



Sonoma County Commission on the Status of Women Position Paper
Unhoused & Unheard: The Silent Struggles of Women in Sonoma County
May 2025

Executive Summary

Homelessness among women in Sonoma County is an escalating crisis shaped by trauma, gender-based violence, systemic gaps, and an inequitable housing system. Although women make up at least 37% of the local unhoused population, their experiences are often hidden and unaddressed in both policy and public perception.¹ Aging women, survivors of domestic violence, single mothers, and working professionals are increasingly unable to access stable housing due to rigid eligibility systems, unaffordable rents, and a fragmented support network.

In response to this growing issue, the Commission on the Status of Women held a public hearing on April 10, 2025 to center the voices of women with lived experience alongside those of frontline service providers and experts. The stories shared at this event reveal the urgent need for policy reforms and a housing-first approach rooted in dignity and equity. A critical theme that emerged was the need for a restructured housing voucher program—one that responds more effectively to vulnerability and real-time needs.

This position paper outlines the unique challenges faced by unhoused women in Sonoma County and offers actionable recommendations for system-wide improvements. By investing in compassionate, needs-based solutions, Sonoma County can lead the way in ensuring every woman has access to safe, stable, and supportive housing.

The Invisible Crisis of Women’s Homelessness

Women in Sonoma County often do not fit the typical narrative or public image of homelessness. Many are single mothers, aging retirees, or survivors of domestic violence and trauma. Because they are more likely to avoid encampments and public spaces where safety is a concern, their homelessness remains largely hidden. Consequently, they are often overlooked by policy and undercounted in statistics.

¹ All statistics cited in this position paper were provided by the guest speakers listed.

One woman, **Lucy**, shared how she has spent two years couch surfing with her dog while dealing with chronic health issues, including seizures.² Despite actively seeking stability, Lucy has been turned away from shelters for not meeting priority criteria like addiction recovery or recent incarceration. Her brother, recently released from prison, was able to secure housing within a month, while Lucy remains in limbo.

She desperately wants to hold down a job, but the instability of her housing situation and the need to care for her dog, combined with her health issues, create overwhelming barriers. If she had access to stable housing and healthcare, not only would her medical needs be met, but her dog—her only companion and source of comfort—would have a safe place to stay. This security would empower her to pursue and maintain employment, a step she is both willing and eager to take. Her story reflects the broader systemic issue: support often goes not to those most in need, but to those who meet rigid qualifications.

Trauma, Violence, and Systemic Barriers

Gender-based violence is a consistent thread running through the experiences of unhoused women in Sonoma County. According to The Living Room, 83% of the women they serve have fled domestic violence. Sexual assault, trafficking, and bullying are disturbingly common in shelters and encampments. This ongoing trauma is both a cause and a consequence of housing instability.

Kelly, a survivor of sex trafficking and childhood abuse, found a rare sense of safety and stability at Caritas Family Center. With secure housing and access to childcare, she was finally able to begin healing, enroll in college, and imagine a new future for herself and her children. Her transformation underscores how housing, when paired with supportive services, can be the foundation for long-term recovery and reintegration.

However, for many women, that opportunity never comes. **Noelle**, who was pregnant during her homelessness, utilized every service available to her yet gave birth without stable housing. Only after navigating a patchwork of supports and living temporarily with family did she receive a housing voucher—months too late to prevent the trauma of child protective services' involvement. Though now housed, she remains financially insecure, navigating the immense challenges of single motherhood without consistent support.

The Voucher System: A “Golden Ticket” That Too Few Can Redeem

The housing voucher program was described by multiple panelists as a “golden ticket,” yet the system is failing the very people it is meant to serve. Vouchers are distributed on a first-come,

² The names of the volunteer speakers were changed to protect their identities.

first-served basis, with little consideration for urgency or vulnerability. The waiting lists are long, and when vouchers are finally awarded, many recipients discover they cannot find a landlord willing to accept them.

Even women who are employed full-time are unable to afford market-rate housing. **Jocy**, despite holding a managerial position and earning more than she ever has, still cannot afford to live anywhere in the county. Her girlfriend, who is transgender and unhoused, lives out of the back of a car—categorizing her as an even higher at-risk case.

Additionally, the use of background checks as a prerequisite for housing or services often serves as a gatekeeping tool that penalizes women for past mistakes—mistakes that, in many cases, stem directly from poverty, abuse, or lack of access to services in the first place. These policies perpetuate cycles of instability instead of offering a pathway out.

Service Providers in Crisis

The weight of these systemic failures is also felt by those on the frontlines. Staff at shelters and nonprofits often face burnout, housing insecurity, and a lack of mental health support themselves. Organizations struggle with funding that prioritizes new, "innovative" programs over essential operating support, forcing them to divert resources or create workaround projects to meet grant requirements.

As Petaluma People Services Center noted, the fastest-growing segment of unhoused women in the region are those over 65—many of whom live in mobile home parks and are now facing eviction without alternatives. The psychological effects of isolation, especially among seniors who can no longer drive or access food banks, are profound and overlooked.

Policy Recommendations: A Healthier Housing Voucher System

To address these issues, the Commission on the Status of Women recommends an overhaul of the housing voucher system, centered on equity, urgency, and human dignity.

1. Transition to a Needs-Based Allocation System

Move away from first-come, first-served distribution. Implement a triage model that prioritizes women facing domestic violence, aging populations, single mothers, and those at risk of immediate harm.

2. Expand Acceptance and Availability of Voucher-Eligible Housing

Create incentives for landlords to accept housing vouchers through risk mitigation funds, tax benefits, and streamlined inspection processes.

3. Eliminate Discriminatory Eligibility Requirements

Remove unnecessary background check barriers that disqualify individuals based on past events tied to their experience of homelessness and trauma.

4. Pair Vouchers with Wraparound Services

Housing alone is not enough. Voucher recipients should also receive case management, childcare assistance, transportation support, and financial coaching.

5. Improve Transparency and Navigation Support

Ensure applicants receive timely updates, clear communication, and dedicated staff support throughout the voucher process.

6. Collect and Disaggregate Data by Gender and Age

Better data collection will enable the county to respond more effectively to the needs of women experiencing homelessness.

Conclusion

Women experiencing homelessness in Sonoma County are not invisible—their stories highlight not only the depth of the crisis but also the potential for resilience and recovery when appropriate support is available. It is time for the County to respond with compassion, urgency, and accountability. Reforming the housing voucher program is a critical first step toward building a Sonoma County where every woman has a safe place to call home.

Guest Speakers/Subject Matter Experts

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