

Homelessness catches the attention of Congress

People who have lost their homes in the current mortgage foreclosure crisis have become new faces among the homeless in New Jersey. With the national economy in a downward spiral, and unemployment rates rising, the ranks of homeless people are likely to increase, perhaps dramatically.

For many years now thousands of people have been struggling to find or maintain safe, decent shelter. The estimated 35,000 homeless people in New Jersey include a large portion of the workforce living on very low wages. Military veterans, children, people struggling with mental illnesses, and long term victims of failing government programs are also among those experiencing homelessness. As always, the onset of winter weather places the health and safety of this population at severe risk.

The New Jersey Advocacy Network to End Homelessness is committed to keeping the issue of homelessness in front of leaders in government. In October, the Network released its first "Congressional Report Card", grading New Jersey's U.S. Senators and Members of Congress on legislation that would help people who face homelessness.

Thankfully, New Jersey has competent and compassionate people in Congress attentive to the issues and willing to support needed legislation and reforms. Our survey of voting records shows that all but one of the 15 members of New Jersey's congressional delegation ranked as "supportive" on key legislation addressing homelessness. Republicans and Democrats in the delegation have been positive, active and responsive. Both U.S. Senators and 6 of our Congressmen ranked "very supportive". Only Congressman Scott Garrett was ranked "not supportive".

Media coverage of the Congressional Report Card brought public attention to the issue and also generated considerable interest among New Jersey's legislators. As soon as the report card was publicized, the Network began to hear from several members of Congress. Even those ranked supportive for their positive records wanted to know what they could do to be even more helpful in upcoming congressional actions. Clearly, New Jersey's representatives in Congress are very serious about responding to homelessness.

It is evident that elected officials would gladly do more about homelessness if they heard from people in their district who care about it. Many legislators expressed a desire to hear from people who know about the realities of homelessness on a local level. Several Congressmen said that they would have joined particular legislative initiatives if people in their Districts had simply asked them to do so.

There are hundreds of formal and informal groups throughout New Jersey that provide direct help, support and shelter to people who are homeless. There are thousands of people statewide who volunteer in feeding and housing homeless families and individuals. Thousands more express deep concern when they see homeless people

living on the streets of virtually every town and neighborhood in the state. It is important for those who care about homelessness to take a step beyond compassion and direct service, and communicate with those who serve us in Congress. There is openness among our elected leaders and they want to do what is right for those facing the most serious needs for shelter.

Those who know personally about the devastating effects of homelessness can help these legislators to continue to act with boldness. Write or call their offices and thank them for their support. When you know of an initiative in Congress that will help homeless people, urge your member of Congress and our Senators to stand behind it. When the painful reality of homelessness moves you, you can let your elected officials know you want things to change.

The New Jersey Advocacy Network to End Homelessness finds the remarkable response of New Jersey's congressional delegation very encouraging. We deeply appreciate being reminded that elected leaders do their best when the public communicates their thoughts to their representatives in Government. As an advocacy Network, we will increase our efforts to keep New Jersey's congressional delegation informed of key votes and initiatives that seek to prevent and end homelessness. We urge the public to join us in speaking out on this serious and challenging issue.

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(To learn more about homelessness and to view our Congressional Report Card, visit our web site at: www.endinghomelessnessinnj.org)