

What It Will Take to End Homelessness in D.C.

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Abstract

In this commentary for The Washington Post, researchers Martha Burt and Sam Hall recommend, among other things, that Washington, D.C., offer permanent supportive housing to those who have been homeless the longest or have the most severe forms of disability. Making major changes in its data system would help the city have real-time information regarding homeless people.

What It Will Take to End Homelessness in D.C.

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The administration of D.C. Mayor Adrian M. Fenty should take a bow for tackling homelessness. New initiatives and the resurrection of neglected plans have positioned the District to become a leader in homeless service systems -- a far cry from where it stood three years ago. But if the goal is to make a lasting difference, the hard work is just beginning.

An Urban Institute study for the D.C. Department of Human Services outlines an entirely new shape for the District's homeless assistance system. The District is already making good on parts of the proposed four-part plan, but ending homelessness requires concerted effort and follow-through on all major recommendations. That, in turn, means public agencies and groups that provide services and advocacy for the homeless must work together in unprecedented ways.

Step one involves moving the most chronically homeless individuals into permanent supportive housing (PSH). Our study showed that only 14 percent of homeless people stay in emergency shelters longer than six months, but they use almost two-thirds of shelter resources. Still more linger on the streets, putting heavy demands on emergency medical and corrections services.

As Denver, San Francisco and Portland, Ore., have proved, providing housing plus counseling and similar services is far more humane, efficient and cost-effective, and reduces street homelessness (as much as 70 percent in Portland). Mayor Fenty has committed to creating 2,500 new PSH units by 2014.

Another recommendation is that agencies developing PSH units commit themselves to housing those who have been homeless the longest or have the most severe forms of disability. We favor a process to identify these people that weighs such factors as time on the streets or in shelters, level of disability, use of emergency rooms and jail cells, and possibly pre-homeless District residence. Such a process would cut emergency health care and corrections expenses, as it has done in cities as diverse as Seattle and Portland, Maine. The Department of Human Services has already started work on this task.

The third pillar of the new system is restructuring emergency homeless shelters. As long-term users move to supportive housing, far fewer emergency beds will be needed. In several years, the District should be close to having a system half the present size, with savings poured into smaller shelters and more staff and services. Service participation at shelters would remain voluntary, but staff would be trained to establish rapport and engage even the most uninterested residents.

These three recommendations won't do the job unless the District makes major changes in its information management system regarding homeless people. Government needs real-time knowledge about how many people fall victim to long-term homelessness, how many frequently stay in both shelters and the D.C. jail, and whether people who get certain services leave homelessness behind permanently. Today's data system provides shockingly little information -- and does even that awkwardly. Having solid data is one front where the District still lags many cities.

By pushing for timely and substantial change on many fronts, the District may be a pioneer in more than the

battle against homelessness. For now, the diligent follow-through required to make homelessness a thing of the past will test the administration's mettle.

The writers are Urban Institute researchers who co-authored three reports for the D.C. Department of Human Services last month assessing the District's homeless assistance system.

Other Publications by the Authors

- [Martha R. Burt](#)
- [Sam Hall](#)

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