

Moving Toward Prevention Together: A New Federal Vision for Ending Homelessness

By HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan, the Chair of the Interagency Council on Homelessness

For a quarter century, we've known that ending homelessness is bigger than any one agency or level of government – that while every homeless individual or family need affordable housing, for some, it's not enough. Resolving the problems at the root of homelessness will require cross-agency work at the federal level – with the Interagency Council on Homelessness leading the charge.

To be sure, this work will be challenging. But President Obama has made it clear that he expects us all to use this moment as an opportunity – an opportunity for unprecedented collaboration and innovation to address tough challenges like homelessness. And the need is clear; even as we see most major housing indicators improving in part due to the Administration's comprehensive approach to stabilizing the housing market, we know that no one is feeling the force of this economic crisis more powerfully than those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

The approximately 650,000 men, women and children who are homeless on any given night in America and the more than 1.6 million people who experience homelessness at some point every year are as diverse as America itself. With a 56 percent increase in rural and suburban family homelessness, we see that homelessness is not simply an urban problem, but one every kind of community struggles with. But there is one thing that everyone who is homeless shares in common: a lack of housing they can afford.

That's why tackling this challenge head on starts with getting the Federal government back in the business of affordable rental housing.

As Secretary of HUD, you only need look at the \$14 billion my agency is investing in our communities through the Recovery Act to know that we are – from our \$2 billion investment in full funding of Project-Based Section 8 to our \$2.25 billion injection of HOME funding to stabilize affordable housing projects financed by the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit. The President's budget builds on these investments – increasing funding for the Housing Choice Voucher program by \$1.8 billion and capitalizing the National Housing Trust Fund.

During the early 1980s, a part of our response to the rapid growth in homelessness was to build emergency shelters. But today, our challenge is to do everything in our power to make sure families spend as little time as possible in those shelters. That is why our FY 2010 budget includes a \$117 million increase, to nearly \$1.8 billion in McKinney-Vento homeless assistance grants – the linchpin of the federal response to homelessness. And that's exactly why the \$1.5 billion we dedicated in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to the Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program or HPRP is so important – the funds I

saw firsthand working as a volunteer at a Catholic Charities Homeless Prevention Call Center in Chicago this summer.

As important as these efforts are, we need to make tackling homelessness a shared responsibility across the Federal government. That's why as the chair of ICH, I am working closely with our new executive director, Barbara Poppe, to develop and implement a federal strategy to prevent and end homelessness.

With veterans comprising 15 percent of America's homeless population, more homeless Vietnam-era veterans today than troops who died during the war itself, and some of the 1.6 million Americans who deployed to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan already living on our streets, our first job will be to build on and strengthen existing partnerships such as HUD-VASH, which addresses the housing and service needs of homeless veterans.

At the same time, we need to capitalize on the remarkable progress we've made in developing new approaches to chronic homelessness. By improving the "technology" of combining housing and supportive services, we've "moved the needle" on chronic homelessness over the last decade, reducing the number of chronically ill, long-term homeless by nearly a third. Given what we now know about how "housing plus services" can improve health outcomes at the same time they save money for the taxpayer, Secretary Sebelius and I are committed to linking HUD's housing work with HHS programs and have each designated senior staff who, with input from nearly 100 staff from both agencies, have already brought forward an initial set of recommendations for collaborative efforts which are being implemented.

This work proved that we can house anyone. Our job now is to house everyone – to prevent and end homelessness. We must bring as many partners as possible to the table, including those outside of government who are responsible in many ways for the innovations that enabled us to shift our focus in the Recovery Act toward prevention and rapid re-housing. And our goal is clear: to provide everyone—from the most capable to the most vulnerable—the opportunity to reach their full potential.

That's what our partnership is about – and if we are going to face down this housing crisis, it's the direction we must forge in the months ahead.