



## Center for homeless transgender people opens in the D.C.

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By Derrill Holly

**WASHINGTON (AP)** - Eleven years ago, District of Columbia firefighters laughed at Tyra Hunter, a transgender woman born Tyrone, as she lay injured and dying on the street.

Last weekend, some of Hunter's friends opened a center near the U.S. Capitol where homeless transgender people can get hot meals, showers and other services from 6 a.m. until 10 p.m.

"We want to let them know they don't have to live on the street and be sex workers," said Brian Watson, executive director of Transgender Health Empowerment, Inc., which received a \$70,000 grant from the D.C. government to open the Tyra Hunter Drop In Center.

Hunter, 24, was a popular hairdresser before she was critically injured in an automobile accident on Aug. 7, 1995. Her medical treatment was delayed after an emergency medical technician slit open her pants and discovered she was biologically male. A city doctor who treated her was later ordered to pay her mother a \$3 million malpractice award.

The District of Columbia government later reached a \$1.75 million settlement with Hunter's mother and named a sensitivity training program required for firefighters after her.

According to a survey conducted six years ago, about 1,000 of the 5,000 transgender people living in the city are homeless. Many sleep in parks or engage in prostitution in dark alleys and rundown streets.

"It's hard for transgender people to get jobs," said Cierra Williams, 20. Besides facing censure at school or work for wearing clothing some people consider inappropriate, many also suffer strained family ties leading to homelessness.

Williams, 20, a transgender woman, who grew up not far from the center, said she would take advantage of the housing counseling and workshops taught by several transgender men and women on the staff.

"If people see other transgender people who are like them, and doing well, it could help them get on their feet for their first time in their lives," said Geanna Eichenbaum, project director at the Transgender Resource and Neighborhood Space in San Francisco.

"There's a huge need in the community for jobs other than drug dealer or prostitute," Eichenbaum said.

Similar programs are offered in Los Angeles and New York, although few homeless shelters adequately protect transgender people from threats, violence or sexual abuse, she said.

**"A transgender woman who was born male, but lives as a woman should not be in a men's shelter. That's an incredibly unsafe situation," said Lisa Mottet, a lawyer with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute.**

Clients at the Hunter Center will also get help with name change paperwork and other documents needed to establish identities separate from the genders and names they used earlier in their lives.

"You're essentially trapped in the role of an illegal immigrant or undocumented alien in your own country," said Denise Leclair, executive director of International Foundation for Gender Education near Boston.