

## Alma Vizcaino Public Testimony

My name is Alma Vizcaino. Thank you so much for taking the time to listen to my experiences.

I am here today to bring to light some of the statistics that you will hear about the impact on homelessness for women.

- What is troubling to me is that I was one of the over 216,000 women experiencing homelessness across the nation.
- This is a growing population of people experiencing homelessness.
- Nationwide, in the last year women experiencing homelessness grew by 3% and locally in Los Angeles there was a 13% increase.
- In Los Angeles, among both sheltered and unsheltered women approximately half experienced Domestic Violence.

Of course, please keep in mind this is a count of women that felt comfortable sharing that they had experienced domestic violence. Due to the stigma surrounding domestic violence we know that this is an under counted experience.

This was the case for me.

I did not acknowledge that I had experienced domestic violence until just two years ago when I was sitting in a mental health support group at the Downtown Women's Center, a local non-profit that supports women with housing and healthcare. I swept it under the rug for long time. There was never a good time to talk about it, so I did not talk about it.

Consequently, I have experienced periods of homelessness, mental health problems related to the impact of trauma, and chronic health conditions like diabetes as a result of my hardships.

I was born in Tijuana and raised here starting as a toddler in South Central. At an early age I started running away from a dysfunctional home of alcoholism and depression that impacted my ability to stay housed. My life was filled with struggle. The depression ended in having many unhealthy relationships. Domestic violence blanked me out mentally. Many women are ashamed and do not admit to the control and abuse they suffer, and some find it hard to get the help them needed.

When I first reached out for help at a shelter in the 1980's with my three children, it did not really work. All of the shelter staff were white; there were no Hispanics or Blacks there, and it was not a good fit for me and my family. We ended up leaving because I felt awkward.

I did ultimately find the help I needed through a Domestic Violence shelter called House of Ruth. After our stay there, my kids I left into housing subsidized through Section 8 for the next twenty years. I also became a board member with House of Ruth and found fulfillment in giving back in that way. For many years, we lived in the Los Feliz community. We felt safe, and my family thrived. My kids were doing well in school and I carried a few jobs. We were comfortable and we did not have to move around nor did we fear facing evictions.

Then my building was sold.

I could only afford housing for me and my kids in the South Central part of town. I was able to get my kids into private school through scholarships, but we could not escape the violence related to gang activity in my community. The burden of the community violence resulted in an eviction. My children went to live with friends and I became homeless again. For awhile, I sought comfort in a relationship, but that ended violently. When my boyfriend acted in a rage, I ended up in Skid Row. I stayed at the Union Rescue Mission. I then stayed with my brother in his car dealership building, but that was not a livable situation. I was then referred through the County to a women's program at the Weingart Center.

I now live in a Single Room Occupancy building in the Skid Row Community. I thought that permanent housing would solve all of my problems. Of course, it is better than living on the streets, but I still need more support to help me heal from the trauma of my life experiences.

The supports and services that have been most effective for helping me have been affordable housing, drug and alcohol services, support groups, and health outreach programs. I also am participating in a job training program, called LA:RISE where I am a support staff at the social enterprise at Downtown Women's Center. I look forward to graduating the program and seeking additional employment.

Congress could take many steps to end homelessness and prevent violence against women, including:

- Congress should ensure that the HUD budget is sufficient every year to meet the housing and services needs of people experiencing homelessness.
- One way to ensure adequate funding would be to pass the "Ending Homelessness Act of 2019".
- Additionally, congress should require HUD to call out women as a unique sub-population of people experiencing homelessness as they have done for Veterans.
- Congress should ensure that the Violence Against Women Act is reauthorized.
- Congress should ensure that programs allow for flexibility to serve women, including flexible funding for childcare, education, work programs, housing subsidies, and transportation.

Thank you for listening to my story. I hope that by sharing my story, I am able to end homelessness for my 216,000 sisters who do not have a home today.

Thank you.