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Addressing the Needs of Unaccompanied Women Experiencing Homelessness

The 2020 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count (Homeless Count) conducted by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) showed that more than 66,000 individuals in Los Angeles County (County) are experiencing homelessness on any given night, and nearly one-third (21,129) of these individuals are women. That is a 15% increase over the number of women experiencing homelessness in 2019. Moreover, nearly 60% of the women experiencing homelessness are unsheltered. However, the Homeless Count does not account for how many of these women are “unaccompanied,” meaning women over the age of 18 living without a partner or children. As a contrast, the Homeless Count does include the subpopulations of Veterans, families, transitional age youth, and the chronically homeless. The designation of these subpopulations has enabled the creation of specific strategies and the allocation of resources to identify and address each subpopulation’s unique challenges and needs. This approach has been deemed more effective than a “one-size-fits-all” approach. One notable example of the

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success of this approach is visible in the homeless population of Veterans, which saw no increase in the 2020 Homeless Count. Furthermore, women who are accompanied by children or dependents do qualify and are often prioritized for resources allocated to unhoused or housing-insecure families. As the County continues to invest resources to address widespread homelessness, it is important to increase our understanding of what causes unaccompanied women to fall into homelessness as well as what is required to meet the specific needs of this population.

The Los Angeles Women's Needs Assessment (Needs Assessment), a survey and study conducted every three years by the Downtown Women's Center (in partnership with the Downtown Women's Action Coalition) for nearly two decades, documents the demographics, needs, and conditions of homeless, low-income, unaccompanied women in the Skid Row Community and most recently throughout the City of Los Angeles. This community-based research project sheds light on how women fall into homelessness and how we can create the support and programs they need to be successful on their path towards permanent and stable housing. Through self-reported data captured in the 2019 LA City Women's Needs Assessment, the experiences of 305 unaccompanied women give us insight into the unique traumas and challenges with which unhoused women in Los Angeles are struggling. Nearly half of the women surveyed (48.9%) are age 51 and older. A majority of women (64%) have children, with about half (48%) having children over the age of 18. On average, women surveyed had 2.8 children. A majority of survey participants (60.2%) also have experienced some form of violence in the last year, with women who identify as LGBTQ more likely than average to have experienced sexual assault or sexual violence over the same time period. And a vast majority (82%) of

women indicate they have struggled to access permanent housing. LGBTQ women experience homelessness at disproportionately high rates, and transgender women often face greater challenges in accessing shelters and homeless services. More data needs to be collected and analyzed for a broader population of unaccompanied women in Los Angeles County to help inform future homeless services delivery and access to housing.

In December 2016, LAHSA created an Ad Hoc Committee on Women and Homelessness (Committee) to develop recommendations for reducing the number of women experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County. In August 2017, the Committee released its report and recommendations, which centered around five categories: (1) data and reporting, (2) training and capacity building, (3) funding, (4) service delivery, and (5) advocacy and policy development. In addition, on June 13, 2017, the Board directed LAHSA to implement a Women's Crisis Housing program to support a minimum of 200 crisis housing beds with funding from Homeless Initiative Strategy E8 (Enhance the Emergency Shelter System) and directed the Chief Executive Office, in collaboration with LAHSA and Department of Health Services, to make recommendations regarding whether funding in other Homeless Initiative strategies should be set aside to specifically address the needs of homeless women. Although a number of actions have been taken and much progress has been made to identify and address the needs of women experiencing homelessness, a deeper look at the acute needs of unaccompanied women is necessary.

In addition, the County can advocate at the federal and state government levels to elevate the issue of unaccompanied women experiencing homelessness. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) sets the requirements for the

mandated point-in-time homeless count conducted by each Continuum of Care (CoC), and then HUD uses the data collected to allocate federal funding to the CoCs for homeless services. At the state level, since 2018, the California State Legislature has required local entities to spend a minimum percentage of state homelessness funds on programs that meet the specific needs for homeless youth populations. In 2018, Senate Bill 850 established the Homeless Emergency Aid Program (HEAP) and required a minimum investment of five percent of all awards be set aside for emergency assistance for homeless youth. In 2019, the Homeless Housing, Assistance, and Prevention Program (HHAP) authorized by Assembly Bill 101 required that at least eight percent of the funds allocated be spent on services that meet the specific needs for homeless youth populations. It is critical that the federal, state, and County's investments in the fight against homelessness include resources to meet the unique needs of unaccompanied women experiencing homelessness.

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic slowdown has further jeopardized the lives of people experiencing homelessness, women in particular. In 2019, before the pandemic, women working full time earned just 82 cents for every dollar paid to their male counterparts. For women of color, who also make up a disproportionate share of the homeless population, the wage gap was even wider with Latinas paid just 55 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men, and Black women paid just 63 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men. Rent increases, evictions, and stagnant wages push families and individuals into homelessness, and the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will accelerate these impacts.

The designation of unaccompanied women as a homeless subpopulation would

make Los Angeles County only the second county after San Bernardino to recognize unaccompanied women. The statistical analyses, research, and strategies that would result from this change could provide a template to municipalities, counties, states, and the country on how to successfully reduce homelessness among women.

WE, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors:

1. Recognize unaccompanied women experiencing homelessness as a unique population with specific needs that requires targeted strategies and resources and designate unaccompanied women as a recognized homeless subpopulation in Los Angeles County.
2. Instruct the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) to incorporate data on unaccompanied women into its pre-existing public-facing dashboards indicating race, gender, age, geography, sexual orientation, Domestic Violence/Intimate Partner Violence (DV/IPV) status, etc., in the Annual Point-in-Time Count and additional Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) data analysis.
3. Instruct the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Homeless Initiative and LAHSA to report back to the Board within 60 days with a plan to conduct a countywide Women's Needs Assessment, documenting the experiences as well as the housing and service needs of women experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County, including a focus on unaccompanied women; this Needs Assessment would include policy recommendations and be a collaboration with the Downtown Women's Center, academic institutions, Department of Health Services, Department of Mental Health, Department of Public Health, Los Angeles County

Development Authority, Office of Immigrant Affairs in the Department of Consumer and Business Affairs, and other relevant County Departments and Agencies.

4. Instruct the CEO to provide an update within 60 days regarding whether funding in any or all Measure H-funded Homeless Initiative strategies, beginning in the FY 2021-22 Measure H Funding Recommendations, should be set aside to address the needs of women experiencing homelessness, specifically unaccompanied women.
5. Instruct the County's Legislative Advocates in Sacramento to support State legislative and budget proposals that would require a minimum allocation of State homelessness funding, such as HEAP or HHAP, be spent on services that meet the specific needs of unaccompanied women experiencing homelessness.
6. Direct the County's Legislative Advocates in Washington, D.C. to support the prioritization of unaccompanied women as a homeless subpopulation in the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Point-In-Time count, through a targeted funding initiative in HUD's next Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA), and via the designation of unaccompanied women as a subpopulation to achieve the focus and results previously advanced for other populations.

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