Sarah’s Circle

Sarah's Circle is an Illinois not-for-profit organization founded in Uptown in 1979 serving unaccompanied women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The organization's service area is the City of Chicago, but Sarah's Circle does not turn away women in need of services because of geography. Sarah’s Circle meets immediate needs but its primary focus is on permanent solutions. It provides a continuum of services designed to address the complex circumstances that have led each client to become homeless or in unstable housing, and to help her transition into permanent and stable housing.

Sarah's Circle provided services to 853 women in 2015 and we are on pace to serve a similar number for 2016. It now estimates it provides services to about 2/3 of homeless unaccompanied women in Chicago. Sarah's Circle commits itself to continually increasing the number of women it transitions from homelessness to permanent housing. Last year, 110 women were transitioned from homelessness to permanent housing. This year, the goal is 200 women.

Need

The needs of women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in Chicago are significant and increasing. The 2016 City of Chicago Point-in-Time count (PIT) of homelessness reported 3,680 single individuals who are homeless. Of these, 34% (1,251) were women. Our clients have typically become homeless through a complex of personal circumstances that may include any combination of unemployment; low or no income; physical or sexual trauma; severe and persistent mental illness; domestic violence; chronic medical conditions; alcohol and substance abuse; physical disabilities; and criminal histories. Disparities related to race and ethnicity also contribute.

Women are particularly vulnerable to violence on the streets, and in unstable living situations. As they encounter violence, delay medical care, and remain unable to find employment, women lose the health, confidence, and optimism necessary to make it on their own. Women also have unique biopsychosocial needs, which a gender-specific agency is best-suited to address. Even during episodes of housing instability, women also physically, psychologically, and socially deal with pregnancy, menstrual cycles, motherhood, and menopause. Relationships, caregiving, and gender role expectations have particular significance for women as catalysts for both problems and solutions.

Even with the large percentage of women experiencing homelessness in relation to the total population, there are minimal, targeted resources for them. Sarah’s Circle, in an effort to find permanent solutions for women who are homeless, is working to increase resources and collaborative efforts to address their unique needs. First and foremost is safe, secure housing. 92% of the women we serve have experienced trauma, a common issue affecting the disparate group of women we serve. The trauma has many causes, physical, emotional, sexual, experienced in early childhood, or adulthood. Regardless of the source, a safe, secure home is a primary need for the women we serve in an effort to end their homelessness and increase their own self-sufficiency.

The housing we provide for women will include case management and access to community resources, in addition to security and staff available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Programs
Across programs, Sarah’s Circle staff use best practices and provide case management and clinical services to achieve three overarching goals:

- To welcome all women with safety, respect, and community;
- To support growth in health, well-being, self-sufficiency, and self-determination; and
- To help each woman find her home.

Sarah’s Circle has four primary programs:

The **Daytime Support Center** provides a safe space, physical services, educational and general interest programming, and case management to any woman in need. Food, computers, showers, laundry, and lockers are available. Women who are street homeless, doubled up with friends or family, housed but at risk of homelessness, or formerly homeless may all take part in this program. The Daytime Support Center is open 9am – 4:30pm on weekdays and until 7 pm on Tuesday evenings for community art night. A meal is served daily at 10am.

**Clinical Services** are provided to address the trauma, domestic violence, mental illness, and substance abuse that often contribute to and/or are a consequence of housing instability among the women served. Services including case management, individual and group clinical counseling, including art therapy, are provided on site. In 2015, the art therapy program was expanded to include more individual and group art therapy programming under the leadership of a full-time Art Therapist. Other services, such as health care and treatment for substance abuse, are provided by referral to established Sarah’s Circle partner institutions.

The **Interim Housing Program** is a 50-bed shelter for women who are homeless, providing 24-hour access and supportive services designed to move women directly into permanent housing as quickly as possible. The targeted length of stay is 120 days, but may be longer if needed. Sarah’s Circle operates from a harm reduction philosophy, taking in all unaccompanied women in need of shelter and continuing to work with women until they achieve their goals. The Interim Housing program is the largest program of this type in Chicago, and the agency has worked hard to increase the efficiency of the program by decreasing the average time spent in Interim Housing.

Sarah’s Circle provides 30 units of **Permanent Supportive Housing** to women who have a disability and have been chronically homeless – homeless for over one year or four times in three years. Some of the women served were homeless for over a decade before being placed in housing by Sarah’s Circle. Each woman in this program also participates in intensive case management with a Housing Coordinator and receives other supportive services tailored to her individual needs. Permanent supportive housing has been proven to improve outcomes for the most difficult to serve individuals and reduce public costs associated with recidivism, inappropriate emergency room use, and other crisis services. In 2015, the Permanent Supportive Housing Program was expanded to include three additional units specifically for chronically homeless female veterans.

**Collaboration**

Sarah’s Circle works very closely with other organizations in order to assure the broad array of services required to address the severity and complexity of homelessness. Sarah’s Circle has formal collaborative agreements with housing, health, mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, employment services, and job training programs. Sarah’s Circle also participates actively in All Chicago (Chicago
Alliance to End Homelessness), the Chicago umbrella organization overseeing HUD and housing prevention funds, advocating to end homelessness, and coordinating service provision. Program staff members sit on various constituency groups and task forces, and Kathy Ragnar, the Executive Director of Sarah’s Circle, sits on the All Chicago Board of Directors.

Sarah’s Circle also has strong relationships in our neighborhood. Numerous community members volunteer and donate to Sarah’s Circle. We have built supportive relationships with Alderman James Cappleman, State Senator Heather Steans, State Representative Greg Harris, and U.S. Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky. Sarah’s Circle reached out to local residential block clubs around our recent capital projects and continues to meet with their representatives to discuss developments. The Associate Director of Finance is also Treasurer and Executive Committee member of the local Chamber of Commerce, Uptown Business Partners.