

April 29, 2009

Partners In a Vision

Seven years ago, who would have predicted the first national documented decreases in homelessness in the nation, including in street and chronic homelessness?

Who would have believed that 20 Federal agencies, 53 Governors, more than 850 Mayors and County Executives, and business and civic leaders would be partnered through strategic business planning to the idea of using the verb "end" with the noun "homelessness"?

Who would have thought that federal spending targeted to homelessness would have nearly doubled?

Who would have expected a reframing of the issue of homelessness and its solutions that moved discussion to a focus on outcomes and the central antidote of housing?

Who would have imagined that the most humane, effective, and innovative solution to end homelessness - Housing First - would come directly from listening to vulnerable and disabled people living on the streets and would become the dominant strategy for ending homelessness?

Who would have conceived of the economic consequences of homelessness as the frontier of research through cost benefit analysis, proving to be the decisive mobilizer of political will among jurisdictional leaders?

These were difficult to imagine or believe, yet they are the reality in our country today. The dedication you have made in the field and our partnership has accomplished what many would deem to be impossible.



THE ABOLITIONIST AGENDA

During my 29 years of working to end homelessness, I have had the privilege for the past seven years of serving homeless people as the Executive Director of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. When I first went to Washington in March 2002, expectations were low for the new Administration. Since then, I have had the honor of serving two Presidents, having been appointed by President Bush and now serving during the first 100 days of the Obama Administration.

Our work together in those seven years achieved significant results in increasing resources, decreasing homelessness, constellating an unprecedented national partnership, and in changing the national mindset on the issue. I am proud to have partnered with so many elected officials across our nation, local stakeholders, faith communities, and Federal officials. I have also had the honor of serving with what I believe to be the hardest working staff in the Federal government.

I will be leaving my position as Executive Director of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness effective May 15, 2009. I want to thank former President Bush for the opportunity he offered me in revitalizing the Council to advance a bipartisan abolitionist agenda from the White House. That spirit continues tangibly in the recovery package forwarded by President Obama which includes resources targeted to our homeless neighbors, further advancing our national efforts to reduce and end this moral disgrace.

In the past seven years we have made progress in that abolitionist agenda:

1. Federal spending on homelessness increased to record levels for eight consecutive years, nearly doubling between 2000 and 2009 to more than \$5 billion.
2. The first documented national decrease in homelessness was achieved, a 30% decrease in street and chronic homelessness and a 12% overall decrease between 2005 and 2007.
3. The Council reframed the national response to homelessness, partnering with states and communities to create strategic plans led by jurisdictional elected officials, shaped by community stakeholders, oriented around business principles and practices, and measured by results in reducing homelessness.
4. Recognizing that no one level of government could solve the problem alone, and that homelessness could not be solved inside the Beltway, the Council created a national partnership which now includes 20 Federal agencies, 49 Governors who have created State Interagency Councils on Homelessness, and more than 850 Mayors and County Executives who are partnered in local strategic Ten Year Plans to end the homelessness of those who are the most vulnerable and disabled on our streets and in our shelters. This partnership literally extends from the White House in Washington to the streets of our country.
5. The Council urged a consumer oriented approach that involved homeless and formerly homeless people as customers in decision making. That emphasis led to the identification by consumers of the central antidote to homelessness, housing.
6. The Council supported a Housing First approach, the rapid rehousing of homeless people with support services as the central strategy of strategic planning. That approach is now the prevalent strategy to reduce homelessness, not only in the United States, but in countries around the world.
7. The Council affirmed, supported, and made visible innovative initiatives that are now central to strategic thinking and planning. Innovators from across the nation, from New York City to San Francisco, from Seattle to Miami, from Minneapolis to Dallas, have offered remedies to cure the disgrace. The Council has had the great privilege to practice the rapid dissemination of these life enhancing and saving ideas through City Focus Groups, State Colloquies, and National Summits, as well as through our weekly newsletter and web site, and the extraordinary work of the Regional Coordinators. The Council's "faculty of innovators," drawn from across the country and beyond, were central in the disseminating process. And, perhaps, most importantly, the Council worked to move the dialogue and response from good intentions and well-meaning programs to innovative solutions informed by cost studies and cost benefit analysis documenting the economic impact of homelessness. Nothing has impacted political will more than the Council's encouragement and dissemination of the economic consequences of homelessness.

Through these new approaches the Council, together with its partners, focused first on the most vulnerable and disabled homeless people, living on our streets, languishing in our shelters. Those identified as experiencing chronic homelessness became the first priority of a larger strategy to end all homelessness, a strategy that was informed by the best researchers and business thinkers in our country. In that focus, the Council and its partners literally connected the story of the Good Samaritan to public policy. As a nation we would no longer pass by our neighbors on the street. We would stop. And we would ensure that they have a place to stay and whatever they needed to gain stability and security.

I went to Washington with an abolitionist agenda. I leave Washington with the knowledge that across our nation that intent is shared. While I have served in two administrations, I don't see my work as serving administrations, but in abolishing homelessness.

President Obama's commitment on the issue is obvious. In his recovery package homeless people were included with an emphasis on preventing homelessness and rapid rehousing. Those are the right themes, not only for the first 100 days, but for the next four years. I am encouraged by the focus already demonstrated by his Cabinet on this issue. HUD and VA have already demonstrated leadership in moving an aggressive agenda.

The legacy of the last seven years is clear. More resources than ever before - decreases in street and chronic homelessness - unprecedented political will - unprecedented innovations - and unprecedented research and planning. Your work in government and in the field in initiating and implementing these new approaches and partnering in local strategies has made the difference across our country. The economic difficulties of the past year - what I term the "double trouble" of foreclosure and job losses - have increased the numbers of families who have fallen into homelessness and who are at risk of losing their housing. The President's resolute action in his recovery package, infused into field-tested and evidence-based initiatives and jurisdictionally-led plans, is a recipe to mitigate the impact of that "double trouble." Even in the midst of the current economic difficulties, that old saying of Einstein's remains true: "In the midst of difficulty, lies opportunity."

And, finally, I am grateful to my "patron saints" who prepared my soul, heart, and mind for this abolitionist mission. St. Francis of Assisi taught me that one's whole life can be dedicated to companionship with the poorest of the poor. Simone Weil's life and writings call all of us, especially public officials, to focus attention on the "single and permanent obligation" to remedy "all the privations of soul and body" which may damage the life of any human being. And my abolitionist heroes William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass taught me that righting a moral wrong requires relentless advocacy and partnership with elected officials whether Mayors, Governors, or the President of the United States.

These "saints" and others taught me that our quest to end social evil is bound to moral insomnia. An insomnia inspired by Garrison's abolitionist declaration: "I am in earnest. I will not equivocate. I will not excuse. I will not retreat a single inch. And I will be heard."

Let's be clear. Our calling to serve our homeless neighbors is a call to abolitionism. Our work is to abolish the wrong. Anything less leaves our neighbors in human tragedy and long misery. As I have said many times across our country, the long moral arc of history, as Dr. King taught us, bends toward justice. In our abolitionist cause, history is on our side.

You can be certain that, in leaving this position, I do not leave our mission.
I stand ready to work with you to complete our abolitionist agenda.

Philip F. Mangano