

Ensuring a Positive Response to the Homelessness Crisis

Bay Area Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness and Housing

Serving the homeless population from the Monterey to San Francisco Bay Areas, members of the Regional Steering Committee have a shared goal of ending homelessness. The federal government's "Collaborative Initiative to End Chronic Homelessness" reflects an exciting revitalization of the effort to eradicate homelessness. The Initiative supplies homeless service providers with greater resources as they assist people in moving from the streets and into housing and jobs. But in order to maintain the drive towards ending homelessness, federal funding and support of proven programs must continue to improve, with particular attention to the threats to the voucher program and public housing. We therefore hope that you will consider the following suggestions for the continued revitalization of our nation's response to homelessness.

1. Oppose the State and Local Housing Flexibility Act

The bill's major changes would put current residents or those in need of affordable housing at great risk. The bill both limits the use of enhanced vouchers and shifts the housing choice voucher program's income targeting requirements away from extremely low-income households. Such a shift creates a mismatch between known housing needs and the use of federal housing resources. The bill also imposes time limits on Section 8 voucher holders after five years of assistance. This would have punitive effects on the elderly and disabled who represent 41% of those on the program for longer than five years. Portability of vouchers, which is intended to allow for deconcentration of poverty, is severely restricted by the bill. The sweeping changes proposed in this bill would damage the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program and public housing programs.

2. Support adequate funding and distribution of the *Housing Choice Voucher Program*

If *Housing Choice Voucher Program* funding does not meet needs, fewer families will be served, while more will be put at risk of becoming homeless. A funding cut will not leave enough funds to cover existing vouchers or issue needed new vouchers. Funding for the *Housing Choice Voucher Program* must be preserved, and the program restructured to account for economic fluctuations so that the vouchers will always have value. Achieving this will call for greater responsiveness to local market conditions and support for the President's request for a central reserve fund to meet agencies' unanticipated needs.

3. Support Enactment of the *Services to End Long-Term Homelessness Act*

The *Services to End Long-Term Homelessness Act* (SELHA) is the new name of ELHSI (*Ending Long-Term Homelessness Services Initiative*). This program, if authorized, would be administered by the Department of Health and Human Services and would provide a full range of supportive services including mental health and substance abuse services and case management (but no housing) to individuals and families who experience long-term homelessness. Funds would be targeted to individuals who are homeless repeatedly or for long periods of time and who have a disability. Through the bill, communities will be able to carry out their strategies of ending chronic homelessness.

4. Ensure an equitable reauthorization of *Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF)*

Inequitable reauthorization of TANF will result in even fewer of the poorest and most vulnerable families accessing and retaining the assistance they need, because of the combined effect of increasing the percentage of recipients expected to work, increasing the work requirement to 40 hours per week, limiting access to rehabilitative services, requiring that states impose full family sanctions, and providing credit for future caseload declines regardless of the outcome for families. To guard against these damaging results, oppose the *superwaiver* provision as well as the provision that requires states to impose full-family sanctions. We also urge support for the amendments in the House and Senate bill that would allow immigrant families legally residing in the country to access TANF and State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). TANF reauthorization should include measures to safeguard those at risk of homelessness, and should make the process of transitioning from welfare to work less, not more, burdensome.

5. Support the establishment of a *National Housing Trust Fund*

Since a high number of public and Section 8 housing units disappeared during the economic boom of the late 90's, the nation's shortage of affordable housing has become a crisis. A National Housing Trust Fund will provide a continuing source of funding for both new housing and the rehabilitation of existing housing to meet the goal of 1,500,000 housing units over the next 10 years. Furthermore, the mission component of the Government Sponsored Enterprises regulatory reform bill would be accomplished through the establishment of the National Housing Trust Fund. Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac would meet their mission requirements by funding the production of predominantly rental housing for predominantly extremely low-income households with a percentage of pre-tax profits.

6. Reauthorize *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)* programs

In response to growing budget deficits, local governments are expected to cut funding to mental health providers serving thousands of individuals. Without residential or outpatient mental health services to provide stability in the lives of mentally ill patients, many of them will wind up on our streets. In light of this, it is crucial that existing federal programs serving mentally ill homeless individuals be not only maintained, but also reformed where necessary based on consultation with local service providers.



The San Francisco and Monterey Bay Area Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness and Housing is an eleven-county body composed of representatives of local government, non-profit homeless service providers and housing developers, academics, advocates, volunteers and those who have experienced homelessness. The RSC meets bi-monthly to collaborate on homelessness and poverty issues. We have been proactive in advocating our concerns regarding federal and state policy issues, conducting research and trainings, designing programs, and supporting the work of those in our community to serve homeless people while seeking an end to homelessness. For additional information, please call Marty Fleetwood at HomeBase/CCC, 415-788-7961 ext. 312, or Piper Ehlen at HomeBase/CCC, 415-788-7961 ext. 304.