

# Fact Sheet

## *Questions and Answers on Homelessness Policy and Research*

---

### What Can We Do About Homelessness?

Updated January 2010

Today, approximately 671,859 people experience homelessness on any given night in the United States. An estimated 1.5 million people use the shelter system in the course of a year.<sup>1</sup>

These numbers include people of all backgrounds. Families with children, single adults, elderly individuals, veterans, and youth all experience homelessness. This national problem exists in rural areas, small towns, suburban neighborhoods, and big cities.

Though seemingly straightforward, examining homelessness often requires an understanding of many other issues. Substance use, disability, mental health, and physical health are often topics included in discussions about homelessness. Similarly, affordable housing, social services, and employment are critical elements to both understanding and solving homelessness. Addressing homelessness effectively requires an appreciation of the complexity of the problem.

Though the problem seems insurmountable, solutions do exist. Successful strategies – at the community, state, and national level – tend to focus on permanent supportive housing, rapid re-housing, prevention, and a multi-system approach to care.

### What is Being Done Nationally and Locally?

In 2000, the National Alliance to End Homelessness released [\*A Plan, Not a Dream: How to End Homelessness in Ten Years\*](#), which outlined key strategies drawn from research and innovative programs from across the country. This plan was endorsed by President Clinton and his Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)<sup>2</sup>; in fact, the US Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) challenged 100 cities to create plans to end homelessness. To date, more than 234 communities have completed plans. Most plans focus on ending homelessness among all populations—chronic, families, youth, veterans, and the elderly.<sup>3</sup> These efforts have started to show results: cities and counties across the country have begun to see reductions in homelessness:

- Between 2005 and 2008, chronic homelessness in Wichita/Sedgwick County (KS) decreased by 61 percent.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Sermons, M William and Meghan Henry. 2007. Homelessness Counts: Changes in Homelessness from 2005 to 2007. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). 2003. Affordable Housing Needs: A Report to Congress on the Significant Need for Housing. Washington, D.C. Office of Policy Development and Research.”

<sup>3</sup> Moriarty, Shannon. 2009. A Shifting Focus: What’s New in Community Plans to End Homelessness? Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

<sup>4</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2009. Community Snapshot: Wichita, KS. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

- From 2006 to 2008, Norfolk (VA) reduced homelessness by 25 percent.<sup>5</sup>
- From 2005 to 2007, homelessness among families in Chicago (IL) decreased by 23 percent.<sup>6</sup>
- The number of families in shelter in Westchester County (NY) declined by 57 percent.<sup>7</sup>
- From 2005 to 2008, chronic homelessness declined by 50 percent in Quincy (MA).<sup>8</sup>

In 2009, President Barack Obama created the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP), a \$1.5 billion program funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). This new federal program represents a significant change in the way the country has approached homelessness – moving from an emphasis on shelter and soup kitchens, which manage the problem of homelessness, toward rapid re-housing and prevention strategies, which can help end it. The program is expected to assist 600,000 people. Recent reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Programs incorporate this new approach as well.

## What Further Action is Needed?

While much is being done, further federal, state, and local action is needed to end homelessness. The federal government needs to significantly expand affordable housing programs, particularly the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program. Once back in housing, links to mainstream services — including mental health counseling, child development services, and employment training — are important for building strong households that overcome the risk of homelessness. Other federal programs, including child care subsidies, child support enforcement, TANF assistance, Medicaid, and the Earned Income Tax Credit, also play key roles in ending and preventing homelessness. In summary, federal homeless assistance programs must be funded at levels sufficient to address need.

## About the National Alliance to End Homelessness

The National Alliance to End Homelessness is a nonpartisan, mission-driven organization committed to preventing and ending homelessness in the United States. The Alliance is a leading voice on the issue of homelessness. The Alliance analyzes policy and develops pragmatic, cost-effective policy solutions. We work collaboratively with the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to build state and local capacity, leading to stronger programs and policies that help communities achieve their goals of ending homelessness. We provide data and research to policymakers and elected officials in order to inform policy debates and educate the public and opinion leaders nationwide.

---

*The National Alliance to End Homelessness' Fact Sheets answer common and frequently asked questions about homelessness policy and research. This series draws on the best expertise, data, and*

---

<sup>5</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2008. Community Snapshot: Norfolk, VA. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

<sup>6</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2008. Community Snapshot: Chicago. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

<sup>7</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2007. Community Snapshot: Westchester Count, NY. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness

<sup>8</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2009. Community Snapshot: Quincy, MA. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness

*research available. For more information about homelessness, please visit*  
[www.endhomelessness.org](http://www.endhomelessness.org)