

Nan Roman's Keynote Address
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This is a very important year for us on the issue of family homelessness. There is a new paradigm gaining acceptance around the approach to the problem, and this paradigm has some proven success. But we need to study it, refine it, and implement it across the board. I want to talk to you today about this paradigm and what I think we are learning; and about how we can use it in the coming year to pursue our goal of ending family homelessness.

The principles of this new paradigm begin with a fervent conviction that housing is the central solution to homelessness, but that very poor families also must have access to services and the means to improve their happiness and well being. Second is a conviction that the desires of the families must drive the interventions that are designed to help them. Third is a commitment to ensure the health and well being of children, coupled with an understanding that this is closely linked to both the health and well being of their parents and to the ultimate security found in the normalcy of having one's own place to live. The final principle is a belief that we are obligated to both do the absolute best that we can with the resources we have, and at the same time to advocate for more resources.

The elements of this new paradigm are: more focus on prevention and diversion; the intention to rapidly re-house as many families as possible; and a rigorous targeting of services according to need.

There is also a framework in which this paradigm shift can take place. First, that framework consists of a firm commitment to use research and data. Such information will help us make absolutely certain that the interventions that we fund and undertake – and subject homeless families to – work, are efficient, and end their homelessness. Further we can use the data to monitor and measure our progress in reducing the number of homeless families and ensuring that those who leave our system do not return. The second part of the framework is an effort to go to scale with solutions.

Let me discuss in a little more detail this new paradigm around family homelessness. The principles I think are fairly self-explanatory.

Of course, people need much more than housing to achieve their full potential, as individuals and as families. But families that are housed are not homeless, and that is the job that we have set for ourselves. Having said that, both to stay housed, and to do well in life, families need much more than just a place to live. Maybe we cannot provide a lifetime's worth of education, health care, counseling, training, treatment, and children's services while they are homeless. But we can do what is possible to stabilize them while they are with us in the homeless system, and then set them off on a good course as they leave by providing them or linking them with strong local services while they are in housing.

On the issue of consumer orientation, in addition to all the ethical and moral reasons why we should let this drive our actions, interventions will simply work better if the families want and like them. If our services work, people will want them. If we have to threaten them with expulsion from the program to get them to use the services, then those services probably are not going to help that much anyway. Taking a consumer approach is also consistent with the emerging research on the impact of trauma on homeless families, and on best practices in remediating its effects.

While child well being is linked to parent well being, the two should not be conflated. Children are resilient and will rebound from the damages of a homeless experience. But they may also be affected during key developmental moments, and these cannot be re-captured. We need to pay full attention to the needs of children while they are homeless, including their developmental needs. And most fundamentally, we need to get them back into stable housing quickly. According to Sheridan Bartlett from the City University of New York in a paper on housing's impact on children, "Children's developing sense of emotional security and trust in the world is rooted not only in their relationships with other people, but in the security, familiarity and predictability of their physical environment. Children need to live in a place that will not be taken away next month."

Finally, the issue of resources is a key and a controversial one. Our resources to help homeless families are limited. We have to make sure that we use them wisely, most importantly because this is our bond and trust with the homeless families. We must know that every dime we are spending is being spent in the smartest and most effective way possible. Of course we owe this to our committed funders, public and private, and to our own integrity as well.

On a more practical level, it has become obvious to me that justice and compassion go only so far in the arena of the public's interest. There is an increasing national momentum around the ability of public and private funding to work effectively to solve problems. We must be part of that. Having said that, of course, a key part of our responsibility as those entrusted to help homeless families is to try to change the playing field and get more resources.

So given this set of principles, what are the new strategies that are helping communities make a difference on homelessness?

The first is prevention and diversion. Given all the debilitating results of a homeless experience and the cost of allowing people to become homeless, preventing homelessness is clearly a preferred strategy.

There are two approaches to prevention. The first is to encourage mainstream systems like TANF or child welfare to more strongly attend to families' housing needs so that they do not become homeless in the first place. I was just in Australia, where I found that there was little family homelessness, as we would define it. The reason is, first, because families that need it get an income supplement and housing assistance. Second, if a child is involved, as one Australian colleague put it, everyone swoops down to help – everyone being the mainstream public systems. So clearly the major method of prevention is via the mainstream systems, and it is remarkably effective.

In our nation, things do not work quite like that. We do not have an across the board safety net that prevents family homelessness. While we are working on that, we have to do more to ensure that child welfare and welfare systems are more attentive to the housing needs of the families they serve. This is the basis of longer term solutions to family homelessness.

Another method of prevention is emergency prevention such as rent assistance and eviction prevention. These are used very effectively by many communities to divert people who are having what is essentially a housing crisis away from the homelessness system. I often remember a woman who came up to me after a meeting in Berkeley. She said she was a retired social worker and that in the 60s and 70s, when a family had a housing crisis, her job was to find them another place to live. Now, if a family has a housing crisis, the social worker will refer them to the homeless shelter. Obviously, the shortage of affordable housing has caused this change, but our first line of defense should still be to keep families in housing.

A key issue in prevention and diversion is determining which families that are having a housing crisis are likely to become homeless. In Australia, this does not matter – they believe it is right to support all families. Here, however, there is no such commitment. We have limited resources to assist people, and while many millions of families have housing crises every year, only a small fraction of these families become homeless. That is the good news. The bad news is that we have fairly limited knowledge of how to identify those who are likely to become homeless so that we can target prevention assistance effectively. It seems rather that there are many poor families with housing issues who live on the brink of homelessness. For the most part those families that emerge from this pool and fall into homelessness are those who experience some crisis event. This crisis cannot be predicted, and the families have no real characteristics that set them apart. The family that becomes homeless is the one that loses the job, or who is staying with a sister whose house is foreclosed upon. There is no predicting which family that will be.

So how are communities addressing the challenges of prevention?

If they are doing prevention, they are increasingly trying to examine who, in their own system, is showing up at homeless programs. They are moving away from broadly targeted prevention efforts, such as a pool of funds for people below poverty who have an eviction notice, and bearing down more tightly on who actually enters their own system. Some communities are finding more success in diversion strategies. You know for sure that the family that is knocking on the shelter door is on the brink of homelessness, and diverting that family quickly into housing, which is often possible and fairly inexpensive, can be effective. Finally, some communities are finding that the families with the most acute needs and that have been homeless before are the ones that may need more intensive assistance. Exits from subsidized housing, extremely young children, mental illness and chronic substance abuse problems, and repeated incidences of homelessness are among the histories these families may present. Such families may be the targets for transitional housing or more intensive permanent housing assistance such as supportive housing.

A second and related key strategy of this new paradigm is the intention to return people to housing as quickly as possible. The basis of this strategy is that families will do best from a platform of stable, permanent housing. Children will do better in school; adults will do better with their education or job searches; treatment regimens will be more effective. The key to this strategy, and it is a controversial one, is the use of short term

or shallow subsidies. There is no question that long term subsidies would be preferred. Such subsidies end homelessness and give families the very best chance to succeed in all their goals for themselves. However, I know of no community which has an adequate supply of long term, Section 8-type subsidies to provide one to every homeless family. And yet, all families eventually leave the homelessness system, despite the fact that they do not have these subsidies. And only a very small percentage returns.

Strategically, the key to this approach is the fact that very few families who enter the homelessness system see any major change in their income: they enter poor, and they exit poor. While they get help getting stabilized, and they may get some benefits assistance and get connected with education, training, or employment programs, they have not become middle class – or even working class – while staying in shelter or transitional housing. In fact, the increase in the number of families who have some form of employment, nationally, goes only from 28% when they enter a transitional housing program to 43% when they exit it, and there is no indication of significant increases in income even for the increment that is newly employed. Even if they increase their income by say, 25%, 25% of an income that is only at 10% or 15% of AMI is still very low. If at all, they are only marginally more able to afford housing when they leave than when they came in.

The reason for this is not difficult to discern. For most of us, the process of increasing earning power is a lengthy one involving education and job experience. It is not something that can be done overnight, relatively speaking. 80% of homeless families spend less than one year in homeless programs and 60% spend less than six months. So even if the program were spectacularly able to increase incomes over time – for which there is little evidence – nevertheless the impact of the short stays is likely to make only a marginal difference.

So, the families that exit homelessness programs are not doing so with huge incomes, but they *are* leaving. We can help them to do that faster. As a result, it is not surprising that there are some indications that something short of a full-fledged subsidy can be effective for a large majority of homeless families. Communities like Washington, DC, Columbus, OH, and Minneapolis, MN have been successfully utilizing such subsidies to get families quickly back into housing and then connecting them with the services that they clearly need.

The Congress has recently appropriated \$25 million for a demonstration to test the

effectiveness of rapid re-housing strategies. HUD is administering the program, and hopefully they will be looking at which families it is effective for, and for which it does not work; how much housing assistance which families need; and what the service linkages need to be. Watch out for this demonstration in the upcoming Super NOFA. Similar data may come from other communities in the near future that are funding these efforts on their own. And, while we may have to utilize these more modest subsidies for the time being, we must continue to advocate strongly for a more robust and comprehensive safety net for families, including adequate, longer-term housing assistance.

Finally, another and a related key strategy is the rigorous targeting of services based upon need and proven impact. There is increasing evidence that the families in our system who receive the most resources are those with the fewest needs. I would not necessarily call this creaming. I think it has happened largely because programs do not have the services resources to provide professional mental health care, to address serious trauma issues, or to provide substance abuse treatment to those with more serious problems.

Accordingly, they are more likely to select those whom they *do* have the resources to help, and who they believe are most likely going to benefit from their services. The corollary to this, though, is that people with the highest needs do not get service assistance. They are either screened out of service-rich programs or get ejected from them for non-compliance with services, and tend therefore to bounce around within the homelessness system, or enter and exit homelessness repeatedly.

This is an inefficient way to approach our services resources. We need to ensure that our very scarce resources dollars are focused on ensuring that families end their homelessness. By targeting our resources better – providing fewer resources to lower need families and more services to higher need families – we have the hope of having fewer families spend shorter periods of time homeless.

As you can see, these principles and strategies are closely linked. They insist that we be guided by what our consumers want. They are about using our resources more efficiently and effectively. They demonstrate a laser-like intention to get people back into stable housing and connected to services that will ensure their well-being. They focus on minimizing long homeless stays and delivering services that are best received in the community.

Individual programs have their own missions and goals they set for themselves, and quite properly so. But if we are going to end family homelessness, another set of goals must be adopted at a community-wide level – goals around progressively reducing, and eventually ending, homelessness. While programs will work individually to assess and meet their own goals, this work must be brought together to achieve these community goals. This requires both data to measure progress and effectiveness, and the ability to go to scale.

Data is essential to learn what works, to ensure our efficiency, and to prove our effectiveness to others. Data and research are powerful tools to attract new resources and build political will. They will help us when compassion and the thirst for justice have reached their limit in compelling political action. And they ensure that we are doing the smartest work possible. Data and research are among the best friends we have.

Looking at our work as part of an effort to go to scale is also important. We have always tried to go to scale on things like shelter beds – if there are 500 families who need a place to stay every night, then there should be 500 beds available. We need to take the same approach to the issue of ending family homelessness, although it will be considerably more complicated. This means not only setting numerical goals that can be achieved, over time, for units of housing. It also means setting goals around prevention and diversion, length of stay, housing stability, and services. And it means that these goals will be for the community, covering all of the families who become homeless, from those with the most intensive needs to those with the least. It will be a challenge for individual programs to fit their own goals into these community-wide goals.

So this is a new paradigm around ending family homelessness. Communities that have adopted it, from Massachusetts to Columbus, from Portland to Minneapolis, from Washington DC to Denver, are seeing reductions in their numbers. We can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our homeless family system, and by doing so we will make life better for homeless families and we will reduce the number of homeless families.

But ending family homelessness will not be accomplished by improving the efficiency of the homeless system, alone. We must demand the same types of efficiency and effectiveness, and rigor and attention to research, data and best practices from our

mainstream systems. We must also demand, quite simply, that they do more.

We must make the case and insist that the lack of affordable housing is the crisis that is driving family homelessness and not some character flaw in millions of poor families.

We must make the case and insist that atrocious child welfare systems must stop feeding children into homelessness and refuse to accept that it is OK that the homeless system remediates this squandering of our youth.

We must make the case that mental health and substance abuse treatment are not luxuries but must be available to mothers and fathers and to their children, and that to fail to provide these is no cost savings, but in fact increases the cost to society and the public coffers, as well as to the very fabric of our society.

And this year is a wonderful time for us to be making these cases, for, to mirror the theme of current events, this is a time of change. For a certainty, things are going to change in Washington. No matter who wins the primaries, the nominations, and the White House, we will have a new president. This means a new Domestic Policy Council, a new HUD Secretary, a new HHS Secretary, and more. There's also going to be a new Congress, with new leaders, and a new agenda.

There is a change happening in the economy. There is the threat of a recession. Oil prices are trending up, raising the price of many of life's necessities. Food, heat, and the ride to work seem to get more expensive every day. The shift to a service economy and the increasing link between high levels of education and high incomes continues. State and city budgets are affected and many governments will start to cut services.

The housing market is changing, with the subprime crisis; the continuing loss of affordable housing; revitalization of cities in many places, and pushing of poor people to suburbs; and the lack of focus on rural areas.

So everyone is talking about change and change will certainly happen. It is up to us to make sure that the change is good. Change presents challenges, but more importantly opportunities. Innovators, visionaries and forward thinkers look at periods of change and see them as opportunities to make new things happen. As Charles Darwin said, "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change."

Our new paradigm around ending family homelessness is a path of change, and one that we can stand on. It holds the promise of engaging new people, including mayors and governors, philanthropy, and the business community. It holds the promise of generating new resources because it increases effectiveness and solves a problem. It holds the vision of new and better practice, with a shift to helping people get into housing; a stronger focus on consumer driven approaches; a better use of key strategies like prevention, rapid re-housing, and supportive housing.

If we are smart, we can harness this period of change to our own purposes. Will it be easy? Not at all. And it remains to be seen if we can turn our ship on family homelessness entirely. If, while not solving every problem, we can create a nation in which a family, while they may have a housing crisis, is quickly returned to housing and connected with support. But even if we do not succeed across the board, our nation and a lot of homeless people are better off for the effort.

As Robert F. Kennedy said, "Few will have the greatness to bend history itself; but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation." This is our calling, and this is the year of our challenge. We at the National Alliance to End Homelessness are honored to be part of this calling with you.