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Commentary: We Need Rental Assistance and Services, Not Punitive Policies, to End Homelessness

By Peggy Bailey

The Trump Administration seemingly intends to abandon strategies for housing services and rental assistance that have been proven to help reduce homelessness and connect people to the health and social services they need. Among other steps, it recently appointed a proponent of punitive and counterproductive policies to lead its homelessness agenda, and its proposal for addressing homelessness in Los Angeles seems to favor emphasizing criminalization and increased law enforcement over community-based health and social services. If proposals like this were implemented, it could result in unnecessarily detaining or arresting large numbers of people experiencing homelessness, confining them to shelters disconnected from community support services, and halting progress on declines in the number of people who successfully exit homelessness.

The Administration's shift in strategy ignores both the causes of and solutions to homelessness. Most people are homeless because they can't afford housing, so the best way to address the problem is to help them afford a place to live.¹ People experiencing homelessness can also have serious physical or mental health conditions or substance use disorders, but we have learned that, to address these challenges, most people first need stable housing to improve their health and thrive. The Administration should re-commit to interventions that work: well-funded rental assistance to close the gap between income and rent costs for those at risk of homelessness,² and programs that couple stable, affordable housing with community-based supports such as mental health and substance use recovery services for those who need it.³

For over 20 years the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has taken a "Housing First" approach that has reduced homelessness by helping people find safe, affordable

¹ National Alliance to End Homelessness, "Income," <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/what-causes-homelessness/incomequality/>.

² Anna Bailey, "Housing Vouchers Work: Vouchers the Best Tool to End Homelessness," CBPP, April 6, 2017, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/housing-vouchers-work-vouchers-the-best-tool-to-end-homelessness>.

³ Peggy Bailey, "Medicaid and Federal Grant Funding Can Improve Treatment and Housing Options for People with Substance Use Disorders," CBPP, August 2, 2018, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/health/medicaid-and-federal-grant-funding-can-improve-treatment-and-housing-options-for>.

housing and connecting them to support services. This approach — which does not require people to meet pre-conditions to qualify for housing assistance — is based on evidence showing that people experiencing homelessness face serious obstacles to successfully reducing drug or alcohol use, managing mental health, or saving money for upfront rent costs, such as security deposits, while living on the street. This strategy, along with investments in key rental assistance programs, has contributed to declines in homelessness among veterans and other populations in recent years.⁴ But more remains to be done, especially because some 3 out of 4 low-income households that pay more than 30 percent of their income on rent don't get the rental assistance they need due to limited federal funding, putting them at risk for housing instability, homelessness, and other hardships.⁵

The Trump Administration is taking steps in the wrong direction, supporting costly policies that keep people homeless longer, or worse, increase the number of people who experience homelessness overall. In December, the Administration appointed Robert Marbut as the new executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), which is charged with coordinating how the federal government deploys resources to combat homelessness. Marbut is a longstanding critic of the successful Housing First strategy and proponent of punitive measures such as denying access to showers, food, or shelter beds to those struggling with substance use or exhibiting symptoms of mental health conditions. Such punitive measures fail to recognize that denying people these basic needs can exacerbate behavioral health conditions,⁶ unlike Housing First strategies, which give people access to housing and community-based behavioral health services so they feel safe and get the help they need to manage their health conditions.

Another concerning step the Administration has taken is HUD Secretary Ben Carson's recent proposal asking Los Angeles to shift local policy and funding to support shelter construction and policing of people experiencing homelessness.⁷ While details of the plan are unclear, Carson offered the city access to federal property and unspecified federal resources for onsite services if it agreed to devote local law enforcement resources to address homelessness and build a centralized shelter on federal land, potentially diverting city resources away from strategies to permanently house people.

The plan raises concerns about wasting government resources and unnecessarily keeping people homeless for longer periods. Local law enforcement strategies might effectively criminalize homelessness by outlawing activities such as sleeping outside, sitting in public, living in cars, or panhandling, subjecting people to fines or jail time for not being able to afford a place to live. We know that criminalizing homelessness makes it harder for people to access housing. Public housing agencies and landlords typically screen out people for past involvement in the criminal justice

⁴ Ehren Dohler *et al.*, "Supportive Housing Helps Vulnerable People Live and Thrive in the Community," CBPP, May 31, 2016, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/housing/supportive-housing-helps-vulnerable-people-live-and-thrive-in-the-community>.

⁵ Peggy Bailey, "Housing and Health Partners Can Work Together to Close the Housing Affordability Gap," CBPP, January 17, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/housing/housing-and-health-partners-can-work-together-to-close-the-housing-affordability>.

⁶ Kriston Capps, "The Consultant Leading the White House Push Against Homelessness," CityLab, December 12, 2019, <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2019/12/trump-homeless-shelter-agency-robert-g-marbut-texas-housing/603280/>.

⁷ Letter from HUD Secretary Ben Carson to Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, January 9, 2020, <https://ca-times.brightspotcdn.com/87/b8/f83b45fc406ca88886bc3c4c74ff/final-response-package-20-00586.pdf>.

system.⁸ A person arrested for simply sleeping on a bench might have difficulty finding someone to rent to them because of the arrest, perpetuating their need to sleep outdoors and making another such arrest likely.

Moreover, significant investments in shelters and transitional housing⁹ would be a first step in the Administration's apparent move away from the longstanding approach of using homelessness and housing funding for rent subsidies and community-based services. Emergency shelters, which help people in crisis and protect them from the dangers of living outside, are a necessary component of every communities' homelessness response system. But they are a temporary solution. Communities must dedicate resources to long-term housing assistance and community support services, otherwise people will remain homeless longer than necessary. The Administration's proposal would provide no additional federal resources for these permanent solutions and likely would result in Los Angeles shifting funding out of these areas to finance shelters and law enforcement.

“Housing First” Ends Homelessness for People and Is Cost-Effective

When emergency or transitional housing alone failed to stem decades of rising homelessness, practitioners in the early 1990s, starting in New York City, began experimenting with investments in long-term rental assistance coupled with community-based support services targeted to people who had experienced homelessness for over a year or had several recent periods of homelessness.¹⁰ Programs that provided housing free from unproductive restrictions such as time limits and sobriety requirements were shown to be an effective long-term solution to homelessness, successfully housing people including those who had been without a home for years. State and local governments began to invest more in these programs, which showed that housing stability is a first step toward a job, better health, and improved quality of life. Both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations supported such policies, allowing homeless service providers, policymakers, public housing agencies, and other stakeholders to shift away from punitive practices that made housing a reward for people achieving certain behavioral markers¹¹ and toward helping people access housing first.

⁸ Elayne Weiss, “Housing Access for People with Criminal Records,” National Low Income Housing Coalition, March 2019, https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/AG-2019/06-07_Housing-Access-Criminal-Records.pdf.

⁹ HUD defines transitional housing as that “designed to provide homeless individuals and families with the interim stability and support to successfully move to and maintain permanent housing.” See <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/coc-program-eligibility-requirements/>.

¹⁰ See, for example, Ted Houghton, “A Description and History of the New York/New York Agreement to House Homeless Mentally Ill Individuals,” Corporation for Supportive Housing, May 2001, https://shnny.org/uploads/NY-NY_Agreement_History.pdf.

¹¹ Steve Berg, “Ten-Year Plans to End Homelessness,” National Low-Income Housing Coalition, 2015, https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/Sec7.08_Ten-Year-Plan_2015.pdf; U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, “Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness,” 2015, https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/USICH_OpeningDoors_Amendment2015_FINAL.pdf.

These efforts have contributed to significant declines in the projected number of people who experience homelessness on any given night, from over 647,000 in 2007, when HUD began reporting to Congress on homelessness, to about 568,000 people in 2019.¹²

HUD has examined the ways communities help people experiencing homelessness, including transitional housing programs.¹³ A 2016 evaluation,¹⁴ which studied the effects of different housing and services interventions for families with children that were experiencing homelessness, provided guidance on the best ways to use limited resources, finding that:

- Transitional housing reduced the number of days families spent in emergency shelters but had no impact on other outcomes such as family stress, children being separated from families, food security, or adult and child well-being.
- Long-term rental assistance had the largest impact on families' housing stability, reducing by more than one-half the number of families that spent at least one night experiencing homelessness.¹⁵
- Other benefits of long-term rental assistance include reductions in food insecurity, psychological stress, alcohol or drug use, child separations from the family, intimate partner violence, and school days missed among children.
- Long-term rental assistance is also significantly less expensive than transitional housing and emergency shelters. Among studied sites, rental assistance costs were \$1,172 per month per family — less than half of the costs for transitional housing (\$2,706) and less than a fourth of emergency shelters (\$4,819).

More research and program innovations are needed to address at all levels of government the systemic causes of homelessness, such as structural racism and its role in intergenerational poverty.¹⁶ People of color are typically over-represented among people experiencing homelessness.¹⁷ In 2019, Black people made up 40 percent of those experiencing homelessness on any given night, Hispanic people 22 percent, and Native Americans over 3 percent, all disproportionate to their U.S. populations (13 percent, 18 percent, and 1.6 percent respectively). Addressing homelessness and its disproportionate impact on low-income people of color will not only require significant new investments in rental assistance and other policies that raise incomes and educational outcomes. But

¹² The number has increased slightly from the all-time low of about 550,000 in 2016, but the data show that most states (29) have continued to see decreases. National Alliance to End Homelessness, “New Homelessness Numbers Reflect Uneven Progress, Increased Urgency,” January 9, 2020, <https://endhomelessness.org/new-homelessness-numbers-reflect-uneven-progress-increased-urgency/>.

¹³ Martha R. Burt, “Life After Transitional Housing For Homeless Families,” March 2010, <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/publications/LifeAfterTransition.pdf>.

¹⁴ Daniel Gubits *et al.*, “Family Options Study: 3-Year Impacts of Housing and Services Interventions for Homeless Families,” October 2016, https://www.huduser.gov/portal/family_options_study.html.

¹⁵ This study defines homelessness as being in an emergency shelter or in places not meant for human habitation. It excludes transitional housing.

¹⁶ Teresa Wiltz, “A Pileup of Inequities: Why People of Color Are Hit Hardest by Homelessness,” Pew Charitable Trusts, March 29, 2019, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2019/03/29/a-pileup-of-inequities-why-people-of-color-are-hit-hardest-by-homelessness>.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, “The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress,” January 2020, <https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2019-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>.

it also requires undoing the continued effects of policies and practices — including redlining and exclusionary zoning — that excluded people of color and sometimes low-income people generally from high-opportunity, often majority-white, communities that have experienced better local investments in schools, job opportunities, and transportation.¹⁸ It is notable that the Administration’s recent attempts to unravel the nation’s fair housing rules move decidedly in the wrong direction.¹⁹

Rental Assistance Is Needed

Unemployment, racial injustice, serious mental health conditions, chronic health conditions, and substance use can all factor into homelessness, but many people who experience homelessness are employed, and don’t have serious health conditions. The one unifying factor is the inability to afford a place to live, and for most people with low incomes that means paying rent. Along with services calibrated to people’s needs, any successful effort to end homelessness requires investing in rental assistance.

Since 2001, rent costs nationally have increased by 13 percent but median incomes for renter households increased by only about 0.5 percent.²⁰ Even in states with relatively flat rental markets, incomes haven’t kept pace. In Ohio, for example, rent costs have only risen 1 percent but incomes fell by 9 percent.²¹

We know that rental assistance can fill the gap between rent and incomes and reduce homelessness.²² However, there’s not enough to go around: only 25 percent of those who need rental assistance get it, leaving everyone else likely struggling to pay their rent. The housing affordability gap isn’t due to a problem with rental assistance programs, but to a lack of federal funding.²³

There is no reason to reverse course on federal homelessness policy. Instead, policymakers should invest further in what works: permanent housing, rental assistance, and strong community support services tailored to meet people’s individual needs. USICH Director Marbut is right when he says there’s a homelessness crisis, but the answer for it is scaling up what we know works, not repeating past mistakes.

¹⁸ Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, 2017.

¹⁹ Peggy Bailey, “Trump Administration Rule Would Reverse Communities’ Progress Toward Meeting Fair Housing Obligations,” CBPP, January 7, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/press/statements/trump-administration-rule-would-reverse-communities-progress-toward-meeting-fair>.

²⁰ Alicia Mazzara, “Census: Income-Rent Gap Grew in 2018,” CBPP, September 27, 2019, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/census-income-rent-gap-grew-in-2018>.

²¹ CBPP, “National and State Housing Fact Sheets and Data,” updated December 10, 2019, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/national-and-state-housing-data-fact-sheets>.

²² Will Fischer, “Rental Assistance Cuts Homelessness and Poverty, But Doesn’t Reach Most Who Need It,” CBPP, December 5, 2019, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/rental-assistance-cuts-homelessness-and-poverty-but-doesnt-reach-most-who-need-it>.

²³ The Trump Administration has attempted but failed to cut housing funding dramatically. Douglas Rice, “Trump Budget Would Slash Rent Aid for Struggling Seniors, Families, Others,” CBPP, March 19, 2019, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/trump-budget-would-slash-rent-aid-for-struggling-seniors-families-others>.