Inquiring Minds– 13 March 2020

Melissa Butler, Moderator

What's the Best Way to Handle Homelessness?

Homelessness, which actually decreased by 15 percent from 2007 to 2018, has reemerged as a huge issue. According the Department of Housing and Urban Development, in 2019 homelessness increased to 567, 715 an increase of nearly 15,000 people, or 2.7%, since 2018. This marked the third year in a row that the overall homeless population in the U.S. increased, but across the country, the rates of change in homelessness have been uneven. Twenty-nine states experienced declining rates and twenty-one saw increases, led by California. In December, President Trump blamed California's Governor, Gavin Newsom, for the problem and threatened federal intervention. In response, Newsom claimed that the President was "not serious about this issue" and was simply "playing politics." By early 2020, Newsom focused his entire State of the State address on the problem of homelessness and announced that he would "send an envoy to meet with administration officials and discuss ways to address the issue together." (NY Times, 1/16/2020)

Why are people homeless? The National Coalition for the Homeless says: "Homelessness results from a complex set of circumstances that require people to choose between food, shelter, and other basic needs. " They cite foreclosures, poverty, eroding work opportunities, declining public assistance, a lack of affordable housing, lack of affordable health care, domestic violence, mental illness and addiction disorders. (https://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/why.html)

But what are the options? What's the best way to deal with the problem? Two radically different approaches have been offered:

1) "Housing First"—the approach favored by the National Alliance to End Homelessness. For years, U.S. advocates for addressing homelessness have pursued a model known as Housing First, a philosophy that calls for providing permanent housing to people before addressing other chronic concerns, such as substance abuse or mental health disorders.. Under this approach, if people are in crisis and need a place to live, agencies will try to get people into a stable home, without first requiring them to prove they're sober or drug-free. It's also the approach that has been credited with dramatic successes treating homelessness in cities like Helsinki, Finland, and in Utah, where homelessness dropped 91% from 2005 to 2015.

Housing First is also a conservative approach. Sam Tsemberis, a founder of the Housing First philosophy, notes that chronically homeless people cost the government a lot of money when they're living on the street, because of services like emergency room visits

and jail time. (In 2015, HUD estimated that annual cost at between $30,000 and $50,000 per person.) Housing them simply costs a lot less. The George W. Bush administration worked to spread the philosophy as a best practice, and it is considered by many to be the most effective way to actually reduce the homeless population, as opposed to simply clearing unsheltered people from the sidewalks.

Housing First is premised on the following principles:
➢ Homelessness is first and foremost a housing crisis and can be addressed through the provision of safe and affordable housing.
➢ All people experiencing homelessness, regardless of their housing history and duration of homelessness, can achieve housing stability in permanent housing. Some may need very little support for a brief period of time, while others may need more intensive and long-term supports.
➢ Everyone is "housing ready." Sobriety, compliance in treatment, or even criminal histories are not necessary to succeed in housing. Rather, homelessness programs and housing providers must be "consumer ready."
➢ Many people experience improvements in quality of life, in the areas of health, mental health, substance use, and employment, as a result of achieving housing.
➢ People experiencing homelessness have the right to self-determination and should be treated with dignity and respect.
➢ The exact configuration of housing and services depends upon the needs and preferences of the population. https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/Housing-First-Permanent-Supportive-Housing-Brief.pdf

2) **"Housing Fourth"**—the approach favored by Robert Marbut, the Trump appointee as executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH).
"I believe in Housing Fourth," Marbut told HuffPost in 2014. This approach refuses to give people living on the streets food, money, or a roof over their heads until they solve the behaviors that caused them to be homeless—failings that are personal, never systemic Styled by some a "velvet hammer" strategy, it is a policing-heavy model that emphasizes banning panhandling, requiring homeless people to live in close proximity by centralizing services in massive facilities far from urban centers, and providing food and shelter only as a reward for good behavior. In his career, Marbut has pushed for shelters that set up barriers to treatment, namely sobriety. For example, at Haven for Hope, a shelter he founded in San Antonio, homeless people with substance-abuse problems sleep outside in an exposed courtyard until they can pass a drug test. He has also argued against providing food claiming that "Street feeding is one of the worst things to do, because it keeps people in homeless status. I think it's very unproductive, very enabling, and it keeps people out of recovery programs." (NPR 2014) This approach supports criminalizing various behaviors associated with homelessness such as sitting or lying down on sidewalks, camping or sleeping in public places, loitering, loafing and vagrancy laws, banning bathing in fountains, living in vehicles, sharing food, storing personal belongings in public, expanding rules about panhandling and 'hoarding' in backpacks or shopping carts. The underlying idea is that a allowing these behaviors simply enables homelessness. Supporters of the approach may favor expanding police authority to arrest individuals for minor offenses that now might result in a ticket.