



United States Interagency Council on Homelessness e-newsletter

Reporting on Innovative Solutions to End Homelessness

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Partners In a Vision

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• IN WASHINGTON: COUNCIL REVIEWS FEDERAL AGENCY DEFINITIONS OF HOMELESSNESS

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WASHINGTON, DC. This *Special Issue* of the e-news reports on the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness's (USICH) ongoing review of definitions of homelessness used by Federal agencies.

Background. Consistent with its statutory responsibility to review Federal activities and programs to assist persons experiencing homelessness, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) has conducted a review of the definitions of homelessness used by Federal agencies administering targeted and non-targeted programs that assist persons who are homeless. This review and ongoing discussions with Federal agencies have focused on definitions of homelessness as they exist in statute, regulation, and agency program guidance.

The goal of these initiatives has been to consider areas of commonality between different existing Federal definitions of homelessness, and ways that these definitions advance agency and program objectives. While some nuances exist among definitions used by the Federal agencies, there is also a significant degree of commonality. Differences reflect both the varying purposes of programs to assist persons who are homeless, as well as the mission of the Federal agencies administering those programs.

Federal programs to assist persons who are homeless provide a wide range of services, including transitional programs, mental health and substance abuse services, health care, food assistance, emergency shelter, and housing. Many of these programs are targeted to serve the needs of different segments of the homeless population (e.g., homeless veterans, runaway youth), while others are intended to reach a broader number of persons, including those who may be at risk of homelessness.

Research and Discussion on Commonalities. The Council regularly conducts Senior Policy Group discussions on key issues with representatives from the Council's twenty member agencies. Senior Policy Group discussions have included a review of the five different Federal statutory definitions of homelessness covering the terms "homeless individual," "homeless person," "homeless children and youths," and "homeless youth." Several Federal agencies were found to share one statutory definition of homelessness, while others administer multiple programs authorized under different definitions. For the most part, these definitions share common language that defines homelessness as lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.

Differences in definitions primarily relate to the inclusion both of individuals who are sharing the housing of other persons (i.e., "doubled-up") due to loss of housing or economic hardship and of persons living in trailer parks and substandard housing. The latter definition references a much broader population of individuals that may not be living on the streets or in shelters, but could be construed as experiencing homelessness due to housing instability.

Several Federal agencies share one statutory definition of homelessness, while others administer programs that are authorized under different statutory definitions. Over the last year, the Council has conducted research and convened a series of meetings with Federal agencies to look at the distribution of statutory definitions of homelessness across programs administered by seven different Federal agencies including the Departments of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Veterans Affairs (VA), Health and Human Services (HHS), Education (ED), Labor (DOL), Agriculture (USDA), and Homeland Security/FEMA (DHS). Federal agencies have also provided regulatory and non-regulatory guidance regarding the definition of homelessness to address ambiguities and clarify eligible populations.

The Council looked at the history and timeline of development of the five federal statutory definitions of homelessness, as well as regulatory and non-regulatory guidance issued by Federal agencies. This history shows the common statutory language regarding the definition of homelessness, as well as the nuances added to definitions authorizing specific programs in the McKinney Act.

Linking Definitions to Program Purposes. Definitions of homelessness used by Federal agencies are closely tied to the overall mission of the Federal agency, and to the types of services being offered and the purposes of the program itself. Definitions reflect the need to frame an identifiable population of individuals intended to benefit from services provided with a fixed amount of resources. For example, HUD supportive housing programs define homelessness as restricted to individuals who are literally homeless living on the streets, in shelters, or public spaces as a way to target resources to the neediest population. An expanded definition of homelessness to include all persons living in doubled-up situations would greatly increase the number of individuals eligible for the program, putting greater pressure on a limited source of funding. Also, many agencies have increased emphasis on tracking performance goals and establishing measurable outcomes in programs. A targeted definition of homelessness can ensure the hardest to serve individuals are not overlooked by service providers.

Alternatively, it can be important for other programs, specifically those serving families, children, and youth, to define homelessness more broadly to be inclusive of individuals and families that are at-risk of homelessness or experiencing housing instability. The Department of Education administers the Education for Homeless Children and Youth program, which provides funds for local school districts to ensure homeless children and youth have access to public education and other educational services offered by the district. The statutory definition authorizing this program is purposefully broad to include children and youth that may be in non-permanent or inadequate living situations, such as temporarily sharing the housing of other persons.

The Health Care for the Homeless (HCH) program, administered by HHS, is also inclusive of persons living in "doubled-up" living situations in the definition of homelessness, and authorizes programs to continue serving individuals in permanent housing up to 12 months after they are placed. HCH program goals are related to access and continuity of care; these aspects of the program are conducive to a broad definition of homelessness.

Homelessness and Federal Mainstream Programs. Federal agency definitions of homelessness distinguish between different segments of the "homeless" population in the context of a broader social welfare system. In addition to Federally-funded homeless assistance programs, there are numerous mainstream Federal programs, such as TANF, Medicaid, SSI, and Food Stamps that operate with greater resources and serve a larger population of low-income families and children, some of whom may be homeless, at risk of homelessness, or experiencing housing instability.

Coordination of resources between homeless assistance programs and mainstream services can help distribute resources more widely to a larger population, while allowing targeted resources to be focused more narrowly. Increased access to these resources for families and individuals was the focus of the twelve Federal Policy Academy events for state government leaders convened by a wide range of Federal agencies from 2001-2005 and attended by 55 States and Territories.

Lastly, definitions distinguishing between the poorly housed and literally homeless should be sensitive to cultural and social issues. It may be inappropriate to classify extended families that share housing voluntarily - reflecting cultural preferences - as homeless. Definitions inclusive of families living in trailer parks make assumptions about the adequacy of these types of living situations. Also, inclusion of at-risk categories of persons based on their living situation can generate stigma unless ambiguous elements, such as substandard housing, are clearly defined. Definitions of homelessness must recognize existing traditional support networks through family and friends, as well as the diversity of living situations that are voluntarily chosen by individuals.

Summary. The very nature of homelessness makes identifying and classifying the homeless population a continuing challenge. At the Federal level, programs designed to assist persons who are homeless provide a wide range of services, and many programs are targeted to serve needs of different segments of the homeless population (e.g., homeless veterans), while others are intended to encompass a broader number of persons including those who may be at risk of homelessness.

The Council's review of definitions of homelessness found that existing variation between agency definitions of homelessness reflects this diversity in program purposes, and is closely tied to the overall mission of the agency and program office. Definitions also reflect the need to frame an identifiable population of individuals intended to benefit from services provided with a fixed amount of federal resources. While some nuances exist among definitions used by Federal agencies, there is also a significant degree of commonality given the range of Federal programs that provide assistance to homeless people.

Discussion regarding definitions will continue with Federal agencies and will be a continuing topic of Interagency Council meetings.

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