



**Opening Doors:
A Response to the Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness**

by Arnold S. Cohen

On June 22nd, President Obama's Inter-Agency Council on Homelessness submitted to the President and Congress its report, *Opening Doors*, hailed as the nation's first comprehensive strategy to prevent and end homelessness.

With homelessness dramatically increasing throughout the country, we applaud the President's efforts. Ending homelessness is an audacious goal because it requires, at its most basic, tackling poverty. Unquestionably, we welcome the President's willingness to lead by directing an unprecedented coordination among federal agencies to find solutions to a problem that too many believe is an intractable part of our urban landscape.

But now the hard work begins of putting the plan into action. As an important Partnership supporter, I'd like to share with you some brief thoughts about the Inter-Agency plan and what I think are the most important next steps that the President can take.

Breaking with the Past

In one very important regard, the President got it right. Any plan to end homelessness must start, first and foremost, with an aggressive, broadly based commitment to affordable housing. Housing, without question, is an indispensable part of ensuring human dignity and is the locus from which all other positive outcomes can flow.

Rightfully, the President emphatically eschews the nation's long-standing reliance on emergency shelter as our primary approach to confronting homelessness. Instead, the plan recognizes the need for a fundamental shift in strategy, away from crisis management, to one in which permanent housing isn't simply an end goal but rather an immediate first step on the road to well-being and stability. Numerous research studies have shown that rapidly securing housing for people who have become homeless is more effective in helping them achieve long term stability than their enduring a long shelter stay and a progression of services before being deemed "housing ready."

These are precisely the views of the Partnership. Our chief disagreement with traditional approaches isn't that it's not useful or necessary to provide immediate relief. Far from it. But too often we focus on programs that address acute symptoms without attacking the underlying issue of entrenched poverty. Nothing happens to break generational patterns of homelessness. The household bottom line is often the same as it was before – marginally above, at or below the poverty level. Unless we see housing as the beginning, rather than the end point, of our work, little will change for these individuals and families to realize their inherent potential to contribute fully to our communities.

Research-driven, Evidence-based

We're also encouraged that the President recognizes the need to challenge our underlying assumptions about what makes for effective approaches to ending homelessness. The Partnership is heartened to see his insistence that we rely increasingly on efforts that use a strong research methodology to produce evidence of what works and what does not. By evaluating results, we can begin to develop *best practice* models and, as we share data, we can determine which efforts reliably produce the outcomes we are seeking and begin to scale them up.

Here, too, the Partnership has made a significant commitment. The Partnership today is one part service provider and two parts a learning and advocacy organization. Our research arm uses rigorous research methods to evaluate the effectiveness of our work. And through its analysis of our programs our research team seeks to gather and disseminate information about what causes housing instability and how we can best promote stability and prosperity.

Unfortunately few today operate with this paradigm in mind; in truth our collective understanding of what drives homelessness is still somewhat nascent and always evolving. But the President's plan also recognizes that to make this work there needs to be leadership at the federal level to create strong public/private coordination and partnerships.

Still more to consider

While the President's plan is bold in its emphasis on innovation and evidence-based programs, several important elements for success deserve greater consideration.

The first is the understanding that *place* matters. The plan still relies heavily on helping homeless individuals through social services. But it is unlikely that we can have a real impact on homelessness without changing the conditions under which poor people live. Structural issues such as a lack of affordable and decent housing, inadequate access to health care, enervated neighborhood schools, stagnant local economies and few economic opportunities – even issues of adequate transportation, sanitation, and local choice for finding goods and services – create stressors that put individuals' well-being at risk and entrap them into believing that positive change in their lives isn't possible. More than simple perception, these structural deficits present hard obstacles to success.

Any plan to end homelessness then must also pay attention to these structural issues. Using evidence of what we know is most important to achieving stability, implementation must focus on actionable recommendations about how we should invest in the infrastructure of communities.

Moreover, successful implementation will depend on broad support for the Plan's strategies from many sectors, including business, local public officials and civic leadership, service providers, and to some extent the public. Ending chronic homelessness and homelessness among veterans in five years, and family homelessness in ten – the stated goals of the plan – will indeed require a far greater expression of collective will than we have seen to date.

By focusing on evidence-based programs, the sharing of data, and collaboration across many levels of the public and private sectors in the plan, the President certainly set the stage for success. We would hope that as implementation begins, there will be greater attention given to innovative

approaches that will truly encourage many entities to see themselves as stakeholders in the proposition that, in the United States of America, no one should be without a home.

The Partnership's Strategic Approach

Many aspects of the President's plan mirror the approaches already underway at the Partnership. This year, for example, we are launching two research-based interventions that are designed to impact critical needs: making sure children who are experiencing homelessness can be successful in school; and helping those with HIV/AIDS who have been previously homeless remain stably housed. Both will be designed to test and evaluate whether the activities we believe will have the greatest effect on these desired outcomes in fact work and what their success (or failure) tells us about our assumptions and the experience of those who are homeless or most at risk. These new initiatives are a further expression of our ongoing collection and analysis of longitudinal data from our programs.

Increasingly the Partnership is restructuring its work so that the direct housing assistance we provide is but one step in a more fulsome effort to engage with our clients that includes soliciting their participation and leadership in *preventing* homelessness in their own lives and in their communities. Working at the community level, taking on issues of affordable housing and other structural elements, and advocating for new public policies based on evidence of what works is a robust vision for the Partnership that goes well beyond the work of public contracts.

It would be easy to write off the current rise in homelessness in America to the recession. But long before our current economic crisis, millions of poor and working-poor Americans lived haunted by the knowledge that decent housing is a fragile condition. Today more than 1.7 American experience homelessness every year; increasingly those who are becoming homeless are families with children. Something must be done.

The President's plan is a strong starting place. We especially applaud its emphasis on moving beyond the status quo to discover and share a new vision of how to end homelessness. Imagine what a compelling accomplishment that will be.