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## OP-ED Submission

### Community at Threat: Women's Center Defines Addiction for Women

Addicts. Homeless. Prostitutes. These are more than just labels; responsible people who should know better than use these to minimize a threat that doesn't discriminate, regardless of one's station.

As the news unfolded Halloween weekend, reporters revealed that eleven (11) women had been brutally murdered at the hands of accused serial killer, Anthony Sowell. Before offering any explanations, public officials quickly labeled the victims as addicts, homeless and prostitutes well before the first victim had been identified. These labels allowed officials to shift the blame of neglect from the police and county administration to the victims of these heinous crimes. As to the question of how could this happen, the simple answer is addiction.

"Addiction is a disease that alters the brain chemistry in such a way that women may not be able to make rational decisions and evaluate a situation for their own personal safety. Their disease does not diminish their value or their ability to love their families," says Mary Jane Chichester, Executive Director of the Women's Center. She will tell you that many of her clients described their addiction as being so focused on "getting high," that they could not hear the little voice in their heads telling them that danger was near.

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The abuse delivered by these labels also causes damage to the families of the murder victims. Many media reports tell us they are being judged and scrutinized for not having filed a police missing person's report, although in the City of Cleveland there is not a division specifically identified to investigate these. One unidentified patrol officer indicated that in a given day he receives as many as ten (10) reports. If the habitual box is checked on the form, that report is likely to not be investigated. At this point, investigation often is nothing more than one detective per ward making telephone calls. If we remove the addiction, we reduce the need to dedicate resources to make calls and focus more on hands-on investigation of the missing.

Addiction is a progressive disease. It manifests itself differently in women than men. More than 90% of female addicts have experienced or witnessed violence. Without adequate treatment of the trauma, many women develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Some of the symptoms of PTSD include:

- Intrusive, upsetting memories of the event
- Flashbacks (acting or feeling like the event is happening again)
- Nightmares (either of the event or of other frightening things)
- Feelings of intense distress when reminded of the trauma
- Intense physical reactions to reminders of the event (such as pounding heart, rapid breathing, nausea, muscle tension, sweating)

For many women, alcohol and drug abuse becomes a coping mechanism. "If she self-medicates, she will not re-experience the event or perhaps is able to sleep through the night," says Chichester. Women often experience shame with their addiction and are able to hide and keep their addiction a secret from even those closest to them. The motivation to keep it a secret may include: 1) lack of insurance or funds for the treatment; 2) fear of losing custody of children; and, 3) the burden of the shame.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 6.5 million American women are diagnosed with substance abuse or dependence and yet, they are not seeking treatment services. Among them, SAMHSA estimates that between 20,000 – 30,000 women are chemically addicted.

Each year, complications of addiction claim 200,000 women's lives. This figure represents four times the number of women who die from breast cancer. Without

treatment, women die. The Women's Center has incorporated trauma services to address the specific traumas while treating the addiction. This approach, which recognizes the individual's trauma and treats it and the addiction, is allowing clients of the Women's Center to recover at nearly twice the rate of those treated at Betty Ford Clinic, which is benchmark for recovery services.

The Women's Center operates a non-profit outpatient drug and alcohol treatment facility for medically indigent women and their families. The mission of the Women's Center of Greater Cleveland is "providing opportunities for women to take greater control over their lives – physically, emotionally and economically." We do it without labeling our clients. We do it because we save lives. For more information, visit [www.womensctr.org](http://www.womensctr.org).

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