Homelessness in America Is a Growing Problem

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From Opposing Viewpoints in Context

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Website :

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Tony, 48 years old, spent 15 years as a Navy yeoman and now receives $361 a month in disability payments from the Veterans Administration. He panhandles for extra cash around Norfolk, Virginia, and has been homeless for three years.

Tony is far from alone. According to a survey announced in early October [2005] by USA Today, more than 727,000 individuals were homeless in 460 communities [in spring 2005].

However, about 3.5 million Americans are likely to experience homelessness in any given year—not counting the many thousands set adrift after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita decimated the Gulf Coast. Billions in emergency funds are being spent to help the hurricane victims, and billions more are spent each year to control the nation's perennial homelessness problem.

The [George W.] Bush administration's proposed budget for fiscal 2006 includes $528.5 billion for homelessness programs administered through HUD [Department of Housing and Urban Development] and a $1 billion increase for Section 8 [low-income] housing. It also includes $1.4 billion for Homeless Assistance Grants, $200 million more than in 2005. Altogether, the administration has requested $4 billion in 2006 for federal housing and social programs for the homeless—an increase of 8.5 percent.

Homelessness was growing even before Hurricane Katrina made it worse. In 1997, research conducted in 11 communities and four states by the National Coalition for the Homeless found that shelter capacity had more than doubled in nine communities and three states in the previous decade.

A New Strategy

According to Dan Straughan, executive director of the Homeless Alliance in Oklahoma City (which has an estimated 1,200 to 1,500 homeless residents), ideas about housing the homeless are changing. He says that the old model is based on a continuum of care that begins in an emergency homeless shelter, where the newly homeless get shelter, food, clothing, and access to government and nonprofit services. Those ready to move on typically go to transitional housing and then to permanent housing, often with financial support.

However, many communities, notably large metropolitan areas on the East and West coasts, have taken a different tack in the last five to 10 years. Their approach, called "housing first," moves the homeless person into supportive housing immediately. The aim is to get homeless individuals off the streets and into a self-supportive culture that will keep them housed and self-reliant.

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"The thought is that it's a lot more likely that a person will work on their problems if they're in an apartment or single-room occupancy facility rather than in a cavernous barracks with 100 other people with the same and worse problems," explains Straughan. "Some really good longitudinal research indicates that this approach can be both cost-effective and successful."

He cites a study by the Lewin Group, a national health care and human services consulting firm based in Falls Church, Virginia, which examined the daily cost of supportive housing in nine cities: San Francisco, Los Angeles, Atlanta, New York, Chicago, Boston, Seattle, Phoenix, and Columbus, Ohio. The results of the study, issued in November 2004, showed that a day in supportive housing costs significantly less than a day in jail or in a psychiatric hospital, and a day in permanent supportive housing costs even less than a day in a shelter.

The Fannie Mae Foundation and the Corporation for Supportive Housing, a nonprofit based in New Haven, Connecticut, followed 4,679 people placed in supportive housing and found that their total annual unit costs were $17,277—or nearly $6,000 less than it takes to house an individual in a shelter, according to figures compiled by the New York-based Coalition for the Homeless.

"A formerly homeless person in stable housing is twice as likely to be employed," says Straughan, "twice as likely to be physically and mentally healthy, to be free from substance abuse, and to stay out of jail, than a homeless person either in the shelter system or on the street."

Portland, Oregon, is one city that is embracing the housing first approach. In a report issued December 2004, Home Again: A Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness in Portland and Multnomah County, the city states that "the most critical issue that faces all homeless people—the lack of permanent housing—will be addressed first. Other services and programs directed at homeless people and families will support and maintain homeless people in this permanent housing."

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The report sets an ambitious goal for the city and county: to create 2,200 new permanent supportive housing units for chronically homeless individuals and homeless families with special needs by the year 2015.

To accomplish these goals, the city will focus on three specific areas: First, it will attend to the problems of the most chronically homeless. Then it will streamline access to existing services in an effort to prevent further homelessness—for example, by seeking more partnerships with nonprofits. Finally, it will put resources into specific programs that offer measurable results.

The Emerging Homeless

In the midst of the current real estate bubble, more and more families are becoming homeless, says Joan Noguera, executive director of the Nassau-Suffolk Coalition for the Homeless on Long Island—the suburban area east of New York City. "We have a housing market that has gone sky high," she says.

She points out that Long Islanders have a median income of $85,000, yet many wage earners don't earn 30 percent of that figure. The region is home to some of the nation's most affluent communities, but some 40,000 individuals are homeless. Two-thirds of those are members of families; half are children. According to data released by the Urban Institute in 2000, children make up about 39 percent of the homeless population nationally.

Noguera cites an example of a single mother with children who is currently in a homeless shelter and is seeking a rental unit for $900 per month—hard to find on suburban Long Island. To secure an apartment, she needs the first month's rent plus two months' security deposit—or $2,700. The coalition was trying to help her, but without the funds, she and her children would remain in a shelter.

Families composed 41 percent of the urban homeless population, according to a U.S. Conference of Mayors survey completed in 2004. This was an increase of five percent over the two previous years. "The face of homelessness has changed," said James Garner, mayor of the village of Hempstead, Long Island, when the survey was released. Garner is a past president of the mayors' conference.

Advocates for the homeless agree that services are crucial.

New York as a whole seems to be on the right track. Linda Gibbs, commissioner of the city's Department of Homeless Services, recently announced that from December 2004 to May of [2005], the number of people in the city's homeless shelters dropped by 2,379 individuals, the largest decline in any six-month period since 1990. The number of homeless children dropped by 13 percent, from 15,766 in May 2004 to 13,770 in May 2005. These results put the city ahead of an aggressive target set by Mayor Michael Bloomberg to reduce homelessness by two-thirds over a five-year period.

Services Are Crucial

"In my view, large-scale homelessness of the kind we have seen over the past 25 years is primarily attributable to the policy of deinstitutionalizing the mentally ill," says Seth Forman, AICP [American Institute of Certified Planners], deputy director of the Long Island Regional Planning Board. Forman believes that homelessness has less to do with housing markets than with poor mental health, addiction, and physical abuse.

Advocates for the homeless agree that services are crucial. That means services to enhance life skills and budgeting skills and rehabilitation for drugs and alcohol. Affordable housing without such services is not likely to work, the experts say.

Father Joe's Villages, a faith-based nonprofit organization in San Diego, follows that premise. Its founder, Father Joe Carroll, won the American Planning Association's Paul Davidoff Award for advocacy in 1997. The organization's innovative formula for programs and services has been endorsed as a prototype by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

A recent project developed by Father Joe's Villages is Villa Harvey Mandel, opened in May 2003. It is a $13.3 million, six-story affordable housing development with 90 units that provides a home to the "hardest-to-serve" community members, with residents ranging from the extremely low-income and formerly homeless to those with chronic physical disabilities, substance abuse problems, and mental illness. The project was awarded the "2004 Special Needs Housing Project of the Year" by the San Diego Housing Federation.

Units vary in size from 326-square-foot studios to 540-square-foot one bedrooms, with many of the west-facing apartments offering views of the Coronado Bridge, Petco Park, and downtown San Diego. The development also features the world's largest glass mosaic, titled "Neighbors Helping Neighbors: A Tribute to Donors, Volunteers, and Staff."

Support services are offered at the nearby St. Vincent de Paul Village, also affiliated with Father Joe's Villages. Services include medical and dental care, counseling, job training and placement services, legal assistance, information and referral, and assistance with entitlement programs.

Eight of the units at Villa Harvey Mandel are designated Shelter Plus Care units for formerly homeless single adults with disabilities. Some 25 beds are reserved for single adults who have mental illness or are chemically dependent. At the time of application, all prospective special needs residents must complete a certification form verifying their disability or special needs. Many residents are both substance abusers and have a mental illness.

Getting project approval wasn't easy. To combat negative perceptions, Father Joe's Villages met many times with East Village and Barrio Logan groups. The city council approved the project by a single vote. Construction began in April 2002.

Obstacles to Housing the Homeless

Permit processing for affordable housing is her agency's biggest headache when it comes to dealing with homelessness, says Marcella Escobar, deputy director of San Diego's Development Services, a branch of the city's planning department. "Fast tracking the permit process has been the focus that our department has taken. We realize that time is of the essence," she says.

That's where the affordable housing expediting program comes in. "In the past we had situations where [permitting] would take six months to a year, if not longer," Escobar says. With the expediting program, some projects have received discretionary approvals and gotten to a public hearing within three months, she adds.

The city of San Diego works hand in hand with various social organizations and community and faith-based groups to assist the city's homeless population. It is also renowned for developing single-room-occupancy housing—the type of housing that can prevent homelessness because the units are affordable to people with very modest incomes.

Community Housing Works, a local nonprofit organization near San Diego, is mindful of the problems caused by the not-in-my-backyard syndrome. Sue Reynolds, the organization's executive director, says her group works with the surrounding community through a board of directors that includes local residents, businesses, and government officials.

One of the group's projects, the Marisol Apartments in Oceanside, California, won APA's [American Planning Association's] Paul Davidoff Award in 1999. Everyone living in the 21 apartments there is HIV-symptomatic or has AIDS. Ten apartments are reserved for the homeless. Rents range from about $110 to $300 a month, and the apartments serve residents with monthly incomes of $330 to $1,000.

Bureaucracy is the enemy of housing solutions.

The project wasn't greeted with universal approval, Reynolds says, but her group used what she calls "old-fashioned community work" to turn the tide. It managed to convince neighbors that the new project would be better than what it was replacing.

"In many communities, the faith-based community is doing the lion's share of the day-to-day work with the homeless," says Dan Straughan. "The nonprofit community is also deeply involved. It behooves a city planning department to become (or get access to) a community convenor—that is, an organization that can bring many groups together to reach a consensus on how to best attack a problem."

A last word from Straughan: Bureaucracy is the enemy of housing solutions, which face what he calls the three Bs of homeless funding: "It's byzantine in its complexity, burdensome in the amount of oversight required to administer, and blind to local community need."