

## HUD Fact Check: Ending “Chronic” Homelessness?

On Wednesday, November 7, HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson issued a press release claiming a 11.5% decrease in the numbers of chronically homeless people between 2005 and 2006. To be considered “chronically homeless,” one must be a single, disabled individual living on the street or in emergency shelter, either continuously for a year, or at least four times in three years. According to HUD’s news release, between 2005 and 2006 the number of such individuals dropped from 175,914 to 155,623.

For an Administration in need of good news, this was conveniently timed information – both the White House and HUD issued press releases. Unfortunately, it appears that this week’s glossy rhetoric does not match reality. Questions about methodology make the data suspect. And significant questions remain about the impact of efforts to end “chronic” homelessness on homeless children, youth, and families.

In July of 2001, then HUD Secretary Mel Martinez declared a goal of ending “chronic” homelessness by 2011 – a modest goal considering that the “chronic” homeless population is at most 10% of the overall homeless population over the course of a year. HUD and the US Interagency Council on Homelessness declared that this goal could be met by providing 150,000 new units of permanent supportive housing. Beginning in 2002, HUD began working to achieve this goal, primarily by shifting existing resources from programs serving other homeless populations, but also through targeting of the new homeless assistance grant funding provided each year.

Between 2002 and early 2007, HUD frequently asserted that “chronic” homelessness was being reduced, but no data was released to support this claim. In February, HUD released its first “Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress.” Citing January, 2005 data collected as part of Continuum of Care applications, the number of chronically homeless persons was listed as 169,879 persons.<sup>1</sup> This is a different number than the 175, 914 people who HUD’s press release cited as being “chronically” homeless in 2005. Since HUD did not release any data to support the numbers listed in their press release, it is hard to account for this variance. But whichever number you take, it would certainly appear that “chronic” homelessness did not decline between 2001 and 2005.

With respect to the “new” 2005 to 2006 data, both national and local advocates have noted methodological concerns. A USA Today article pointed out that it can be difficult to determine whether or not an individual living on the street is disabled and that some cities have seen increases in “chronic” homelessness even as other cities have seen declines.<sup>2</sup> HUD’s release acknowledges this, stating that over 1,500 of 3,900 communities reported decreases in “chronic” homelessness, meaning that 2,400 communities showed increases.

And in a Daytona Beach News-Journal article, Volusia/Flagler County Coalition for the Homeless Executive Director Lindsay Roberts dismissed the HUD announcement, attributing any decreases in “chronic” homelessness to HUD’s changing standards for how communities have been instructed to count homeless persons. According to Roberts and local officials, their area’s point in time count of all homeless people, which includes the category of “chronic” homeless persons, dropped from 2,660 to 1,478 – not because of new housing opportunities, but instead because HUD required them to use new methods for estimating the extent of homelessness in their community. Among these changes, HUD no longer allowed them to “count homeless people who were in jail or hospitals more than 30 days, or people sharing places with another person in a hotel.” As Roberts concluded, “If you torture the numbers enough, you can make them tell you anything. I think they would really like the picture to be rosier. I think it’s justification of not providing adequate funding to address the genuine need. Skewing the numbers doesn’t make these people go away.”<sup>3</sup> Without more information from HUD on how rules for counting homeless persons have changed, any reported decrease in “chronic” homelessness remains suspect.

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<sup>1</sup> HUD Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, February, 2007, available at <http://www.huduser.org/Publications/pdf/ahar.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> *Federal Study Cites Fewer Homeless*, USA Today, November 7, 2007, available at [http://www.usich.gov/newsletter/2007-11-7\\_usatoday.pdf](http://www.usich.gov/newsletter/2007-11-7_usatoday.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> *Officials question new homelessness report*, Daytona Beach News-Journal, November 8, 2007, available at <http://www.news-journalonline.com/NewsJournalOnline/News/Headlines/frtHEAD02110807.htm>.

In addition, HUD efforts to focus federal homeless assistance resources on the “chronic” homeless population have had a profound impact on homelessness among children, youth, and families. At the same time that New York City cited a decrease in “chronic” homelessness, the city also reported a record number of homeless families.<sup>4</sup> Similar issues have occurred in Philadelphia, where funding for successful housing and services programs for homeless families was reduced in order to focus on “chronically” homeless individuals – an effort that even organizations serving the homeless street population have criticized. Increases in family homelessness help to explain why HUD is unable to report any overall decrease in homelessness.

We do not expect HUD and the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness to end homelessness overnight. Homelessness will only be ended when this country restores the massive cuts over the past 25 years to affordable housing programs – programs that go well beyond HUD’s homeless assistance grant programs. However, we do expect federal agencies to put forth a good faith plan to accurately define and acknowledge the extent of homelessness, to ensure that local communities have flexible funding to best meet local needs, and to provide new resources that allow communities to make steady progress in ending homelessness for every man, woman, and child who does not have a place to call home. This standard is not being met.

By accurately defining homelessness and providing local flexibility balanced with federal oversight, H.R. 840 – the HEARTH Act, now pending in the U.S. House of Representatives, would be a strong first step in this direction. Congressional activity for 2007 is winding down. We call on the House to make the HEARTH Act a top priority in early 2008.

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<sup>4</sup> *Homeless Families In City Shelters Hit Record, Despite the Mayor’s Efforts*, New York Times, March 8, 2007, available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/08/nyregion/08homeless.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/08/nyregion/08homeless.html?_r=1&oref=slogin).