INSPIRED LEADERS
SHAPING CITIES

POLICY BACKGROUND: HOMELESSNESS

INTRODUCTION

According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development's 2020 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report to Congress, roughly 580,000 people were experiencing homelessness in the United States on any given night in 2020.[1] The report found that for the fourth consecutive year, homelessness increased nationwide.

According to HUD, nearly 6 of every 10 people experiencing unsheltered homelessness did so in an urban area. The report also found that, for the first time since HUD began data collection, the number of unsheltered individuals was higher than the number of individuals in shelters.[2]

In 2018, the federal government, through the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, established a goal of ending homelessness among various populations, including families, youth, chronically homeless individuals, and veterans.

By the late 2010s, studies showed that the number of homeless had gone down. Data shows an estimated 13% fewer people were experiencing homelessness in 2017 compared to 2010, and there were 17% fewer people who were unsheltered.[3] However, rising housing prices in (particularly in some markets) combined with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, have led to a new increase in homelessness.

Kinds of Homelessness

Experts identify three distinct categories of homelessness:

- *Chronic Homelessness.* People who are chronically homeless tend to be older, permanently unemployed, and often face mental and physical disabilities and/or substance abuse problems. Despite common perceptions of most homeless people in this situation, the chronically homeless represent a significantly smaller population than the transitionally homeless.

- *Transitional Homelessness.* Transitionally homeless individuals typically enter the shelter system for a single stay and for a short period. They tend to be younger and can be recent members of the precariously housed population who have become homeless because of a sudden or catastrophic event. Many will eventually transition into more stable housing. Due to the higher turnover rate, transitionally homeless individuals account for the majority of people experiencing homelessness.

- *Episodic Homelessness.* People in this category often transition in and out of homelessness many times over a long period of time. While they tend to be young, like those in transitional homelessness, episodically homeless people are often chronically unemployed and may experience mental and physical health issues and/or substance abuse problems.

Causes of Homelessness

Experts identify a number of root causes of homelessness:

- *Lack of Affordable Housing.* As the nation's stick of affordable housing has dwindled, people in precarious housing situations can find themselves becoming homeless. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH), "today, 8 million extremely low-income households pay at least half of their income toward housing, putting them at risk of housing instability and homelessness."[4]

- *Low Incomes and Unemployment.* The same people who are most vulnerable to rising housing costs are also most likely to face significant employment challenges, due to labor market shifts, limited education, gaps in work history, criminal records, unstable housing, and poor health or disabilities. For people living paycheck to paycheck, a sudden job loss or chronic unemployment or underemployment can result in their losing their housing.

- *Health and Homelessness.* Health and homelessness are inextricably linked; acute or chronic physical or mental health challenges can lead to homelessness, and homelessness can cause or exacerbate health issues. Some homeless individuals lost their housing when health conditions made it impossible for them to maintain their living accommodations or caused

[1] These figures are for the period before the onset of the COVID pandemic.
[2] HUD: "The 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress," https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2020-AHAR-Part-1.pdf
[3] USICH: "Home Together Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness", https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Home-Together-Federal-Strategic-Plan-to-Prevent-and-End-Homelessness.pdf
[4] NAEH: "What Causes Homelessness," https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/what-causes-homelessness/housing/

them to lose their jobs.

- *Substance Abuse.* Like other health challenges, substance abuse is intertwined with homelessness, with each causing or worsening the other. According to NAEH, "more than 10 percent of people who seek substance abuse or mental health treatment in our public health system are homeless." The opioid epidemic has made the problem worse; homeless people are les likely to seek out and receive treatment for substance abuse problems.

- *Domestic Violence.* Domestic violence is another trigger for homelessness, as survivors seek out homeless service programs and shelters to escape abuse when they cannot otherwise secure housing. Yet, homelessness presents additional safety challenges for those fleeing domestic violence.

- *Homelessness and Race.* According to the NAEH, "most minority groups, especially African Americans and Indigenous people, experience homelessness at higher rates than Whites, largely due to long-standing historical and structural racism." This is due to a number of factors, including higher levels of poverty among minority groups, a legacy of segregation and rental housing discrimination, and higher rates of incarceration, which makes it harder to pass background checks required for housing and jobs.

- *COVID and Homelessness.* The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated homelessness, as the sudden economic downtown created significant job loss in 2020 and forced many people out of housing. It also is more challenging to provide vaccines to homeless individuals, creating greater risk for contracting COVID among those without homes.

FEDERAL ROLE IN COMBATTING HOMELESSNESS

According to the Congressional Research Service (CRS), "Federal assistance targeted to homeless individuals and families was largely nonexistent prior to the mid-1980s." The earliest federal program for homelessness was the Runaway and Homeless Youth program, created in 1974. The first federal program focused on assisting homeless people regardless of age was the Emergency Food and Shelter (EFS) program, established in 1983. In 1987, Congress enacted the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, the first comprehensive homelessness legislation, which created a number of new programs to comprehensively address the needs of homeless people, including food, shelter, health care, and education.

U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH)

USICH is the only federal agency with a sole mission focused on preventing and ending homelessness in America. The council consists of 19 federal agencies that help create and implement of the Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness.[5] USICH drafted the first Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness in 2010. In 2018 it released its most recent plan, ***Home, Together***, which outlined eight objectives.[6]

Federal Funding Programs

- *Emergency Food and Shelter (EFS) Program (DHS).* The oldest federal program serving all homeless populations, EFS allocates funds to local communities to fund homeless programs and homelessness prevention services. Eligible expenses include groceries, food vouchers, and transportation expenses related to the delivery of food; items for mass shelters such as hot meals, transportation of clients to shelters or food service providers, and toiletries; payments to prevent homelessness such as utility assistance, hotel or motel lodging, rental or mortgage assistance; and local recipient organization program expenses such as building maintenance or repair, and equipment purchases.

- *Homeless Assistance Grants (HUD).* Established in 1987, the grants fund housing and services for homeless persons through three separate programs:
    - *Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG) Program* distributes formula grants to state and local governments to distribute to private nonprofit organizations, public housing agencies, or local redevelopment authorities to provide assistance to homeless individuals. ESG funds may be used in two categories: (1) emergency shelter and related services, and (2) homelessness prevention and rapid rehousing.
    - *Continuum of Care Program* provides funds for transitional housing, permanent housing, and Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS). Grantees may provide housing and services by acquiring,

[5] USICH: About USICH | United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), https://www.usich.gov/about-usich/

[6] 1. Ensure Homelessness is a Rare Experience Objective
1.1: Collaboratively Build Lasting Systems that End Homelessness Objective
1.2: Increase Capacity and Strengthen Practices to Prevent Housing Crises and Homelessness
2. Ensure Homelessness is a Brief Experience Objective
2.1: Identify and Engage All People Experiencing Homelessness as Quickly as Possible Objective
2.2: Provide Immediate Access to Low-Barrier Emergency Shelter or other Temporary Accommodations to All Who Need it Objective
2.3: Implement Coordinated Entry to Standardize Assessment and Prioritization Processes and Streamline Connections to Housing and Services Objective
2.4: Assist People to Move Swiftly into Permanent Housing with Appropriate and Person-Centered Services
3. Ensure Homelessness is a One-Time Experience Objective
3.1: Prevent Returns to Homelessness through Connections to Adequate Services and Opportunities
4. Sustain an End to Homelessness Objective
4.1: Sustain Practices and Systems at a Scale Necessary to Respond to Future Need

rehabilitating, or constructing properties; leasing properties; providing rental assistance; and by paying operating costs.
    - *Rural Housing Stability (RHS) Grants* reserves not less than 5% of Continuum of Care Program funds for rural communities to apply separately for funds that would otherwise be awarded as part of the Continuum of Care Program.

- *Health Care for the Homeless (HCH) Program (HHS).* Provides grants to nonprofit, state, or local government entities to operate outpatient health centers for homeless individuals. Centers are required to be community designed and operated and must provide primary health care and substance abuse prevention and treatment services to homeless individuals. Centers may also provide services to connect homeless individuals with support services such as emergency shelter and job training and may provide care at mobile sites.

- *Education for Homeless Children and Youth (Education).* Provides assistance to state educational agencies (SEAs) to ensure that all homeless children and youth have equal access to the same free, appropriate public education, including public preschool education that is provided to other children and youth. Grants must be used to facilitate the enrollment, attendance, and success in school of homeless children and youth.

- *Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH) Program (HHS).* Distributes funds to states to support local organizations providing services for people with serious mental illness who are homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless.

- *Grants for the Benefit of Homeless Individuals (HHS).* A competitive grant program that supports services to homeless individuals with substance use disorders. Programs and services include substance abuse treatment, mental health services, wrap-around services, immediate entry into treatment, outreach services, screening and diagnostic services, staff training, case management, primary health services, job training, educational services, and housing services.

- *Runaway and Homeless Youth Program (HHS).* Provides services to runaway and homeless youth outside of the law enforcement, juvenile justice, child welfare, and mental health systems.

- *Transitional Housing Assistance for Victims of Sexual Assault, Domestic Violence, Dating Violence, and Stalking (DOJ).* Funds programs that provide assistance to victims of sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and/or stalking in need of transitional housing, short-term housing assistance, and related supportive services.

- *Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (Labor).* Provides grants to states or other public entities and nonprofit organizations to operate employment programs that reach out to homeless veterans.

- *Homeless Veterans (VA).* The Department of Veterans' Affairs runs several programs to support homeless veterans, including:
    - *Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) Program.* Operates at VA sites around the country to provide outreach services, physical and psychiatric health exams, treatment, and referrals to homeless veterans with mental health and substance use issues.
    - *Domiciliary Care for Homeless Veterans.* A residential rehabilitation program intended to meet the clinical needs of homeless veterans while preventing the therapeutically inappropriate use of hospital and nursing home care services.
    - *Compensated Work Therapy/Transitional Residence Program.* A comprehensive rehabilitation program that prepares veterans for employment and independent living.
    - *HUD-VA Supported Housing (HUD-VASH).* A joint HUD-VA initiative that provides specially designated Section 8 rental assistance vouchers to homeless veterans while the VA provides supportive services.
    - *Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF).* A program of supportive services to assist very low-income veterans and their families who either are making the transition from homelessness to housing or who are moving from one location to another.[7]

ORGANIZATIONS

A large number of non-profit organizations advocate on behalf of policies to reduce attend homelessness. There are two main national groups that focus exclusively on homelessness:

- *National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH).* NAEH is "a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization whose sole purpose is to end homelessness in the United States." NAEH was founded in 1983 and is a national network of over 10,000 providers, public agencies, and private partners. (https://endhomelessness.org/)

- *The National Coalition for The Homeless.* The Coalition is "a national network of people who are currently experiencing or who have experienced homelessness, activists and advocates, community-based and faith-based service providers, and

[7] CRS: "Homelessness: Targeted Federal Programs," https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL30442

others committed to a single mission: To end and prevent homelessness while ensuring the immediate needs of those experiencing homelessness are met and their civil rights are respected and protected." (https://nationalhomeless.org/)

In addition to national groups, there are many organizations that work at the local level, such as The Coalition for the Homeless in New York, the nation's oldest advocacy and direct service organization helping homeless individuals and families.

POLICY SOLUTIONS

Experts have identified a number of policy approaches they believe can significantly reduce or even end homelessness.

Coordinated systems approaches

A coordinated, community-wide approach that involves harnessing local data to inform decisions about how to most effectively allocate resources, services, and programs to best address the needs of those experiencing homelessness in the community. According to NAEH, a successful coordinated systems approach entails these steps:

- *Coordinated Entry,* also known as coordinated assessment or coordinated intake, is a process designed to quickly identify, assess, refer and connect people in crisis to housing and assistance, no matter where they show up to ask for help.
- *A Shared Data System*, such as a Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), used to collect client, program, and system-level data on housing and homelessness services. Shared data systems enable a more seamless process of matching individuals with the right resources and enables a comprehensive analysis of a community's homeless system.
- *Performance Measurement and Evaluation.* HUD has developed system-level performance measures to help communities gauge progress in preventing and ending homelessness.

Rapid Re-Housing

Rapid re-housing has shown effectiveness in getting people experiencing homelessness into permanent housing and keeping them there, which better positions them to address other challenges like unemployment or substance abuse. Rapid re-housing is offered without preconditions (such as employment, income, absence of criminal record, or sobriety) and the resources and services are typically tailored to the needs of the person.

Permanent Supportive Housing

Permanent supportive housing combines affordable housing assistance with voluntary support services to address the needs of chronically homeless people with the goal of fostering independent living and tenancy skills. Research has demonstrated that permanent supportive housing can also increase housing stability and improve health, while reducing public costs associated with the use of crisis services such as shelters, hospitals, jails and prisons.

Crisis Response Systems

Crisis response systems identify those experiencing homelessness, prevent homelessness when possible, connect people with housing quickly and provide services when needed. An effective crisis response system has these features:

- *Outreach workers,* who connect people at risk of or experiencing homelessness to coordinated entry, emergency services, and shelter.
- *Coordinated entry* to quickly identify, assess, refer and connect people in crisis to housing and assistance and services.
- *Diversion and prevention strategies* to aid households in preserving their current housing situation and helping people at risk of homelessness identify immediate alternate housing arrangements.
- *Emergency shelters and interim housing*, particularly for those experiencing a housing crisis or fleeing an unsafe situation.
- *Permanent housing,* through rapid re-housing and permanent supportive housing strategies.

Opening Doors Employment Strategies

An Opening Doors model supports homeless services providers in helping people experiencing homelessness in their quests for employment and/or job training. Federal legislation enacted in 2014, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), authorized federal work programs and required states to create a strategic plan for helping vulnerable men, women, and adolescents to secure employment.[8]

CURRENT LEGISLATION

- S. 220, Emergency Family Stabilization Act
  *(Introduced by Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK)_*
  S. 220 would authorize $800 million to be awarded competitively by HHS to enable local agencies and organizations to assist children, youth, families, single pregnant women, and survivors of dating violence, domestic violence and trafficking impacted by homelessness and insecure housing during the COVID-19 crisis.

[8] National Coalition for the Homeless: "Employment and Income", https://nationalhomeless.org/issues/economic-justice/

- S. 1991, Family Stability and Opportunity Vouchers Act
  (Introduced by Senator Chris Van Hollen (D-MD))
  S. 1991 would establish 500,000 new Housing Choice Vouchers over the next five years for families that are experiencing homelessness or housing instability, or wish to live in areas with quality schools and other opportunities for healthy development.

- S. 2182, The Eviction Crisis Prevention Act
  (Introduced by Senator Michael Bennet (D-CO))
  S. 2182 would increase housing stability by creating a new national $3 billion Emergency Assistance Fund (EAF).

- S. 2210/H.R. 4131, Better Care, Better Jobs Act
  (Introduced by Senator Robert Casey (D-PA) and Representative Debbie Dingell (D-MI))
  H.R. 4131/S. 2210 would expand Medicaid's HCBS program to provide home health care to the elderly and the disabled, including supportive housing services for people experiencing homelessness with acute needs.

ABOUT IDA

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