

March 16, 2010

NCH Public Policy Recommendations **Rural Homeless Assistance Act**

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure that people in rural areas experiencing homelessness receive the same opportunities for homeless assistance as homeless persons in urban and suburban populations by establishing a rural homeless assistance program within the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

U.S. Representatives – Introduce or co-sponsor the Rural Homeless Assistance Act, a legislative proposal of the National Coalition for the Homeless.

U.S. Senators – Introduce or co-sponsor the Rural Homeless Assistance Act, a legislative proposal of the National Coalition for the Homeless.

ISSUE STATUS

The National Coalition for the Homeless has developed a legislative proposal to establish a rural homeless assistance program within the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The proposed Rural Homeless Assistance Act would authorize the Secretary of Agriculture to make competitive grants to private nonprofit entities, Indian tribes, and county and local governments for the purpose of providing homeless assistance to people experiencing homelessness in rural areas. Grantees could use funds for homelessness prevention, emergency housing, transitional housing, re-housing, supportive services, and capacity-building assistance.

NCH sought to have its proposal incorporated into legislation being considered by Congress to reauthorize the homeless assistance programs of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Regrettably, neither the Senate version (Community Partnership to End Homelessness Act (S. 1518) nor House version (Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act (H.R. 840) of the HUD homeless assistance reauthorization measure include the NCH proposal.

Consequently, NCH is seeking the introduction of its Rural Homeless Assistance Act as a stand-alone measure so that Members of Congress concerned with rural homelessness may have a vehicle to demonstrate support for the issue and to build momentum for action on rural homelessness in the 111th Congress.

NCH is also seeking to contribute to a Government Accountability Office (GAO) study into rural homelessness authorized in the HEARTH Act.

WHY THIS MATTERS

- Rural homelessness is a silent epidemic afflicting thousands of individuals and families every year.
- In addition to the causal factors of homelessness among all people who experience it, additional economic, social, and geographic factors unique to rural areas exacerbate homelessness among the residents of rural communities.
- Rates of homelessness in many rural counties exceed that of urban and suburban counties.
- There is a dearth of homeless assistance services in rural areas. Most individuals and families experiencing homelessness in rural areas either go without even basic needs or they migrate to small cities and urban centers

for assistance. Such forced migration leads to child and family trauma and disconnection from workplaces, relatives, and peer and professional supports.

- Congress has established homeless assistance programs within the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, but those programs poorly serve rural communities. Funds are allocated to geographic areas in a manner that is disadvantageous to rural communities. The collaborative planning and application development process currently used by HUD to solicit applications and award homeless assistance funds are difficult for rural regions to execute. Also, the current emphasis in HUD homeless assistance programs on permanent housing overlooks front-end emergency and support services needs that are still desperately needed in rural areas.
- NCH's proposed Rural Homeless Assistance Program seeks to bring homeless assistance programs to residents of rural communities quickly and with minimal administrative burden on applicants and grantees.
- The program would be assigned to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the federal department with greatest expertise in rural development and with an elaborate outreach structure.

BACKGROUND

In 1992, Congress enacted a rural homelessness program and assigned it to HUD. The program was designed to make competitive grants directly to housing and services organizations serving rural areas and rural communities. Congress never appropriated funding for the program. Its authority has now expired.

The Senate's HUD homeless assistance reauthorization bill (S. 1518) and a substitute amendment to the House bill (H.R. 840) each propose to establish a rural housing stability assistance program within the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The rural housing stability assistance program is established as an alternative funding stream for project sponsors serving rural areas and rural communities who would waive their opportunity to apply for HUD "continuum of care" program funds. In exchange, rural grantees would be exempt from many of the requirements of the continuum of care program. The rural housing stability assistance program would be funded through a reservation of funds appropriated to the HUD homeless assistance account, rather than an appropriation of new funds.

For further information on the public policy recommendations of the National Coalition for the Homeless, contact the NCH public policy staff at info@nationalhomeless.org or 202.462.4822, or visit www.nationalhomeless.org.