The Newsletter of FEANTSA - The European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless

Alternative Approaches to Homelessness: Looking Beyond Europe

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HOMELESS in Europe

Spring 2004

Editorial

Although aware that there is a certain irony in devoting an issue of our Newsletter **Home*less* in Europe** to the problem of homelessness *outside* Europe, after some seven years of issues devoted to Europe, **FEANTSA** felt it would make an interesting change to look at approaches adopted beyond our borders. There is a double advantage to be gained from a critical glance at the situation in other countries. First of all, they can be a source of fresh ideas and new approaches, which may be of interest or might even prove transferable. Secondly, it can be a very useful way of gaining some perspective on the approaches and policies in place here in Europe. Have we fallen into traps avoided in other countries? Have we circumvented pitfalls that are a problem elsewhere? This edition of the newsletter presents a good cross section of contributions from developed countries outside Europe. Although the bulk of the articles deal with the situation in Canada and in the US, there are also very informative contributions from Japan and from Australia. Overall, a good picture of the situation in developed countries outside Europe emerges, bringing with it some recurring themes, such as the crucial role of good housing policies and the pressing need for affordable housing, which will be familiar to **FEANTSA** members. With a view to exploiting the comparative and relative value that these contributions offer, European experts have read and reacted to many of the articles, highlighting elements that have struck them, variations of approach and major similarities and differences that emerge.

Some of contributors, knowing that they are addressing a European audience who may well be unfamiliar with the situation in their country, have chosen to offer a broad overview of homelessness and the way it is approached at national level. This is true, for instance, of our Japanese contributor, Professor Yoshihiro Okamoto, and a fascinating picture of a situation that is substantially different to that in Europe, is what results. Ali Hanrat, a government worker in the new Canadian National Secretariat for the Homeless, and US researchers Jessica Barrett-Simpson and Paul Tepper, have also chosen to offer a general overview; in both cases it is a recent innovative development in the approach to homelessness at the national level that is the main focus of the article. Thus Ali Hanrat offers us a discussion of the new National Initiative for the Homeless and the Californian researchers look at the development of the ten year plans to end homelessness in the US. The Canadian article contributed by researchers Margaret Eberle and Luba Serge provide an important balance to that of Ali Hanrat, as it offers, among other things, a critical assessment of the new National Initiative and provides a much-needed focus on outcomes.

This edition is interspersed with reactions that serve to make the links between homelessness outside Europe and homelessness in Europe.

An introduction to an innovative project, or a sharply critical stance on a specific aspect of policy in relation to homelessness, has been the preferred focus of our other contributors. On the positive side, we learn from George Fisher in Australia about an exciting new housing project, which builds upon an Australian historical notion of what housing is, and which is being pioneered in Western Australia. John Parvensky, of the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, offers an outline of the 'housing first' approach, which is being used with encouraging results in healthcare for the homeless in Colorado in the US. Jim Gurnett, executive director of the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, describes a planned innovative project to support the integration of refugees through supported housing in Edmonton, Canada, though this is contextualised by a bleak picture of the general housing situations of immigrants arriving in Canada. On the negative side, Michael Kane, executive director of the National Alliance of HUD Tenants sharply criticizes the US government policies which have led to a steep decline in the supply of affordable, subsidized rental and social housing. The dangers of the criminalisation of homelessness are recalled in an article from the National Coalition for the Homeless.

This edition is interspersed with reactions that serve to make the links between homelessness outside Europe and homelessness in Europe. They draw attention to striking similarities or parallel projects that may exist. They highlight possible applications of the approaches used outside Europe and indeed, vice versa. Sometimes, they are a timely reminder that the problems described may not be so far removed as we would like to think. We are grateful to Donal McManus and Michel Mercadié (respectively President and Vice-President of **FEANTSA**); to Freek Spinnewijn (Director of **FEANTSA**); to John Evans (former President of **FEANTSA**); to Toby Blume (Director of UK NGO Groundswell); to Bill Edgar (Coordinator of the European Observatory on Homelessness) and to Dearbhal Murphy (Communications Officer of **FEANTSA**) for making their expertise available to provide these thought-provoking reactions.

FEANTSA welcomes your comments and reactions to this newsletter. Please send them to dearbhal.Murphy@feantsa.org •

HABITAT 21: An innovative approach to homelessness in Australia

By **George Fisher,** *Founder of Beyond Shelter - Australia*

Australia is the so-called 'lucky country' and there are many who are seeking to make it their adopted country, but unfortunately, like other developed countries, Australia is confronted by the problem of homelessness and its close relative, poverty.

The Australian governments have sought to attack these joint problems with purpose, and various innovative plans have been tried. In general, most agencies and government bodies in Australia tend to approach homelessness problems as complex, and resources are made available to try and tackle them, but all too often the end result is still the same: the construction of homes that are quite simply not affordable for those in need.

It is not surprising, therefore, that most funds have to be directed into providing shelter or crisis accommodation or into subsidising costs of rental property. In a recent newspaper article a leading housing body (Shelter Western Australia) was quoted as saying 'Shelter considered homes over $135,000 too expensive for these people' [referring to families earning less than $50,000 per year]. The point is, however, that the homeless are often in a situation where they are not earning any money at all, and therefore rely entirely on social welfare. This means it is somewhat irrelevant for agencies and for the government to talk about affordability, when the affordability focus is levelled at such a high-income bracket. We must pose the question: 'who, exactly, we are talking about?' The Australian Bureau of Statistics puts 'Full-time adult earnings' at about $940 per week, while a person on the dole receives about $208. The government ensuring that no one should pay more than 25% of the weekly income on rent is masking the fact that in many instances, the taxpayer has to buy the house in the first place. In Western Australia alone, there are, by the governments own reporting, over 12,000 people homeless and their housing arm have a 14,000 waiting list. Clearly a problem, given that our population is only 2 million.

The approach directed at crisis-level homelessness and subsidised housing clearly hasn't allowed progress towards solving the problem of poverty, given that homelessness is on the increase. 'Beyond Shelter – Australia' is trying to take a different approach. As its name shows, we must escape from the concept of crisis shelters, in order to go 'beyond' these and build sustainable futures - sustainable for both the government and the beneficiaries.

Beyond Shelter - Australia is a non-profit organisation based in Gosnells, Western Australia. Its main purpose is:

- To provide direct relief from poverty, sickness, suffering, distress, misfortune, disability or helplessness to people;
- To provide relief in the form of money, goods and services to people in necessitous circumstances;
- To provide service-enriched affordable housing for low-income people.

In relation to this third aim, Beyond Shelter - Australia has developed an innovative project that seeks to offer a solution to homelessness and poverty. This project is called HABITAT 21 and is outlined below.

The key element in Beyond Shelter - Australia project Habitat 21, is that it encourages unemployed homeless people and volunteers to work together to build low-cost, but nevertheless very attractive, architect-designed homes, which they can then purchase at affordable prices.

To qualify as a home buyer the homeless/unemployed must enrol in a Beyond Shelter - Australia programme that, among other things, provides education and training particularly in money management, but specifically in work in which they are likely to succeed. (Building homes and a service-enriched community require more skills than just building a house.) Each potential breadwinner is given a personal employment councillor and a personal trainer is allocated to the whole family. This is part of the 'Welfare to Work with Dignity' approach.

The Project Habitat 21 coordinates housing development in carefully selected locations, so that service-enriched facilities can be provided to beneficiaries. For example: child minding centres, library and computer resources, health clinics, handyman workshops, sporting facilities, social centres, vegetable gardens, etc. These usually are included within a housing complex or are organised partly in cooperation with local government.
The project seeks to allow qualified buyers (beneficiaries of the project) to quickly own the property by:

a. Reducing the cost of these homes by using volunteer labour as outlined above and by using low cost materials;
b. Providing modular designs (low cost, easy to set up) that allow the home to grow as the family grows;
c. Providing affordable finance terms;
d. Providing the land at very low cost per year on a 99-Year Renewable Lease. (Lease conditions ensure that should the beneficiary ever wish to leave for any reason, Beyond Shelter - Australia has first buyer right and the resale price is based on original price plus allowance for inflation plus any added capital value.) This ensures continued affordability;
e. Obtaining comprehensive, all-risk insurance in bulk, in order to minimise cost and maximise cover;
f. Obtaining government grants and subsidies that may be available to first time homebuyers.
g. Joint ventures are undertaken with local employers, in order to train the unemployed to meet the specific needs of local industrial and or commercial jobs.
h. Finally, the main value in the Beyond Shelter - Australia project Habitat 21 is that beneficiaries build equity for themselves and for their families. Social equity is achieved by working with others and capital equity is achieved through ownership of property.

To understand why Beyond Shelter - Australia is taking this innovative approach, which is far beyond the scope or methods that have been adopted by others, we need, perhaps, to take a fresh look at old ideas. For example, leasing land has been a practice in some areas for decades. In Western Australia, the gold-mining town of Kalgoorlie/Boulder supplied low-cost leasehold land over 100-years ago. It's useful to look back at a past where homelessness was not the problem that it is today and see what lessons can be taken from it. A good perspective is provided by Eric Hunting in 'The Nature of Form'. The following extract contains ideas that we have tried to apply in the Habitat 21 project:

"Where did your house come from?
A simple question, but one with a very complicated and increasingly critical answer today. Yet just a couple hundred years ago, the answer to this question was so simple as to be inconsequential. Most people lived in homes built by their own hands and made from the materials they had around them. The architecture was dictated by the types of materials available and the cultural traditions of the inhabitants.

Today homelessness is the direct product of an increasingly impractical housing industry which has destroyed vernacular architecture, made it impossible to shelter people at a realistic individual and environmental cost, and taken away the individual's right to shelter himself through his own skills and labour."

By reworking natural materials and by considering the substantial resource of the unemployed as labour, the actual construction is no longer a problem. Beyond Shelter - Australia can now produce affordable homes using volunteer labour, donated material, alternative materials, innovative architecture, simple design modular construction and by using low-cost urban land.

Project Habitat 21 is for homeless, low income people living in poverty, giving them back their dignity, providing them with a service enriched environment, a home, lifting their standard of living and helping them to gain employment.

If we are to succeed in solving homelessness we must solve its companion problem, poverty. The innovative project Habitat 21 pioneered by Beyond Shelter - Australia effectively does both.

As a non-profit organisation, Beyond Shelter - Australia has a very difficult task to keep pace with the demand and welcome all support and donations. To date we have received no support from any Australian government, although this may change as our project develops and graduates from our programme emerge. We also provide an advisory service to fellow agencies and welcome any enquiries or suggestions. ●

REACTION:

AN « IGLOO » in Australia?

by Michel Mercadié, *Vice-President of FEANTSA*

The IGLOO programme was set up in 1993 through a partnership between three European networks: CECODHAS[1], FEANTSA and the ETUC[2]. It ran until 2000 and indeed certain national projects, which grew from it, continue to run in countries like France and Spain. To find out more about IGLOO, see FEANTSA newsletter article 'The IGLOO venture: Partnerships for Sustainable Networking" in FEANTSA Newsletter Winter 2003: http://www.feantsa.org/news/newsletters/networking_newsletter_en_dec_2003.pdf. Copies of the IGLOO report "For a global integration through housing and jobs" are also available from FEANTSA, on request.

Although a comparison of "Habitat 21" with the European programme "IGLOO" may be debatable, given that it takes no account of the different socioeconomic contexts, it is nonetheless possible to highlight some common characteristics and some differences.

An approach that takes the whole family into account and the provision of a personal support service, within the framework of an integrated local environment, are elements that point to a shared philosophy and approach: insertion into a home (and not simply into accommodation), must take into account all the dimensions of social life: work, health, education, etc. in a local framework.

From the point of view of construction, I noticed that Habitat 21 has recourse to several principles, which, to my mind, are fundamental elements of such a project: the use of leased land, modular construction, which reduces costs, without diminishing the quality of the housing constructed. Finally, the use of grants and subsidies is a reminder that social action is dependent on solidarity. As the EU has recognised, investments have a cost.

The differences between Habitat 21 and IGLOO should also be pointed out, for often they are the result of ideological choices, or indeed may relate to specific characteristics of Australian and European society. The first is related to the link with employment. While IGLOO associates employment and construction (or renovation) of housing, Habitat 21 seeks rather to facilitate insertion into the local labour market. It could well be interesting to discuss the choice of using volunteers in the construction process with Habitat 21. We think, rather, that working with professionals serves to lift the programme out of the purely charitable sphere, making it rather a question of a common right and thus encouraging insertion.

Finally, the question of costs should be examined. IGLOO does not produce housing that costs less per square metre than social housing, using low-cost materials. The choice to stay within the norm of social housing is part of insertion! It is rather in its method of financing the 'normal' cost of housing that IGLOO is unusual.

Aside from these differences of approach and of society, however, IGLOO shares with Habitat 21 its recognition of the growing social exclusion in developed societies and the need to go beyond the provision of emergency accommodation – or "beyond shelter!" ●

[1] CECODHAS: European Liaison Committee for Social Housing

[2] ETUC: European Trade Union Confederation.

The National Initiative for the Homeless A comprehensive and integrated community approach

By **Ali Hanrat,** *National Secretariat for the Homeless (SNSA)*

In recognition of the increasingly visible and serious problem of homelessness, particularly in large urban centres, the Canadian government created a national secretariat for the Homeless (NSH), headed by a Minister, who is designated the Federal Coordinator for the Homeless. Following a survey and a wide consultation of various governmental bodies, community organisations and homeless persons across the country, a strategy to combat homelessness entitled "the National Initiative for the Homeless" (NHI) was launched in 1999, with the aim of helping to reduce and prevent homelessness.

The NHI took innovative action by adopting a more comprehensive and integrated approach to combating homelessness. This clearly differed from previous approaches, which all too often simply consisted of investment in affordable housing. The NHI not only injected new funds into local actor initiatives, but also started a series of activities, designed to encourage local actors to take action to define, organise and make the most of resources available to them in order to help the homeless.

It is in this sense that the initiative seeks to be community-based, comprehensive and integrated. It is based on the notion of a "continuum of services." This means that the solution to the problem of homelessness cannot simply be reduced to offering a roof, rather, a large range of support measures and services, intended to help the homeless to become independent, must be provided. Furthermore, this approach is based on the mobilisation of the community and widespread cooperation between different actors concerned by homelessness and service providers (accommodation, employment, physical and mental health, training, etc.).

A. THE BASIC PRINCIPLES

The NHI based its approach on the premise that the fragmentation of the existing support network for the homeless and the lack of coordination between service providers, limits the effectiveness of the actions undertaken, as well as the integrated accessibility of services and programmes. From this basic premise, The NHI elaborated the following principles:

The complexity of the phenomenon and the variety of issues at stake means that the solution to the problem cannot be the sole undertaking of a government body (whether federal, provincial or municipal), nor can it be dealt with by community actors alone. Rather the solution must be based on partnerships formed between governmental institutions and community bodies, which are determined to pool their resources and efforts. The actors on the ground, who work directly with the homeless or with people at risk of becoming homeless, are certainly the best placed to find effective solutions at local level and to apply them. The planning of actions and the allocation of funding are carried out by local actors themselves. These actors must assume responsibility for action taken and take on a monitoring role, as well as oversee the application of detailed plans to meet the numerous and complex needs of people and families who are homeless.

B. THE AIMS OF THIS INITIATIVE

The NHI's primary aim is to encourage local actors to unite their efforts to define common objectives and to establish strategic action plans concerning the most effective way to use available resources. It invites and helps local actors to make services more accessible and sufficiently integrated to not only cater for urgent needs, but also to help and support the homeless in order to break the cycle of homelessness. The third objective of The NHI is to make the problem of homelessness in Canada better known and understood, in order to help to elaborate more effective and targeted policies. In other words, the main strategic objective of The NHI is to break the cycle of homelessness by strengthening the capacities of local actors and helping to ensure that they remain constant, in order to allow them to offer a complete range of services that will encourage the independence of the homeless and will help to prevent those at risk from becoming homeless.

C. THE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

The community partnership approach, which has been adopted, favourises the cooperation and concerting of the efforts of different governmental bodies (federal, provincial/territorial and municipal), as well as cooperation with the private sector and the voluntary sector. Local actors[1] are obliged to carry out a joint planning and consultation process concerning services for the homeless. The planning process allows local actors to allocate funds according to their particular needs and encourages the creation of a continuum of services (covering prevention, emergency shelter, support services, as well transitional housing, supervised housing and indeed permanent housing.)

The NHI's primary aim is to encourage local actors to unite their efforts to define common objectives and to establish strategic action plans concerning the most effective way to use available resources.

By making the elaboration of a large-scale, integrated community plan a condition that must be fulfilled in order to receive financial aid, the initiative favours close cooperation, the participation of new groups and the creation of innovative partnerships between non-profit organisations on the one hand, and various institutional partners on the other. More than just a simple document, it represents a process, a way in which the community may unite its efforts by building on a shared understanding of common problems and solutions. It also seeks to make the most of the strong points of a given community and to enrich its capacities by drawing on other sources and thus to work towards the creation of a continuum of services for the homeless which is more complete and functions more smoothly.

D. THE MAIN COMPONENTS OF THE INITIATIVE

The NHI is made up of various parts:

a. *The Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI)* is the cornerstone of the NHI. This programme allows local groups and all governmental bodies to come together to find approaches that may be applied most effectively in their own particular circumstances. It seeks to increase the availability of services and to encourage the setting–up of a continuum of services, ranging from homelessness to independence, as well as access to these services (emergency shelters, transitional and supervised housing, prevention, etc.) SCPI is funded by the government of Canada on an equal cost-sharing basis (50:50). The local actors receive federal funding, which must be combined with other financial sources (fundraising, money from local sleeping partners, subsidies etc.) This approach seeks to encourage local actors to procure financial support from a wide range of sources and to bring together provincial, territorial and municipal government bodies, the private sector and the voluntary sector in a dynamic and concerted drive to reinforce existing capacities and to find new solutions to the problems of homelessness.

b. *Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS):* the aim of this programme is to meet the needs of aboriginal Canadians who are homeless or who are at risk of becoming so. It seeks to facilitate the development of a system of service provision which is more integrated, more adequate from a cultural point of view and which focuses more on local action in order to meet the needs of aboriginal Canadians. This UAS element is integrated into an overall strategy aimed at aboriginal Canadians and at improving their well-being in urban areas and at reducing the disparities of treatment between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians.

c. *Strategy for the young homeless:* a part of the initiative was specially dedicated to tackling the problem of homelessness among young people. This strategy seeks to meet their urgent needs in the areas of housing and of support and to help them to be reintegrated into the school system or into work through targeted programmes. This strategy is carried out with the cooperation the Youth Employment Initiative of the federal government and other local programmes. The primary strategic aim is to get young people off the street by offering them support services through vocational and training programmes and employment programmes, while ensuring that they are adequately and appropriately housed.

d. *The regional funds for helping the homeless* seek to support small communities and rural communities which are confronted with the problem of homelessness at local level and which, quite often, do not have the resources necessary to address the issues related to this problem. Thanks to these targeted funds for strengthening support and prevention services, the programme helps to combat the usual movement to large urban centres and thus prevents extra pressure from being placed on the infrastructure and services in these centres. Similarly to the programmes which target aboriginal Canadians, this programme is exempt from the 50:50 cost sharing formula. Instead the funds received from the Federal government cover all costs emanating from the projects undertaken by local actors.

e. *CHMC Renovation and Conversion Programmes (*run by the Canadian Housing and Mortgages Corporation). By offering financial support to property owners, the programme facilitates the modification and repair of housing, as well as the conversion of non-residential high-rise buildings into affordable housing for people on a low income. These measures allow the imposition of norms of hygiene and safety and thus they can guarantee the existence of adequate housing at an affordable price for this sector of the population. The funds from this programme may also be used to modify housing, which is occupied by handicapped people or by the elderly people who are living on a low income, in order to adapt it to their needs and their condition. In parallel, another programme provides financial aid for the creation or the repair of shelters for women, children and young people who have been victims of domestic violence, as well as for transitional housing which helps the homeless to move towards independence.

f. *The Surplus Federal Real Property for the Homelessness Initiative:* this initiative seeks to place surplus federal sites at the disposal of organisations which manage shelters and affordable housing, in order to help reduce the high costs associated with fixed assets, in the form of the purchase of sites or buildings. Thus non-profit organisations and other levels of government (provincial, territorial and municipal) can receive federal buildings and sites, with a view to creating infrastructures to receive the homeless and persons at risk.

E. THE APPLICATION

An initial budgetary envelope of 753 million dollars was allocated to this initiative by the federal government (1999-2003) and another 405 were allocated when the initiative was renewed for the period 2003-2006. This Federal funding helps to increase the capacity for action of actors at local level, to favour investment in infrastructure and services for the homeless and to increase knowledge and information on the problem of homelessness in Canada.

a. *The actions undertaken*

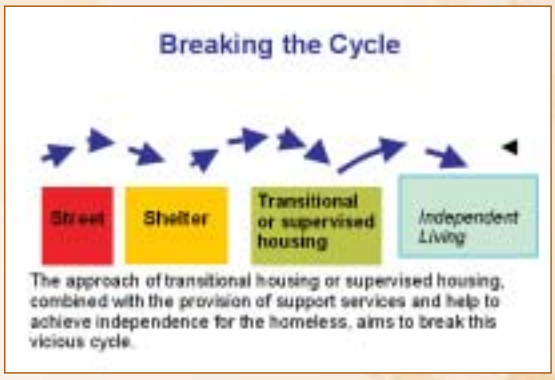
• *Phase I:* during the first few years of the initiative, action was mainly concentrated in the area of increasing the capacity of the infrastructure to meet the most urgent needs of the homeless. Thus, local actors tended mainly to invest in the construction, renovation or modernization of shelters, as well as on improving various support services, such as food and furniture banks.

• *Phase II*: The prolongation of the initiative was intended to help local actors to continue their efforts to reduce and eliminate homelessness. The latter could thus offer increased aid to the homeless and concentrate on more long-term solutions, such as temporary and supervised housing. Thus greater emphasis is placed on preventive action and on support, as many homeless people need help with transition in order to reach a greater degree of stability. These transition/support actions may take the form of training programmes or a return to education, training in interpersonal relations, help to prepare for work and help with job-seeking, physical and/or mental health treatment or counselling to prevent, overcome or reduce drug or alcohol addiction. These support services may be offered for a fixed period, when the person is housed in quality transitional housing. This constitutes a safe environment and thus favours the achievement of independence of the person living there through the support services offered (financed by Federal or provincial financial aid) and the employment resources made available.

b. *Final Objective: To Break the cycle*

The NHI approach is based on the provision of a continuum of services at local level to allow homeless people to get off the street and to escape from other difficult and dangerous living conditions and help them to move towards living in shelters and then on to transitional and supervised housing, combined with support services, to finally give them the possibility of independent living. Studies have shown that combining transitional and supervised housing with the provision of social support services can lead to a reduction of the numbers of homeless, improve the stability of the chronic homeless and offer improved quality of life for persons suffering from mental health problems, drug addiction and chronic health conditions. Furthermore, this type of housing and service provision is more profitable, as it reduces the numbers in shelters, as well as the number and length of hospital stays and incarcerations. According to a study carried out in British Colombia, in February 2001, the costs associated with supervised housing over a one-year period varied between 16 000 $ and 28 000$ CAN per person, depending on the location and nature of services on offer; whereas cost estimates for emergency services and shelters are between 30 000 $ et 40 000 $ CAN per person, per year. A similar study carried out in new York reveals that certain chronic homeless cost, on average, some 40 450$ US of public funds per person, whereas the average cost per person in a supervised housing unit is about 16 300 $ US per year.

Follow-up costs have also been recorded in the areas of hospitalisation and imprisonment. For example, the cost of supervised housing, which offers some degree of support services, varies between 20 $ and 90 $ a day. The cost of emergency shelter varies from between 31 $ and 85 $ to much higher sums, depending on the nature of support services provided – intensive care costs some 512$ a day, it costs 318$ for a psychiatric hospital and between 155 and 250$ for each day spent in a provincial prison or between 90 and 125$ for a municipal cell. In 1995 the New York enterprise group "Almost Home" estimated the cost of homelessness as follows: a bed in a psychiatric hospital: 113 000 $ US per year (310 $ US a day); a prison cell: 60 000 $ US per year (164 $ US per day); a shelter: 20 000 $ US per year (55 $ US per day); and a permanent and supervised housing unit: 12 500 $ US per year (34 $ US per day).



F. UNDERSTANDING HOMELESSNESS AND COUNTING THE HOMELESS

Research is another element of the NHI. By including research as a strand in its own right of the NHI strategy to combat homelessness, the NSH is demonstrating the utility of filling the comprehension gaps that exist in relation to different aspects of homelessness, such as its primary causes and the factors that may contribute to it, as well as putting the understanding gained to use, in order to support the elaboration of effective measures and policies, which will contribute to preventing and reducing homelessness. To this end the NHI action plan includes the setting up of a database of this fundamental information concerning the homelessness situation in Canada.

The National Research Programme (NRP)

The NRP is based upon partnerships with research groups, community organisations, other Federal ministries and universities. Research projects are financed and initiated directly or jointly with other ministries or institutions. The research agenda 1999-2003 was centred, essentially, on three main issues, which covered the structural or systemic problems relating to homelessness, the profiles of the homeless and the needs of various groups (families, young people, aboriginal Canadians) and the best ways of improving the capability of local actors, in order to make them more effective in reducing homelessness in the long term. The agenda of the NRP 2003-2006 has made certain specific themes directly related to homelessness a priority: health, the legal system, immigration, diversity, the cycles of homelessness, education, employment and income, as well as homelessness in the north of Canada.

True to its primary objective of capacity-building of communities, the NSH makes a partnership between a researcher or research center and a community body active in the area of homelessness, a precondition of all financing of research projects. This partnership is beneficial in many different ways for both parties concerned (knowledge transfer, exchanges, bringing together of the world of academic research and bodies working on the ground to combat homelessness, collaboration in studies and surveys, etc.)

Homeless Individuals and Families Information System

Given the lack of systematic analysis on homelessness and on the needs of the homeless, HIFIS serves as the basis for a national system of information gathering. The HIFIS is an easy-to-use tool, for the collection of electronic data and it is accessible to shelters and local actors all over Canada. It is used by shelters, both as a tool for organizing their daily activities, as well as source of national statistics on the profiles of the homeless for use in the elaboration of future policies.

The HIFIS serves to bring together a common group of basic variables, such as the demographic characteristics of the homeless who use homeless shelters, the factors which contribute to homelessness, the reasons why people turn to shelters, the reasons why they leave them, as well as the health profiles of the clients of shelters. The centres for the homeless can personalize the computer software according to their own information needs.

G. CONCLUSION

The most long-term advantage of the SCPI is to have created a "collective will" to plan. Indeed, the evaluation and the lessons learned from the first phase of the initiative have confirmed the benefits of this approach, which allows different actors to meet, to establish and to build upon networks of mutual confidence and coordination, to get to know existing needs and potential at local level better, to exchange innovative ideas and best practices, to encourage the creation of partnerships and the putting place of a continuum of services and thus to arrive at improved service provision.

As regards precise results in figures, The NHI has allowed thousands of partnerships at local, provincial and national level to be put in place and over 1,800 projects have been undertaken, financed in total or in part by The NHI. These projects have, among other things, allowed some 8,000 new permanent beds in shelters to be put in place in shelters, transitional and supervised housing. Some 1,000 accommodation and care centres have been constructed or renovated (such as food banks, soup kitchens, day and night centres). 50 transfers of federal properties were approved, within the framework of the programme strand which targets surplus federal property for use by the homeless. This in turn allowed the creation of 212 affordable, transitional housing units. Finally, other funding was obtained to the value of more than half a billion Canadian dollars, which will be invested, along with government financing, in order to carry out new projects for the homeless. •

HANNAT Ali
Ministry of Human Resources and Skills Development, Canada –
National Secretariat for the Homeless (SNSA)
Ottawa, March 2004

[1] Local actors: this refers to all organisations and institutions, both public and private, who are active in the area of homeless and the provision of related services and which are situated in a defined geographical area (town, extended town and suburbs, etc.)

The Human Face of the NHI – the Story of Geraldine Lush[1]

Geraldine went home to die. She went back to the place where she and her ten brothers and sisters had been raised, a place that had brought her so much physical, emotional and sexual abuse. She went home to finish her life as she had been living it, with booze and pills. Fortunately for Geraldine, and all the lives she would touch in the years to come, she didn't succeed. But she still had some difficult times to face. A continuing drug and alcohol problem, a series of abusive relationships, life on the streets and two prison sentences were still in front of her. "I knew there was something wrong with me, but I didn't know what it was," says Geraldine. "And I couldn't find any answers outside of the prison system."

After prison, she entered into an abusive relationship and moved in with a man who lived in Carew Lodge, a notorious den of crime and violence in St. John's, Newfoundland. As Geraldine's life in the lodge unfolded during the next few years, her next-door neighbour would be murdered and there would be three other suspicious deaths. There would be fires, bomb threats and frequent visits from the police, fire and ambulance services. But Geraldine is a tough woman. She was one of the few women who were tough enough to live in Carew Lodge. And, if any of us can point to a moment in our lives when everything changes, when we take a completely new direction, it is Geraldine Lush.

It started when Stella Burry Community Services (SBCS), a corporation run by the United Church of Canada, purchased the Carew Lodge building in 1998. Jocelyn Greene, executive director of SBCS, started looking for funding to upgrade the building. She tirelessly lobbied all levels of government and secured over $500,000 from the Government of Canada's Homelessness Initiative and over $200,000 from the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador.

She also needed a new superintendent for the building. Then an unconventional thought occurred to her. What if they offered the job to someone who lived at Carew Lodge? Someone who was tough enough to live there, and respected enough to shepherd through the changes they had planned for the building. What if Geraldine Lush was the superintendent? "Geraldine was also a participant in some of our programs," says Jocelyn of the woman who by this time had overcome her addictions. "She's bright, capable and has been through the rough and tumble." Jocelyn chuckles as she remembers when she offered Geraldine the job. "She was really floored!" Geraldine puts it another way. "Nobody's ever done anything for me without strings attached and it really costing me. I thought it was a joke and had to ask Jocelyn to tell me straight out that it wasn't."

It was no joke.

Together with Jocelyn and the others at SBCS, Geraldine worked to transform Carew Lodge. They used the federal funding to completely rebuild Carew Lodge into a long-term housing facility for fourteen low-income singles. There are also outreach services and a resource centre. Carew Lodge is now safe, supportive and a part of the community. The police, fire and ambulance services are rarely around. Most of the residents, who by nature are often transient, have stayed and brought some stability to their lives. And the neighbourhood's reaction to the building is considerably improved.

This is partly because of the improved condition of the building, but also because Geraldine went door-to-door and talked with the neighbours in the surrounding houses about who they were and what they were doing. "I put a face to the place. There is no NIMBY around here," she says referring to the "not in my back yard" reaction that can often occur. And how did the residents who knew Geraldine before she was the superintendent react? "I tell the residents that 'I'm just like you guys, I still went through the ringer. I just want to do something more with my life,'" says Geraldine.

Perhaps most telling of all, when you think of the woman who once tried to take her own life, Geraldine says something that sums up her transformation.

"I love what I do."

***Stella Burry Corporation**, Carew Lodge – St. John's, Newfoundland*

[1] No names have been changed. Permission was given by all individuals named in the story.

From Housing… to Homelessness

By **Margaret Eberle** and **Luba Serge**

The Canadian homelessness situation on many levels is very similar to that found in the United States and many western European countries: increasing numbers; new groups such as youth, women, and families finding themselves homeless; and growing recognition that for some the problem is more than *houselessness* and encompasses social exclusion. And, as in other countries, structural changes can be seen as playing a pivotal role in contributing to the problem. Over the last two decades, Canadians have witnessed a significant restructuring of senior government social policies, including affordable housing, and their relation to the provinces and individuals.

Homelessness in Canada

While longitudinal data on the scope of homelessness in Canada are rare, there is ample evidence, based on demands placed on services to homeless persons across the country that the numbers in Canada have grown and continue to grow. Diversity is a central theme in describing homeless persons and service providers are struggling to meet the specific needs of each target group.

- Family homelessness is visible for the first time, and a recent study found that family homelessness in Canada is growing. Most homeless families are headed by single mothers, between the ages of 26 and 29, and have one or two children living with them.[1]
- Homeless youth can be found in most large cities and share common characteristics of exposure to physical violence, alcohol and drug abuse, mental health problems, and sexual abuse. Youth having experienced the child welfare system are over represented and some cities have especially high proportions of Aboriginal youth. The proportion of young women appears to be growing.
- More shelters are accommodating employed workers who cannot afford or cannot find affordable housing. In Calgary, 50% of the absolute homeless were employed either full or part-time, according to a recent study, a proportion that has increased over time.
- The face of homelessness is particularly apparent among the country's urban aboriginal population, who are over-represented among shelter users in almost every count, and although this is an area of concern, there is little research on specific causes or solutions.

As elsewhere, homelessness is difficult to quantify, although some progress has been made. At the national level, the 2001 Census added "shelters" to the types of collective dwellings enumerated in order to better identify the population staying in emergency or temporary accommodation for persons who may have no other usual place of residence. Facilities for abused women/partners and their children, halfway houses and other shelters with some form of assistance were included the survey. On census day in 2001 14,150 individuals were staying in homeless shelters. This figure in no way represents the full extent of homelessness, as it excluded the street and hidden homeless.

The federal government is introducing a national homelessness database that would track individual shelter use over time. The Homeless Individuals and Families Information System will be used to collect demographic information on shelter clients, the immediate reason for using a service, length of stay and contributing factors to homelessness. The first aggregation of data is expected in 2004.

As a response to crisis situations, efforts to enumerate the homeless have occurred at the local level, in individual cities, towns, or metropolitan areas. One of the most comprehensive studies was undertaken by the City of Toronto in 1998. The 300-page report identified youth and families as the fasted growing group among the homelessness population and attributed much of the growth of homelessness to a lack of affordable housing, due to the spread of poverty and a decline of inexpensive rental accommodation.

Backdrop

The diversity of the homeless population and changes to the Canadian welfare state all point to structural causes of homelessness. The 1980s and 1990s were characterized by a move to fiscal conservatism at the federal and provincial levels, which ultimately led to major policy shifts. The drop in federal transfers to provinces begun in the 1980s lead to major restructuring of social welfare programs as the provinces, many also moving towards a more conservative position, adopted policies such as 'welfare to work' income assistance strategies and reduced benefit levels for certain groups, including youth. Other changes such as declines in real median incomes, increases in the number of households living in poverty, the growth of non-standard employment, low vacancy rates in rental housing, and gentrification, all formed a backdrop of growing fragility and social exclusion of vulnerable populations.

The role of housing

Housing problems reflect these trends. The rental housing stock became more and more residualised, so that for example in Toronto, between 1996 and 2001, the rental share of the housing market declined, both in relative and absolute terms. At the same time, the number of households at risk of homelessness (i.e. paying over 50% of their income on rent) grew. According to the latest census data, almost three-quarters of a million Canadian households find themselves in this situation.

Perhaps nowhere is the link between housing and homelessness more evident than in Montreal where most rental leases end on July 1st. Because there is a very low vacancy rate in rental apartments, especially affordable, family-sized units, and in spite of tenant protection legislation, hundreds of households find themselves on the street on the day their leases end. This situation, which has played itself out for a number of years (and as the City gears up to deal with the problem again this year), illustrates the widely cited analogy that likens the pursuit of affordable housing to a game of musical chairs. When there are not enough "chairs" to go around, the weak and disadvantaged are not as quick to lay claim to a chair when the music stops.

Although housing is a provincial responsibility, the federal government had assumed responsibility since the Second World War as part of the war effort. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), established in 1946 to help house returning veterans, expanded its role over the years to include mortgage guarantees, and funding for the provision of public and social housing. At its peak, over 20,000 social housing units were being funded annually with the end result that in Canada about 7% of the housing stock, some 700,000 units out of a total 10 million units are social housing, in projects managed by provincial governments and municipal or non-profit housing agencies. To the extent that Canadian housing policy was focused on creating affordable social housing during this period, there may be said to have been an implicit homelessness *prevention* policy. Starting in 1986 this role was reduced and responsibility for the delivery of non-profit programs was transferred to the provinces and territories. In 1993 the CMHC withdrew all support for new social housing.

For several years thereafter, market solutions to housing affordability predominated at the federal level. Examples include permitting the use of registered retirement savings plans as down payments for homeownership, and more recently, waiving of down-payments altogether. Inspired by the American example, partnerships with private and non-profit organisations have been encouraged through a centre devoted to this purpose within CMHC and has led to the development of affordable housing projects using a variety of tools and resources throughout the country on an ad hoc basis.

Some provinces maintained their own social housing programs in the face of declining federal involvement, but over time and with changes in provincial leadership, most have abandoned funding new social housing and like the federal government, redoubled their efforts in support of market initiatives. Two provinces maintained a separate social housing program during this period.

Current homelessness policies

A major turning point in Canadian response to homelessness was the declaration in November 1998 by the Big City Mayors Caucus of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities that homelessness was a national disaster. It called on the federal government to take immediate action to institute a 10-year program to provide new affordable housing units, funds for rehabilitation of units, and improvements to income or rent assistance. One of the country's leading banks, the Toronto Dominion Bank, even entered the fray by calling for the federal government to take action to address the situation.

The response at the federal level has been threefold. In 1999 the federal government created a Minister in charge of co-ordinating homelessness initiatives, established a National Secretariat on Homelessness (NSH), and launched the National Homelessness Initiative. This initiative initially introduced for three years and renewed in 2003 for another 3-year period includes a number of components including the homeless database, support for communities to strengthen capacity and develop new responses, an urban Aboriginal strategy, and a fund for small and rural communities. The NHI is based on a "continuum of supports" approach to *planning* for homelessness (prevention, emergency shelter, outreach, support services, transitional, supportive and permanent housing), but in the first round stopped short of offering *funding* for the final rung on the ladder – resettlement in permanent affordable housing. While the community-based focus of this initiative has had some success in bringing resources together within designated communities to plan for and implement strategies to address homelessness, the situation, by all accounts, continues to worsen. And the response on a community-by-community basis has been quite varied.

The primary outcome of the federal homelessness initiative is a significant increase in the number of direct services for homeless, particularly shelter beds. A recent evaluation of the first three years of the initiative concludes that "NHI funds have been spent on a wide range of projects across the continuum of supports, but have primarily focused on meeting emergency needs. More work remains to be done in the development of transitional facilities and services. … There is a reported need at this point …for communities to expand significantly on the existing base of second-stage support facilities, and to move away from the funding of emergency facilities and services in future fund allocations."

An Affordable Housing Initiative was announced in 2001 as a federal response to the deteriorating affordable housing situation, and particularly the problem of low vacancy rates. Rather than replacing the social housing program, it provides a modest contribution for provinces/territories to assist households in need. The five-year $1 billion program is a cost shared program which requires provincial participation (agreement has been reached with all provincial and territorial governments) and sets a maximum federal per unit contribution and stipulates that units must be affordable for 10 years. It is applicable to a variety of housing types and initiatives including rehabilitation of existing units, conversion from non-residential uses, home ownership, supportive housing and rent supplements. Projected to create as many as 30,000 to 35,000 units over 5 years, it has been slow to get underway and some provinces are avoiding provincial contributions by using municipal and non-profit matching funds. Nonetheless, the federal initiative, though modest, has suc-

cessfully levered some provincial dollars in support of affordable housing. Recent announcements by Prime Minister point to a forthcoming election pledge for a 5-year program and acknowledgment that the –" government had been erratic in its support for housing".

One of the major issues has been the role of Canadian cities in these initiatives and in dealing with social problems. As mentioned above, the mayors of the large cities were instrumental in pushing the federal government to respond to the homelessness issue, and in addressing homelessness. However, there is still a considerable shortfall between the cost of programs municipalities must deliver, and what they can afford – currently estimated at $60-billion by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. To this end, the recent speech from the throne promised a new deal for municipalities that would target infrastructure and deliver "predictable and long-term funding" for affordable housing, transit, health care, schools, and green spaces. Means proposed include exempting local governments from the federal sales tax estimated to be worth $550-million and other fiscal mechanisms such as sharing a portion of gas tax revenues.

Conclusion and what's next

Canada has moved from a situation in the 1970s and 80s, when homelessness was a rare phenomenon with a housing policy that could be said to be preventive to the point where homelessness is now prevalent in many Canadian cities, large and small. Given the overwhelming need, policy is now largely premised on meeting emergency needs and alleviating the worst conditions. Because various levels of government and the community sector are involved, all with varying capacities and priorities, the approach on a nation-wide level is piecemeal. Jurisdictional issues also intercede when dealing with support services for homeless persons who need more than housing. This is a major issue for providers in all provinces – the integration of housing, permanent or temporary, with services, is still severely underdeveloped, leaving issues of social reintegration ignored.

Nonetheless, innovative approaches have been developed and continue to emerge. In British Columbia, for example, a model of multi-stage housing has been promoted, consisting of emergency shelter, transitional housing, and expandable capacity in cold wet weather. In Toronto, Eva's Phoenix offers transitional housing and training for youth 16-24 in what was a former fire department repair garage, donated by the City of Toronto, that was transformed into five two-storey row houses (each with five bedrooms) on each side of an interior main street. In Ottawa, the Mission offers 14 beds for homeless persons or those at risk, in need of palliative care based on a harm reduction approach. In Winnipeg, the Native Women's Transition Centre, a safe home for Native women and children, uses the concept of the Healing Circle to help the women heal from the effects of experiences such as violence and abuse.

Innovation is also evident in funding. The Calgary Homeless Foundation, a collaboration between the private sector, non-profit sector and governments, is a unique example of an organization that has engaged corporate and individual financial and other support for initiatives to address homelessness, contributing capital funding toward at least 30 projects since its inception. Other jurisdictions are looking at this model with interest.

What can we expect to see over next few years? Major policy shifts are unlikely in the foreseeable future. The national homelessness initiative is now scheduled to end in 2006, once again making long-term planning difficult. It is carefully not being institutionalized, which on the one hand, is positive since it indicates the government doesn't see this as a permanent issue requiring a full-fledged homelessness system. On the other hand, the 3-year cycle means there is no medium/long-term planning, and it is difficult to sustain worthwhile projects. We will likely see some adjustments to national homelessness initiative funding allocations along the continuum in favour of more transitional and supported housing.

Direction on homelessness continues to take place at the local level both by default and design, but local governments are not in the fiscal position to address it. The recent federal budget is considered "a very good start" to revenue sharing with the municipalities, but still lacks a clear time frame for implementation. Provincial roles will undoubtedly continue to be varied as each responds to differing priorities from diverse political philosophies.

If the ultimate goal is the elimination of homelessness, all that is known about homelessness underlines that while alleviation is critical to help those who are homeless, the key is prevention – both prevention of first time homelessness and prevention of reoccurrence. Until real progress is made in tightening up Canada's social safety net, including access to decent affordable housing, Canada is far from finding permanent solutions for all those who are currently homeless and preventing those at risk of homelessness from joining their ranks. •

[1] CMHC Research Highlights. Socio-economic Series 03-006. Family Homelessness: Causes and Solutions. July 2003.

REACTION:

Homelessness in Canada: the Lessons to be learned from the Canadian Experience

by **John Evans,** *Former President of FEANTSA*

Each time a report on homelessness appears from a country with which I am not familiar, two things become very clear. On the one hand, there are elements of homeless deprivation which are common world-wide and on the other, each country has its own specific problems. The report from Canada demonstrates these characteristics.

To begin by examining the second of these, homelessness among aboriginal peoples, youth or otherwise, is not an issue in the European context. Family homelessness, single parent or not, has been part of the scene for many years, but many European countries and especially the U.K. prioritise children and families with children for immediate attention by State authorities. Therefore, whilst family homelessness is evident, it is usually being addressed and resourced. The truly unique element in the Canadian scene appears to be the growing numbers of employed persons using homeless shelters because they cannot afford housing. Given the rapid and continued rise in house prices in certain western European countries this may well be a signal warning to government policy makers here.

We are all familiar with the difficulties of enumerating homeless people. Statutory figures tend to underestimate and NGOs - dare I say it - may well err in the opposite direction. The truth probably lies somewhere between the two. Unfortunately civil servants and politicians like simple defined problems to which they can deliver simple defined and time limited answers and are reluctant to accept that in terms of homeless statistics these cannot be given. Too much in time and resources can be devoted to this end. We know there is social exclusion in its most extreme form with homeless people. We know there is a problem and whether there are 65 or 87 homeless people sleeping rough on the streets of any given city on 5th December 2003 is not significant - one is too many!

Elements from the Canadian report, which are familiar to us, are several. Firstly, changes to welfare benefits systems, which restrict entitlements, are well known. Conservative policies of the last quarter of the twentieth century have increased the gap between the rich and the poor and decreased the fiscal ability of the latter to access such essentials as housing.

A recent report from Ireland highlighted a district, which has, for some time, been building Affordable Housing. The take-up of these units has been so low, that the authorities are considering stopping the Affordable House building programme. The problem is that Affordable housing based on commercial and market values and definitions, is simply NOT affordable for those in low-paid employment or even jobs which pay at, or around, the average national salary. When considering homelessness and its resolution, affordable in housing terms needs to be defined in relation to a percentage of disposable incomes and not by the market. In these terms, it is almost impossible to provide affordable houses in the private sales market without subsidy.

It is notable that Canadian Federal Government initiatives have fallen into the same twin traps as government policies in Europe. They have concentrated on short-term solutions and short-term funding - three years really is short-term when attempting to address the problems of people who may well have been experiencing deprivation, exclusion and homelessness for months and years - in response to the perceived crisis situation of visible homeless people. Along with this, no real attempt at prevention of future homelessness appears to have been made. Consequently the removal of one homeless person from the street or railway station, often does no more than leave room for another to very quickly take their place, or for them to return to homelessness in the foreseeable future, when their deprivation needs (mental health, substance abuse, etc.) and a supply of truly affordable social rented housing is not addressed.

Finally, and significantly, the report highlights that funding programmes have stopped short of "the final rung on the ladder" - resettlement in permanent affordable housing. The lesson has been demonstrated on many occasions, but it seems it has still has to be accepted by policy makers that it is nearly always more expensive, in the long run, not to address homelessness and exclusion – and this, of course, is speaking purely in economic terms, before ever taking into account the human dimension. •

John Evans

A new homeland should include a home

By **Jim Gurnett**, *Executive Director of Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers*

Early in the 1990s both the Canadian federal government and most of the provincial governments in Canada ended financial commitments to housing. This was part of the mania sweeping the nation to reduce government deficits at all costs, at the same time as pressure to respond to a demand for lower taxes, especially from the corporate lobby. While the savings by this, and other massive cuts to social spending, were tiny compared to other possible ways, such as a more progressive tax system, to deal with deficits, still the cuts came. Those at the economic bottom in Canada have been paying the price ever since.

By the end of the 1990s public funding supported construction of about 2000 units of housing a year, compared to more than 20 000 units a year two decades earlier. The demand for affordable housing for those with low incomes is so large, it is not sensible to even talk about waiting lists. In Edmonton, a city of 600 000 people, for example, there is an identified need for 6000 units of housing. At any time there are more than 3000 names on the waiting list of the major provider of social housing and no vacancies.

Immigrants have felt the effects of these cuts more than many Canadians. The bitter reality for newcomers to Canada is that on average the education and professional qualifications of independent class immigrants (not family or refugee class), that account for about half of the 225 000 newcomers a year, are better than their Canadian born age equivalents, yet the period of time immigrants are living below the poverty line continues to get longer.

One significant reason for this is that the federal government gives credit to qualify for immigration to those with education and professional qualifications but once people arrive in Canada the complexities of being able to work in a profession are all defined and supervised by legislation of individual professions that is under provincial jurisdiction. In most professions it is very difficult for those with international qualifications to obtain work, and people end up instead in low-skilled low-paying jobs.

A strong economy in most of Canada means that rents and the cost of new housing has increased a great deal in the past decade and the available supply is stretched to the limit. Rental vacancy rates in many Canadian cities have been two percent or less much of the time in recent years. Combined with population growth in the cities and a declining supply of social housing due to the cutbacks, it is very difficult for people with low incomes to find safe, healthy, affordable housing. Gentrification in neighbourhoods in the urban core has created more difficulties as the areas where those with little money had lived in poorer quality housing that had lower rents have been gobbled up by young professionals wanting to live near the downtown.

These events have affected a disproportionate number of recent immigrants. Currently nearly 20 percent of people in Canada were not born here and in some of the larger cities the figure is 50 percent. Independent class immigrants have been best able to deal with the challenging housing market as many arrive with some financial resources, good proficiency in an official language, and often considerable cultural competency as well. Since the places of origin have changed considerably and many immigrants now are visible minorities coming from Asia and Africa some of them may experience "NIMBYism" (Not In My Back Yard), especially since there has been some increase in racist responses to people since September 11, 2001. Utility costs for heating have also increased dramatically in the past two years, adding further to the cost of housing. But many refugees are experiencing the most severe difficulties.

The profile of recent refugees to Canada has changed from twenty years ago. Today many are coming from parts of the world where they have been displaced for ten or more years. Many are living with diagnosed mental illnesses such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression. They seldom have skills in English or French or any skills relevant to the labour market in Canada. In many cases the children have never been to school and are illiterate in their first language. Families are frequently large and often the only adult is a woman. Government supported refugees receive the same housing allowance as Canadians on welfare, which is less than half of average rental rates in most cases. Being new to Canada it is unlikely a refugee will have any reference from a previous landlord and will probably not have an extra month's rent, normally required as a security deposit. These are additional problems to obtaining housing.

The result of low income and discrimination is that refugees are often forced into very inadequate housing. It is not uncommon for them to "couch surf", or live temporarily with other members of their ethnocultural community, moving from one place to another every short while. This can have very bad consequences for children, already struggling in school, and then lacking any stability where a teacher can get to know them and work with them in an individualized way. Staff at agencies serving refuges have many horror stories of families of five or more people living in small basement suites with one bedroom and no appliances to store or prepare food.

Government supported refugees normally have up to two weeks to live in a government funded "reception house" while they look for permanent housing. Privately supported refugees will usually have housing found for them by their sponsors during their first year as well. The people who struggle the most are those who arrive and make a claim for asylum once they are in Canada, as they have no status initially and no sponsor with a financial commitment to them. In southern Ontario, where the majority of refugee claimants arrive, there are a number of facilities, primarily operated by faith-based groups, that provide short-term housing however.

Once any refugee is beyond the brief initial period of sponsorship (normally one year) they are left to compete for the small supply of lower-cost housing with many other people of low-income.

After the long period of government withdrawal from funding housing, in recent years there has been a small reinvestment. The federal government has been funding emergency housing needs for the past four years and in the past year the federal government has also presented a program to build affordable, below-market-rates, housing that requires provinces to agree to match the federal dollars. That has some promise but provinces have been slow to enter the program and there are many loopholes that reduce the possibility of it assisting the most needy.

Research by Dr. David Hulchanski at the University of Toronto has suggested that to address the current housing crisis in the nation both the federal and provincial governments would need to commit one percent of their budgets to the purpose. The current commitment is less than one tenth of that requirement.

One potentially exciting development in housing for refugees will begin in the coming months. In Edmonton the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers has been approved for funding from the government to develop a building that will offer 40 units of supported housing for refugees with more significant settlement barriers than normal, where they will be able to live in a facility

built around community but providing entirely independent homes for each. A wide range of support services will be available around the clock, seven days a week. The hypothesis is that this will assist people to integrate more quickly and successfully and result in fewer expenses for the public treasury over time, as well as being far more dignified and satisfying for the people involved. The goal would typically be that people would move on within a year or so to live independently. The project will work closely with the community organizations representing the cultures that are the source of the majority of immigrants and with a range of service providers.
If this model is successful, it could be easily duplicated in other cities where refugees face similar struggles.

Canada likes to see itself as a welcoming destination for immigrants. But the lack of policy or programs to address the lengthy period of time a majority of immigrants live in poverty and the low level of support offered to refugees arriving with complex settlement challenges calls this claim into question. The general weakness of public commitment to housing is one of the reasons many immigrants find the initial years of their lives in Canada more difficult than necessary. For far too many newcomers to Canada, their new homeland does not bring with it a safe, decent affordable home. •

***Jim Gurnett** is the Executive Director of Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers and has been active in public policy advocacy for many years. He is part of the Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness that involves about 40 community agencies in the city.*

REACTION:

Immigration and Homelessness: The Need for Targeted Services and Policies

by **Bill Edgar,** *Coordinator of the European Observatory on Homelessness*

Although Canada has traditionally been a country of net immigration, from which its population and economic growth has benefited, the pattern in Europe has been more diverse. The countries of southern Europe have, until recently, been net exporters of population, while the countries of northern Europe have experienced different patterns of emigration and immigration, depending upon their colonial history, their need for guest workers and their attitude to refugees. Both Canada and Europe share in common an increase in 'new wave' immigrants, during the last decade, coming from countries from which they have been displaced. These new wave immigrants face additional difficulties in integrating into their host country and, as a result, additional problems in obtaining housing. Canada and Europe also share a common lack of policies or programs to address the integration of such immigrants and refugees resulting in a low level of support to deal with, in Jim Gurnett's words, complex settlement challenges.

Against this background, structural changes in the housing markets in Europe have resulted in a retrenchment of state investment in provision that has led to a lack of affordable rented housing in many areas. In most countries this combination of public expenditure restraint and economic growth has led to an overheating of metropolitan and capital city housing markets, resulting in severe difficulties for all low income households. It has created particular problems for immigrants (and ethnic minority or second generation immigrant households) who tend to concentrate in the major cities.

This housing situation means that legal immigrants, even those with skills or good education, struggle to find decent affordable housing in the areas where jobs are abundant. Evidence suggests that policies for dealing with asylum seekers – whether using reception centres or dispersal programs – fail to provide support for those whose applications are accepted to find suitable housing. The increase in immigrants among service users reported by homeless service providers in recent FEANTSA research illustrates the increasing precariousness for those asylum seekers whose applications are rejected and for those who are regarded as illegal immigrants.

It is relatively easy to describe the precarious housing circumstances of increasing proportions of immigrants in all countries in Europe; it is more difficult to describe what is happening to prevent homelessness among immigrants and to support their integration into the housing market. FEANTSA research suggests that there are different problems to be addressed. Firstly, there is a need for a co-ordinated integration strategy for asylum seekers to provide support or, like the example quoted in Canada, supported accommodation while immigrant families find employment and adjust to their new life situation. This may often involve homeless service providers working in partnership with other agencies including those representing refugees and immigrant groups. Our evidence suggests that part of the reason for the increase in immigrants in traditional homeless hostels is due to the blockages caused by a lack of adequate asylum accommodation. The implications of this situation for homeless services providers need to be recognised. Secondly, there are numerous examples, in different countries, of projects that have emerged to meet the special needs of vulnerable immigrants. These include projects for women immigrants fleeing violent partners; projects for immigrants with mental health problems associated with the cause of their displacement; and projects for young unaccompanied immigrants. Thirdly, there are problems related to the needs of immigrants (including illegal immigrants) using homeless services. The legal barriers to homeless NGOs in providing services to immigrants, some of whom may be or become illegal, needs to be confronted. The management issues arising from the increase in immigrant service users include the need for appropriate funding to enable service providers to train staff and provide services related to the needs of immigrants as well as indigenous homeless populations. There is a need to consider what is the role of homeless NGOs, beyond alleviation and emergency provision, in facilitating the integration of immigrants into appropriate transitional or permanent housing. This indicates the need for further targeted research to examine the role of homeless services in the process of reception and integration of immigrants in different situations and to consult immigrants on their experiences and needs. •

The problem of Homelessness in Japan

By **Yoshihiro Okamoto**, *Professor in Chukyo University, Japan*

INTRODUCTION

Japan is the second largest economy in the world and rate of housing completions per head of population is among the highest in the world, for example, in 2000, the rate of housing completions was 9.6 per thousand people. Despite huge investments in housing, however, the number of rough sleepers is increasing rapidly. There were over 25,000 rough sleepers in Japan in 2003.

DEFINITION

People in Japan didn't have a word meaning *"homeless"* until the 1980s. Since the economic bubble burst in the beginning of 1990s, the number of rough sleepers has been increasing rapidly. The government therefore legislated a special law to tackle rough sleeping. The special measures contained in this 2002 law, which are intended to provide support for homeless people living independently, defined a homeless person as someone who lives rough in parks, streets, riverbanks, etc. without special reason. The media use the word *"homeless"* to refer to this situation. Many support groups for rough sleepers oppose this use of the word *"homeless"* because it creates the impression that rough sleepers are somehow lazy. In Japan, the definition of the word *"homeless"* encompasses only people who live in public spaces. This means that discussion about homelessness is necessarily restricted and it makes it difficult to tackle the root cause of homelessness. It would seem, in this context, that Japan should consider the problem of homelessness based on the wider meanings, which include those living in unstable housing for example, which form a part of the discussion in Europe.

THE PROFILE OF ROUGH SLEEPERS

Rough sleepers in Japan are almost always single, male, over 50 years old and in general, their most recent employment was day labour as a construction worker. The national survey carried out in 2003 reveals the character of rough sleepers as follows: the ratio of male : female rough sleepers indicates that 93.1% are men, while only 4.7% are women. The average age of rough sleepers is 55.9 years. 41.1% of them sleep in parks, 14.7% sleep on river banks, 10.6% sleep in the streets. Half of them have built some kind of temporary shelter to sleep in. 16.8% of them have only a meal a day and 46% of them have two meals a day. Two thirds are working and two thirds collect waste articles such as aluminium cans, cardboards and bottles. More than half of them (53.6%) have been employed at some time as construction workers prior to becoming rough sleepers. 38.6% of them were full time workers and 48.5% of the were day labourers or part timers. Half of them suffer from some kind of health problem. One third have contacted and consulted with welfare offices.

CAUSES OF ROUGH SLEEPING:

A*"Yoseba"* is an open-air labour collective in large urban cities in Japan. The largest *"Yoseba"* is in Osaka, called Kamagasaki, where an estimated 20,000 day labourers live in. There are others in Tokyo, Yokohama, Kawasaki, Nagoya and so on. Day labourers dependent on getting work in a *"Yoseba"* find work in booming economic conditions and stay in dosshouses. During a period of depression, however, they may be reduced to sleeping rough in and around the*"Yoseba"*. There have been some rough sleepers in and around different *"Yoseba"*. Their numbers increased sharply after the economic bubble burst. It has become very difficult for day labourers to get the jobs in the *"Yoseba"*. There are two reasons for this. The first is the employment policy in construction companies, which don't employ people who are over 50. The Japanese baby boom generation born between 1947 and 1949 were over the age of 50 by the end of the 1990s and increasingly they have failed to find jobs. The second reason is the change in the method of collecting day labourers, which is related to the management of the construction companies. The construction companies have begun to employ students or illegal foreign labour rather than day labour in the*"Yoseba"*. This is because they must pay the Japanese day labourers in the *"Yoseba"* a minimum wage that is higher than that which is accepted by students or illegal labourers. After the economic bubble burst, the great era of competition led to this new style management in Japanese companies. So together these factors explain why the *"Yoseba"* no longer work as they did formerly.

THE CHANGING PROFILE OF ROUGH SLEEPERS

Employment practices in Japan have recently gone through a period of change. The possibility of a permanent employment contract has come to an end due to corporate streamlining. Previously, companies would hire young employees who were then trained on the job. The training cost for the young has increasingly come to be seen as a burden on the management. At the same time, hiring the middle aged and the more elderly constitutes a burden on the management as well. The result is that between 20% and 40% of young persons who have just graduated from university don't get full time jobs. Most of them can only find part-time jobs. The other growing tendency is for middle-aged and more elderly employees to be suddenly fired, due to the higher salary to which they are entitled. There is a weak social security system in Japan. In the past, companies and families supplemented it. Large companies also provided welfare benefits for their employees through the company. These benefits have, however, been substantially reduced, in the name of the corporate streamlining. Another tendency which needs to be taken into account in this context is the reduction in family size over the last decades. In 1960, the average household size was 4.14 people. In the year 2000, it had decreased to 2.67. In addition, some 27.6% of households consisted of single people. Thus family networks have decreased and the function of family support has weakened. When one looks at the overall situation, lack of employment stability, weakened family support networks and poor social security, together lead to an increased risk of homelessness and rough sleeping. No job means no income, and no home. Joblessness means homelessness, which, in Japan, means sleeping rough. It is true to say that in Japan no-one is truly exempt from the risk of becoming a rough sleeper.

CONCLUSIONS

Local government authorities have established some support facilities for rough sleepers, which provide accommodation, meals and information about jobs. There are restrictive conditions attached to the use of these facilities however. Rough sleepers may only stay there for a 6 month period. As was mentioned previously, most rough sleepers suffer from some form of health problem. It is also expected that by the end of one or two months, they should have fully recovered their health and then must begin the search for jobs. The factors which lead to rough sleeping are basically the current economic conditions combined with the poor social security system in Japan. It is almost inevitable for these rough sleepers to loose their employment once they are over 50 years old. It is very difficult for them to find jobs while they are staying at the facilities provided by local authorities. First of all, it is necessary to provide permanent accommodation for rough sleepers. This should be combined with the provision of other forms of assistance, such as job training and training in the basic skills that are necessary for daily living. Social policy in the world is changing, as we move towards an increasingly market-oriented society. Yet it needs to be borne in mind how dangerous it is to widen the gap between the rich and the poor. Otherwise we must expect to see more and more people faced with homelessness and sleeping rough. •

REACTION:

Homelessness in Japan: the need for an integrated approach

by **Dearbhal Murphy,** *Communications Officer of FEANTSA*

What emerges strongly from this article is the fact that homelessness is a relatively recent phenomenon in Japan and that it has gone hand in hand with major societal changes. In Europe there is a growing understanding that macro-social changes, restructuring of welfare states and changing social networks have a direct impact on homelessness and on the profiles of the homeless. This was strongly suggested in the 2003 thematic report on "The Changing Profiles of Homeless People" from the FEANTSA European Observatory on Homelessness. In Japan, however, there seems to be little recognition that a shift towards a more market-orientated society and a demographic movement towards smaller family networks, are having a causal effect on homelessness. Thus homelessness is strongly stigmatized and even associated with laziness. The definition of homelessness described in the article reflects this point of view and it would seem that until a wider and more comprehensive understanding of the nature and causes of homelessness in Japan is reached, a more effective and integrated strategy to combat this phenomenon will not be developed. Furthermore, the current definition encompasses only those that are roofless or houseless. This type of definition makes a preventive approach difficult. It also fails to take account of those that are in insecure or inadequate housing.

It is also useful to consider the rapidly growing number of rough sleepers in Japan at the present time as a highly revelatory symptom of the nature of social exclusion in that country. It seems that the profile of rough sleepers in Japan is far less heterogeneous than in Europe. The single, highly prevalent age group and professional history, points to a very specific type of social exclusion. It indicates a growing breakdown of the integration of older workers into the labour market, across all sectors, but particularly in the construction industry. A policy to effectively combat this prevalent type of homelessness must take account of the need for interventions at the structural level, in order to prevent the growing exclusion from the labour market after the age of 50. The solutions offered also need to take account of the present realities of social exclusion in Japan. The present facilities; short-term accommodation, combined with information services about employment, can hardly hope to successfully combat homelessness, in a social climate where it is almost impossible for older workers to return to work, and where unemployment can effectively mean exclusion from housing. It is also true that Japan needs to tailor the services it offers to meet the specific needs its older homeless people may have, whether in relation to mental or physical healthcare, support in the transition to housing or help to acquire coping and daily living skills.

Thus it would seem that Japan could look towards Europe in order to reach a better understanding of the complex nature of homelessness and how to develop an integrated strategy. On the other hand, although it is not strongly emphasized in this article, it would seem that Europe too, could learn many lessons from the experience of Japan. It would seem that the social system in Japan has not given rise to the same levels of female, family and youth homelessness as Europe has experienced. It would be certainly interesting to find out why. •

Criminalization of Homelessness in the United States: A Public/Social Policy Trend

Article based on the August 2003 report: "Illegal to be Homeless: The Criminalization of Homelessness in the United States" produced by the ***National Coalition for the Homeless****. The full report and survey may be downloaded from their website: www.nationalhomeless.org.*

Introduction

The pattern of legislating against homelessness in the United States by passing city and county ordinances that target homeless people can be traced back to the mid-1980's. Public drinking and intoxication laws and laws against sleeping in public, loitering, and panhandling do not seem to be discriminatory in their wording, but they are selectively enforced to discriminate against people who look homeless.

Most people do not know or understand the causes of homelessness or the daily struggle for survival, much less the solutions to getting people off of the streets. The government, media, and individuals fall into the pattern of "victim blame," which is the act of blaming the individual for their plight without taking into account the hardships and the injustices of the system which creates and maintains poverty. In many cities in the United States, community, mental health, and drug courts act as alternatives to criminal courts. These cities usually reserve existing beds and support services like addiction treatment for these courts to use as "sentencing." As a result, these precious resources are not available voluntarily but can only be accessed by those who are arrested and tried in the alternative courts.

Public safety advocates use these courts and their "alternative sentencing" as a method of "urban cleansing" to mask their practices of criminalization in seemingly-compassionate language. These courts thrive on the misconception that people who are homeless are "treatment resistant" and therefore, must be coerced into housing and social services. The idea of treatment resistance intentionally dehumanizes people living on the streets in order to lay the foundation for legislating against the very existence of these people. No mention is made of the fact that the need greatly surpasses the available resources, housing, and services. They ignore that for every homeless person who accesses these resources, at least three cannot, because of the insufficient amount of housing, shelter, treatment, and jobs.

The Rationale behind Criminalization:

The Expediency Factor: Out of Sight, Out of Mind

At the same time that the growing demand for emergency beds and services remains unmet, cities have generally failed to address the root causes of poverty and homelessness. For example, homeless people frequently receive life-skills training instead of jobs that pay livable wages; case management instead of treatment; and shelters or transitional housing instead of permanent housing. Homeless people who are unable to access these limited services or who fall outside the current system are targeted as "service resistant" and become victims of more expedient solutions to their presence. As a result, many city governments have adopted an "out of sight, out of mind" attitude that involves sweeping homeless people and their property from public areas. This attitude is synonymous with the sentiments that result in the criminalization of homelessness; it attempts to push it from view by making living outside illegal and increasingly dangerous. Once individuals become homeless they are vulnerable to countless acts of violence and injustice and are targets of violations of their civil and human rights.

Political Rationale for Criminalization

Criminalizing the life-sustaining acts of people experiencing homelessness without offering legal alternatives is supported by conservative think tanks like the Criminal Justice Legal Foundation (CJLF), http://www.cjlf.org, and the Center for Community Interest (CCI), formerly the American Alliance for Rights and Responsibilities, www.communityinterest.org. These think tanks apply the rules of private ownership to their recommendations for ways that cities should control public space. These groups publish and advocate anti-homeless policies under the guise of preserving the "common good." The CJLF has especially targeted solicitation under the justification that whatever is good for private development is good for all urban residents. They publish reports and manuals that detail methods for regulating panhandling.

In addition, the CCI publishes anti-panhandling guides and defines itself as "a leading advocate for urban quality-of-life and safe-streets measures" that works "to protect children from sexual predators; and to get guns out of schools, drug dealers out of housing projects, porn shops out of neighborhoods, aggressive panhandlers out of ATM lobbies and mentally ill substance abusers into treatment and off the streets." Simply in this definition, the CCI lumps panhandlers into the same category as sexual predators and drug dealers.

The Costs of Criminalization

Economic

The amount of tax dollars that this country is spending to arrest, prosecute, and jail people experiencing homelessness is substantively higher than what it would cost to provide housing and supportive services. Combined with the new tax cuts for the rich, the lack of funds is becoming more of a hindrance to the creation of affordable housing. As the country fails to provide money for housing through the proposed National Housing Trust Fund and as funds are cut from social services, the amount of money spent to jail people for "quality of life" crimes increases.

The legal challenges that have resulted from criminalizing ordinances have proven costly for both the prosecution and the defense. These anti-homeless ordinances violate HUD's Consolidated Plan and should jeopardize jurisdictions' access to CDBG, HOME, and McKinney/Vento federal funds. Moreover, local ordinances which discriminate against and criminalize homeless people often violate constitutions and expose city governments and police departments to civil liability.

Social Costs

The "quick fix" solution of criminalizing homelessness fails to begin to address the complex issues and causes of homelessness. Passing ordinances that make illegal life-sustaining activities without providing viable alternatives will never correct or eliminate homelessness. In fact, by exacerbating the hardships of surviving on the streets, criminalization acts as a yet another barrier to people exiting homelessness. Punishing homeless people for non-criminal behavior is inhumane, especially in light of the overwhelmingly insufficient resources available to individuals experiencing homelessness. Criminalization masks the social exclusion of homeless people under the guise of public safety interests.

Cities warn tourists and residents not to give money to panhandlers. In San Francisco, the Hotel Council launched a media campaign against panhandlers. They placed ads on taxis and buses that equated giving money to panhandlers with supporting drug habits and hurting local business. This criminalization of homelessness leads housed individuals to unnecessarily fear homeless individuals.

Individual Costs

The criminalization of homelessness makes it even more difficult to survive on the streets and acts as a major barrier to individuals trying to get out of homelessness. Once homeless people have been arrested for "quality of life" violations like obstructing the sidewalk, they have a criminal record and are excluded from jobs, rent and housing applications, and even some emergency services like transitional housing and income support. Anyone incarcerated at least 30 days loses Social Security benefits during incarceration. Also, if an individual receiving benefits is found to have a warrant, then s/he can be denied benefits. The Social Security Administration has gone so far as to give agencies $400 per person who they find in violation. Many people experiencing homelessness lose all of their few possessions when they are arrested. When they lose their identification, they have to go through a long process in order to obtain a new ID. In addition, police harassment causes homeless people to miss appointments and/or interviews, reinforcing their status as second-class citizens.

Criminalization further perpetuates homelessness by diverting resources and funding from housing and services to pay for courts and jails. Regardless of how many ordinances are passed, homeless people will still have to eat, sleep, and survive in the public arena because no alternative is available to them. Criminalization policies defeat the purpose of removing homeless people because they simply create further barriers for their survival and undermine individual efforts to escape homelessness. When individuals are released from jail, not only are they still homeless but they have even more barriers to overcome than before.

Responses to Criminalization

Although the task is a daunting one, many local and national advocacy groups are working to fight criminalization and its effects. Local advocates, volunteers, and homeless people are teaming up to fight criminalization in their cities. Local groups are employing grassroots organiz-

Efforts to make the voice of homeless people heard include voter registration drives.

ing to raise awareness about criminalization and to change anti-homeless ordinances. Criminalization has spread to service-providing groups, and many people providing meals to homeless individuals and families are facing governmental and local opposition. Through a variety of organizing, media and legislative advocacy strategies, homeless people are gaining similar small victories in cities nationwide. Efforts to make the voice of homeless people heard include voter registration drives, like NCH's "You Don't Need a Home To Vote," a national, nonpartisan voting rights effort. Through this campaign and others like it, thousands of homeless individuals are becoming registered to vote. This is a small step toward change.

What else can be done?

Gentrification and efforts to clean up urban areas have exacerbated the hardships of homelessness and have chosen homeless and poor people as scapegoats. This trend can only be reversed through organizing by homeless people and concerned advocates to hold policy makers and business owners accountable for their actions and legislation.

- **Education and Communication**

The public information campaign must be geared toward: 1) alerting homeless and poor people that a new civil rights movement is building along with new and subtle dangers, and 2) alerting the general public that rights lost to any segment of our society are rights lost to all of our society. It is now a historical fact that "the war on poverty" has become a "war against the poor and homeless." Networking of local groups is also vital, as is communication both nationally and locally about campaigns that have been successful and about useful training models, funding strategies, and technical support.

- **Organizing for Change**

Organizing homeless people to take action must begin with extensive outreach, in which the input gathered directly from homeless people drives the working agenda. This outreach has four main purposes: 1) to provide information to poor and homeless people about their rights; 2) to record civil rights abuses, including police interaction with homeless people, through written and video documentation; 3) to provide information about opportunities for participation in the work to affect change; and 4) to gather ideas, insights and opinions about solutions to poverty and homelessness.

- **Legal Remedies**

After organizing efforts, litigation is oftentimes the last resort. In the past and even now, homeless people have used and are using the legal system to fight the unconstitutional ordinances that criminalize life-sustaining activities that, for lack of alternatives, they must conduct in public. Because it is nearly impossible for people experiencing homelessness obtaining decent representation and to pay legal fees, many cities have legal aid/rights organizations that represent homeless people and give legal advice for free. The positive thing about litigation is that it shows homeless people that they have a voice and the power to get laws overturned, but the drawback of litigation is that it is a long process.

Policy Recommendations in the US

Support must be gathered for the Bringing America Home Act, H.R. 2897-108th Congress, sponsored by U.S. Representative Julia Carson. This will include provisions and funding that will end homelessness through additional housing, universal health coverage, liveable income, treatment on demand, and civil rights assurances.●

REACTION:

"Part of the Solution, Rather than the Problem!"

Combatting the Criminalisation of Homelessness in the UK

By **Toby Blume**, *Director of NGO Groundswell UK*

Reading the 'Criminalisation of homelessness in the US' report by the National Coalition of the Homeless, I am struck by a number of similarities, as well as some differences. As in the US, homelessness is being criminalised in the UK, with frightening effects. The introduction of the Anti Social Behaviour Act 2003 allows the prosecution and imprisonment of people subjectively described as 'anti social', it's already clear that homeless people, those begging or drinking and many other vulnerable people, are being targeted with these new powers. The injection of £22million (€33m) of Government money into this initiative, funding a team of 'Anti-Social Behaviour prosecutors' now means homeless people (and others) can face up to five years in prison[1]. Evidence makes clear that sending people to prison is expensive and ineffective, yet the policy agenda within Government is focussing on dealing punitively with the symptoms, rather than tackling the underlying causes. Instead of providing support and services for people who are, for example, drinking on the streets, by providing detoxification spaces and appropriate support, the police are tasked with rounding up and prosecuting these vulnerable homeless people. It's easy to portray homeless people as a threat to community safety, but the reality is that they are as much as 15 times more likely to be victims of crime than the general population[2].

In England - it's important to acknowledge the major differences in homelessness policy and legislation that exist in the devolved countries in the UK - homelessness appears to be falling off the political radar, and anti-social behaviour is replacing it. It's no coincidence that the former Director of the Government's Homelessness Directorate is now heading up their Anti Social Behaviour Unit. Unlike the US, the UK Government have, thankfully, backed down from proposals to withhold housing benefit from people found guilty of ASB offences, following a sustained campaign of opposition.

The fight back starts here!

As in the US, a major response is needed among community groups and homeless people. The voting rights battle has already been won in the UK, when Kevin Lippiat, a homeless activist from Cornwall, took his local council to court, winning a landmark victory and giving homeless people the right to vote[3]. Since then, the Electoral Commission have produced guidance to make it easier for homeless people to register to vote, although it is not clear that large numbers of homeless people are actually voting – but then that's a trend that goes way beyond homelessness!

Solutions need to be based on homeless peoples' own experience and expertise, rather than imposed top-down initiatives that are expensive and ineffective. In the UK, Groundswell is supporting homeless people to develop suitable responses to these policy developments.

1. Information – making sure that information is accurate and available to homeless people.
2. Networking – linking groups, sharing experience and collaborating to achieve common goals.
3. Opposing proposals and proposing suitable solutions - only by presenting alternatives to the complex problems will the agenda shift from criminalisation to prevention.
4. Education and awareness raising – promoting positive images of homeless people, being seen as part of the solution, rather than as *the problem*.

It is essential to clearly spell out the benefits and possibilities of a community-led approach if we are to begin changing public opinion. It's a long journey ahead, but one that will, if successful, address the root causes of poverty, homelessness and exclusion, rather than try to alleviate the visible symptoms.

Further information

Groundswell is a national charity that supports projects run by homeless and excluded people. Groundswell has been promoting practical solutions that see homeless people as part of the solution rather than 'the problem' since 1996. Groundswell aims to enable marginalised people to play a more effective role in community life and participate in decision-making processes which affect their lives.

We provide training, advice, networking, publications, grants and information to around 2,500 groups and individuals. By supporting marginalised people to set up and run their own projects we support long-term solutions that are based on communities' own needs and aspirations.

We believe that homeless, poor and excluded people:

- are not 'the problem' – they must be part of the solution;
- hold the key to solutions in their experiences and knowledge;
- have a right to the information they need to make informed choices about their lives;
- can build communities and create positive change by acting together. ●

Groundswell UK
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[1] Source: Home Office Anti Social Behaviour Action Plan (http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crime/antisocialbehaviour/actionplan/index.html)

[2] Source: Ballintyne, S. (1999) Unsafe Streets – Street Homelessness and Crime, IPPR

[3] Source: SchNEWS (issue 112, 21st March 1997) (http://www.schnews.org.uk/archive/news112.htm)

USA Tenants Fight to Save Social Housing

By **Michael Kane**, *Executive Director, National Alliance of HUD Tenants*

In the USA, unregulated markets and government policies to undermine social housing are aggravating a chronic problem of homelessness. The National Coalition for the Homeless estimates that 3.5 million US families experience homelessness each year. Although it is well-established that the private sector cannot produce housing affordable for low income families who need it without massive government assistance, the US government has not sponsored a new low-cost rental housing production program since 1983.

The explosion of massive, visible homelessness dates from that time, as the low income population which needs government housing assistance has grown more rapidly than the available supply. The problem has been made worse by the lack of private market rent controls in the US, which puts much of the rental housing stock beyond the reach of low income families, who must double and triple up to avoid homelessness. (Only New York, California, New Jersey and Massachusetts allowed rent controls ten years ago; these regulatory systems have all been weakened or repealed by the reactionary "property rights" movement in the US in the past decade.)

In its housing policies, the Bush Administration has emphasized assistance to first time homeowners through downpayment assistance and access to low cost credit. While this version of "the American Dream" undoubtedly works for some working and middle class families, most poor and working people in the US are unable to purchase homes due to poor credit, unstable or low incomes, and high costs in many markets.

In its housing policies, the Bush Administration has emphasized assistance to first time homeowners through downpayment assistance and access to low cost credit.

Although most states and large cities maintain some sort of rental housing production programs, their resources are woefully inadequate and fall far short of housing needs. Only the federal government, through its housing agency (HUD—the Department of Housing and Urban Development) has the potential resources to meet the challenge. But since the Reagan Administration's dramatic cutbacks of HUD programs in the early 1980's, the nation's supply of affordable subsidized rental housing has stagnated and declined.

Three types of rental housing assistance.

Today, the US government supports three types of subsidized rental housing assistance through HUD, aiding about five million families. This is approximately one fourth the number who qualify for housing subsidy assistance, based on families who pay excessive rent burdens (defined in the USA as more than 30% of household income spent on rent) and/or live in overcrowded or substandard housing.

Rental Vouchers. Of the five million assisted, approximately two million receive rental "vouchers," which they can utilize in the market with landlords willing to accept them. Known as "Section 8" vouchers after a section of the US housing law which created it in 1974, this program pays landlords a guaranteed amount for rent, while tenants pay 30% of their household income. Tenants must have household incomes less than 50% of the area median income to qualify for Section 8 assistance.

Public Housing. A second type of rental housing assistance program is known as "public housing," similar in concept to Council Housing in the UK. Created in 1937, HUD's Public Housing program today subsidize the operating costs for about 1.3 million apartments built and owned by Local Housing Authorities in each major city. Unlike Council Housing in the UK, public housing tenants in the US are typically very low income people: most earn less than 30% of the median income in their areas. About 40-50% of public housing tenants are elderly or handicapped households paying minimal rents for their government-owned apartments.

Privately-owned, HUD-subsidized. The third major HUD-subsidized housing sector consists of privately-owned, HUD-subsidized multifamily housing complexes which receive either operating and/or capital subsidies and guarantees as incentives for private owners to build and maintain affordable housing for lower income people. Approximately 1.7 million families live in these buildings. About half are elderly or handicapped, most earn less than 50% of the median income, but some earn up to 95% of the median income. These buildings were constructed between 1966 and 1983, and are usually newer and in better condition than the older "public housing" stock.

Social housing stock under attack.

For the past decade, HUD and Congressional housing policies have eroded the supply of federally-subsidized affordable rental housing. In the Public Housing sector, US housing policy has promoted the HOPE VI demolition and reconstruction program since 1992, aimed at tearing down ill-conceived high-rise family housing developments which racially segregated low income minorities in the post-World War II era. More than 120,000 units of Public Housing have been demolished under HOPE VI since its inception. In their place, fewer than 40,000 new units of "mixed income" housing have been built, and few of these have been affordable to the low income tenants whose homes were destroyed. HOPE VI also promotes privatized management and redevelopment by private sector investors, whose for-profit goals are fundamentally at odds with social housing and will only lead to institutionalized conflicts in the future.

Many public housing tenant organizations have harshly criticized HOPE VI. Some have called for abolition of the program, others have demanded that local Housing Authorities guarantee one-to-one replacement of units torn down under the program. The Bush Administration has proposed its elimination, but has made no proposals whatsoever for building new rental housing to replace units lost.

In the privately-owned HUD-assisted apartment sector, owners (mostly large, national corporations) have begun to take advantage of the time-limited subsidy contracts which began to expire in the late 1980's, twenty years after the buildings were initially constructed. Since 1996, when Congress repealed a program which had slowed down the rate of owners opting out of federal subsidies, the US lost more than 200,000 units affordable to low income families through conversion to unregulated high market rents in "hot" real estate markets, primarily the East and West Coasts and "gentrifying" neighborhoods in between. (Clear data on "opt outs" end after August 2001, so the number of units converted to market rents probably exceeds 300,000 today.)

The National Alliance of HUD Tenants (http://www.saveourhomes.org) has been organizing tenants in this sector since 1992, but has been unable to find Congressional support for regulating owners ability to opt out and not renew expiring subsidy contracts. The Bush Administration has made matters worse by converting subsidy contracts tied to the buildings into tenant-based "vouchers" at every opportunity, further eroding the subsidized housing stock.

Bush proposes radical housing cuts.

While the subsidized housing stock has gradually eroded over the past decade, for most of the 1990's Congress at least added new Section 8 Vouchers to HUD's third subsidized rental housing sector. By 2003, more than two million families received some form of Voucher assistance, up from about 1.6 million at the start of the decade.

However, the Bush Administration attempted last year to cut this program by seeking, for the first time, inadequate funding to renew all Section 8 contracts when they expired. In response, NAHT and its allies organized a major campaign to persuade Congress to restore the funds. (NAHT organized press conferences in several cities in October 2003, as part of International Housing Rights Day called by the Habitat International Coalition and the International Union of Tenants). Congress added $900 million to Bush's budget request in January 2004, ensuring enough funds for one more year.

No sooner had the ink dryed on the 2004 budget, however, than the Administration proposed an even deeper cut—$1.6 billion—for 2005. If Congress adopts the Administration's proposal, 250,000 families could be cut from the Voucher rolls in 2005, and a total of 600,000 by the year 2009—fully 30% of the number of families assisted today.

The Bush Administration has also proposed to devolve administration of the Section 8 Voucher program to Local Housing Authorities, giving them greater administrative discretion but at a reduced funding level. Housing Authorities would be encouraged to "experiment" with higher rents for tenants (above 30% of income, perhaps up to 40%), "time limits" forcing people off rental assistance after a certain period, and replacing very low income tenants with higher income ones to reach more households with limited funds.

NAHT and its allies are preparing for another budget battle in Congress during 2004, a national election year in the US, to block these proposals.

"Starving the beast."

Behind the Bush Administration's radical proposals to cut Section 8 is a strategy dubbed "starving the beast" by some of the Administration's favorite intellectuals, such as Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform and Howard Husock of the right-wing think tank the Manhattan Institute. In this vision, the Administration has created huge budget deficits by pushing through massive tax cuts for the very wealthy coupled with huge budget increases for war and "homeland security." This creates long-term, structural pressures to close the growing deficit by slashing non-military domestic programs, such as housing, health care, education, and social security. As the quality of these services and the agencies that run them declines, public support weakens, making deeper cuts and even agency abolition politically feasible in the future.

Overall, the housing sector (tenants, owners, agencies, and their trade associations) is perceived as politically "weak" by the Bush Administration and its Republican allies in Congress, particularly since many beneficiaries are perceived as powerless minorities, and the housing finance and building sector has historically been allied with the Democratic Party in the US. The Bush Administration has pursued an aggressive strategy to "starve the beast" by defunding, privatizing, deregulating, voucherizing and devolving administration of America's social housing system—the same witch's brew of "neoliberal" social policies found, in different forms, around the globe.

So the battle lines in the US have been drawn for many years to come, as tenants organize and link up with allies to first save peoples homes before they are lost, and to build alliances for a new rental housing production program in the future. In the meantime, as the need for housing outpaces the government's ability to provide it, more and more Americans will find themselves paying excessive rents in overcrowded apartments—or living on the streets. •

REACTION:

The Retreat of the State: Housing policy in the US and in Europe

by **Freek Spinnewijn,** *Director of FEANTSA*

As this article clearly highlighted, in the United States, as in Europe, the State feels increasingly less responsible for providing sufficient affordable housing for its citizens. The retreat of the State, in favour of the private housing market, strongly decreases the possibilities of fighting homelessness effectively, as the logic of supply and demand alone does not insure access to housing for those in greatest need.

In Europe and in the United States we observe similar developments in the area of housing policy, which limit access to decent housing for low-income groups of the population. These developments are caused to a great extent by changes in public intervention. It is possible to identify four key developments that have occurred to a varying extent in both continents and which are still ongoing:

- The private rental market is shrinking and becoming increasingly expensive;
- Public expenditure on public/social housing is diminishing;
- The public rental housing is being privatised (see, for instance, the selling off of public units to private buyers);
- Occupants of public housing are being charged higher rents and new tenants are selected on the basis of ability to pay.

The causes of homelessness in the United States and Europe are probably fairly similar. In Europe, however, NGO's involved in the fight against homelessness do not sufficiently exploit the demonstrable causal link between flawed public housing policies and rising levels of homelessness. The responses to the problem of homelessness and the worsening housing crises vary a great deal. In this context, it is certainly true that transnational exchanges beyond Europe could be beneficial for FEANTSA's member organisations. •

Housing First in the United States of America – A new Health Care approach for the Homeless

By **John Parvensky**, *President of the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless*

Homelessness in the United States continues to grow to record levels. The combination of a loss of affordable housing units, the lack of adequate health care for indigent persons, and budget cuts at the national, state and local levels have contributed to an increase in homelessness among both families and single adults. According to the U.S. Conference of Mayors, requests for emergency shelter assistance increased by an average of 13 percent in 25 major U.S. cities in 2003.

Addressing the health care needs of homeless individuals and families in the United States has been a growing focus in local communities throughout the nation. Beginning in 1985, health care for the homeless programmes began in 19 cities, including Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Denver. In 1989, funding from the federal government allowed health care for the homeless (HCH) programs to develop in additional cities. Today, there are more than 125 HCH programs throughout the U.S.

The main focus of HCH programs is to provide access to comprehensive, quality health care for homeless individuals. Given that 85% of homeless individuals in the U.S. are without health insurance (the U.S. being one of the last industrialized nations to be without universal health care), providing free health services is critical. Beyond this, however, HCH programs demonstrate the effectiveness of a comprehensive approach to health care, integrating physical health services with mental health and substance treatment services. Other important elements of this comprehensive approach include street outreach, dental care, and social services.

People who are homeless are at higher risk than the general population for diseases such as diabetes, liver disease, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS. Yet, their homelessness makes it more difficult for them to receive appropriate care. Consequently, the health status of homeless persons, particularly those who are chronically homeless, is much worse than that of most Americans.

Those who experience homelessness are subject to conditions that can result in deterioration of health or exacerbate existing chronic or acute illnesses, leading to rates of illness and injury from two to six times higher than for people who are housed. Trauma resulting from violence and conditions caused by exposure to the elements are common among homeless people. Homelessness also severely complicates the delivery of health services. Without access to appropriate health care, acute and chronic health problems may go untreated, creating medical complications in multiple co-occurring conditions and ultimately impeding the individual's ability to overcome homelessness.

In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that housing must be part of the prescription of health care. Without adequate housing, homeless individuals are treated and sent back to the streets, where conditions exacerbate their illness and inhibit their recovery.

One of the most interesting developments in the provision of housing for homeless individuals is the "**housing first**" model.

"Housing first" is designed to create a comprehensive and integrated strategy to assist persons who are chronically homeless to move from the streets and emergency shelters into stable, long-term housing and receive the services and other support they need to achieve greater self-sufficiency. As the name implies, this model addresses the primary need of the homeless individual – housing – first, and then addresses the other health, mental health or addiction issues that contributed to their homelessness.

The best housing first models combine the housing with an "assertive community treatment" approach, to move homeless persons from the streets and shelters into appropriate permanent housing. Assertive community treatment involves a multi-disciplinary team with expertise in the areas of primary health care, mental health care, and substance treatment. The team provides comprehensive services where the client is, and when the client needs them.

Thus, the housing is linked to health care, mental health and substance treatment, and other support services. Providing these services in an integrated and coordinated manner provides the best chance for increasing housing stability and achieving positive treatment outcomes for homeless persons with disabling conditions.

Through outreach and engagement, participants will move quickly from the streets and shelters into permanent housing. Through the comprehensive, assertive community treatment, these individuals will be stabilized in their housing, and will begin to improve their health, mental health and substance use status.

One of the most interesting developments in the provision of housing for homeless individuals is the "**housing first**" model.

Many communities in the U.S. have historically used a "continuum of care" model to address homelessness for persons with mental illness of substance abuse disorders. This model uses an incremental approach to move persons from the streets into long-term housing. Each incremental step is conditioned on the individual committing to participate in treatment, and taking positive steps in their recovery. As a reward for such steps, such as completion of treatment, more desirable housing, such as a private room or independent apartment, is offered.

Studies of the Pathways to Housing program in New York City have demonstrated that a housing first approach is more effective in ending homelessness for persons with disabilities that the more conventional approach of providing a progression of emergency shelter, transitional housing, and long-term housing conditioned on the individual completing various programs.

A four-year study followed 225 participants at 6-month intervals for four years. Contrary to the expectations, the Pathways clients did not exhibit higher rates of psychiatric symptoms or substance use. Indeed, after two years, housing first participants were twice as likely to be stable in their housing as those in the more traditional programs. Additionally, they were more likely to be utilizing services that those who were required to take services as a condition of their housing. (For more information please see http://www.pathwaystohousing.org)

The lessons learned to date suggest that by addressing an individual's homelessness first, through housing, and then providing an opportunity to address their other issues, we can help homeless persons with disabilities increase their housing stability as well as improve their overall health and mental health status. In addition, it is likely to cost our society much less than leaving them to fend for themselves on our streets.

Denver began its housing first program in February 2004. To date, 25 individuals with chronic mental illness have been moved from the streets to long-term housing. By June, we will increase that number to 100. We are hopeful that more cities will begin to move to a housing first model as a way of reducing homelessness. •

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For more information, please see http://www.coloradocoalition.org *and* http://www.nhchc.org

Can the United States End Homelessness in Ten Years? Los Angeles Joins the Municipal Planning Movement

By **Jessica Barrett Simpson** and **Paul Tepper**, *Institute for the Study of Homelessness and Poverty*

As part of a new strategy being tried in numerous cities across the United States, Los Angeles County has embarked upon an effort to create a ten year strategic plan to end homelessness. But can a community actually end homelessness? The challenges are daunting, especially for Los Angeles, the most populous county in the United States.

The alluring image of the Los Angeles region as the playground of movie stars in Hollywood and multimillionaires in Beverly Hills is not representative of the area's population. Los Angeles County is comprised of 4,081 square miles, 88 cities, and nearly 10 million people. The government budget (exclusive of the numerous cities within the County) is approximately $16.4 billion, nearly one-fifth the size of Belgium's budget. It is a region with a large immigrant population, sky-rocketing housing prices, low-wage jobs, and a growing income gap. The City of Los Angeles is ranked as the 22nd most expensive city in the world.

Thirty years ago, homelessness was not a problem in Los Angeles. By 1984, there were an estimated 25,000 to 50,000 homeless people in Los Angeles County. In 2004, that number has swelled to an approximate 80,000 people who are homeless on any given night, which is around one percent of the population. Over 18,000 shelter beds are available for homeless persons. Hundreds of nonprofits (NGOs) exist to provide outreach, housing, job training, mental health services, substance abuse services, legal help, and a host of other services.

This local growth in homelessness has mirrored national statistics, with an estimated 2.3 to 3.5 million persons who are homeless in the United States over the course of one year. The U.S. McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, the most commonly used definition of homelessness, describes a homeless person as an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence or a person who resides in a shelter, welfare hotel, transitional program or place no ordinarily used as regular sleeping accommodations, such as streets, movie theatres, abandoned buildings, etc. People in jail are not considered homeless.

Both nationally and locally, leaders and advocates have begun to speak of ending homelessness, rather than continuing to manage the problem. One rationale behind such an ambitious goal is that widespread homelessness in times of economic prosperity is a relatively recent occurrence in Los Angeles, dating only from the late 1970s. If homelessness had a beginning, then it is possible it can end.

A Framework for Ten Year Plans

In 2000, the National Alliance to End Homelessness, a nonpartisan advocacy group in Washington D.C., issued a report called *A Plan, Not a Dream: How to End Homelessness in Ten Years*. The report challenged each community in the nation to develop a local plan to end homelessness.

The National Alliance proposed four critical components for a ten year plan:

Step 1 - Plan for outcomes by gathering data on homelessness and starting a local planning process.
Step 2 - Close the front door to homelessness by focusing on prevention.
Step 3 - Open the back door by immediately housing people who are homeless.
Step 4 - Build the infrastructure of support systems for low-income people so they will not become homeless.

Beyond simply crafting their blueprint plan, the National Alliance undertook a strategic operation to advance their vision. This included a national public education campaign, alliance building with national leaders, national policy advocacy, presentations on the plan to local communities, and local capacity building. The National Alliance worked with scholars in the United States to compile detailed research that would build the case for the ten year plans. They also did multi-level analysis of the current policies and programs, and examined both public opinion on homelessness and the political will to change it.

Local and National Plans

Over eighty local municipalities and a number of states have responded to the National Alliance's call to create ten year plans. Plans have been completed by New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Columbus, Indianapolis, Phoenix, Memphis and many other jurisdictions. Other communities, including Los Angeles County, Boston, Dallas, Houston, and Detroit, are in the midst of creating a plan.

The federal government has also joined the movement. In 2003, the Bush Administration set a national goal of ending chronic homelessness in ten years. The Administration also reactivated the Interagency Council on Homelessness, which strives to coordinate over a dozen federal departments and agencies whose programs affect people who are homeless.

The National Alliance blueprint was general enough that it could be adopted and modified by local communities to fit their specific needs. The Interagency Council on the Homeless suggests ten steps to create a local plan:

- Obtain a strong commitment from the mayor;
- Develop broad stakeholder participation, including government, business, law enforcement, NGO's, homeless people, philanthropic organizations, religious groups and others;
- Convene a broad based "working group" of well-respected community leaders;
- Gather research regarding local homelessness;
- Identify the local causes of homelessness;
- Develop specific prevention and intervention strategies;
- Obtain input from the community to build consensus;
- Identify specific measurable activities tied to responsible parties, a timeline, and funding sources;
- Publicize the plan;
- Implement the plan.

A Snapshot of the Plans

The locally crafted planning methodologies utilized by cities, counties and states often parallel the steps described by the Interagency Council. There has been more divergence among the ensuing recommendations, which have varied in both breadth and specificity. While there are many commonalities among their recommendations, there are also substantial differences due to local needs and political realities.

Plans created to date vary significantly in both length and in the recommendations' level of detail. For example, the Chicago plan is twenty pages long and contains mostly broad recommendations; while the Atlanta plan is over one hundred pages and for every recommendation includes action steps, potential strategy partners, best practices, measurable outcomes, timeframe, and budget.

Plan for outcomes

Most plans include recommendations on better ways to track homelessness, such as implementing a Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), which is a requirement of the federal government. Each community is permitted to develop their own proprietary system to report on service outcomes, and may in some cases use it to track clients across various programs. The Chicago plan recommends an information system that will improve service delivery and link with an affordable housing clearinghouse.

Close the front door

Recommendations for prevention range from a focus on discharge planning to an increase in permanent affordable housing. The Chicago plan includes the creation of a 24-hour prevention and referral hotline. A few cities have attempted to tackle larger economic issues that cause homelessness, such as Montgomery County, Maryland, which recommends implementing a "living wage" law to increase income for workers.

Open the back door

Some plans generally include creating more supportive housing, while others such as Columbus and Franklin County, Ohio have specific numeric goals of how many units of housing to be developed for different sub-populations of the homeless. As part of their outreach strategy, the Atlanta plan recommends a substance abuse rapid response team and the expansion of community courts.

Build the infrastructure

Many cities such as Philadelphia advocate developing new funding sources for homeless services. Indianapolis also recommends reallocating existing resources. Almost all the cities that have created plans so far have recommended the establishment of a formal network of service providers and a coordinating body.

Los Angeles' Planning Process

The Los Angeles effort to create a ten year plan, dubbed *Bring LA Home*, was initiated by a partnership between local government and a local homeless advocacy organization. The year-long planning process is led by a panel of over fifty community partners, including leaders from local government, business organizations, academia, law enforcement, religious institutions, advocacy organizations, philanthropy, nonprofit agencies, and people who were formerly homeless.

In Los Angeles County, a dozen city-level homeless counts have been done in the last decade. Due to varying methodologies and time frames, it has been difficult to compare numbers and provide reliable estimates. The *Bring LA Home* partnership has produced a new study on the composition of the homeless population, as well as a second study summarizing all the data available on homelessness in Los Angeles County. These studies will inform the panel members of the needs of various sub-populations among the homeless, their geographical locations, the current services available and the gaps where services are needed.

The partnership has also solicited input from the public by holding community meetings throughout the County. In addition, survey letters were sent out to over two hundred city officials whose work relates to the issue of homelessness and hundreds of businesses, whose daily operations may be impacted by homelessness. Subject matter experts were consulted on issues such as housing and mental illness. Focus groups and other meetings were held with homeless men and women, service providers, advocates, government staffers and others.

Bring LA Home has created a website to both publicly disseminate planning information and collect additional input from the community. These contributions, along with the guidance of the fifty panel members, will inform the planning process.

The Road Ahead

The Los Angeles plan is expected to be released in early July 2004. Like many other plans, it will be the product of negotiation and compromise. The real struggle will be its implementation. The Los Angeles plan, like its sister plans in other cities, faces significant struggles in light of budget constraints, shifting priorities and other political realities. Regardless of the plan's length or specificity of its recommendations, the real test will be whether or not there is a significant reduction in homelessness. •

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Resources

Institute for the Study of Homelessness and Poverty – http://www.weingart.org/institute
National Alliance to end Homelessness - http://www.endhomelessness.org/
Interagency Council on Homelessness - http://www.ich.gov/
Bring LA Home - http://www.bringlahome.org

REACTION:

Combatting Homelessness in the US: A Battle on Two Fronts

by **Donal McManus**, *President of FEANTSA*

FEANTSA President Donal McManus examines whether the new ten year plans to end homelessness in the US could be undermined by welfare reforms.

Our contributors from the US have offered us insights into the different perspectives on, and approaches to, the problem of homelessness in the US. In the article *Can the United States End Homelessness in Ten Years?* researchers Jessica Barrett Simpson and Paul Tepper offer us an in-depth analysis of the innovative community ten year plans to end homelessness; in the article by Michael Kane of the National Alliance of HUD Tenants, *USA Tenants Fight to Save Social Housing,* a worrying picture of radical welfare reforms and the '*slashing'* of social welfare programmes is what emerges. Given that the very government that has initiated the drastic cuts to housing programmes, has also given its support for the call to end homelessness in ten years, one must surely ask, how are the two stances compatible?

Homelessness in the US:

Arriving at an accurate estimate of the numbers of homeless is always fraught with difficulty and is complicated in Europe by variations of definition from country to country. In the US, the scale of homelessness is also difficult to pinpoint, as statistical information is not collated at the federal level, but more often at the city or state level. However, it is estimated that between 2.3 and 3.5 million[1] people experience homelessness in any one year, with the number of people sleeping rough between 250 and 750,000. Whatever the precise figures, there are some definite trends for homeless people. Firstly, people are remaining homeless for longer and families with children are now the fastest growing segment of the homeless population throughout the US, with homeless children representing about a quarter of the homeless population. In addition, a recent survey of US Mayors found that about one third of requests for emergency shelters could not be met.

Responsibility for the homeless

The articles from the US have shown us that the fight against homelessness there is being carried out by a variety of bodies and actors. As Michael Kane outlined in his article, in the US, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)[2] is responsible for the various federal homeless assistance programmes. States, municipalities and non-profit agencies are all eligible to apply for funding under different programmes, which currently place an emphasis on the continuum of care of homeless people. With no legal right to housing, the *Mc Kinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (1987)* is the main statutory basis for addressing homeless issues at national level. This Act represented a significant evolution in the response to homelessness in the US in the last 20 years. Prior to this, most of the programmess to address homelessness were operated on an ad-hoc basis at the local municipality level. However, during the Regan presidency pressure was growing from many NGOs for the federal government to become more actively involved in addressing the needs of homeless people and therefore the *McKinney Vento Act* was seen as a significant breakthrough in this respect.

As was described by our US contributors, the goal of ending homelessness came to prominence in 2000, through the work of the National Alliance to End Homelessness. In 2001, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) at a federal level accepted this goal and by 2003 the Bush Administration set a national goal of ending 'chronic' homelessness in 10 years. The reactivation of the Interagency Council on Homelessness provided the necessary impetus, as the Inter-Agencies' role was to co-ordinate over a dozen federal agencies whose programmess affect homeless people, while also keeping homelessness as an issue at national level. This is similar to structures that have been developed in a number of EU member states where national committees comprising different government departments have been established to focus on homeless issues.

We have seen that, to date, over 80 municipalities have created their own 10 year homeless plans, although the content has varied greatly depending local needs. However, there are common themes, which will be readily familiar to members of FEANTSA. The need to have ways of tracking homeless people with better information, was commonly identified as an issue in most homeless action plans. This wasn't surprising, given that it is now a requirement of the federal government. Common recommendations on preventative measures included the identified need for proper discharge planning from institutions, as well as the need to increase the supply of affordable rental housing. In the area of intervention, the creation of more supported housing type units and outreach initiatives for the homeless were identified as key elements. All cities, which had produced 10-year homeless plans, recommended the establishment the formal network of service providers and a co-ordinating body. Certainly, with FEANTSA's background and the role which it plays at European level, this would be an area where it could lend some of its experience.

The Los Angeles 10 year Homeless Plan

Jessica Barrett-Simpson and Paul Tepper outlined the complex consultative process that was a fundamental part of the Los Angeles ten year plan. The benefit of this process was that it provided a huge amount of legitimacy and ownership to the plan from a broad range of interest groups in the city. However, resources for homeless services in Los Angeles, as in other US cities, will still be dependant on continued political commitment and goodwill, in the absence of a more formal statutory basis to the 10 year homeless plans. Providing a statutory basis to the 10 year homeless plans through enhanced federal laws would have seriously demonstrated the commitment to eliminating homelessness throughout the US. Instead, it would seem from the governmental cuts of social welfare programmes, a concrete commitment to ending homelessness is not a real policy priority.

Conclusion:

As Michael Kane confirmed, there are currently a number of NGOs campaigning and lobbying their local congressional representatives to have the government cuts overturned, as they point to the huge anomaly of the government supporting the call to eliminate homelessness in 10 years on one hand, whilst on the other hand cutting back in the area of housing subsidies, that is key to eliminating homelessness. These contradictions are not specific to the US. In recent years, a number of EU member states have introduced particular welfare reforms whose negative effect will be most acutely felt by the most vulnerable including the homeless. Other reforms such as the capping of welfare benefits for 5 years and restrictions on unemployment benefits make it more than likely that these issues will have a negative impact on the level on homelessness in the US. Whilst there is a lot to admire about how the campaign to eliminate homelessness has evolved in the US including the production of 10 year homeless plans, keeping homelessness as an issue at national level will be key to addressing the issue in a consistent manner throughout all 50 US states. Otherwise national issues, such as welfare reform will have always priority over the implementation of local homeless plans. What the US does demonstrate is the importance of social welfare policies being developed in tandem with other homeless policies, not policies which are contradictory. ●

[1] Urban Institute. Washington

[2] Department of Housing and Urban Development(HUD)