

## **Ending the Crisis of Homelessness in America Background for Recommendations to President-Elect Obama**

### **1. Commit to End Homelessness—Now.**

**Background:** Solutions to homelessness exist and thousands of programs are implementing them across the country, but these groups do not have the resources to bring them to the scale needed to solve the problem. Further, many state and local governments have created plans to end homelessness in their communities, but they are hampered by the lack of federal support. While President Bush made a commitment, albeit limited, to end some forms of homelessness, federal support was not forthcoming. Public opinion surveys consistently show that the American people favor government action to end homelessness, and would pay higher taxes to fund it. Coordinated federal action, funding and leadership are needed, and White House leadership is essential to mobilizing the political will to end the crisis.

**Recommendation:** During the first year of your Administration, hold a White House Conference on Homelessness at which a federal, interagency plan to end homelessness in the United States is presented. The plan should have concrete goals and timelines.

### **2. Increase the Supply of Affordable Housing**

**Background:** Federal funding for affordable housing has been slashed over the past 30 years; in the private market, gentrification has replaced inexpensive housing with luxury residential or commercial property, without provision for those displaced. Currently, in no U.S. county can a minimum wage worker afford a one-bedroom apartment, according to federal affordability guidelines. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), approximately 5.99 million low-income households had worst case housing needs in 2005, the most recent year for which data is available; that number does not include persons who were homeless or who were living doubled up. Even emergency shelter is insufficient: according to the most recent data from HUD, approximately 280,000 persons were unsheltered on a single night in 2007.

Subpopulations of homeless and at risk people have particular needs. Homeless veterans, both men *and* women, account for 30% of the adult homeless population, and the numbers threaten to rise as a result of inadequate support for those returning from the current Gulf wars. For women, domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness, but there is a severe shortage of housing for women fleeing abuse. Unaccompanied youth also face a shortage of housing options – in 2007, programs funded by the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act made street contacts with over 740,000 youths, but only 7% received shelter or housing options. Additionally, many homeless persons have disabilities or suffer from addictions and need permanent, supportive housing. For example, access to affordable housing is critical for persons with HIV/AIDS – a 15-year longitudinal study by Columbia University found housing to be one of the primary needs for persons living with HIV/AIDS, and housing with supportive services provided a critical pathway to HIV care and treatment.

**Recommendation:** Fund at least 150,000 new housing vouchers each year to help address the critical shortage of rental housing affordable to people with extremely low incomes who are homeless or at risk of homelessness; create and sustain 90,000 additional units of permanent supportive housing; add 20,000 new HUD-VASH vouchers and 40,000 new units of permanent supportive housing for veterans who are homeless or at risk by enacting and fully funding the Homes for Heroes bill you introduced; and fully fund the housing programs created by the Violence Against Women Act, sponsored by Vice-President Elect Biden. Additionally, quickly promulgate regulations for the National Housing Trust Fund and work to increase Trust Fund funding to \$5 billion. Protect homeless families by providing 19,000 housing vouchers under the Family Unification Program. Lastly, prevent low-income people from becoming homeless as a result of the current foreclosure crisis by immediately providing \$575 million to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to use to assist tenants displaced by foreclosure.

### **3. Ensure Adequate Incomes**

**Background:** Approximately 44% of the adult homeless population has performed some type of work for pay in any given month, yet most do not make enough to afford housing. Many more homeless persons may be unable to work due to disabling conditions – some 31% of homeless adults experience mental illness, addiction or both in a year; and approximately 45% suffer from chronic health conditions, such as asthma, diabetes, cancer, or lost limbs. Yet, while many are eligible for disability benefits under the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Income (SSDI) programs, only 11% receive SSI and only 8% receive SSDI benefits.

**Recommendation:** Ensure that every American has an annual income—whether through wages, public income assistance, tax credits, or a combination thereof—sufficient to obtain and maintain permanent housing that costs no more than 30 percent of the household’s income.

### **4. Expand Access to Health Services**

**Background:** Homeless people suffer from multiple health problems at a rate far higher than the general U.S. population, yet 55% have no medical insurance; only 30% receive Medicaid, and only 7% receive medical care from the Department of Veterans Affairs. Once people become homeless, they have shorter life spans than housed persons, and are three or four times more likely to die prematurely due at least in part to untreated medical problems. When homeless persons are hospitalized, they remain in the hospital longer than housed persons with similar ailments. Mental health and substance abuse disorders are also common – as many as 74% of homeless adults have experienced a mental health, alcohol, or drug problem within the past year. Without access to treatment, these issues may both prolong and be exacerbated by homelessness.

**Recommendation:** Ensure that your health care plan guarantees access and eliminates all financial barriers to comprehensive health services – including mental health services – for all Americans, and enact Medicaid policies that allow reimbursement for effective services that help reduce the use of more costly emergency and hospital care.

## **5. Ensure Access to Education for Homeless Children and Youth**

**Background:** School is a place of safety, structure, and opportunity. Yet homeless children and youth face unique barriers to education. These barriers include being unable to meet enrollment requirements, high residential mobility, lack of transportation, lack of school supplies and clothing, and poor health, fatigue, and hunger. When these barriers are not addressed, homeless children and youth often are unable to attend, or even enroll in, school, which prevents them from obtaining the education that is guaranteed under law and is their best hope of escaping poverty as adults. The McKinney-Vento Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program was created specifically to remove the barriers to education, including early childhood education, caused by homelessness. It was amended most recently in Title X, Part C, of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

**Recommendation:** By 2010, strengthen educational access and stability for homeless children and youth, including young children and unaccompanied youth, through the reauthorization and the full funding of the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Act.

## **6. Protect Homeless People from Discrimination**

**Background:** Homeless persons encounter many challenges not faced by housed persons when trying to exercise basic civil rights. Homeless persons seeking to vote or register to vote may face obstacles because of their inability to prove residency or because they lack the necessary identification documents such as a photo ID. The lack of ID also may cause them to be denied access to government buildings, such as Social Security offices, even when the purpose of their visit is to obtain replacement identification documents.

City ordinances frequently serve as a tool for criminalizing homelessness – prohibiting persons from engaging in necessary, life-sustaining activities in public spaces even when those persons have nowhere else to go. Furthermore, some cities have taken the criminalization of homelessness a step further, by prohibiting public feeding of groups of homeless persons or limiting feeding to certain parts of the city.

**Recommendation:** 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.