

## **LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS**

### **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SURVIVOR & HOMELESS TOO? A CA COHORT SHOWS WHAT CAN BE DONE**

LAURA FLANDERS: The war on women takes many forms, but have you ever considered that at least some of its refugees might be the homeless people you see on your streets. Homeless or houselessness in the US has reached a crisis point. In 2022, the number of homeless individuals here reached a record high, over half a million people, according to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. Look more closely at those numbers as researchers in Los Angeles did recently, and you'll find a disturbing fact. In one study, 35% of those who'd experienced homelessness had also experienced domestic violence. Now some are calling for more gender conscious policymaking. In LA, a unique cohort of advocates, policy makers and survivors, is laying out what that might look like. Today we will meet some of them. Teniecka Drake and Yenni Rivera Martinez are survivors of domestic violence related homelessness who've turned into advocates. Teniecka works with Rainbow Services in LA and Yenni with LAHSA, the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. Krista Colon is senior director for public policy for the California Partnership to End Domestic violence. She's successfully advocated for over a hundred million dollars in new funding for domestic violence victim services and prevention. As we're speaking though, federal funding for crime victim services is slated to be cut by 45% this summer, with a lot at stake. I am very happy to welcome our guests, all of you. Thanks for joining me here on Laura Flanders & Friends. Let me start with you Krista. You deal with policy at the state level as well as the county and city. Can you just lay out the scenario and what you've learned about that link between domestic violence and homelessness?

KRISTA COLÓN: The link between domestic violence and homelessness is fundamental. For domestic violence survivors, housing is a huge barrier in making that decision about whether to stay in an abusive situation or to leave and once they've left, the ability or lack of ability to find housing can be a number one reason why they would return to an abusive situation. For survivors, and for our homeless population, especially among women, domestic violence is a leading cause of their homelessness and the domestic violence shelters serving survivors are homeless service providers, even though we don't always talk about them in that context.

LAURA FLANDERS: Seems first before we know we have a problem, at least at the level of policy making, we have to be persuaded by numbers. Have we always looked at the gender breakdown and the causes for homelessness, especially among women and single people on the street?

KRISTA COLÓN: You know, I think there's always been some data and certainly coming from the domestic violence perspective, we've been looking at and know this data. But at the partnership along with partners in Los Angeles including Rainbow Services, we co-sponsored legislation to really push farther for that. It was a bill that passed a couple years ago, SB-914 by Senator Susan Rubio that was designed to really fundamentally say to the state and the cities and counties that when you're planning for domestic, or for homelessness, you must include domestic violence survivors and unaccompanied women experiencing homelessness in your goal setting, in your plans, in what you were attempting to do. Because we know if you aren't tracking a particular population, you're not targeting solutions at what they need.

LAURA FLANDERS: I like the people I know who say that the solutions and the problem exist in the same place. Coming to you Yenni on this, your experience of domestic violence, which led you to a kind of homelessness, started with you having a very good job at Marriott. Is that right? Tell us what happened.

YENNI RIVERA MARTINEZ: I was a sales manager with Marriott, so I worked for the Fortune 500 company. I had a career, I was eight years there. But something that I want to kind of connect with what was just said is that people don't realize that when you leave a domestic violence scenario, you're automatically homeless. You don't have a home the moment you step out that door or step out of that relationship. And so for my case, even though I had a career, I had a great job, I had a bank account, I had to leave it all behind because of my safety. And unfortunately in California, which is fortunate or not, but whatever you possess, they also possess, is a communal, you know, state. So my bank account was their bank account. My vehicle was his vehicle. So even though I went to the police with bruises, with a broken lip, you know, to kind of obtain my vehicle back, they let me know, unfortunately he is your spouse, he is your husband. So that is his vehicle. When I walked out that door I had not even a quarter to my name and a nine month old.

LAURA FLANDERS: You said that he emptied your bank account, he emptied, he took the car. What were you left with?

YENNI RIVERA MARTINEZ: Nothing. Basically the clothing I was able to save. When I called my family, my mom, my parents, they were able to just go to like, you know, markets and try to get carton boxes and so whatever we're able to get, even all my documents I wasn't able to obtain. But whatever I was able to rescue, of course my furniture, everything stayed. So this reminds you once again that you don't end up with zero, you end up with negative, because now you're borrowing money, especially once you have a baby. How do you get formula? How do you get diapers?

LAURA FLANDERS: Now you mentioned that you stayed with your parents, your mother, would you then have shown up in homeless data?

YENNI RIVERA MARTINEZ: So I didn't stay with my mom originally. When I went to seek services, I was able to get an emergency restraining order through the police department. At that moment they would give six weeks of motel vouchers. At this current moment in 2024, it's only two weeks they're able to give. But when I went through it, it was six weeks. So that's how I was connected to a shelter. It was through motel vouchers because there was no DV shelter that had a vacancy and there wasn't even a regular shelter that had a vacancy in LA County. There was nothing they could match me with at the moment. So at least I was able to get connected to motel voucher. Unfortunately the HUD definition says that somebody who's doubled up or staying or couch surfing is not considered homeless anymore. Only for the education system are you considered. So I'm glad that at least they were considered homeless, because at least my child was able to get support the moment he started preschool. We were able to get coats and backpacks and things like that, you know, utensils that he would qualify as a low income and homeless child. But for HUD services, I was never able to get my own apartment. So I had to end up saving, took me years, because first I had to save for being able to get a vehicle to then get to my employment, to then get an apartment. So it took me five years to be able to get out of that.

LAURA FLANDERS: What rigmarole. I'm so sorry you went through that Yenni. Teniecka, coming to you, you were an Air Force veteran. Are there special situations that veterans find themselves in regarding domestic violence and surviving?

TENIECKA DRAKE: Yes, actually, it's a little bit complicated because when I was fleeing from my situation, I had four kids, I had an eight, a seven, a six and a 3-year-old and when you go to the VA and you're going for your doctor's appointments and they're trying to ask you, is anything wrong? Are you being harmed? If I say yes, there are also mandatory reporters. That puts me in position, in a very awkward position saying, oh yes, there's something wrong. So I would never tell them that. So when I was fleeing, I did find help and assistance from Rainbow Services, but because they are mandatory reporters, they do have to go ahead and do the proper protocol by calling and letting DCFS know, even though I've left the situation, they kind of have to check and make sure that there's no connection with the father, any of that.

LAURA FLANDERS: The family protective services is often seen as family policing strategies, particularly come down hard disproportionately on women of color, African American women specifically. So you were afraid of losing your kids if you said there was violence in the home,

TENIECKA DRAKE: You're absolutely a hundred percent correct, because although I did the correct thing to leave the situation. Now on the opposite spectrum, I'm putting my kids in harm's

way because now I'm homeless. Now you're not protecting them correctly. So now you're also being watched by the state, like how are you taking care of your kids adequately when you don't have housing? You can't. So, then I had to be very careful as when I'm maneuvering, when I was fleeing to make sure I'm doing everything in my power. because I was staying with my family as well, but there was five of us and that's a lot on my family. So I had to go into a transitional facility and actually be deemed homeless, because like Yenni said, you're not considered homeless when you're with family.

LAURA FLANDERS: So coming back to you Krista, on policy, and I want everyone to talk about this too. Clearly, we need data to be a bit more comprehensive, perhaps a little bit more sensitive, a little bit more curious. With respect to understanding what services people need, You talked about the bill that provided some resources for services. When you suggested what it is that could keep victims of domestic violence off the streets, what did you prioritize and what do you prioritize in terms of services?

KRISTA COLÓN: Since there was conversation about, you know, shelters being full. I want to just name, for the domestic violence emergency shelters here in California, in 2021 to 22, which is the last year we have published data, they provided emergency shelter to over 13,000 individuals for a total of more than 354,000 nights. But at the same time, in that same year there were over 15,000 unmet requests for shelter. The demand is so high on these shelter services, right? And unfortunately, Yenni, that experience of calling shelters and them being full is one that is a struggle. And so when we think about what services are needing, housing is essential, but not just emergency shelter, longer term housing, right? Transitional housing, which Teniecka mentioned that can provide several years of stable housing, along with a range of services and also a housing first approach that provides rapid rehousing for folks who may already be experiencing homelessness or housing stabilization for folks who are housed, but at risk of losing their housing. And that is flexible to accommodate that range of needs that a survivor might need to be able to establish permanent housing, which could be help with a security deposit, which is not cheap here in California with our rent prices where they are. Could be helped with an employment and job training program or completing a college degree, so that you can earn a higher wage. Can be helped with car repair, so that you can get to and from work and sit in LA traffic and commute to your job to, you know, get paid to be able to pay your rent. That whole range of needs. And that's just the housing spectrum.

LAURA FLANDERS: So first you need data, then you need some input on policy. Teniecka, coming to you. Do you think survivors themselves have adequate input into the policy that's being promoted and potentially passed?

TENIECKA DRAKE: Not always. If you're not part of a cohort, as I'm an advocate, so I get to be a part of more than if I was just a survivor just going through it or just a victim of that. You

don't really get to really share about what's going on, especially if you're fleeing, you don't really have an input on these different things. I know for myself, one of the things that is key is when you're doing these policy things, it's kind of bridging the gap between the nonprofits and other organizations coming together, collaboratively working, because it's hard to find things because there's so many different systems, different layers, and you can't break through all of them. And if they're not working together, that makes it even more hard and more strenuous on you trying to find the services and trying for those partners to work together.

YENNI RIVERA MARTINEZ: It's breaking the silos. I think we have come a long way to where we realize that we need to educate each other about our systems. There is a homeless system, there is a DV system, there's education, there is childcare system. They each have their own protocols, they each have their own bills that get passed. They each need to be working with each other. And that's the purpose of the cohort, to be able to sit at the table together, to be able to look at bills together, to be able to initiate bills. because not only about what is on the table, but also hey, what doesn't exist that we need to create something that Krista was sharing. Like Teniecka says, if we don't get involved, we don't advocate, changes don't come about because we are the faces of the survivors. It did take a while before we were able to speak and share stories because we're in hiding. So I think that's the burden that me and Teniecka kind of share along with Krista, is making sure that as a cohort we sit at the table, we look at what doesn't exist that can exist. For example, my story, five, six years ago along the line now was able to help to get rid of family fees for childcare subsidy and that will help a future family surviving DV to be able to get childcare and then continue working, just like Krista was sharing, just like Teniecka was sharing that it does make an impact when we all speak to each other.

LAURA FLANDERS: Coming back to you, Krista, this cohort that we keep hearing about, who's in it? How did it come about? What is it?

KRISTA COLÓN: Yeah, so at the state level there's a cohort called the HOME Cohort, which is a shorthand for Housing Opportunities Mean Everything. And it brings together 11 organizations from all across the state. Folks outside of California sometimes forget that California is a deeply rural state in many areas. And one of the things that I find so special about the HOME cohort is that it brings together folks from all of those perspectives who are doing such important and hard work in their communities and the challenges even in deeply urban Los Angeles to, you know, the Central Valley and the rural far north, may look a little different in terms of complexity and scope, but fundamentally the lack of housing for survivors and the struggles of survivors navigating the homelessness system, is a commonality shared all across the state. So it's bringing folks together to work on shared solutions. They've produced toolkits to help support the entire domestic violence field, in doing this work. They've produced a whole series of webinars on the issue. They've produced tools for survivors to know their rights in housing when they're renting.

All sorts of really incredible work that's designed to lift up the realities of the day-to-day, to some larger system change.

LAURA FLANDERS: I hate to go from this high point of enthusiasm about new data collection, new input, and new policy making from a new cohort. But then when we get to the implementation stage, money is required. And as I said at the top, the federal funding that comes from the crime victims act, VOCA, the Victims of Crime Act, is due to be slashed by 45%. What will that do to the services available to people in in California? Starting with you Teniecka, what do you think? What do you fear?

TENIECKA DRAKE: I fear that more of the women will go back to their abusers not wanting to stay away and try to become self-sufficient, because when the funding is limited, you can't do a lot, you can't help, you can't provide the resources because there's no funding to do so. So I really do fear that people will go back and that's scary, because there's also the scary part of that person not coming out of that and ultimately losing their life. Funding is so important and vital to the resources that all survivors and victims need in order to sustain self efficiency, be independent, and be able to come out of those situations and never have to return.

LAURA FLANDERS: Congress finalized their spending bills in March and the dollar amount included for VOCA is lower than we have seen in years and years, and has been on a steady decline since 2019. These funds are not traditional taxpayer dollars. They're fines and penalties from federal prosecutions that go into a special fund and the balance has been dropping, and therefore, Congress has been dropping how much they release. Congress has also made an intentional choice not to supplement that from a different funding source or find a different option. The state agency that administers these funds out to programs like Rainbow and over 380 other organizations, has said that without an infusion of new money beginning in the fiscal year that starts July one, programs will see a nearly 45% cut to their Victims of Crime Act grant dollars. The Victims of Crime Act dollars are half of the money that goes out to fund the emergency shelters and the 24/7 crisis lines. It's a hundred percent of the money that goes to our transitional housing program and it's a hundred percent of the money for our domestic violence housing first program. It is what underpins the state's response to domestic violence survivors housing needs, along with so much more. So this is, what's at stake here is everything.

LAURA FLANDERS: Does bringing a gender lens to this situation and this argument, this case, this advocacy, that you're doing, make a difference? Is it making a difference with legislators, policy makers, maybe other advocates? What do you think Yenni?

YENNI RIVERA MARTINEZ: I do believe so. I think, I'll go back to what I said in the beginning. I think it's putting that face to the story. I think we, in LAHSA especially, we're focusing on providing the qualitative and quantitative data with narrative. And that includes

putting a gender to it. Because we do know that certain ethnicities are marginalized, but we also know that women in general are marginalized. We do know that they get less funding for us. We do know that as it is they get paid less in the workforce. So having that support of a narrative matching the qualitative and quantitative data, has really made a difference this whole fiscal year. It really has.

LAURA FLANDERS: And Teniecka, are you seeing that too? I mean of course there's race as well as gender and then we have the backdrop of the assault on women's reproductive rights.

TENIECKA DRAKE: When you have to navigate the homeless system, you have to navigate the system, system of the city or the federal or the county. If they're not all working together, you can just get so lost, so overwhelmed, so stressed. because you don't understand all these different things. You're just trying to get help. You're just trying to get your family taken care of. When you go to get help, there's no funding. You can't. Well I'm a woman trying to get help, sorry, we don't have the funding for you. So what do you do then? You're back to square one, homeless, trying to figure it out in a very vulnerable situation out there on the streets, fighting the elements along with fleeing the situation. It just makes a compounding situation even that more worse, even that more dire.

LAURA FLANDERS: Now the Veterans Administration, the VA federal agency, has sometimes been an agency of improving equality treatment of women combating racism, anti LGBTQ bias. Is the VA doing any better at any of this or worse?

TENIECKA DRAKE: Well I can say when I first fled in 2016, what they have in place now, which they didn't have anything about domestic violence at all. They didn't have social workers that dealt with that specifically. Now they do. So definitely things have progressed, things are changing. They're kind of slower to move as they are the federal government. They're slower to move. But as I go into the VAs, I see that there's a social worker, they are now putting out the literature. Now if you do have a situation, now you can talk to someone without always having that in the back of your mind. Are you going to mandatory report and then take my kids and then do all these things that I had in my head? because like you guys do not have anybody that represents any of that understanding of what I'm dealing with. So how can you actually help me navigate the process?

LAURA FLANDERS: Yenni, I'm going to come to you with the question that we ask all our guests at the end of our programs and I'll pose it to everybody. If you were to look to the future, I don't know, 50 years from now, what do you think is the story people there will tell about us in this moment?

YENNI RIVERA MARTINEZ: I think that, I hope that we're part of what helped to build a great system that speaks to each other, that no longer has silos, that encourage a community, encourage neighbors to let go of their by-stander syndrome, that encourage community to learn what DV shelters are around them, what numbers to call. That we were part of that message, that advocacy. That this show helped to educate the community and those watching to care for this cause.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, that sounds good to me. What do you think, Krista? What's the story the future will tell of now?

KRISTA COLÓN: You know, I hope that when they look back, they see this moment as unimaginable. That we are living in a future where it is unimaginable, that there are nearly 80,000 people in Los Angeles alone who are experiencing homelessness. That so many survivors cannot access the services they need. That so many of our other populations are experiencing homelessness. And I hope that this true crisis moment that we are living in is a springboard for real and lasting change.

LAURA FLANDERS: And Teniecka?

TENIECKA DRAKE: I would hope that just like my two ladies out here are sharing with me, that people would look back and say, hey, I have an awareness of domestic violence. Not only am I aware, I'm sensitive to it and I want to be one that's a changer, a doer, and not just a spectator on the sidelines. So that's the collaboration, the policy, the working together, and the helping of your neighbor one to another.

LAURA FLANDERS: Teniecka, Krista, Yenni, thank you so much. It's been great having you here with me on Laura Flanders & Friends and thank you for your work.

Is homelessness a state of being a condition, a status, or is it rather an action, a decision, a choice? That's the question recently considered by the Supreme Court reviewing a case involving a homeless woman in Oregon's right to be protected from cruel and unusual punishment, when city police raided a homeless encampment and seized what possessions she had left. To have to choose between those two options seems cruel enough when viewed from the point of view of the poor in a country that leaves housing mostly to the market, and therefore underdevelops, under builds for the poor and way overbuilds for the super rich. But when viewed from the point of view of a family fleeing domestic violence, the very choice seems cruel and unusual punishment. California governor Gavin Newsom, who is resisting calls to add \$200 million to his budget for crime victim services, which might help those victims of domestic violence, is nonetheless supporting the Supreme Court in overturning that Oregon woman's rights. As usual, I could end this program by saying something is very much out of whack. Last look, California



spent \$700 million clearing encampments. We'll continue to talk about what possible alternatives might exist. In the meantime, don't forget, you can find our full uncut conversation through a subscription to our free podcast. And you can join me here every week for Laura Flanders & Friends. Stay kind, stay curious, till the next time. Thanks for joining us.

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