

ENTERING THE THIRD DECADE OF THE NATIONAL RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA: A CONSENSUS STATEMENT ON FIVE FUNDAMENTALS

The July 22, 2007, twentieth anniversary of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act marked the onset of the third decade of the national government response to mass homelessness in the United States. This anniversary calls for consideration of what is needed to overcome homelessness and for a new spirit of commitment and determination to eradicate this social evil.

The undersigned national organizations call for reauthorization of McKinney Act programs, and in the forward-looking spirit of the bi-partisan authors of the Act we declare fundamental principles that must animate public policy in a nation without mass homelessness.

Consider:

- On one night in January 2005, at least 744,313 homeless men, women and children were without homes in America. Although all counts of homeless persons are imprecise and controversial, it is unacceptable that hundreds and hundreds of Americans remain homeless each night.
- On an annualized basis, as many as 3.5 million Americans are thought to experience homelessness each year. Over 1.35 million of these are children.
- Full time work at the current minimum wage does not provide sufficient income to rent a one-bedroom apartment in any county in America.
- In 2006, in constant dollars, the budget authority for the US Department of Housing and Urban Development was only 49% of what it was in 1978.
- The life expectancy of homeless persons is 30 years less than for other Americans, and their rates of illnesses of all kinds are far greater than for others.
- 160 unprovoked assaults were committed against homeless persons in 2007, with 28 of these resulting in death. 2007 saw more attacks than any of the previous eight years.
- City ordinances frequently serve as a tool to criminalize homelessness. Of 224 cities surveyed in 2005: 28% prohibit "camping" in particular public places in the city and 16% had citywide prohibitions on "camping"; 27% prohibit sitting/lying in certain public places and 16% prohibit loitering citywide; 43% prohibit begging in particular public

places, 45% prohibit aggressive panhandling and 21% have city-wide prohibitions on begging.

- Between 150,000 and 200,000 veterans of the United States armed forces are homeless on any given night, and one-third of homeless men are veterans. Nearly 400,000 veterans will experience homelessness sometime during the course of a year. The newest generation of combat veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom (OIF-OEF), both men and women, are returning home and suffering from war related conditions that may put them at risk for homelessness.
- More than half of people experiencing homeless nationwide have no health insurance and are typically unable to access the health care they need to stabilize and resolve their health issues, which prolong their homelessness. They are among 47 million US residents who are uninsured at any time.
- 92% of homeless women have experienced severe physical or sexual abuse at some point in their lives. Of all homeless women, 60 percent have been abused by age 12, and 63 percent have been victims of intimate partner violence as adults. On an annualized basis, at least 1.7 million youth run away from home due to severe family conflict, abuse or neglect, or are expelled from their homes by a family member.
- Over 900,000 homeless children and youth were identified and enrolled in public schools in the 2005-2006 school year, a 50% increase from the 2003-2004 school year. However, the Department of Education count does not include pre-school children, and over 40% of homeless children are under the age of five.
- Federally funded programs under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act made over 740,000 street contacts to youth in 2007, but only seven percent (a little over 52,000) received shelter or housing options. Over 6,800 youth were turned away and denied shelter and housing in 2007. A 2006 report on homeless youth by the Congressional Research Service noted "grantees serve only a fraction of the more than one million youth who run away or are homeless."
- An untold number of homeless people continue to reside in rural areas of the US but remain uncounted and largely unserved.

National nonprofit organizations and a host of state and local organizations have worked vigorously throughout the 21 years of the McKinney Act to end homelessness. The undersigned nonprofit organizations have developed various analyses and strategies to end homelessness, but have agreed on the following Five Fundamentals:

I. The McKinney-Vento programs should be reauthorized.

“McKinney-Vento” programs within the US Department of Housing and Urban Development provide approximately \$1.5 billion per year in shelter, services and supportive housing for people who are currently homeless. We believe that the HUD McKinney-Vento programs have helped very many homeless persons to survive, to improve their circumstances, and to escape homelessness.

Yet a number of systemic factors result in a constant flood of newly homeless persons replacing those whose status has improved. Mass homelessness is still an emergency.

Our national organizations agree that an explicit national commitment to meet the immediate needs of homeless persons must be expressed through HUD McKinney-Vento reauthorization, and that the Congress must appropriate sufficient resources for the purpose.

Likewise, the McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program must be reauthorized, and other targeted homeless programs must be reauthorized, including the Health Care for the Homeless Program, Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program, and the Programs for Assistance in the Transition from Homelessness (each originally part of the McKinney Act), the Treatment for Homeless Persons Program (in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration reauthorization) and the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. Pending legislation that includes the needs of homeless people in mainstream programs that serve the needs of poor people must be enacted, including the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, the Food Stamp Act, the Workforce Investment Act, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration titles of the Public Health Service Act.

We recall that the McKinney Act, at the time of its adoption in 1987, was viewed as only the first step in a national response to homelessness. This bi-partisan legislation providing emergency relief measures was to be followed by measures to prevent homelessness and by more systemic solutions to the problem. The remaining Fundamentals must be addressed in public policy to make good on that early promise of the McKinney Act.

II. The supply of affordable housing must be dramatically increased if homelessness is to be abated. Homelessness is at

root a housing problem, driven by the dire shortage of housing units that are affordable for very poor people. The historic withdrawal of federal support for the creation and operation of low-income housing that began in the early 1980s and continues today must be reversed if homelessness is to be ended.

III. Health care, education, and social services must be provided to all who need them. Debilitating health and social problems often precipitate and are aggravated by homelessness. Existing “safety net” systems are gravely inadequate for homeless people and for those at risk of homelessness; in most states, impoverished and homeless adults are not eligible for Medicaid. Comprehensive health insurance for everyone must be enacted as the equitable basis for financing necessary services, while targeted services for those with special needs and services linked with housing must also be supported. Children and youth need school stability and support if they are to acquire the skills needed to avoid poverty and homelessness as adults.

IV. Personal incomes must be sufficient to pay for the necessities of life. Individuals’ responsibility to care for themselves – including paying for housing, health care and other services – can only be fulfilled if their incomes are adequate. People who are able to work should be paid a living wage; that is not now the case for most homeless people who work. People who are disabled and cannot work should receive public support at living wage levels.

V. Discrimination against homeless persons must be prevented. Public systems including education, child welfare, criminal justice, health care and others must not deny services on the basis of one’s housing status. Homeless persons’ civil rights to vote, to frequent public places, to utilize public facilities, and to enjoy equal protection of the law must be supported and advanced.

We recognize that much remains to be done to relieve the suffering and financial costs of homelessness. We believe that a renewed, concerted effort to eradicate mass homelessness is required by our commitment to basic human rights and by our responsibilities to our neighbors. We call on the governments that represent and act for us all to implement these fundamental principles, and we pledge our own diligence to these ends.

ENDORSED BY:

AIDS Housing of Washington
The AIDS Institute
Catholic Charities USA
Catholic Health Association of the United States
Catholic Health East
Coalition on Human Needs
Corporation for Supportive Housing
Covenant House International
Family Promise
Give US Your Poor
The Institute on Homelessness and Trauma
Lutheran Services in America
Mercy Housing, Inc.
National AIDS Housing Coalition
National Alliance to End Homelessness
National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth
National Association of Community Health Centers
National Center on Family Homelessness
National Coalition for Homeless Veterans
National Coalition for the Homeless
National Health Care for the Homeless Council
National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty
National Low Income Housing Coalition
National Network for Youth
National Policy and Advocacy Council on Homelessness
National WIC Association
Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues
USAction
Volunteers of America