Homelessness Essay, Research Paper

Introduction

Homelessness is not new to our nation, and it has greatly increased over the past ten years. (Hombs, 1-4) For growing numbers of people, work provides little, if any, protection against homelessness. Low national un-employment levels do not mean that all working people are well-off. (Blau, 21-24)

What is homelessness? According to the definition stated by Stewart B. McKinney,

for purposes of the 1987 McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, “a homeless person (homelessness)is one who lacks a fixed permanent nightime residence, or whose nighttime residence is a temporary shelter, welfare hotel, or any public or private place not designed as sleeping accommodations for human beings.” (Blau, 8) A rather deceptive definition when one considers the fact that homelessness is not a natural state, but one created and maintained by political agendas.

Our government is not doing all that it can to combat our nation’s homelessness.

In 1987, the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act was put into law. (Hombs, 68-83) However,

our government has moved away from the need to address the causes of homelessness. Instead

our government has focused on the individual responsibility of those who become homeless,

blaming their misfortune as their own fault. (Blau, 5-9) It is this belief that has helped to increase the homelessness of our nation, and it is this belief that will continue to do so if our government does not take a closer and more realistic look at the causes behind homelessness in our nation. Unless our government commits to ending homelessness through public education, policy advocacy, and technical assistance, homelessness will become a national disaster for the United States. Right now our government is not doing all it can towards putting into place the necessary solutions to combat homelessness.

Who are/where are the homeless people

Many of the homeless have completed high school. Some have completed college. Some are AIDS victims, many are the elderly, many are children, some are disabled vets, some are illegal immigrants, and many of the homeless hold down full-time jobs. (Blau, 21-30) They are found not only in cities, but in small towns, rural areas, and affluent suburbs. (Kroloff, 1993). Some even make up the “hidden homeless” (Kroloff, 1993), or people who are one crisis away from losing their homes for a variety of reasons, such as a sudden medial emergency or unforeseen health problems.

Recent statistics have found the following “trends:

1. …the homeless are young people

2. Minority groups are represented

3. Families with children constitute approximately 35 percent of the homeless

4. …working people account for an average of 30 percent of the homeless

5. …homelessness is found to be a chronic and recurring event.” (Hombs, 5)

Why do people become homeless

Alarming statistics challenge the persistent stereotypes of why people become

homeless. Stagnating wages, lack of health insurance, domestic violence, changes in social services and welfare programs, cuts in benefit programs, such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Food Stamps and Elderly Assistance, single parent families, drug addiction, mental health problems, natural disasters, job displacement due to military actions, and affordable housing shortages account for increasing poverty among American families. It is also believed that “the distance between the middle and lower classes has begun to shrink dramatically; middle-class households now experience the problem as an inability to afford owning a home, just as homelessness has increased dramatically.” (Hoch/Slayton, 253)

In the United States, one of the most economically prosperious nations on earth, our

government has organized our public and private institutions in such a manner that mass

homelessness is one of the “normal” outcomes. For example, because of the gap between

the cost of housing and what people with low incomes can afford to pay for it, a growing

number of people are excluded from having an adequate and secure place to live. “Local

housing policy…like national policy, has been criticized as a cause of homelessness, because

of (1) the redevelopment and conversion of poor urban areas and low-income housing into

middle-class neighborhoods and commercial areas, and (2) a failure to provide new low-

income housing”. (Greenblatt/Robertson, 9) For some, this is a temporary situation, for some

an occasional situation, but for many it is a long-term situation.

Government and homeless people

During the Reagan Administration, homelessness was viewed as a problem that did

not necessitate federal intervention. In 1983, the first federal task force on homelessness was

created to provide information to local communities on how to obtain surplus federal property. However, The task force did not address homelessness through policy actions. (Blau, 109-132)

In the following years, advocates around the nation demanded that the federal government

acknowledge homelessness as a national problem requiring a national response. As a result, in 1986, the Homeless Persons’ Survival Act was introduced in both houses. The act contained emergency relief measures, preventive measures, and long term solutions to homelessness. However, only small pieces of this proposal, were enacted into law. The first, the Homeless Eligibility Clarification Act of 1986, (Hombs, 67) removed permanent address requirements and other barriers to existing programs such as Supplemental Security Income, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Veterans Benefits, Food Stamps, and Medicaid. Also in 1986, the Homeless Housing Act was adopted. (Hombs, 67) This legislation created the Emergency Shelter Grant program and a transitional housing program, which were administered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development or HUD. (Blau, 16)

In late 1986, legislation containing Title I of the Homeless Persons’ Survival Act,

emergency relief provisions for food, shelter, mobilized health care, and transitional housing,

was introduced as the Urgent Relief for the Homeless Act. (Hombs, 70-89) After an intensive

campaign, the legislation was passed by large bipartisan majorities in both houses

of Congress in 1987. After the death of its sponsor, Stewart B.McKinney, the act was re-named the 1987 Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act. It was signed into law by the reluctant President,Ronald Reagan, on July 22, 1987. The 1987 Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act was the first, and only, major federal legislative response to homelessness. (Blau, 112-114)

The McKinney Act originally consisted of fifteen programs that provided a range of services to the homeless. The services included job training, education, emergency shelter, transitional housing, primary health care, and a limited amount of permanent housing..

The McKinney Act has been amended numerous times, with the 1990 amendments including the Shelter Plus Care program, which provided housing assistance to the homeless with disabilities, mental illness, AIDS, and drug/alcohol addictions, and a program within the Health Care for the Homeless to provide primary health care and outreach to at-risk homeless children.

(Levy, 360-368) Also in 1990, the Community Mental Health Services program was amended and re-named as: the Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH) program. The 1990 amendments more clearly outlined the obligations of states and local educational agencies in assuring public education of homeless children and youth. (Kryder-Coe, 81-85)

Unfortantely, even with the passage of the McKinney Act, and the amendments to it, the causes of homelessness have not been adequately addressed. The 1994 goal of the Interagency Council on the Homeless was “to achieve the goal of ‘a decent home and a suitable living environment’ for every American.” ( Hombs, 131-132) The President called for increasing housing subsidies and repairing the “damage caused by the misguided and harmful housing budget cuts of the 1980s.” (Hombs, 132) However, the President’s Fical Year 96, 97, and 98 budgets maintained the cuts to housing programs made by Congress. President Reagan believed that “the homeless are on the streets by choice and prefer this to the available shelters…and that the jobless are simply not motivated.” (Hombs, 9) Thus, Congress left in place a number of measures which reduced the poor’s access to housing, such as tightened eligibility standards for

public housing, cuts to federal aid to poor children, (Foscarinis, par. 5-8) and cuts in subsidized low-rent housing.

Still, today, our nation’s government has not enacted any permanent solutions to homelessness. Our local, state or federal governments have not addressed the so desperately needed solutions for the fundamental cause of homelessness: 1) providing subsidies to make existing housing affordable, creating additional affordable housing through rehabilitation, and where needed, new construction; 2) ensure that working people earn enough to meet basic needs, have access to jobs and job training, and if not able to work, are provided with assistance adequate to meet baics needs, including housing; 3) ensure access to social services, including health care, child care, mental health care and substance abuse treatment; 4) prohibit laws that discriminate against the homeless. (Robertson/Greenblatt, 339-346)

New policies that address the causes of homelessness, by addressing housing, education, income and treatment problems, must align with prevention policies to stop the rise in homelessness.

Making a difference

When President Clinton was first elected, it appeared that he had a plan to make homelessness the number one HUD priority and to introduce innovative reforms to make a real change to the nation’s homelessness. Eight years later, no legislation has been passed in this area.

What can an individual do to make a difference? One can volunteer. Work in a soup kitchen or a non-profit used goods store once every two weeks. Tutor someone at a jobs skills center. Deliver meals to home bound people. One can offer some innovative services to non-profit service providers and support agencies. Offer to design and/or maintain someone’s webpage. Research and write grant applications or plan a fundraising event. Network an organization’s computer system. Offer to teach a resume writing course or facilitate a staff training. ( Kroloff) All of these are needed services and available in most every community.

What can our local communities do? They can develop: 1) community-based prevention and family preservation centers; 2) family-oriented substance abuse treatment programs; 3) housing placement and long-term follow-up case management for families; 4) information and referral for the newly homeless; 5) street outreach to homeless children and youth; 6) permanent low-income housing for families and the physically/mentally ill. (Kroloff)

What can our nation’s government representatives do? Our government must establish a clear understanding of who the homeless are in our nation. They must take a look at what major system failures are contributing to homelessness in America. They must understand what is causing the problems in our current service systems. They must understand what purpose the McKinney Act is trying to serve. They must take a look at what goals we are trying to achieve through federal legislation, and then they must re-examine how current legislative steps take us to our national goal?

Our government understands that the homeless are people in the crisis of proverty, for any given number of reasons. They understand that the major systems contributing to homelessness are: low income jobs, expensive/bad housing conditions, social service system failures like health and mental health, no committed responsibility for the chronically disabled, domestic violence/prisons/military/foster care system discharges. And they understand the problems with our nation’s current service systems in place: 1) more people coming in everyday, but insufficient opportunity to access mainstream programs; 2) increased costs and lack of new funding;

3) frustration and perception that the system is failing. So what can our government do? They must make the McKinney Act work for us: 1) provide flexible resources to develop local programs; 2) programs that prove success should be allowed to grow into the mainstream system, receiving support outside of McKinney; 3) programs that provide emergency services should form a core of a local emergency services system and be supported and maintained; 4) affordable housing programs should be revamped in recognition of the current housing crisis; 5) Don’t expect McKinney/HUD resources to meet all needs among people not housed. Require other systems to provide support services. (Homelessness in America)

As a nation, our goal must be to end homelessness, prevent its recurrence, and decrease its effects on communities. Our approach must be twofold: identifying and analyzing the causes of homelessness and developing and implementing long-term solutions that remove these causes.

As individuals, we must work with service providers, local communities, public and nonprofit sectors, and homeless people to implement these solutions.

The focus of our government programs must be to: 1) support communities in implementing and maintaining long-term comprehensive responses to homelessness; 2) establish easily accessible community networks of services available to homeless families, adults, and children; 3) channel community and government resources to housing and employment; 4) ensure that every dollar invested is well spent.

To accomplish these goals, we, as a people, must work with our community and federal goverment representatives to share ideas, information, and resources. We must work together to actively recruit service providers, decision makers, funders, private sector partners, and people who are or formerly were homeless to collaborate on policy and solutions. We must work together to implement programs that: 1) improve delivery of support services; 2) increase incomes from public benefits; 3) provide accessible, affordable transportation; 4) provide job training, development, and placement; 5) expanding community acceptance of responsibility to the homeless; 6) provide long-term funding for services; 7) set up housing trust funds.

Objection to paper

Many local urban communities have already taken the necessary steps and have demonstrated innovative strategies. For example, Washington, D.C. has set up a prevention model which guarantees rental assistance for families and individuals facing eviction. The D.C. program includes a 90-day case management follow-up to assist these households in overcoming such a crisis and in developing a long-term plan for future housing. (Homelessness in America) A Los Angeles program provides homeless families with long-term case management to achieve permanent stability and independence. Follow-up lasts for a year after placement in permanent low-income housing to insure maintenance of housing, participation in job training and placement, and access to support services linked to job training, such as child care. (Homelessness in America) However, it is not realistic to believe that local communities are financially capable of solving the homeless issues on their own. To successfully rid our nation of homelessness requires collobration between people, local communities, the state, and the federal government.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as initially stated in this paper, our government is not doing all that it can to combat our nation’s homelessness. Unless our government commits to ending homelessness through public education, policy advocacy, and technical assistance, homelessness will become a national disaster for the United States. The restructuring and funding of the McKinney Act and HUD, as well as other federal homelessness programs is long overdue. New legislation should provide incentives for states to address homeless problems, which they have never really done in the past. To solve the national homelessness, we, as a people, must work with our community, state and federal goverment representatives to share ideas, information, and resources. We must work together to actively recruit service providers, decision makers, funders, private sector partners, and people who are or formerly were homeless to collaborate on policy and solutions.