



Helping All of Our Homeless

Developing a Gay- and Transgender-Inclusive Federal Plan to End Homelessness

Jeff Krehely and Jerome Hunt | January 2011

Introduction

President Obama last year announced an ambitious new plan to end homelessness in the United States. The plan builds on previous administrations' work to combat homelessness as well as on existing state and local programs. When announcing the plan, the president noted the impact homelessness has on people and society, stating, "Since the founding of our country, 'home' has been the center of the American dream ... without a safe, affordable place to live, it is much tougher to maintain good health, get a good education or reach your full potential."¹

The president's plan has four key goals:

- End chronic homelessness in five years
- Prevent and end homelessness among veterans in five years
- Prevent and end homelessness for families, youth, and children in ten years
- Set a path to ending all types of homelessness²

The president's plan references gay and transgender Americans, particularly unaccompanied youth, and one of the plan's goals is to make information more readily available to all levels of government, nonprofits, philanthropy, and the private sector when working with the gay and transgender community.³ This inclusion is an important step forward, considering that gay and transgender Americans were essentially absent from previous government strategies to end homelessness in the United States.

Yet the federal government should be much more explicit in its efforts to tackle gay and transgender homelessness if homelessness overall is to be eventually eradicated. The reason: Research suggests that gay and transgender youth and adults are at a higher risk of homelessness compared to other homeless Americans. Gay and transgender youth often face rejection at home and at school, leading to a series of failures in social safety nets that often ends with youth on the streets.

These youth then have a difficult time transitioning to a successful and economically secure adulthood, which means they could remain homeless as adults. Even for gay and transgender adults who never experienced homelessness as youth, prevalent workplace discrimination leads to economic hardships and vulnerabilities that reduce their incomes, leading to higher rates of poverty and risk of homelessness compared to adults who are not gay or transgender.

This brief reviews existing data and research that suggest gay and transgender Americans are at a higher risk of homelessness than the overall population, with a focus first on youth and then adults. It concludes by offering gay- and transgender-specific recommendations for federal agencies that are working to implement the president's plan to end all forms of homelessness.

Gay and transgender youth are disproportionately homeless

Gay and transgender youth experience higher rates of homelessness, which the Center for American Progress reported last summer. That research estimated the number of gay and transgender youth who are homeless and outlined steps the federal government should take to eliminate the causes of this problem. The report found that 320,000 to 400,000 gay and transgender youth out of 1.6 to 2.0 million total homeless youth experience homelessness at some point each year. This means that gay and transgender youth make up about 20 percent of the youth homeless population, but only about 5 percent of the general youth population.

This high rate of homelessness is fueled in part by gay youth on average coming out at earlier ages (between 14-to-16 years old today, compared to 19-to-24 in the 1970s). When people come out as youth, they are often met by families, peers, educators, and service providers who are ill prepared to provide guidance and a supportive environment for them. A lack of support can lead some gay and transgender youth to fall through a series of social safety nets, including families, schools, healthcare providers, the courts, and other service providers—and ultimately find themselves on the streets.

Given the paucity of services and support for gay and transgender homeless youth, as we documented in our report earlier this year, it is reasonable to assume that many of these youth have a hard time transitioning to a successful and stable adulthood. That fact, combined with higher rates of workplace discrimination and poverty that gay and transgender adults face, which we describe below, means that this population is especially vulnerable to a range of problems, including chronic homelessness.

Workplace and economic inequality

Besides disproportionate rates of homelessness as youth, a root cause of lower incomes and poverty among adult gay and transgender Americans is the high rate of workplace discrimination they face. This discrimination includes unequal pay, barriers to health insurance, unfair hiring and promotion practices, and verbal and sexual harassment that create hostile and unsafe working environments. Studies show that 16 percent to 68 percent of gay and transgender individuals experience this type of discrimination at some point in their lives.⁴ And an estimated 12 percent to 30 percent of heterosexual co-workers have reported witnessing antigay discrimination in the workplace.⁵

Looking at incomes, gay men earn 10 percent to 32 percent less than their heterosexual male counterparts who are similarly qualified.⁶ Transgender individuals are more likely to face high rates of unemployment and earn less than \$25,000 a year, compared to people who are not transgender.⁷

Further, data from the Williams Institute point to the income disparities between the gay and straight populations. Several findings are striking, and completely dispel the stereotype that gay people are more affluent than others. For example, lesbian couples and their families are more likely to be poor than their heterosexual counterparts, while children from homes headed by same-sex couples are twice as likely to be in poverty compared to children from homes headed by heterosexual couples. Based on that data, it is not surprising that gay and lesbian individuals and their families are also more likely to be recipients of government programs that support poor and low-income families.⁸

Queers for Economic Justice, or QEJ, also examined the impact of poverty and economic hardship on gay and transgender people compared to those who are not gay or transgender. This research found that:

- Gay men and women as well as same-sex couples are more likely to receive government income support than their heterosexual counterparts.⁹
- Same-sex couples who live in rural areas are poorer than different-sex married couples who live in rural areas.¹⁰
- Children from same-sex couple households have poverty rates twice those of children from heterosexual married couple households.¹¹

This past June Welfare Warriors Research Collaborative (a project of QEJ) sought to better understand the challenges that face gay and transgender individuals who have low incomes. Some key findings of their survey and report include:

- A majority of the respondents, 58 percent, currently live on the street, in a subway or homeless shelter, or in some other form of temporary housing.¹²
- About 70 percent of respondents have been homeless at some point in their lives.¹³
- Need-based public benefits (food stamps, public assistance, and housing assistance) have been used by 80 percent of respondents.¹⁴
- A majority of the respondents use health-related public benefits (Medicaid, Social Security Disability, and HIV/AIDS Service Administration benefits).¹⁵
- About half of the respondents reported discrimination by a government or county social services agency, while 40 percent were denied services.¹⁶
- Forty-four percent of those who have been homeless have been stopped and searched in social service agencies, 57 percent have been threatened, and 35 percent have been physically assaulted.¹⁷

Solutions

Based on available data and current research, any national plan to end homelessness must have a specific focus on gay and transgender youth and adults. For this reason, we strongly recommend that the White House instruct the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (see box on page 5) to develop a coordinated strategy to address the problem of gay and transgender homelessness by amending the existing Federal Strategic Plan to include a focus on this population.

Outreach and coordination with Congress should also be undertaken, when appropriate. Additionally, the Federal Regional Interagency Councils and the State Interagency Councils on Homelessness should be instructed to include gay and transgender inclusive policies and perspectives in all homelessness policies and programs.

The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness

The United States Interagency Council On Homelessness was authorized by Title II of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 to be an “independent establishment” whose mission is to “coordinate the Federal response to homelessness and to create a national partnership at every level of government and with the private sector to reduce and end homelessness in the nation while maximizing the effectiveness of the Federal Government in contributing to the end of homelessness.”

The council is comprised of heads of the following nineteen government departments and agencies: U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Justice, Labor, Transportation, and Veterans Affairs; as well as the Corporation for National and Community service, General Service Administration, Office of Management and Budget, Social Security Administration, United States Postal Service, and the White House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives. Currently, Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan serves as the chair, Department of Labor Secretary Hilda Solis serves as vice chairperson, and Barbara Poppe serves as the executive direc-

tor. The chair, vice chairperson, and executive director are elected annually by the members of the council.

The council is responsible for the first-ever comprehensive federal strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness in the United States. The plan entitled, “Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness,” is a bipartisan collaborative effort to end veteran and chronic homelessness by 2015 and homelessness among families, youth, and children by 2020.

Additionally, the council has encouraged the development of federal regional interagency councils in which regional representative of federal agencies are charged with mirroring the work of their federal partners to end homelessness. The creation of state interagency councils on homelessness with representation on the cabinet level has also been encouraged via legislative authority or Governor’s Executive Order, to help meet the goals of ending homelessness by 2015 and 2020.

Source: Interagency Council on Homelessness at <http://www.ich.gov/aboutus.html>.

As the Obama administration thinks through a gay-and-transgender-specific plan, we offer the following general recommendations for consideration.

- Train federal agency workers and federal grantees to be culturally competent and knowledgeable about the gay and transgender community and its needs
- Develop and fund research and data collection on homelessness and the gay and transgender population
- Ensure affordable housing programs are accessible to gay and transgender people
- Improve economic security protections for members of the LGBT community

Let’s examine each of these solutions in more detail.

Increase gay and transgender cultural competency and awareness in federal agencies and grantees

Preventing and ultimately ending homelessness in this country requires that the federal government, as well as public and private organizations, understand all of the conditions and causes that lead to homelessness. We believe that understanding the needs and life experiences of homeless gay and transgender Americans will help improve the efficiency of homeless services and enhance collaboration among private organizations and public agencies across the nation.

Specifically, the Obama administration can take three steps to ensure that gay and transgender Americans are treated with the respect they deserve when they seek assistance from federally funded programs and organizations.

- Agencies should develop the necessary tools and guidance needed to ensure that all employees—particularly people who directly administer or fund programs—are trained, prepared, and equipped to deal with issues affecting the gay and transgender community.
- Homeless shelters receiving federal funds should be required to regularly provide their staff with gay and transgender cultural competency training, and their programs should be evaluated to ensure that they are able to meet the needs of gay and transgender clients.
- State and local governments receiving federal aid for homelessness programs should be required to hold conferences and workshops on how to make homeless policies and programs more gay and transgender friendly. These state and local governments should be encouraged to partner with gay and transgender organizations and experts to gain insight on how to make their policies and practices more inclusive.

Initiate research on gay and transgender homelessness

The Obama administration and Congress should initiate research on gay and transgender homelessness as part of a broader research agenda that explores the challenges and realities that face the entire gay and transgender community. Accurate data collection related to homelessness is critical to determine the precise interventions needed to help gay and transgender individuals move off the

streets and into permanent housing. The administration should direct the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (see box on page 5) to establish a gay and transgender specific research agenda. Further, in the next reauthorization of the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act, known more commonly as the HEARTH Act, Congress should specifically include gay and transgender youth as a priority group for the purposes of research.

Improve housing options for gay and transgender individuals and families

Additionally, the administration should work with Congress to amend the Fair Housing Act (Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968) to add sexual orientation and gender identity to the existing protected categories of race, color, religion, sex, family status, national origin, and handicap. Amending the act would allow gay and transgender individuals to take advantage of a number of affordable housing options that could prevent them from becoming homeless, or help them more easily make the transition from housing shelters to their own homes. The new rules that the Obama administration proposed on January 20, which would prohibit sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination in certain HUD rental and home ownership programs, are an important and much needed step to securing equal housing access for gay and transgender people.

The administration should also focus on improving cultural competency in federally supported transitional housing programs. A better understanding of the discriminatory practices that gay and transgender individuals face when seeking transitional housing can help to ensure that these programs are a true gateway to permanent housing, instead of another barrier.

Finally, future reauthorizations of the HEARTH Act should include gay and transgender inclusive language in grant programs, assistance programs, and regulation issued by HUD.

Strengthen workplace and economic security for members of the gay and transgender community

For many gay and transgender youth and adults, obtaining economic security is often difficult because of discriminatory practices in the workplace, which can lead to unsteady and inconsistent incomes and access to health insurance and

other job benefits. For many people—gay or straight, transgender or not—a secure job is the difference between stable housing and homelessness. Given the workplace and employment discrimination that gay and transgender people face, they are at a higher risk of finding themselves without a steady income and then on the streets.

Congress can swiftly and easily remove this significant cause of gay and transgender homelessness by passing the Employment Non-Discrimination Act. ENDA would make it illegal to discriminate against employees in all aspects of employment based on a person's actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. ENDA would be a major step toward ensuring that gay and transgender individuals are able to obtain economic security free of discriminatory practices in employment, and keep many from ending up on the streets or in homeless shelters.

Conclusion

Any federal plan to end homelessness must include specific strategies to reach and serve gay and transgender adults and youth. Data and research show that this population is disproportionately homeless for a wide range of reasons. Homelessness in this country will not end until federal programs and funds targeting homelessness acknowledge the realities that the gay and transgender population face. The recommendations in this report offer the federal government a starting point for working to remedy this problem.

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Endnotes

- 1 United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, "Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness" (2010), available at http://www.ich.gov/PDF/OpeningDoors_2010_FSPPreventEndHomeless.pdf.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 In this report, the term gay is used as an umbrella term for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transsexual.
- 4 M.V. Badgett and others, "Bias in the Workplace: Consistent Evidence of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Discrimination" (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute, 2007), available at <http://www.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute/publications/Bias%20in%20the%20Workplace.pdf>.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Randy Albelda and others, "Poverty in the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community" (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute, 2009), available at <http://www.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute/pdf/LGBPovertyReport.pdf>.
- 9 Albelda and others, "Poverty in the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community," cited in Queers for Economic Justice, "Tidal Wave: LGBT Poverty and Hardship in a Time of Economic Crisis," available at <http://www.q4ej.org/Documents/qejtidalwave.pdf>.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Queers for Economic Justice and Welfare Warriors Research Collaborative, "A Fabulous Attitude: Low-income lgbtqnc people surviving & thriving on love, shelter & knowledge" (2010), available at <http://www.q4ej.org/Documents/afabulousattitudefinalreport.pdf>.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.