

Testimony of Lisa Lowe  
to The Montgomery County  
Interagency Commission on Homelessness  
March 4, 2020

I am here to speak about the state of our County women's homeless shelters. I have three main concerns:

**My first concern** is that they have become a "dumping ground" for human beings –who fall primarily into three categories:

- 1) Those who meet medical necessity criteria and who are eligible for state funding to be in residential treatment programs –halfway houses and recovery residences, for a substance-use disorder. Sadly, Avery Road Treatment Center (ARTC) has set up a 'treatment-to-homeless pipeline', presumably so they can continue to bill for out-patient services, despite the fact that these individuals want to go, and deserve to go, to residential treatment instead. And what's most egregious is that ARTC is violating COMAR to do it, specifically 10.47.01.04, 10.47.01.08, 10.47.01.09, 10.47.02, 10.47.02.07, and 10.47.02.08 –regulations regarding discharge planning, coordinating, and reporting.
- 2) We also dump mental health patients –who are eligible for and who deserve significant support to maintain functionality, to connect with the larger society, and to attain their full human potential. If they received the support that is warranted by their diagnosis, they could be a contributing member of society, rather than shuffled from homeless bed to homeless bed, wandering confused, aimless, scared and hungry on our city streets.
- 3) Thrown into this mix is our nation's rapidly rising NEWEST homeless population –retirement age women, many with college degrees, who have worked their entire lives, as well as taken on care-giver responsibilities for special needs children or elderly parents, and who have become homeless as a result of a sudden and unforeseen tragedy, or simply because their career path has become obsolete.

**My second concern** is that women in all three of these categories are being “kicked out” of homeless shelters on a routine basis, with nowhere else to go but to lay their head on the cold hard concrete or find a patch of dry ground at night, and hope that they are not molested, taunted or ridiculed by passersby. I have witnessed the following:

- 60-year-old women without any income are kicked out to the streets with no place to go, simply “because their time is up” at the shelter;
- A 70-year-old woman with onset dementia was kicked out in the rain because she was 15 minutes past curfew;
- Schizophrenic or delusional women, mocked and ridiculed by staff first, are then kicked out because they exhibited signs of their disorder –talking / yelling to themselves or others;
- People threatened to be kicked out, ridiculed and verbally abused by staff for: not making their bed, still being in shelter 1 minute past the time to leave, having an orange in their bag and requesting to take it to their car;
- A woman with Down’s Syndrome and/or autism who was living in South Carolina until her husband died, “came home” to Maryland where she was born, raised and resided until her marriage. She was kicked out of shelter because she had a South Carolina driver’s license.

**My third concern** is that in an era where we take civil rights and women’s rights for granted, where the rights of LGBTQ have recently been won –we have no rights for homeless individuals.

I was recently kicked out of shelter after another resident intimidated, harassed and threatened me on two occasions –calling me racially-slurred names, making lewd and vulgar comments about my body, continuing with demeaning and hurtful comments, and threatening to punch me. I had the

apparent audacity to warn her that if she intimidated or threatened me one more time that I would file a restraining order –This was AFTER a staff member told me to ignore her and not say anything to her –to simply tolerate verbal abuse, physical threats, and racial hate. I felt traumatized, not only by the threat, but by the lack of staff intervention to ensure my safety in the shelter.

My peers, however, circled around me with kindly advice –wise elderly African-American women who had survived hate crimes, intimidation and physical and verbal abuse by white counterparts in the 60s. They offered advice on how to cope with racially motivated hatred, harassment and intimidation by silently deflecting it, and they also gave me advice on how to remain silent when confronted with staff members empowered through verbal abuse.

Because I have the luxury of owning a Toyota Corolla, with a back seat to sleep in, albeit uncomfortably, I also have the luxury of not trading my 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment Right to Freedom of Speech for a bed.

So, against this advice to remain silent and learn to tolerate abuse that I would never have tolerated during the first 60 years of my life, I explained to staff that I had a right to defend myself in a way that I saw fit, particularly when they were clearly NOT going to intervene to ensure my safety, and I also explained that I had a right to discuss my safety concerns with shelter staff. Despite the fact that I was not disorderly, or disruptive to the program, or even raised my voice, their response was to threaten me with immediate eviction, apparently for questioning their authority over me and my decisions –a threat that was shockingly upheld and enforced by the Clinical Director of Rainbow Shelter the next day, when I was told not to return.

Similarly, I was told that I could not return to IWWC because I had founded and chaired a “Resident’s Association” while at the shelter –similar to a PTA in schools.

**Conclusion:** Homeless people are not only denied publicly funded services for which they are eligible, and being kicked out to sleep in the streets on the whims of untrained and abusive staff, but they are being denied their First Amendment Constitutional Right to freedom of speech and freedom to organize collectively for mutual benefit.

But the real kicker is this: OUR COUNTY ADMIN, THE DIRECTORS OF OUR AGENCIES, THOSE WHO HOLD THE CONTRACTS FOR COUNTY HOMELESS SERVICES, AND OUR COUNTY ELECTED OFFICIALS ALL KNOW ABOUT THESE TRAGIC EXAMPLES AND THE VERY SAD STATE OF AFFAIRS IN THESE HOMELESS SHELTERS, AND THEY TURN A BLIND EYE. Therein lies the biggest tragedy of all!

We have paid for this safety net year after year with our hard-earned tax dollars –And now, when we actually need to utilize this safety net –we find that on a good day –these shelters are run like a prison –and we are all treated like prisoners.

We must have contractor oversight with input from those with direct lived experience. We must have our Constitutional Rights restored and upheld. We must end the treatment-to-homeless pipeline that exists within the MH/SUD Continuum of Care. AND We must STOP withholding homeless services from vulnerable women who desperately need them.