

NCH Fact Sheet #18

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The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (PL100-77) was the first -- and remains the only -- major federal legislative response to homelessness. This fact sheet provides a brief history of the McKinney Act, describes its content and evolution, and summarizes recent trends in McKinney Act legislation and funding. A list of resources for further reading is also provided.

HISTORY

In the early 1980s, the initial responses to widespread and increasing homelessness were primarily local. Homelessness was viewed by the Reagan Administration as a problem that did not require federal intervention. In 1983, the first federal task force on homelessness was created to provide information to localities on how to obtain surplus federal property; this task force did not address homelessness through programmatic or policy actions.

In the years which followed, advocates around the country demanded that the federal government acknowledge homelessness as a national problem requiring a national response. With this goal in mind, the Homeless Persons' Survival Act was introduced in both houses of Congress in 1986. This act contained emergency relief measures, preventive measures, and long term solutions to homelessness. Only small pieces of this proposal, however, were enacted into law. The first, the Homeless Eligibility Clarification Act of 1986, removed permanent address requirements and other barriers to existing programs such as Supplemental Security Income, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Veterans Benefits, Food Stamps, and Medicaid. Also in 1986, the Homeless Housing Act was adopted. This legislation created the Emergency Shelter Grant program and a transitional housing demonstration program; both programs were administered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

In late 1986, legislation containing Title I of the Homeless Persons' Survival Act -- emergency relief provisions for shelter, food, mobile health care, and transitional housing -- was introduced as the Urgent Relief for the Homeless Act. After an intensive advocacy campaign, the legislation was passed by large bipartisan majorities in both houses of Congress in 1987. After the death of its chief Republican sponsor, Representative Stewart B. McKinney of Connecticut, the act was renamed the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act. It was signed into law by a reluctant President Ronald Reagan on July 22, 1987.

CONTENT

The McKinney Act originally consisted of fifteen programs providing a range of services to homeless people, including emergency shelter, transitional housing, job training, primary health care, education, and some permanent housing. The McKinney Act contains nine titles: