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PRESS RELEASE

The Delores Project Responds to Proposed Rule Changes for Homeless Shelters by the Department of Housing and Urban Development

On Saturday, June 13th, the Washington Post reported that the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Secretary Ben Carson is replacing the 2012 Equal Access rule (updated in 2016) with a new rule that permits discrimination against and exclusion of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals from homeless shelters. For decades June has been recognized as LGBTQ Pride Month, celebrating the riots led by transgender women of color in 1969. This year, while Americans of all identities are taking to the streets to protest racial injustice in all 50 states, the current administration is using Pride Month to dismantle the hard-won protections for transgender people. This is an act of blatant cruelty masked by claims of protecting cisgender women and faith-based providers.

The Delores Project, a Denver-based shelter for women and transgender individuals, has been providing emergency and transitional shelter for 20 years with a commitment to respecting the dignity of every guest that comes through our doors. Our doors opened to meet the needs of an underserved community that has faced unprecedented levels of rejection, violence and sexual assault at the hands of shelter providers. We welcome transgender guests regardless of their gender identity, establishing an intentional community where guests and staff receive training and guidance about gender identities and respect for each other. Frankly, it is not hard to do and requires little more than a willingness to serve people experiencing homelessness with grace and kindness.

According to the story in the Post, Secretary Carson sent an email to staff at HUD explaining that “I had heard from many women’s groups about the difficulty they were having with women’s shelters because sometimes men would claim to be women,” actively propagating the anti-transgender myth that men exploit transgender protections to sexually assault women. The true challenge faced by these unnamed women’s groups is a lack of funding, inadequate staffing, and an unwillingness to provide compassionate shelter. A report issued by the National Coalition for the Homeless in 2017 (<https://nationalhomeless.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/LGBTQ-Homelessness.pdf>) states that 19% of transgender people have experienced homelessness at one point in their lives. That stands in stark contrast with national statistics from HUD’s own point-in-time survey for 2019 that 0.0017% of the general population experiences homelessness – or 17 for every 10,000 people.

In the same report from the National Coalition for the Homeless, the data show that transgender people experiencing homelessness are on the receiving end of unconscionable levels of violence in shelters. When transgender individuals attempt to access shelter services, 55% report being harassed by staff or other guests, 22% were sexually assaulted – again by staff or other guests, and 29% report being turned away. Per the Post’s reporting, the new HUD rule is partly based on anecdotal evidence that women may be uncomfortable in shelters with transgender individuals. Our own anecdotal evidence from conversations with trans-identifying guests at The Delores Project suggests that when beds are unavailable in our shelter, transgender individuals would rather sleep outside than face the violence and discrimination they experience in other shelters.

HUD's proposed new rule leaves transgender individuals experiencing homelessness vulnerable to more than just violence and rejection in shelters. Some transgender people may choose to present as a gender that does not reflect their true identity, further inflicting mental trauma and fear of reprisal if discovered. Transgender women of color, already targeted by violence and murder to an astounding degree, will be further excluded from shelter services and left to face a world that would rather kill them than house them.

Our job as shelter providers is not to pass judgment on the people we serve. It is our duty to provide safe, dignified space for people experiencing homelessness to find security and respite during a time of crisis in their lives. Regardless of identity, we are responsible for building a welcoming, affirming community that provides life-saving shelter. By investing in staff training and being committed to the safety of all guests, The Delores Project has modeled how to provide trans-inclusive shelter. Our experience does not need to be unique among shelter providers.

Safety and compassion are the very basic requirements of providing shelter. HUD has failed to provide any data indicating that there is any risk whatsoever to cisgender women sharing shelter spaces with transgender individuals. That stands in stark contrast to the data provided by the National Coalition for the Homeless and begs the question: why is this administration and HUD advancing new rules that tacitly encourage discrimination and violence against transgender individuals?

The Delores Project provides safe, comfortable shelter and personalized services for unaccompanied women and transgender individuals experiencing homelessness. We also work to end homelessness by advocating for housing solutions.

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