

# Ending Homelessness: A Dream with a Plan

In our nation tonight, at least 650,000 people will be homeless. Over a third of them will have no shelter at all. While most will be single individuals, 37 percent will be people living in families with children. Nearly a fifth will have serious disabilities and have been homeless for years, even. But for the remaining 80 percent, homelessness will be a relatively brief, one-time-only experience—the result of the nation’s chronic shortage of housing that is affordable to low-income people.<sup>1</sup>

Ask a 20-year-old today how homelessness can be ended and chances are you will get a puzzled look in return. In their experience, homelessness has always existed and probably always will. Ending homelessness is a dream.

Except that it is not. Many people are surprised to learn that widespread homelessness is a relatively new phenomenon in the United States. Thirty years ago, we did not have it, and we should not have it now. We should all dream of a nation in which homelessness does not exist. But that dream can be accompanied by a pragmatic, actionable plan for ending it, because ending homelessness is entirely within our grasp.

• Nan Roman  
• Irene Mabry Moses  
• National Alliance to End Homelessness



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**650,000 a night; 1,590,000 each year:**



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and these are people whose chronic illnesses (mental illness, chronic addictions, and physical ailments) prevent them from getting back on their feet.

## Affordable Housing is the Solution

In the course of a year, nearly half of people who become homeless live in families with children; the rest are youth, veterans and single men and women. Most people are homeless because they are poor and cannot afford housing. Of all the people who are homeless—1,590,000 each year—the majority will be homeless for only a brief time and never be homeless again.<sup>2</sup> Only 17 percent will be homeless for long periods of time, and these are people whose chronic illnesses (mental illness, chronic addictions, and physical ailments) prevent them from getting back on their feet.<sup>3</sup>

The major cause of the homelessness crisis is the fact that low-income people can no longer afford housing. Thirty years ago, there were more inexpensive

apartments and houses than there were low-income people who needed them. People may have had mental illness, addiction and disabilities—they may have been very poor and living on the edge—but they could afford a place to live. Today, the cost of housing has risen much faster than people’s incomes, and there are fewer and fewer inexpensive places to live. The combination of more demand and less supply has led to homelessness. It is like a game of musical chairs: when the music stops, someone is left standing.

Of course, housing is not the only problem. People who are poor have difficulty finding jobs or accessing benefits. They lack medical care and often have untreated illnesses or disabilities. Certainly people who are homeless have unmet service and treatment needs and require more income. But the bottom line is, whatever other problems people may have, if they are housed they are not homeless.

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**Plan to End Homelessness**

Research has shown us that if people can be helped to quickly return to housing, most are able to get back on their feet, re-establish their lives and move forward: they do not become homeless again. Re-housing ends homelessness and may even cost less than band-aid approaches like shelter. To be sure, people may still be poor, pay too much for housing and lack services. But they are not still homeless.

To help shift our approach to homelessness from shelter to housing, the National Alliance to End Homelessness released *A Plan, Not a Dream: How to End Homelessness in Ten Years*<sup>4</sup> that gives communities a road map to solutions. The step-by-step process begins with a plan and a commitment to ending homelessness completely and implementation of the following programs:

**Prevention.** After committing to a plan, preventing people from becoming homeless is the first step. Often it is less expensive to help someone stay in their existing apartment than to let them become homeless and then find them a new place to live. It is also the right thing to do: Why put a domestic violence survivor and her children in a shelter when an apartment would be safer and more nurturing?

Besides losing their housing because of poverty or a crisis, many people become homeless after being discharged

from public institutions like foster care, hospitals, mental health facilities, jails or prisons. A more effective, and less costly, approach is to create a support system that helps people transition quickly into housing—the necessary platform for their future employment and stability.

**Housing.** To get homeless people rapidly back into housing, a whole new set of strategies is being used. More affordable housing must be produced. Communities need a toolbox of housing resources, including rental subsidies, housing locators and landlord negotiators. To house the most vulnerable and challenged street people, permanent supportive housing (housing with services) is necessary. Tens of thousands of such units have been created over the past decade, and they are slowly but surely reducing chronic homelessness.<sup>5</sup>

**Big Picture.** The final strategy is to make progress on the housing crisis, low incomes and holes in the safety net. This is a huge challenge, especially during difficult economic times. However, a new initiative could help unlock some federal resources in the service of ending homelessness. Released in June 2010, *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*<sup>6</sup>

**Communities need a toolbox of housing resources including rental subsidies, housing locators, and landlord negotiators and more.**

sets ambitious five- and ten-year goals. It mobilizes mainstream programs such as housing, veterans' assistance, youth programs, welfare and child welfare to do their parts on the homelessness front. While it will not solve the housing crisis or end poverty, using these federal mainstream resources more strategically can have a major impact on homelessness.

**Ending Homelessness is Achievable**

More than 240 cities, towns and rural areas across the nation, Congress, several administrations, mayors, governors and legislators have adopted plans to end homelessness and are reducing homelessness nationwide.<sup>7</sup>

Organizations like National Alliance to End Homelessness, EveryOne Home and BOSS are successfully working for solutions to homelessness locally, statewide and nationally.



Janny (yellow shirt) is now a star staff member of the organization that helped her get back on her feet.

“I have survived abuse, addiction and homelessness. My younger years were rough, relationships were hard and I often made decisions that were bad versus what was good for me.

During a 9 year bout with homelessness BOSS gave me the support and time I needed to find subsidized housing and finally to create a stable healthy environment for my children.”

EveryOne Home, a project in Alameda County (Oakland, CA), is working to permanently house the 15,000 homeless individuals and families in the county by 2020.<sup>8</sup> To meet this ambitious goal, a hotline has been set up to help prevent homelessness. For those who do become homeless, a centralized intake and screening process assesses needs, and one of eight housing resources centers helps them get back into housing with access to the necessary services. To ensure that there is an adequate supply of affordable and permanent supportive housing, EveryOne Home has adopted housing production goals. To keep everything on track, there is a rigorous evaluation of outcomes and a strong component focused on the development of long-term leadership and political will. EveryOne Home is well on the way to meeting its goal: the county has already reduced family homelessness by 37 percent since 2004.<sup>9</sup>

**Costs of Serving Homeless Individuals**

(Cost per day per person)

HOSPITAL INPATIENT	\$	\$1,940
EMERGENCY ROOM	\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$	\$905
PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL	\$\$\$\$\$\$\$	\$604
AMBULANCE	\$\$\$\$\$	\$527
DETOX	\$\$\$	\$256
JAIL	\$	\$87
AFFORDABLE & SUPPORTIVE HOUSING	\$	\$31
SHELTER	\$	\$28

For only \$31, we can avoid some of the more costly, both monetary and emotional, side effects that come with homelessness.

(Source: www.usich.gov/PDF/OpeningDoors\_2010\_FSPPreventEndHomeless.pdf -see p.10)

In 2010, the Department of Veterans Affairs estimated that there are approximately 76,000 homeless veterans, accounting for 9 percent of the entire homeless population.

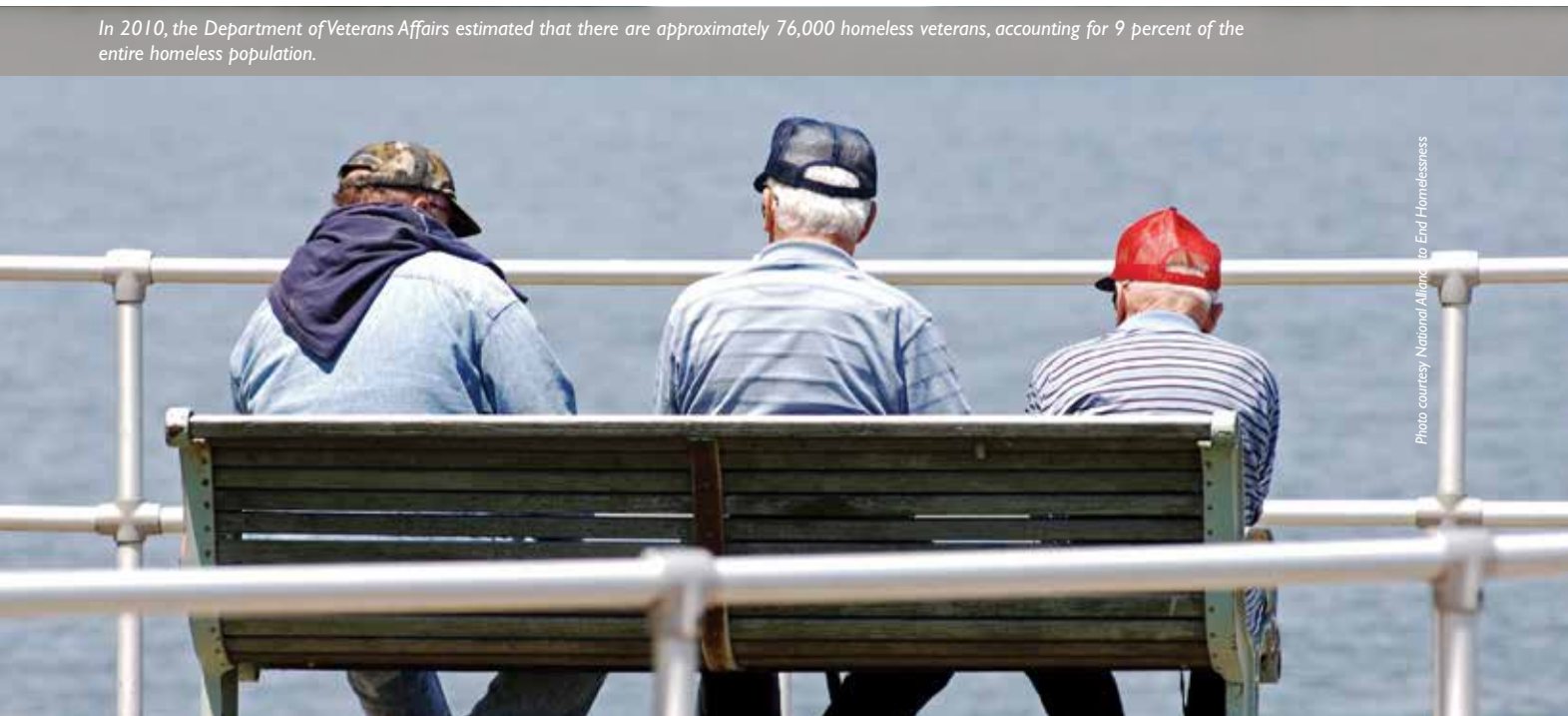


Photo courtesy National Alliance to End Homelessness



**As long as it's been** since I was homeless, the pain is still buried deep inside. When I see a person in that place, I recall that pain.

When my ex-husband returned from Vietnam with a heroin addiction, I made the decision to leave. Even working, I found it hard to maintain my previous lifestyle and ended up homeless, walking the streets of DC with my two young daughters.

I was soon in a shelter where I stayed for six months. The situation may seem inconceivable to most but I've seen so many people who are just one paycheck away from homelessness.

And the reality of being homeless—without a permanent place of residence—is just one part of the issue. The embarrassment, the self-pity, the stares, the taunting, the rejection—it all compounds the situation. I felt the terror my children did that their schoolmates would find out about us. I felt I couldn't call my parents or friends because I was afraid of what they would think. I know too well the stigma our society assigns to people experiencing homelessness; if you're homeless, people seem to think it must mean you're an addict, disturbed or just lazy.

In my time living in shelter, I met people insincere in their efforts and unable to understand my situation.

But today, that's changed. Today there are more programs, more strategies and more people who are dedicated to helping others move forward. I've seen programs that emphasize rapid re-housing, supportive housing, job opportunities, healthcare and other social services critical to helping vulnerable people move forward with their lives.

As a woman with intimate knowledge of the issue, I am truly blessed to serve on the Board of Directors of the National Alliance to End Homelessness. In this work, and in my personal life as a realtor helping people access housing, I feel that I am returning the blessings that helped me out of homelessness. Words can never express the joy of someone who's experienced homelessness, stabilized and turned around to lend a helping hand to another in need. It is a joy that I know and embrace wholeheartedly.

## an author's story



It's move-in day for a family because of the help of EveryOne Home. The family had been dealing with chronic homelessness for over a year.

Photo courtesy National Alliance to End Homelessness

**Ending homelessness may be a dream for our nation; but with a good plan, it is a dream that we can achieve.**

Other cities are also experiencing impressive results as they implement plans to end homelessness. Quincy, Massachusetts cut chronic homelessness by over half. Chicago, Illinois and Fort Worth, Texas reduced overall homelessness by ten percent in just a few years.

Nationally, between the time that homelessness first emerged and the onset of plans to end homelessness, the number of homeless people annually had been increasing, from 550,000 (1987) to 800,000 (1997). Since then, the number has been decreasing (at least until the recession, when it flattened out). Because of a federal focus on ending chronic homelessness with permanent supportive housing, we have done even better in that area: Chronic homelessness has been reduced over 30 percent.<sup>11</sup>

A similar approach has been implemented in Wichita, Kansas. New permanent housing units and services worked to reduce homelessness by 50 percent. An evaluation of the first 12 women housed revealed a 50 percent reduction in emergency room visits and a 90 percent reduction in in-patient hospital stays. These, along with other reductions in public service utilization, have saved the community roughly \$41,000 annually for those 12 women alone.<sup>10</sup>

Ending homelessness may be a dream for our nation, but with a good plan, it is a dream that we can achieve. We are not there yet, but we are beginning to see what ending homelessness might look like. While today's 20-year-olds may believe homelessness is inevitable, their children may have to use their imaginations to think of a world where homelessness exists.

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*Nan Roman, president and CEO of the National Alliance to End Homelessness (endhomelessness.org), is a leading national voice on the issue of homelessness. She developed a pragmatic plan to end homelessness in ten years. To implement this plan, Roman works closely with members of Congress and the administration, as well as with cities and states across the nation. She collaborates with Alliance partners to educate the public about the real nature of homelessness and successful solutions.*



*Irene Mabry Moses is the founder and CEO of Faith Realty LLC and has served as a board member for the National Alliance to End Homelessness since 2008. The realtor, who once experienced homelessness herself, is an active member of her community, her church and charitable organizations focused on housing and poverty.*

*(See left for Moses' picture and story.)*