CHALLENGE

Homelessness is a problem we can solve. Other challenges may be more difficult for mayors to overcome, but homelessness is not intractable. Substantive progress has been made, though the challenge remains.

The face of homelessness defies the stereotype of alcoholics and drug addicts. Many homeless people suffer from mental illness, domestic violence and unemployment. A number of issues force people onto the streets, including health problems, escaping domestic abuse or sex trafficking and low or no income. Many homeless people are women—families, single women, women with children and young parents—in fact, families account for approximately 37% of the homeless population. Nearly one quarter of homeless people are children under the age of 18. They need effective services and rehousing options. Services are often insufficient to meet the problem, and are often fragmented and/or hard to access.

According to the Point-In-Time (PIT) Count, a HUD federal program for assessing homelessness in America, there were more than half a million homeless people in 2014. (The number is actually higher since transient people living in homes of friends for short amounts of time cannot be included in the PIT Count.) Most (69%) were staying in emergency or long-
term residential housing, and 31% were found in unsheltered locations. Among youth, 40% were from the LGBTQ community.

Studies show that chronic homelessness costs the public between $30,000 and $50,000 per person per year through the use of emergency rooms, hospitals, jails, psychiatric centers, detox and other crisis services—though these visits do not result in lasting improvements in quality of life. Given the cost in human suffering and the current high cost in public dollars, ending chronic homelessness is primarily a moral but also a fiscal imperative.

Existing federal, state and municipal government agencies along with local homelessness coalitions are making progress. Under the Obama administration’s priorities, homelessness among veterans declined by 33% (or 24,117 people) between 2009 and 2014. With the government applying meaningful attention and resources, homelessness declined by 2% nationally between 2013 and 2014, and overall by 11% since 2007.

While the situation is unique in every city, success is possible as cities learn from one another’s experiences to ensure that homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring across America.
RECOMMENDATIONS

DATA

Ensure a robust connection with HUD and the PIT Count program to get an accurate assessment of homelessness in your city.

PLAN

Convene all relevant agencies and organizations to develop a comprehensive plan that eliminates homelessness:
- Address all four interdependent issues of housing, transportation, childcare and minimum wage.
- Mandate communication and collaboration across multiple organizations and governmental agencies.
- Consider the whole region, not just the municipality; don’t displace your problem to other cities; solve the problem.

FUNDING

Fund the plan on housing and homelessness:
- Attach a fee to new condo and office development that would be directed toward affordable housing, as Boston has recently done.
- Secure substantive financial commitments from the private sector to enact sustainable solutions to homelessness and promote and celebrate those partnerships.
- Mandate that businesses that contract with the municipality contribute to the housing plan.

TRANSLATIONAL HOUSING

Combine housing opportunities with economic development opportunities in all other city programs. Be sure to consider affordable housing throughout all city planning.

Transitional housing is an extremely effective tool for helping domestic violence victims, women and children.
- Provide transitional housing for families; for example, while a mother is working on her degree, she needs adequate housing until she completes her degree and is able to move on.
- Have a temporary or additional shelter program for the hard winter months.
- Ensure that human trafficking victims are not placed in housing in the same location they were trafficked.
Secure federal funding opportunities and utilize high touch case management programs.
- Support Senator Feinstein’s movement to change the definition of homelessness so that people can access services: Homeless Children and Youth Act of 2015.
- Utilize the federal Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP), which provides funds to stabilize communities that have suffered from foreclosures and abandonment.

Mental health issues are a significant contributor to homelessness and it is essential to provide robust and accessible mental health services.
- Fund mental health treatment at every level.
- Address domestic violence; less domestic violence means less homelessness.

Use land bank authority (land that is owned by the city) to provide housing for people who need it.
- Repurpose surplus real estate for those who are homeless.

Change zoning to allow more temporary shelters and permanent housing.
- Allow new ways of sharing housing—for example, fund an organization that matches people to share affordable housing, like the San Mateo County Home Sharing Program.
- Address zoning issues that act as barriers to creating flexible housing solutions.
- Change zoning to allow junior apartments attached to houses; they are more affordable to rent and allow homeowners to stay in the family house.
- Address the political environment for building affordable housing and shelters, i.e., “not in my backyard” (NIMBY).

Collaborate with religious institutions and other community organizations to update housing and create new housing options.
For example, Habitat for Humanity builds housing for low-income people, and involving the housing recipients and broader community in building the house.
Women and men coming out of incarceration need assistance with release planning to prevent homelessness upon release.

Reduce stigma associated with homelessness with respectful language and trauma-informed care when people are moved and services are offered. (For example, where homeless people live are targeted for “clean-up” rather than providing services to people who are experiencing trauma and need assistance.)
HOPE VI (1999) federal initiative through HUD transforms large congregate massive public housing and redevelops it; redeveloping requires displacing occupants, so it is necessary to have a plan for where they can go.

Streets Team (San Rafael) A program to make the downtown more vibrant; hired the homeless to help keep sidewalks and streets in the downtown area clean; enabled them to make money and receive positive feedback from other citizens.

San Rafael created a new position of Community Health Officer, who spends her entire time on the streets, making sure that people get the mental health and other services they need.

Lava Mae repurposes retired buses to deliver showers and toilets on wheels to homeless people in San Francisco.

San Francisco Interfaith Council decided to take a moral stand on essential housing, creating a task force to use congregation’s property and help social services to collaborate with spiritual organizations.

M.O.M.S. Project An innovative program in Santa Rita county jail designed to reduce recidivism of (pregnant and parenting) women, reunite incarcerated mothers with their children, improve the health and well being of the family and break the multigenerational recidivism cycle.

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RESOURCES

Articles, Books, Organizations, Videos

- **SAMHSA** - A public agency within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), SAMHSA implements policies and programs that aim to improve the quality and availability of behavioral health care. SAMHSA also supports HHS’s Strategic Initiatives and White House programs that address mental and/or substance use disorders.
- **National Alliance to End Homelessness** - Offers toolkits, webinars and services to end homelessness, with specific solutions for victims of domestic violence.
- **Days for Girls** - Volunteer groups organize to provide quality, sustainable feminine hygiene products to women and girls who need them, with chapters all over the world, including in the U.S.
- **How I Got Over** - Documentary film by Nicole Boxer about 15 formerly homeless and low-income women in addiction recovery as they participated in a theater program in Washington DC.
- **Hygiene and Heartache** - Article about homeless women’s daily struggle to keep clean.

Expert Contact Info:

- **Stephanie Lovette**, Economic Development Manager, City of San Rafael: (415) 485-3460;  
  Stephanie.lovette@cityofsanrafael.org (Street Team)
- **Rev. Carol Hovis**, Executive Director, Marin Interfaith Council: 1510 5th Avenue,  
  San Rafael:  chovis@marinifc.org, (415) 456-6957
- **Gary Blasi**, Counsel to Western Center on Law & Poverty in Los Angeles, specializing in complex litigation in the areas of housing, welfare, and homelessness:  Gblasi@wclp.org
- **Samantha Batko**, Director, Homelessness Research Institute for the National Alliance to End Homelessness; Areas of Expertise: Rapid Re-Housing, Young Families, Youth, Domestic Violence:  sbatko@naeh.org
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<td>Collect local data so you understand the nature of the problem in your community.</td>
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<td>Develop a comprehensive housing plan that makes homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring.</td>
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<td>Combine economic development opportunities with housing opportunities.</td>
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<td>Provide transitional housing for all people experiencing homelessness, including domestic violence victims, women and children.</td>
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<td>Pursue federal funding, and support Senator Feinstein’s movement to change the definition of homelessness so people can access the services.</td>
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<td>Fund mental health treatment and services.</td>
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