations in the broader population experiencing homelessness. Indeed, such an effort has allowed veteran

homelessness to decline and recently the effort in targeting transitional-aged youth homelessness has shown great promise in decreasing rates of homelessness in this population.

We are excited about the current launch of Coordinated Entry for Survivors (DVCE). This dedicated pathway, and soon-to-be access points, are geared specifically toward survivors of violence. While not exclusively women, we know that the majority of people who experience domestic assault, stalking, and other forms of interpersonal violence are women and other marginalized genders. As a result, this is a huge win for the fight for equitable access to services for women. We are excited about the promising development of comparable assessments for this population and it is our recommendation that DVCE be equitably funded and staffed when comparing its resources to other access points (particularly those in specialized populations, such as the youth access points). We also recommend that all resources that exist in the mainstream Coordinated Entry system are also available in DVCE, including problem-solving, unit-level inventory, flex pool, and other routes to remediate homelessness. Additionally, it is imperative to understand how this specialized entry point will work with the broader system to ensure that survivors can move seamlessly across a broad spectrum of care. This will require the careful implementation of communication systems that prioritize confidentiality but also assure information and resource sharing.

Allocate funds to fill these gaps

At the end of the day, we demonstrate our priorities through our budget. While we realize that there are competing priorities in the budget process, the gaps in service have shown a need to prioritize women's needs in the City's budget.

"We are seeing women's services cut again this coming year. While women's services don't seem to benefit from 'good' budget years, they are always threatened in any year where there's a budget deficit. Domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness for women and their children and yet we have had difficulty making the connection at City Hall. The community of direct service providers works diligently to help keep survivors and their children safe and housed, but so often there are few options after their emergency shelter stays. We do have some transitional housing, but it is very limited and with a long stay allowed, doesn't turn over quickly." -Beverly Upton

We cannot let more services fall into insolvency and instead must reinforce the services that exist with the proper resources to execute their mission of helping unhoused women. Recent developments, such as the \$30 Million carved out in Proposition A, are encouraging but cannot be the only step taken. Every budget season, women deserve a seat at the table.

Closing

The San Francisco Women's Housing Coalition (WHC) encourages ongoing discussion of this vital issue. San Francisco has a tremendous opportunity to face the challenge of Women's Homelessness with its characteristic passion, vigor, and innovative spirit. This problem is not insurmountable and the solutions presented promise to be achievable and impactful.

The recent passage of Proposition A with its specific carve out for women shows tremendous progress toward finally recognizing unhoused women and demonstrates a city eager to provide solutions. But we cannot stop there: safe housing for women deserves a carve-out in every future affordable housing bond. And when budget season rolls around, women cannot be left to be the first cut in a bad budget year. This report underscores the critical necessity of addressing the multifaceted and unique challenges faced by unhoused women in San Francisco. The analysis of existing problems highlights the inadequacies in current services, the pervasive violence and abuse, health and age-related challenges, and the intersectionality of race and gender identity that compound these struggles. The stark underreporting and insufficient shelter beds for women, alongside the complex and often uncoordinated entry system, further exacerbate these issues.

To address these profound challenges, the WHC proposes six comprehensive solutions that include developing centralized coordination of women's services, investing in gender-specific data collection, ensuring safety for all genders across the continuum of care, stabilizing existing women's programs, fixing the flow within the coordinated entry system, and making women a protected class. Additionally, allocating long-term funds to bridge the service gaps is emphasized as a fundamental step toward meaningful change.

This report aims not only to illuminate the urgent need for systemic change but also to provide actionable recommendations that can lead to significant improvements in the lives of unhoused women. The WHC is committed to collaborating with city leaders, community organizations, and stakeholders to implement these solutions and foster a future where the homelessness crisis among women in San Francisco is effectively addressed. By embracing these recommendations, San Francisco can pioneer a compassionate and comprehensive approach to ending women's homelessness, ensuring safety, stability, and dignity for all women in need.

3.1

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Client quotes and testimonials came from WHC member's clients. Names and some details were changed to protect clients.

Special thanks to Jack Hill for his support co-writing this report.

