

Annette John-Hall: No shelter for family in need

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To protect her, I'll simply call her Ms. J, as her lawyer does in a complaint filed with the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission.

Ms. J's identity can't be revealed because she fears her ex-boyfriend will find her.

For several months, Ms. J has lived with her daughters in a women's shelter for domestic-abuse victims.

She isn't even sure where her other children live every night. See, the shelter doesn't allow men, and J's sons are too old to stay there.

Oh, did I mention the family pet had to go into foster care, too?

J's situation is every woman's nightmare, but it's not unusual in cases of domestic violence.

Sadly, when a victim finally works up the courage to flee her abuser, her struggle doesn't end. The prospect of finding a safe place to land isn't guaranteed. There's a reason domestic violence is the leading cause of homelessness among women.

Which is why J is willing to risk telling her story. So that women won't have to go through what she did last summer, when she found herself on the run and seeking refuge at a local Days Inn - only to be victimized all over again, she says in a Sept. 17 complaint filed with the commission against the motel.

Kind beginning

J's years-long relationship with her ex started platonically and with seeming kindness.

Gradually, the relationship turned abusive, she alleged.

J said she believed that if she didn't get out soon, he could end up really hurting her or, worse, her children.

Twice before, she had tried to leave but had gone back. She never filed charges against him.

But this time, she summoned up the will and fled with the children, leaving behind all her belongings.

She got in the car and drove. She didn't know where she was going, but reached out to the Women's Center of Montgomery County and was told to get a room in the first hotel she came to.

She saw the Days Inn Horsham.

Ms. J and her family checked in with no problem, even receiving a discount from the hotel clerk on duty that night after explaining that she was fleeing domestic violence. She paid for the room in cash and later extended her stay four nights with emergency funds provided by the Women's Center of Montgomery County.

When she tried to extend her stay again, Ms. J said in the complaint, she initially was told by the front desk that rooms were available, at least for the next few nights. When the front desk checked payment arrangements with the manager, the complaint alleges, a manager "came out of the office" and explained that "this was a place of business, not a shelter" and that ". . . the hotel was all booked up."

"They told me to get my stuff and leave," Ms. J said. "They told me in the lobby, in front of my children and other customers. It was embarrassing."

Her family eventually left and slept in the car until a shelter opened up.

Not giving up

But J is nothing if not resilient.

As she collected her family's belongings that day, she called several friends and the Fair Housing Rights Center in Southeastern Pennsylvania, which immediately conducted a phone test, calling the Days Inn Horsham to check availability. Rooms were available.

The Public Interest Law Center filed a complaint on behalf of Ms. J and the Fair Housing Rights Center, alleging discrimination.

"This has been so difficult and heart-wrenching for [Ms. J]," said Public Interest Law Center's Sandra Wang. "It almost shows why women don't leave their abusers."

"Under the Fair Housing Act, a hotel or motel that rents by the week is considered a housing provider," says Elizabeth S. Stamm, the Housing Rights Center's director of enforcement.

Housing Rights Center officials said they spoke to Days Inn Horsham manager Jo-Anne Zapata, explaining to Zapata the fair-housing laws and reminding her that all hotel employees were accountable under the law.

Zapata told me she has a "vague recollection" of the conversation. Personally, she adds, she would never turn anyone away if she knew that person's safety was being compromised.

Asked flat out whether her hotel turned its back on Ms. J, Zapata replied that "if this lady was the guest of the hotel, her information is privileged. So it would be inappropriate for me to comment."

"We are not in the business of refusing service to any paying guest," said James J. Hagerty, vice president of operations for Coakley & Williams, the parent company of Days Inn. He said that guest information was privileged and that the company had completed its investigation. He added that the company does charity work for women's shelters.

Zapata is, in fact, a member of many civic boards, and the Days Inn Horsham has been an event sponsor for the Montgomery County Women's Center.

Whatever happened, it's hard to imagine any institution turning anyone away if it knew what victims go through.

"It's a real hardship," Stamm says. "So often women find themselves unable to have control over anything. They don't have control over their finances. They don't have control over their abusers. If we can ensure they have control over their housing, it decreases the likelihood of homelessness."

Meanwhile, J is trying to find a permanent place to live. And she spends every hour worrying about her sons' well-being and every night listening to her younger daughter cry herself to sleep over her pet.

And she's changed her phone number.

"I don't even know if I escaped," J says, sounding weary. "I don't feel safe, still."