



HOMELESSNESS & “FUNCTIONAL ZERO:” A CRITIQUE

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“Functional zero: At any point in time, the number of people experiencing sheltered or unsheltered homelessness will be no greater than the current monthly housing placement rate for people experiencing homelessness.”

-- Community Solutions

*“If you can’t explain it to a six year old,
you don’t understand it yourself”*

- - Albert Einstein

For years homeless advocates have argued about the definition of homelessness and how inclusive or limited it should be. This is not an esoteric exercise, since the answer drives federal resources.

Sadly, some researchers, consultants and advocates convinced Congress years ago to a much more limited definition of homelessness along with focusing resources first on the chronically homeless, with veterans, families and youth all next in line. This was done of the fallacious argument that once we ended chronic homelessness, we could then devote resources to ending it for the next sub-population. This did not happen and hundreds of thousands of people experiencing homelessness have remained invisible to our leaders at all levels.

*“When people are invisible, you can’t find a solution
because you don’t see them”*

- - Marc Uhry, Fondation Abbe Pierre

Ten year plans to end homelessness are in their 2nd decade or abandoned altogether.

Rather than focus on the systemic and structural systems and policies that have created three decades of mass homelessness – beginning with President Reagan devastating the federal affordable housing budget by 75% in 1980; the continuing dismantling of local, state and federal housing, social services, health and mental health budgets; discharge policies from prisons, jails, hospital and foster care that routinely discharge people to the streets and a minimum wage that keeps people shackled to poverty – we now seek to arrest and define our way out of homelessness.

Criminalization of homelessness:

Despite the admonition by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness [USICH] to communities to move away from trying to “arrest their way out of homelessness,” the number of anti-homeless ordinances in the nation has proliferated. For example, the Sacramento city has 11 municipal codes that criminalize people experiencing homeless – five for standing, sitting and resting in public places; five for camping in public places and three that criminalize begging or panhandling.

Prisons and jails have become the housing for people experiencing homelessness, especially people of color and those with mental health issues.

Functional zero:

Couple this with the newest trend to define our way out of homelessness.

Community Solutions has created the term “functional zero” which took them three pages of definitional “metrics” to operationalize. *What would Einstein say?*

Basically, a community can still have 10,000 homeless people, for example, but if that community can say the number of people entering homelessness is equal to the number exiting- they have reached “functional zero” --- forget the 10,000 languishing on the streets and in shelters.

This term is harmful and counter-productive to addressing the myriad of reasons why people become homeless and is dismissive of the systemic reasons why people become homeless.

In no other walk of life do we use the term “functional zero”- to end hunger; ending domestic violence; ending gun violence? Ending discrimination? In no other walk of life do we address a crisis by redefining it and settling on homeostasis as the new reality.

It is harmful because when politicians and community members hear “zero”- they hear we have ended homelessness – not what Community Solutions has defined it to mean. Then when it is time to allocate scarce public resources it would not be unreasonable for the public and/or elected officials to argue we don’t need as many resources for homelessness because we have solved it! Yet we know nothing could be further from the truth.

We have entered into a new era of becoming more sophisticated about managing homelessness – creating a new way to define status quo – however we rapidly move the same number of people entering homelessness as who exit.

Salt Lake City, Houston, New Orleans and Phoenix: These four cities have become the poster cities for “functional zero” in ending homelessness – which make great headlines and sound bites. But, look at the numbers and what they really meant was ending veteran homelessness Oopps Not really ... chronic veteran homelessness.... And they haven’t even done that.

Take a hard look at the numbers and trends that each of these four cities report to HUD annually [Source: Homeless Point in Time Count and Housing Inventory Count, 2012, 2013 and 2014].

Trends in the four “functional zero” cities: 2012 – 2014:

- Total number of homeless veterans in the four cities in 2014 was 1,392;
- Salt Lake City: the number of homeless veterans increased from 247 [2013] to 275 [2014];
- Total number of homeless people in 2014 was 15,357

- The number of total homeless people increased in Salt Lake City from 2,123 [2013] to 2,150 [2014] and in Phoenix from 5,889 [2013] to 5,918 [2014];
- The total number of permanent supportive housing [PSH] units in the four cities in 2014 was 8,831 or 57.5% of the total number of homeless people;
- The total number of PSH units in New Orleans decreased from 2,670 [2013] to 2,464 [2014].

Clearly none of these cities can legitimately claim they have ended veteran homelessness, yet they have been successful at creating the new urban myth that if we just do what these cities have done we can end homelessness as well.

USICH: Federal agencies that belong to USICH have recently moved away from using the “functional zero” terminology and adopted the new “operational definition of ending homelessness” contained in USICH’s recently released amended federal homelessness plan *Opening Doors*:

An end to homelessness means that every community will have a systematic response in place that ensures homelessness is prevented whenever possible or is otherwise a rare, brief, and non-recurring experience.

This “new” definition of ending homelessness essentially is a retooled “functional zero” definition dressed in new terms. Of course we want a rapid and systematic response to preventing homelessness. However, the new paradigm fails to address how we get to that point in the first place. What about the people who are currently experiencing homelessness?

Tragically for people experiencing homelessness, USICH has opted to size the definition of ending homelessness, based on limited existing federal resources rather than right size the resources to fit the homeless crisis in this nation.

Zero means zero:

While SRCEH supports a “rapid-same-day” response to homelessness, we refuse to abdicate to arresting and defining our way out of homelessness. Yet, a new report by HUD, *Family Options Study*, has shown that the rapid rehousing approach is not nearly as effective as a housing voucher strategy.

SRCEH remains committed to galvanizing the political and community will that “zero” truly means ending and preventing homelessness in our community.

No definitional gimmicks...

No smoke

No mirrors.

As a community we first must stop criminalizing people experiencing homelessness and focus on creating enough affordable housing, social services, health and mental health care and living wage jobs and income that we end and prevent homelessness.

We can end and prevent homelessness if we are intentional about moving beyond sound-bite jargon and squarely address the homeless crisis as a social justice issue and support housing and health care as basic human rights.