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Shelters slowly adapt to help transgender homeless

AP Associated Press

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By DIONNE WALKER, Associated Press Writer - Fri Apr 3, 7:12 am ET



AP - Reva Iman, 42, a transgender homeless woman, at her provided home in Atlanta on Thursday, March 19, 2009. ...

ATLANTA - Twelve years heading the Salvation Army's downtown homeless shelter had done little to prepare Janeane Schmidt for the recent night when a soft-spoken biological male transitioning into a female walked in.

Schmidt didn't want to refuse someone in need. Having seen few such cases, however, and with limited space that winter night, she wasn't sure where to place the transgender woman. The shelter has space for homeless men and women but not anyone in between.

"Rather than turn them away, we give them a cot," said Schmidt, whose staff allowed the woman to stay a week in the shelter's lounge - the only space they could find.

"I don't even know of another shelter that takes the transgendered" in Atlanta, Schmidt said.

Nationwide there are plenty of holes in the safety net of shelters that catches men and women who have fallen on hard times. Activists say help is even harder to find for the transgender homeless, whose nontraditional gender status raises questions about sleeping arrangements and shower facilities.

The people who run the shelters are taking note.

From Phoenix to New York, shelters have fine-tuned policies to recognize preferred gender over birth gender, as they balance the needs of their mainstream clients with those of an unconventional segment of the homeless.

Activists point to the deaths of homeless transgender women in Atlanta and Austin, Texas, to underscore the need for shelter for all. Shelters in both cities are revamping acceptance policies and weighing the creation of trans-friendly space.

The Atlanta Union Mission is considering expanding one or more of its six area shelters, in part to accommodate transgender people.

"We don't know if we need an entirely different facility," spokeswoman Voloria Pettiford said. "We don't know how to meet that need, but there's a need."

Organizers say finding spots for transgender homeless is equally important for others in the shelter.

"Put yourself in the position of someone who's fleeing a domestic violence situation - they've come to the shelter as a haven to get away from a male presence in their lives, and they think they're in an environment that's all women," said Nancy Yarnell, head of the Atlanta Day Shelter for Women and Children.

It's tough to tally the number of homeless who are transgender, a term that includes people who switch gender through surgery and hormone treatments as well as those who just dress the part. The homeless community itself is notoriously difficult to count.

A study last year of 646 transgender Californians conducted by San Francisco's Transgender Law Center found that 20 percent reported having been homeless, and a third of those said they had been denied access to a shelter.

Vanishing jobs are expected to increase homelessness, and activists say the problem is magnified for the transgendered, whose appearance can make it hard to maintain employment.

Reva Iman is tall and busty with arms full of jingling bracelets and broad shoulders that betray her birth gender. She said she began living and working on the street after being shut out of jobs when she first came to Atlanta.

"The street life of escorting and prostitution, that became my main line of survival," said Iman, who avoided shelters that demanded she dress "like a man" to spend the night.

"You can't be yourself," she said.

Transgender women typically consider ditching their makeup and women's clothes an affront to the identity they've spent a lifetime accepting.

Yet for shelter managers, allowing anything else creates other problems. Some argue biological women feel uncomfortable sleeping next to a biological man, whether or not he has breast implants. Others worry that residents with mental problems - common among the homeless - could lash out at transgender guests.

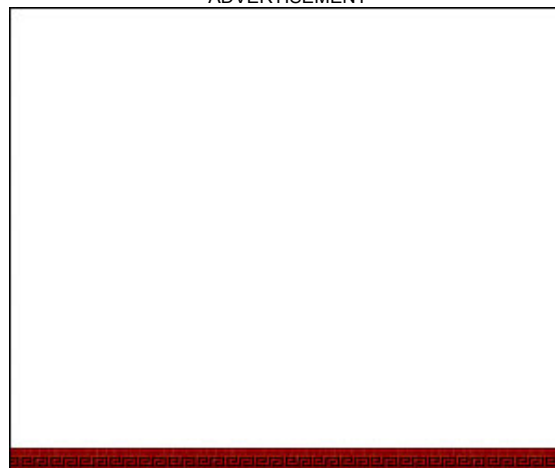
At Atlanta's Peachtree and Pine shelter, director Anita Beaty is concerned with the safety of placing female-looking males among the 700 men sleeping there nightly. She has a small area for women, and a stream of

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transgender women who know she won't turn them away.

"We want to know how to respond better," said Beaty, who plans to discuss revamping shelter housing policies with transgender activists further.

In 2003, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Coalition for the Homeless released a guidebook for making dual-sex homeless shelters more welcoming to the transgendered. Tips included adding shower privacy curtains and changing intake forms to include a blank space for gender — instead of male or female.

Shelters have made similar adjustments in Boston, New York, San Francisco, Phoenix, and Austin, Texas, where a transgender homeless woman's recent death sparked an outcry.

Police found former political candidate Jennifer Gale, who was born male and fell into homelessness, dead outside a church in December. Gay and lesbian activists blamed a lack of space for the transgendered in Austin's shelters.

"When Jennifer Gale passed away, that definitely reignited the flame that we needed to start working on this more," said Dawn Perkins, community relations manager for Front Steps, which coordinates shelters citywide.

Six years earlier, police found 52-year-old Alice Johnston dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound in suburban Atlanta. In a suicide e-mail, the unemployed transgender woman told friends she'd lost her home and had been turned down by city shelters, according to close friend Monica Helms, who testified about it to the city's homelessness commission in 2003.

There has been some progress.

In 2007, Atlanta United Way officials funded the creation of H.O.P.E Through Divine Intervention, a nine-bed program for transgender homeless women. About 21 have moved on to permanent housing through the program, said associate director Kia Croom.

Openings are rare and Croom said it should double in size to be effective, but there's no money for expansion.

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