



U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness

Friday, July 12, 2013
Los Angeles, California

Setting the stage

Last weekend I watched the men's final at Wimbledon – how many of you here caught Andy Murray defeat Novak Djokovic?

To be clear, I'm not a particularly big Andy Murray fan, but I was definitely pulling for him on Sunday as his victory would mean that, for the first time in 77 years, Great Britain would have a Wimbledon champion. And who doesn't love a hometown hero? But to win Wimbledon, any athlete must be able to sustain intense mental focus and summon the ability to find a higher gear at critical moments in order to rise above the challenge and raise the silver cup. Last Sunday, Andy Murray overcame frustration; he never lost focus; and he never doubted his ability to win. Last Sunday, an amazing athlete played an amazing game, and for the first in 77 years the Wimbledon Championship has a hometown champion.

So what does this have to do with ending homelessness in LA?

Like Great Britain, LA has had a long stretch without a "win" in the battle to end homelessness. For years you've been calling yourselves the "capital of homelessness in the US" – certainly not a title that anyone in this room is proud to claim. And like Andy Murray trying to overcome a 77 year losing streak, you're trying to achieve a seemingly insurmountable goal.

Research has shown that elite athletes—champions—have a mental toughness beyond just their athletic skills. They are able to accept failure and move on. They are skilled at mental rehearsals. They imagine success and set goals. And they have great support teams that help them be resilient.

Fundamentals are in place

Over the last few years, you've developed the "athletic skills" – the fundamentals required to end homelessness –

- You're now using data to track progress and adjust your course.
- You've tapped mainstream resources and you're on your way to aligning services to create a seamless system of care that prioritizes people with the greatest needs. Perhaps in the not too distant future you'll have a system that catches people early in their housing crisis and prevents them from lingering on the streets and shelters.
- It also seems that LA programs are now adopting evidence informed and best practices like Housing First, Assertive Community Treatment Teams, and Critical Time Intervention.
- The new Standards of Excellence is another example of an LA specific innovation of best

practices for addressing chronic homelessness.

- The Skid Row Coordinated Entry System is demonstrating the impact of targeting the right service and housing intervention to meet an individual's specific needs.
- And based on the extraordinary progress of the Home For Good Funders Collaborative, investments are better aligned to support programs and a system of care.

No doubt you can and should be training to improve your skills, as any elite athlete would, and become even better at the execution of programs and systems that are hallmarks of success.

The Big Idea

Today, I'm inviting you to consider whether you – greater LA as a community – can become elite athletes—champions in the race to end homelessness.

As I noted, research has shown that champions have a **mental toughness** beyond just their athletic skills. They are able to accept failure and move on. They are skilled at mental rehearsals. They imagine success and set goals. And they have great support teams that push them and help them become more resilient and effective.

Let's ponder for a moment what accepting failure, imagining success, and building a great support team might look like in LA's efforts to end chronic and Veterans homelessness.

Learning from failure

When I first came to LA, I heard from almost everyone about LA's exceptionalism – LA was too big, spread out too far, too politicized, disadvantaged by the jurisdictional boundaries, etc. LAHSA was borne of a lawsuit so wasn't like other Continuums of Care that were created by voluntary affiliations and strategic intentions. There had already been many plans to end homelessness and all had failed due to the exceptionalism of LA. It seemed like there was a never ending list of why LA could not succeed in this space.

Keeping with the metaphor of elite athletes, these would be the issues that tempered their drive for success and propelled them to beat the odds. I'm also imagining that true champions would take each setback as a lesson to be learned, give themselves grace for making mistakes, and move on quickly. What would happen if LA adopted this mindset?

My boss, Council chair and VA Secretary Eric Shinseki often quotes Wayne Gretzky—a hometown hero here in LA for many years with the Kings— saying, "You miss 100 percent of the shots you never take".

What would it take for LA to really move on from the past and process failure as lessons learned along the way?

Imagining success

Can you imagine what ending chronic and Veterans homelessness would really look like? I invite you to create some mind pictures – consider this a little guided meditation.

What would downtown look like if Skid Row didn't have unsheltered people living on the streets?

What would your neighborhood or drive to work be like if you weren't seeing people under bridges, in ravines, and in parks?

What if you didn't have to explain to your children why someone is flying a sign on the street corner or exit ramp?

What would you feel like if you knew when you went to bed that no one was sleeping outside?

Now let's get back into your logical brain and consider: How could these visions propel you through tough workouts? How could these images give you confidence to push forward?

Becoming a great support team

The next question to ask is: what does it take to really be a great support team to each other in this work?

To me, a great support team is one that is positive yet still candid, celebrates success, and picks each other up when failure occurs. Each person has a clear role but each person can also cross cover when needed.

A few months ago, I was at the boot camp for the Skid Row Coordinated Entry System. One comment that most stood out to me was from Mike Alviderez from Skid Row Housing Trust. Mike said something to the effect of "I've realized that it's not just the funders and systems that need to get out of their silos, it's the agencies and providers. We need to start sharing resources and collaborating better."

Closing

So back to Wimbledon and the start of Andy Murray's match against the number one ranked player in world, Novak Djokovic. I was betting that Murray would win in the fourth set; I couldn't imagine Djokovic not winning at least win one set. Murray won the first two sets, but was losing the third set when he shifted gears and came back to win. It was amazing – I could actually see that mental toughness playing out in his expressions and propelling him forward.

As I stand here today, I hope at this mid-point of the Home For Good plan, you are like Andy Murray in the third set. You've got the confidence of establishing the foundation of skills necessary to solve homelessness – data driven, leveraging mainstream resources, system organized, using evidence informed practices, and investing collectively in what works – but to really win the match, it's going to be necessary to shift to higher gear – to use your mental toughness and persevere.

Only you can decide if this is the time you're going to win. Rather than using LA exceptionalism as a way to define why you fail, make LA exceptional in how you succeed. Use your exceptionalism to show the country that ending homelessness is possible. There is no shortage of hometown heroes here in LA, and I'm rooting for you to win. USICH is honored to be part of your support team, and we look forward to seeing how this match turns out.