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Women's Center Responds to Define Addiction for Women

As the news unfolded Halloween weekend to reveal that eleven (11) women had been brutally murdered at the hands of accused serial killer, Anthony Sowell, to offer some explanation, officials quickly released and labeled the victims as addicts, homeless and prostitutes before the first victim had been identified.

In essence as the victims were labeled as addicts, homeless and prostitutes, the blame shifted from the police and county administration to the victims themselves. As the question of how could this happen, the answer is simple...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," said Mary Jane Chichester, Executive Director of the Women's Center. One client described her addiction as being so focused on getting high, that she could not hear the little voice in her head saying that this could be dangerous. You don't know this person.

Families of the murder victims have also been judged and scrutinized for not having filed a police missing person report. Although in the City of Cleveland there is not a division specifically identified to investigate missing person's reports. One unidentified patrol police officer indicated that in a given day, he may receive as many as ten (10) reports per day. If the habitual box is checked on the form, the report may or may not be investigated. At this point investigation is one detective per ward making telephone calls.

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Addiction is a progressive disease. Addiction manifests itself differently for women than men. For more than 90% of female addicts, they 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 though the night,” Chichester said. 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: lack of insurance or funds for the treatment; fear that she may lose custody of her children; as the caretaker of the family, how can she disclose her addiction; and the burden of the shame.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), it is estimated that 6.5 million American women are diagnosed with substance abuse or dependence that are not seeking treatment services. It is suggested 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 that 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.

The Women's Center operates a non-profit outpatient drug and alcohol treatment facility for medically indigent women and their families. The telephone number is 216-651-1450. 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.” For more information, visit www.womensctr.org.