

January 5, 2015

Tackling Individual Homelessness

Recommendations to the New Mayor and DC Council

Summary

Recently, the District has made important strides in tackling homelessness among single adults, but Mayor Bowser and the DC Council need to take further steps to fully meet the needs of homeless residents. The number of homeless individuals has increased in DC since 2007, a time when homelessness fell nationally.¹ Other jurisdictions have reduced individual homelessness by focusing on housing the chronically homeless – those who have been homeless for a year or more – and by making it easier for homeless residents to get the services and housing they need. The District can see similar decreases if it fully commits to initiatives already underway.

We recommend Mayor Bowser take the following steps to tackle individual homelessness:

- ❖ ***Jumpstart efforts to end chronic homelessness by placing 50 veterans into permanent supportive housing (PSH) in the first 100 days.*** The District has joined the Zero 2016 campaign, a national network of communities committed to ending chronic homelessness by 2016. The focus is on residents who have been homeless for more than one year or had multiple bouts of homelessness and suffer from life-threatening health conditions and/or severe mental illness. PSH ends chronic homelessness, improves the health of homeless residents and is cost effective by reducing use of expensive crisis-related services like emergency rooms and jail.² Denver, for example, found that approximately half of PSH residents had improved their health and mental health status, and the program led to a 72 percent decline in emergency-related costs.³

¹ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). *The 2014 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR)*. <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/AHAR-2014-Part1.pdf>
Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments. *Results and Analysis from the 2014 Point-in-Time Count of Homeless Persons in the Metropolitan Washington Region*.

<http://www.mwcog.org/uploads/pub-documents/ql5bX1820140714163555.pdf>
Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments. *Homeless Enumeration for the Washington Metropolitan Region 2007*.
<http://www.mwcog.org/uploads/pub-documents/z1hbWg20070613141807.pdf>

² USICH. *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*. 2010.

<http://www.epaperflip.com/aglaia/viewer.aspx?docid=1dc1e97f82884912a8932a3502c37c02>

³ Colorado Coalition for the Homeless. *Denver Housing First Collaborative: Cost Benefit Analysis and Program Outcomes Report*. 2006. <http://shnny.org/research/denver-housing-first-collaborative/>

The District can jumpstart efforts to end chronic homelessness by placing 50 chronically homeless veterans into PSH in the first 100 days. The fiscal year (FY) 2015 budget includes funding to end chronic homelessness among veterans, but only a small amount of this funding has been allocated. Housing 50 veterans in the first 100 days would be a great start on this effort.

- ❖ ***Fund the new “Coordinated Entry” System to help homeless residents get help quickly and easily.*** Until recently, if a DC resident became homeless, it was unclear where to go to get the housing and services needed to exit homelessness. Residents had to go from organization to organization to find out if they had housing openings. In addition, people who needed housing the most often never got it because the search process was long and complicated. The District implemented a Coordinated Entry System in 2014 so organizations now use a common assessment and referral process for housing and services. This system triages people to prioritize those who need housing the most and determines what type of housing is best for each person. This makes it easy to match homeless residents with help, even if the first place they visit has no openings or is not the best setting for that person. The FY 2015 budget includes \$250,000 for staff to manage this system, but the funding may be held back due to the city’s financial problems. Yet this low-cost effort would greatly improve the efficiency of homeless services and should be implemented.
- ❖ ***Support the Interagency Council on Homelessness Strategic Plan and provide needed funding.*** The Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH) is creating a Strategic Plan to tackle homelessness over the next five years. The plan will identify the number and type of housing assistance needed for homeless families, individuals, and youth, and it will set standards so that homeless residents receive the same services regardless of where they go for help. This plan will require ending low-performing and low-priority programs, so that money can be shifted to higher-priority programs. Beyond that, the District will need to invest additional local funds to implement the plan and should find ways to get new federal funding, for example, using Medicaid to fund supportive services provided through permanent supportive housing (PSH).
- ❖ ***Staff the Interagency Council on Homelessness Director and give the position budget authority.*** The District took an important step last year to improve the planning and coordination of homeless services across multiple agencies by creating a new position to direct the work of the Interagency Council on Homelessness. But the director’s office has no additional staff, limiting its effectiveness. Mayor Bowser and the Council should expand this office to include sufficient staff to implement its responsibilities. In addition, the office of the ICH director has no direct authority over how money devoted to homelessness in the DC budget is spent. The District could improve the delivery of homeless services by giving the Interagency Council on Homelessness authority over funds that are needed to carry out the Strategic Plan.
- ❖ ***Launch a review of the homeless services system.*** It is difficult to get information on how homeless service funds are spent or who is responsible for particular homeless services functions because the District contracts out most of its homeless services to the Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness (TCP), who then subcontracts with direct

service providers. A thorough review of this structure would clarify roles and promote greater transparency while also making it possible to identify potential inefficiencies.