

Now Obama Seeks to End Homelessness

by {ga=jjonas}

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Photo by [Paradiso 76](#)

Upon taking office in early 2009, President Barack Obama [said](#) ending the "national disgrace" of homelessness would be a priority. In June, the Obama administration unveiled [Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness](#), an ambitious commitment by the federal government to end veteran and chronic homelessness within five years, and to eliminate homelessness for families within ten.

Many homeless activists consider this commitment to be groundbreaking because it is comprehensive, establishes a time frame, and is quantifiable. Patrick Markee, senior policy analyst for the [Coalition for the Homeless](#), called it a "landmark" for the president to address homelessness so extensively and "important historically. ... After 30 years of modern homelessness, [you] can't underestimate the significance."

The plan's effect on New York City remains uncertain. The key overall, though -- in New York and elsewhere -- will be whether the administration can accomplish its goals. In 2004, Mayor Michael Bloomberg adopted his own [10-year plan](#) to sharply reduce, if not eliminate,

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homelessness in New York City. The goal has fallen far short of its goals. Instead, during his tenure, homelessness has increased and by some measures, it is at its highest level ever, according to [an analysis](#) by the Coalition for the Homeless. A record 120,381 different homeless men, women, and children slept in New York City municipal shelters at some point during fiscal year 2009.

Many Fronts, Many Players

The Obama administration says its efforts have already had an impact. It reports the [American Recovery and Reinvestment Act](#) of 2009, popularly known as the stimulus plan, has helped prevent homelessness for more than 350,000 people in its first year alone.

But on any given day, approximately 640,000 men, women and children, including 107,000 veterans, find themselves homeless in the U.S. According to the U.S. [Department of Housing and Urban Development](#), about 1.5 million people were homeless at some point during 2009. In New York City, the [Department of Homeless Services](#) reports more than 35,000 people, including children, currently live in shelters. The Coalition for the Homeless [calculated](#) this as the highest level since the Great Depression.

The federal plan was devised by the U.S. [Inter-Agency Council on Homelessness](#) consisting of 19 different federal agencies including the departments of labor, housing, transportation and human services. Their task was to create a far-reaching strategy that would expand and better coordinate the fight against homelessness by all levels of government along with nonprofits, religious institutions and other providers. The strategy aims to make this effort more efficient and effective, and has incorporated feedback from many providers and homeless advocates -- the people in the trenches.

It expands the policy adopted by the Bush administration, which concentrated on the chronically homeless, considered to be the most difficult population to help. Also, Bush's plan emphasized having localities create their own plans; Obama's emphasizes the federal government's role in coordinating these efforts.</>

The inter-agency council is chaired by Housing and Urban Development secretary Shaun

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Donovan, a former commissioner of the New York City [Department of Housing Preservation and Development](#)

"As the most far-reaching and ambitious plan to end homelessness in our history, this plan will both strengthen existing programs and forge new partnerships. ... We will harness public and private resources to build on the innovations that have been demonstrated at the local level nationwide. No one should be without a safe, stable place to call home," Donovan said Donovan in a press release.

The First Steps

The 74-page plan emphasizes the need for stable and affordable housing, and federal housing assistance. While it does not cut existing programs, it also does not increase funding. There are currently 13 different [rental assistance programs](#) available through Housing and Urban Development, and approximately 3,000 different public housing authorities across the country.

The plan highlights the shortage of affordable housing, a particular concern to New Yorkers. "A January 2010 review of characteristics of U.S. rental housing found that from 2001 to 2007 the nation's affordable unassisted rental housing stock decreased by 6.3 percent, while the high-rent rental housing stock increased 94.3 percent. This translates into a loss of more than 1.2 million affordable unassisted rental units from 2001 to 2007," it says.

While specific guidelines are still being written, Sam Miller, a housing coordinator with the Housing and Urban Development's New York Regional Office, described the strategy as a "consortium continuum of care" that is "homeless-centric."

The plan offers 10 objectives and 52 strategies. Some are merely proposals or ideas while others are already in place and working. Highlights include:

--rapid rehousing initiatives that skip shelters and instead place homeless people directly into permanent housing;

--more supportive housing, which offers people not only a place to live but also social services,

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employment help and the like;

--funding for the [National Housing Trust](#) , which preserves and restores affordable apartments;

--linking federal housing vouchers with health and social services provided through Medicaid and multi-faceted services funded through the [Temporary Assistance to Needy Families](#) program, the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) and other agencies;

--outreach to families through a network of emergency domestic violence shelters;

-- grants administered by the [Department of Labor](#) to [provide homeless veterans](#) with skills training, job search assistance, placement, and other services, including an initiative targeted at homeless female veterans.

In addition, the administration is counting on the [Affordable Care Act](#) , the recently passed healthcare legislation, to permit homeless people or people most at risk of homelessness who now have no health coverage to be eligible for Medicaid in 2014, thus removing the economic hardship posed by a catastrophic illness.

Targeting the Help

The strategy distinguishes between homeless sub-populations: the chronically homeless, veterans, families with children, and youth, including lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual people. There is some indication between 20 and 40 percent of all homeless youth identify with this group and are forced to leave home because of their sexual orientation.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development also has expanded its definition of who is homeless beyond just people living on the streets to include people such as those living in shelters and those doubling-up in homes with friends or family because they can't afford their own place.

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Not every homeless advocate applauds the idea of categories. Neil Donovan (no relation to Shaun Donovan), executive director of the D.C.-based [National Coalition for the Homeless](#) (on whose board Markee sits) said it is important to "address the total [homeless] population, not one part at a time." Breaking people into groups, he continued, means there will inevitably be "weak links ... and a disproportionate amount of resources" could be allocated to the sub-populations that may not need the most assistance.

In addition, Neil Donovan worries that the "actual chronic rate of homelessness is higher" than what is reported because providers tend to gravitate toward helping the population that receives the most government and private money. Donovan believes the way assumptions and measures are currently proposed is likely to establish a "hierarchy of less deserving or undeserving." Moreover, he has issues with the plan's lack of specificity and its "patchwork of solutions."

Homelessness and Poverty

"Opening Doors" was released at an opportune moment, with homelessness and poverty at record highs due to a myriad of factors including the recession and subsequent job layoffs and foreclosures; stagnating wages, and the cost of health care. Violence against the homeless has also reached record highs.

Newly released [data](#) from the U.S. Census Bureau reports 4 million Americans fell below the poverty line in 2009, while one in four African Americans and one in five American children lived in poverty. [Data](#) for New York City revealed more people living below the poverty line in 2008 than did nationally, 13.7 vs. 13.2 percent respectively. More than one fifth of all New York City residents -- 21.3 percent -- had incomes below the poverty level in 2009, according to an [analysis](#) by the Fiscal Policy Institute. Nearly half of those people had incomes equal to less than a half the poverty threshold -- or less than \$10,500 for a family of four.

Echoing the City?

Despite the obvious need for services here, in practical terms, the city may not realize any substantive change in homeless services, explained the coalition's Markee. "The federal government's role has been smaller in New York City than anywhere else. So we're not as reliant as other local and state governments. We [are not] waiting for the feds," he said.

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Regardless, the commissioner of the city Department of Homeless Services, Seth Diamond, said he was pleased with the president's plan, and that the city had been "consulted" in its creation. He was especially encouraged that "Opening Doors" includes the strong emphasis on prevention that has characterized the city's efforts for years. It shows, Diamond said, "the city has been out front" in the struggle to end homelessness." The federal plan, according to Diamond, would take up many of the efforts the city already has undertaken, such as employment services, rehabilitation and partnerships with community-based providers.

Even though "Opening Doors" does not discuss additional funding for the program or for New York City, Diamond sees it as a "first step, the initial effort ... [that homelessness] is an important priority" for the administration. "Additional funds and funding reallocation may come next," Diamond said. And the plan may also enable help homeless people tap into other, existing sources of funding they may not have taken advantage of, such as [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families](#)

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New York, according to an email from a city official, already "does an excellent job at linking homeless individuals with TANF support and services. We are a location that is very strong in this area."

"The biggest obstacles" to fighting homelessness in New York City, Markee said, is the Bloomberg administration's policy to [deny](#) federal Section 8 housing vouchers to the homeless. Before then, he said, "every other mayor ... had allotted some [vouchers], ranging from 1,500 to more than 4,000, resulting in [about] 1,000 to 2,000 apartments to homeless families." What's worse, according to Markee, is that "no other city has ever denied all of its vouchers to the homeless.

The Section 8 housing voucher plan is the Department of Housing and Urban Development's largest rental subsidy program. "Currently homeless families in New York City have virtually no access to the two major federal housing programs available to low-income households: the Housing Choice Voucher program (also known as Section 8 vouchers), and public housing (administered by the New York City Housing Authority)," the coalition said in testimony to the State Senate.

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