

# Health Care for the Homeless Mobilizer

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## Refining McKinney *Room for Improvement in Senate Markup*

*Mobilizer* readers know that 2007 marks both the twentieth anniversary of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, the first major federal legislation directed towards ameliorating homelessness, and the time to reauthorize HUD-administered McKinney Homeless Assistance programs. Regrettably, despite the availability of McKinney resources, more people now experience homelessness than when the act first was authorized in 1987. Although McKinney alone will never end homelessness (only dramatic changes in the nation's housing and health care policies will accomplish this goal), the legislation is important and must be strengthened. Last Wednesday, the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs unanimously passed S.1518 – the Community Partnership to End Homelessness Act (CPEHA) – which would reauthorize and amend McKinney Homeless Assistance programs. Several results of the Committee's mark-up session require action from advocates.

### Defining McKinney

The Senate markup would expand HUD's definition of homelessness to include certain individuals and families living in hotels or motels along with those "doubled up" due to economic hardship. Though this expanded definition is welcome, there is still room for improvement. The new definition would only permit doubled up families to be considered "homeless" (and thus eligible for McKinney resources) if they have moved three times in the past year or twice in the past 21 days. The specificity of this language no doubt will prove difficult for communities to measure and enforce and could prevent many eligible individuals and families from accessing HUD's homeless assistance programs. A less restrictive definition would reflect more accurately the realities of homelessness and very precarious housing.

### Realigning McKinney

More than five years ago, the Administration announced the laudable goal of ending chronic homelessness by 2012 – without appropriating resources sufficient to support this noble effort. In FY2007, Congress appropriated \$1.442 billion for McKinney programs – an increase over the previous year, but hardly the investment necessary to end homelessness. The current markup of S.1518 would increase the authorization level to \$2.2 billion. In addition to this increase, the bill rightly requires that funding for permanent housing subsidies created through the McKinney Act be renewed through the Section 8 account rather than through McKinney – thus reserving a greater portion of McKinney dollars for new supportive housing and new and on-going services. Although a step in the right direction, the proposed increases are not sufficient to fund existing projects working to end and prevent homelessness let alone important new projects necessary to get people off the streets and back into the mainstream. The National Council calls upon Congress to appropriate at least \$3 billion for McKinney Homeless Assistance programs.

## House Reauthorization – The HEARTH Bill

In contrast, the House of Representatives is considering a different piece of legislation to rewrite the laws of McKinney—one that the Council and other national homeless advocacy organizations have endorsed because it is more comprehensive and better equipped to address the complicated task of ending and preventing homelessness. Introduced by Congresswoman Julia Carson (D-IN), H.R. 840, the Homeless Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act contains an expanded definition of homelessness that includes individuals and families living in hotels or motels and “doubled up” situations without the restrictive language that defines how often a person must move to be considered homeless, such as the language that exists in the Senate’s CPEHA bill. In addition, HEARTH reauthorizes McKinney Homeless Assistance programs at a higher \$2.5 billion level and provides communities with flexibility in using their McKinney funds to address their community’s needs, rather than allowing HUD to dictate how the money must be used, provisions that are not included in the Senate bill. The House Committee on Financial Services subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity has scheduled two hearings, beginning next week, to discuss McKinney reauthorization.

## Beyond McKinney – Raising our Sights

Staggering cuts to the federal housing budget under Ronald Reagan were the major precipitant of the mass homelessness that has now lasted 25 years. Grotesquely unjust health care policies bankrupt people, drive them into homelessness, and leave them to die homeless, 30 years short of normal life expectancy in America. Minimum wage workers and many disabled people cannot afford the barest necessities. Jails are holding pits for Americans swept up off the streets. The McKinney Act will not change these things or end homelessness, but it does provide some resources that ameliorate these dire conditions, and it should be strengthened. We urge those who care about the plight of our homeless neighbors to act now.

### **ACTION:**

- **Read the National Council’s policy statement on Housing** at <http://www.nhchc.org/Advocacy/PolicyPapers/Housing2007.pdf>
- **Call your Senators and Representatives TODAY** to enlist their support to strengthen McKinney and to back other measures necessary to end homelessness. Urge Senators to pass language more accurately reflecting the number of homeless Americans by including everyone lacking a place of their own due to financial hardship. Ask your Senators to support increasing McKinney authorization to \$3 billion. Ask Representatives to co-sponsor HR 840, the HEARTH Act. Find your Senator at [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov), your Representative at [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov), or call the Capitol Switchboard 202-224-2131.
- **McKinney alone will never end homelessness.** As you encourage your Congressional representatives to pass as strong a homelessness assistance package as possible, be sure to communicate the need for broader national policies promoting access to affordable housing, comprehensive health care, and livable incomes for all.
- **For more information** contact the National Council’s Health Policy Organizer, Adrienne Breidenstine at [abreidenstine@hchmd.org](mailto:abreidenstine@hchmd.org) or 443-703-1337

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