

## [Women's shelters balk at tracking](#)

Several in Colorado opt out of HUD's homelessness database - forgoing funds - because of safety issues.

By [eaquilera@denverpost.com](mailto:eaquilera@denverpost.com)

Elizabeth Aguilera

Denver Post Staff Writer

Friday, October 29, 2004

Domestic violence shelters across the country are balking at a new federal directive requiring homeless shelters to provide client information for a new national database.

Advocates say the database, set to roll out in Colorado in January, would jeopardize the safety of abused women and children.

Several Colorado shelters are opting out of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Homeless Management Information System, even though they risk losing future federal funding.

Although the money is desperately needed, advocates say, the funds aren't worth giving up the anonymity of those they are trying to help.

"They are asking us to go to a woman who has been traumatized enough to flee her home with her children and the clothes on her back, and grill her over a few days for information we are not going to use but that the government wants," said Carol Hollomon, executive director at Alternatives to Family Violence, a safe house in Adams County. "It's not going to happen."

In Illinois, all the domestic violence shelters under the state's "umbrella" have refused to participate in the program, risking its share of \$1.3 billion of federal support that is available nationwide.

The new information system was created to get an accurate count of America's homeless so the government can streamline services and make sure the right programs are in the right places, said Brian Sullivan, HUD spokesman.

"Without this information, you don't get a full and complete picture of homelessness, specifically in rural areas where a domestic violence shelter might be the only game in town," Sullivan said.

HUD will require a birth date, Social Security number, veteran status, race, ethnicity and family background. The department also urges shelters to inquire about HIV status and mental health.

Advocates worry that such probing will scare the most vulnerable people away from services, including those who are HIV-positive, undocumented immigrants and runaways. More worrisome, advocates say, is the fear of security breaches, access to the database by law enforcement and public- records requests.

"We thought there was no way they were going to require us to breach confidentiality," said Vicki Lutz, executive director of the Crossroads Safehouse in Fort Collins. "The laudable purpose is to track homelessness to provide better service.

"But if one woman dies in the name of data collection, that is one too many. Do we really want to give batterers another avenue of tracking?"

### **Expanding the system**

Currently, housing providers are the only groups required to participate, but the system will expand to other homeless services such as food banks, soup kitchens, street outreach programs, mental illness treatment facilities, HIV/AIDS clinics and human services departments, said Tracy D'Alanno, manager of the homeless and resource development program for the state department of human services.

In August, the National Network to End Domestic Violence formally asked HUD to exempt domestic violence programs from the regulation. The department has not responded to the petition.

"This violates our core value of confidentiality for victims and puts them in danger," said Cindy Southworth, director of technology for the National Network to End Domestic Violence in Washington, D.C. "We are happy to help get an accurate count in a less invasive way."

In Colorado, the state department of human services is overseeing the creation and implementation of the program, which will be administered by three nonprofit agencies. It is expected to roll out in January.

According to HUD standards, the system security guidelines are based on those in the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act.

Once the data is collected regionally, HUD will receive aggregate data, including the number of homeless, how many are veterans, what types of disabilities the homeless have and racial, ethnic and gender breakdowns.

HUD officials say personal information will not be linked to create the national database. Still, Jennifer Lynch, information and technology director of the Colorado Coalition Against Domestic Violence, is leery of data creep, when information begins to bleed into other systems.

"It's nice to have easy access to information, and it's tempting for agencies to share that information," Lynch said. "But it's going to undermine the ability for people to protect themselves."

Lynch is referring to victims like Ronni, who says she is on the run from an abuser in another state and hasn't told anyone where she is. Not her mother. Not her closest friend. And not the federal government.

The 37-year-old woman said she would never have checked into a Jefferson County shelter if the new system was in place. She traveled to Colorado to get away from her abuser, seeking a haven and anonymity.

"I wouldn't stay if they were tracking," she said. "Just thinking that someone is tracking me makes me feel that potential employers, the community or the schools would know my business."

And, she added, what if her abuser is still trying to find her? "That scares me."

### **Tough choices ahead**

In Colorado, some domestic violence shelters are prepared to give up federal funding and pump private donors, foundations and other sources to make up the difference.

Lutz decided to bypass the \$26,000 annually that comes from HUD. The money is nearly 5 percent of her yearly budget.

While such a loss won't close her facility, Lutz worries for rural shelters that rely on HUD for more than half of their funding. Such places have two choices, Lutz said - comply or close.

Hollomon has worked around the federal government for her Adams County shelter. She returned her HUD Emergency Shelter Grant funds to the county to use as part of another community block grant. In return, county officials are helping her find an alternative source for the \$22,000 she gave up.

Finding the loopholes beats the alternative, Hollomon said. "They (HUD) are asking us to violate the constitutional rights of folks who come to us for help," she said.

Participation in the new HUD system is listed as an eligibility component on the application for assistance and is part of the grant agreement, Sullivan said.

The only providers that may become exempt are those in states where privacy laws are extremely stringent, including Pennsylvania and Massachusetts, Sullivan said.

Said D'Alanno: "If they want to continue receiving funding, at some point in time, domestic violence agencies are going to have to participate."

HUD, in an effort to get shelters to accept the system, is offering grace periods and delayed implementation.

In Colorado, the system will be based on a unique, confidential identification number, created by a complicated mathematical formula based on personal data, and only that number will be submitted.

*Staff writer Elizabeth Aguilera can be reached at 303-820-1372 or [eaquilera@denverpost.com](mailto:eaquilera@denverpost.com).*