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DATE: November 2nd, 2021
TO: Los Angeles County Blue Ribbon Commission on Homelessness
FROM: Los Angeles County Women and Girls Initiative
RE: Policy Recommendations focused on Homeless Women

The attached document provides an overview of the work done by the Women and Girls Initiative (WGI) Homeless Women Ad Hoc Committee over the past six months. As a response to a rapidly increasing number of women being pushed into homeless during the pandemic, the WGI convened this committee to focus specifically on keeping women housed and safe. The policy recommendations detailed are ones that the Ad Hoc Committee created, with direction and insight from stakeholders and providers who can be found in Appendix A, and were unanimously approved by the WGI Governing Council at our monthly meeting on October 25th, 2021.

The WGI now seeks consideration from the Blue Ribbon Commission on Homeless, given your expertise around the mission to address homelessness. After integrating input and feedback, the WGI plans to submit this document to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors as formal recommendations.

We appreciate your time and willingness to provide input as we work to better serve women and girls across Los Angeles County.

THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY WOMEN AND GIRLS INITIATIVE’S HOMELESS WOMEN AD HOC COMMITTEE – OVERVIEW OF POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In recent years, the number of homeless individuals, particularly women, in Los Angeles County (LA County) has skyrocketed. In 2020, the Greater Los Angeles Homeless County conducted by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) reported over 66,000 individuals in LA County are experiencing homelessness per day. Of that population, over 21,000 were women, a significant jump from past counts. While the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the ability to keep track of changes over the past year, many service providers have reported women being pushed into homelessness at shocking rates.

As a response to this crisis, the Women and Girls Initiative (WGI) Governing Council created the Homeless Women Ad Hoc Committee in March of this year to investigate the current realities for women experiencing homelessness in LA County, and develop policy recommendations to ensure a gender lens is used by the Board of Supervisors (Board) when developing effective aid and solutions to this growing issue. The Ad Hoc Committee is comprised of Wendy Greuel, Sharon Shelton, Alice Petrossian, Sandra Mendoza, Bea Stotzer, and WGI team members Abbe Land and Marissa Ayala.

Process

The Ad Hoc Committee chose to host a series of thoughtful conversations with various experts and stakeholders around homelessness as a means of exploring the intersection between gender and housing, and gathering information to create policy recommendations.

The recommendations have been categorized into two sections or ‘buckets’: Prevention and Long-Term Support, and Shelter and Critical Services. The first section addresses what changes are needed to prevent women from being pushed into homelessness, and what is needed to support long-term stable housing after a period of homelessness. The second section then looks at recommendations relevant to women who are currently unhoused and need access to services.

Overview:

In addition to the specific recommendations below, the Ad Hoc Committee would like to emphasize several overarching changes that are critical to helping women avoid, navigate, and rise above the struggles of being unhoused. While these themes do not distill down to a specific policy recommendation as easily as others, they should be considered at the forefront of any work related to women and homelessness.

First, throughout the course of this Ad Hoc Committee’s work, it has become abundantly clear that homelessness is inherently interwoven with, and cannot be separated from issues of trauma, abuse, and/or sexual or domestic violence (DV) specifically. Therefore, *when the Board is addressing any homeless issue, they should use not only a gender lens, but a DV lens as well.* Our Los Angeles County (County) leadership must ensure that the strong link between domestic

violence and homelessness does not go ignored, as it seeks to address housing issues moving forward.

In addition, the Ad Hoc Committee recommends that lived experience be prioritized as recommendations are considered and implemented. This means that women who have experienced or been on the edge of homelessness should be involved in all phases of new projects, developments, or programs. Service providers, municipalities, and community-based organizations must actively seek to engage with women who have lived experiences.

Lastly, *more resources need to go into homelessness prevention*. Prevention was discussed consistently by participants. Community leaders have spoken to the need for financial education, financial literacy, and other prevention programs.

Prevention and Long-Term Support

Economic Support & Affordability

The overwhelming recommendation of the WGI is for the County to expand its understanding and implementation of ‘prevention policies’ and use all tools at its disposal to engage in preventative actions. Current conditions in LA County, including social, economic, educational, and interpersonal, are pushing women into homelessness, and will continue to feed this pipeline unless root causes are addressed. Effective solutions will address the lowest income and vulnerable women, as well as middle class women who still struggle to make ends meet. The following recommendations focus on changing conditions related to economic support and housing affordability specifically.

- ***Create and sustain more awareness and available funding for programs such as LA RISE and others that help empower women economically***

Some Measure H funds currently are allocated to LA RISE an organization that seeks to provide resources and jobs through social enterprise. However, it would be beneficial to allocate more funding to programs like these in the future. Specifically, LA RISE is a model because it unites the County Workforce Development System with both non-profit and private employers, to provide the best resources available to people with high barriers to employment.

- ***Rental assistance programs should be clear, and easily accessible to the public to prevent some individuals from being pushed into homelessness***

This stems from the story of a woman who was unable to navigate or understand rental assistance programs that may have been able to keep her in housing while she found a new job or made other arrangements. Instead, she had to begin living out of her car with a boyfriend and pets. The woman recalled a Google search for “rental assistance” that gave many confusing results with unknown terms she was not able to discern. Rental assistance programs must clearly

define eligibility and documentation criteria in the simplest terms possible, and in multiple languages, and must be easily accessible online.

- ***The Board should endeavor to create affordable housing and higher housing density housing to the best of their ability whenever possible***

There is a serious lack of affordable housing in LA County, and we continue to see developers and investors building with little to no incentive to build affordable housing. Potential policies like enacting more rent control ordinances, inclusionary and/or density bonus zoning, incentives for accessory dwelling units and small homes, and support of non-profit housing developers may be part of the solutions. The County should begin by assessing property it already owns to be used for permanent or transitional housing.

Additionally, during the WGI teams' meetings with domestic violence service providers there was discussion about the lack of permanent housing and struggles with rapid price changes for women who obtain housing vouchers. Housing density may be a part of the solution to ensuring there is permanent housing for women to enter after a transition from a shelter.

- ***County funding should be flexible not only in how it can be spent, but also in what types of trauma it aims to alleviate***

Flexible and unrestricted spending is key to ensuring that providers can meet the needs of their clients as best as possible. For example, while one woman may need funds to leave her home and avoid a violent situation, another may need funds to purchase a washer and dryer, to avoid public places where she could encounter an abuser. Furthermore, there was discussion of how funding is often designated for one very specific type of issue, as opposed to addressing trauma overall. Women who are or have experienced homelessness often experience a wide spectrum of trauma that cannot always be broken down into neat categories. A key detail to note is that while some women may prefer to find a temporary shelter, other women prefer to stay in their homes, and service providers should aim to meet those goals. Funding cannot be allocated in either a one-size-fits-all model, or overly delegated, but should be flexible to accommodate individual needs.

Holistic Support

In tune with prioritizing homelessness and DV prevention, the County must consider overall well-being, which includes physical, mental, and emotional well-being, and necessitates holistic support. In addition to the recommendations below, the County must oppose criminalizing the conditions of homelessness, which disrupts trust and instills fear into many homeless individuals. This lack of trust is actively counterproductive to providing holistic support and building relationships, which are central to a path out of homelessness.

- ***Emotional support would be helpful during the transition into being housed***

A participant in the Women with Lived Experience meeting shared that continued emotional support would be helpful as she continues to search for permanent housing. The struggles of being unhoused do not necessarily end when someone finds shelter, making longer term support important, especially as women transition into permanent housing. Ensuring funding is available for ongoing case management and access to mental health services is critical. Developing programs specifically tailored to women that provide mentorship, career counseling, financial literacy training and well-being services will ensure a successful transition into permanent housing.

- ***Social Cooperatives should be considered as an ideal model for creating connection, safety, and opportunities to thrive for homeless women experiencing mental illness***

One of the speakers shared insights after visiting cooperative structures in Italy, which allow people to form horizontal relationships (rather than strict hierarchies) and create an environment for individuals dealing with trauma to find purpose. Based on the Clubhouse model of psychosocial rehabilitation these models are ideal for providing participants with a sense of purpose and connection to a community based on their strengths and abilities not their illness. There are approximately 200 Clubhouse type facilities in the United States with The Fountain House in New York City being one of the oldest. These cooperatives often take the form of a business such as a restaurant or café, or a home with a planted garden, both of which provide ways for residents to become active members of their cooperative.

Shelter and Critical Services

Shelter Spaces and Intentional Design

The following recommendations provide clarity about the specific features which should be integrated at existing and future shelters and transitional housing, whenever possible. These features are geared at creating welcoming and functional spaces for women and children, who are often not immediately considered when shelters and housing are being created.

- ***The Board should step in and advocate for DV providers ability to access state funding to create transitional housing beds***

Currently DV providers are unable to apply for many forms of state funding to fund more beds for women, due to confidentiality and privacy issues that ensure women's safety. The committee learned that the specific needs for DV providers differ from homeless providers due to safety issues. County leadership should step in to ensure that DV providers can access the funds they need.

- *Create more transitional housing and shelters for women to enter if women choose or need to leave their homes*

Currently there are not enough beds to ensure a transition for women who are leaving their homes and need a safe place to stay. In the recent past there were hotel rooms women could stay in before finding new permanent housing. Project Safe Haven allowed many service providers to serve about twice as many women as before but was a temporary initiative during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Identifying properties that could be repurposed to provide transitional housing should be a priority for the Board.

- *Design spaces with the intended population in mind, prioritizing safety, and trauma informed design*

Design choices can be considered trauma informed, and include color schemes, setup of beds, space for pets, walkways that keep strangers out of the living spaces, and more. It is important to create spaces that feel comfortable and supportive.

- *Ensure shelters and other housing sites have safe storage on site, so women have a place for valuable belongings and can feel secure*

More safe storage on site would allow women to feel secure that their possessions were safe, and ideally prevent them from having to part with too many personal items when leaving an abuser or difficult situation. It is important for shelters to better adapt to serving women as oppose to serving only men by default.

Access to Resources and Programs

To develop the most effective possible resources and programs to prevent and address homelessness, women with lived experience must be engaged at all points and levels. This means that women with lived experience should be engaged from the earliest stages of policy or program development and should continue to guide implementation and future changes to programming. Without this input, there is little guarantee that changes made to programming will reach women who need it the most. The following are immediate recommendations to help women gain access to effective programs.

- *Ease the process of obtaining a new Identification Card (ID)*

A form of ID is necessary for nearly any apartment or job, and theft or loss of a driver's license or identification card is extremely common while an individual is unhoused. One of the women from the Women with Lived Experience meeting shared that the process of obtaining a new ID was a large hindrance, and the process should be much simpler to navigate. She did not have access to her birth certificate or ID, which made it a lengthy and difficult process to get any new type of

identification. The Social Security Administration and/or Department of Motor Vehicles had in person appointments, often with long wait times, but during the COVID-19 pandemic these offices implemented online/virtual options for services. The County should advocate for these virtual/online options to continue post COVID-19, as well increase the opportunity for appointment-based opportunities for services at those agencies. Given these documents are often lost while on the street, the County should develop ways to digitally store documents.

- *Continue the practice of virtual access to services*

One of the lived experience speakers spoke about the challenges of going in person to seek services, often waiting hours, and then being turned away. This can be especially important for women with children who cannot move around as easily or safely, as well as for women who struggle with high anxiety or social shame from seeking services in person. Women with lived experience should be consulted in the early process of designing websites, portals, or other online materials, to ensure they meet the need to simplify information and ease access.

- *Improve coordination and communication between providers of DV services and homeless shelter services*

Create a structure that allows for ongoing communication, combined advocacy, sharing of best practices, coordination of services and resources to better serve women and girls. This need was brought up by DV providers, WGI members, and those with lived experience. There is a need for more coordination and alignment between City and County resources.

Finally, the WGI recommends that LA County include specific benchmarks and data points about ending homelessness for women in a publicly available online dashboard. The dashboard should include both goals for halving and ending the number of homeless women in Los Angeles, as well as continually updated data points to measure those goals, that are accessible to the public. Potential items could include the number of women contacted via outreach and the amount of beds and housing offered and available. This level of transparency and specificity is needed to restore public trust in our systems, as well as measure effectiveness of any new measures.

APPENDIX A

List of Guest Speakers from Homeless Women Ad Hoc Committee Meetings

Date	Speaker	Organization
July 8 th 2021	Debra Suh	Center for the Pacific Asian Family
	Barbara Kappos	East Los Angeles Women's Center
	Jonathan E. Sherin	Department of Mental Health
	Kerry Morrison	Heart Forward LA
June 30 th 2021	Debra Suh	Center for the Pacific Asian Family
	Barbara Kappos	East Los Angeles Women's Center
June 14 th 2021	Jennifer Myers	Lived Experience
	Jessica Moreno	Lived Experience
	Kelsey Madigan	LA Family Housing
May 10 th 2021	Amy Turk	Downtown Women's Center
	Lorena Sanchez	Downtown Women's Center
	Erica Jaramillo	LAHSA
	Christina Cortes	LAHSA
	Eve Sheedy	Domestic Violence Council
April 20 th 2021	Rowena Magana	LA County Homeless Initiative