

Stopping the revolving door of homelessness

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Wednesday, June 6, 2001

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URL: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2001/06/06/ED142977.DTL>

ONE ENERGY shut-off that could help, not hurt, is to stop the revolving doors that take poor, mentally ill and substance-abusing homeless people from streets to shelters to jail to court and back around again.

Congress recently established the Millennial Housing Commission to help strengthen federal housing policies. The commission was taking testimony in Oakland this week. It seems logical that the end of widespread homelessness must be a benchmark of the success of the federal housing policy in the new millennium.

While we all know there is homelessness, we also now know that taxpayers underwrite the costs of chronic homelessness, and that we instead could spend virtually those same dollars to end it.

A new study by the University of Pennsylvania evaluated the cost of nearly 5,000 mentally ill homeless New Yorkers in seven publicly funded health, shelter and corrections systems. The conclusion: The average annual cost for each person was more than \$40,000.

The study also examined the cost of placing a comparison group in permanent housing, where they were offered services to address mental health, substance abuse and employment issues.

Researchers found that it costs nearly the same amount of taxpayer money to keep a mentally ill person on the streets as it does to give them a permanent place to call home.

These findings are just the latest to confirm that the answer to chronic homelessness for people with mental illness, HIV/AIDS and other disabilities is: A safe affordable place to live tightly linked to voluntary health, social and employment services that help individuals live independently.

More than 8 out of 10 people who get into supportive housing stay housed and regain a foothold in the community. For them, employment rates increase, hospitalization rates decline.

The big question is: Even if it works, how can we pay for it?

In the past 20 years, reaction to widespread homelessness has gone from outrage to "compassion fatigue" to total silence. Most people don't believe we can end homelessness, especially without busting the budget.

At the same time, many of us, especially in San Francisco, continue to confront homeless people in the streets daily, and struggle to deal with family members and friends who become transient due to the toxic combination of serious mental health or addiction issues, or the complications of HIV and AIDS, and the state's high housing costs.

Homelessness has increased, even during the years that much of the nation was enjoying unprecedented prosperity. The Conference of Mayors reported that homelessness had risen by 11 percent in each of the past two years in nearly three-fourths of cities surveyed. The Urban Institute estimates that while 600,000 people were homeless during the winter of 1987, that number rose by 40 percent to 840,000 nine years later.

What the new study reminds us is that we can't afford not to help.

Keeping people homeless and revolving through jails, public hospitals, our parks, streets and shelters is extremely expensive. We can end it for just about what we're already spending.

San Francisco has invested in homeless services, but no city has the resources to completely finance the necessary housing and services without state and federal support.

As the Legislature considers the budget during the next month, members should put at the top of the list: increased funding of the Supportive Housing Initiative Act; services for the mentally ill homeless; and predictable, long-term funding of the multifamily housing program. And, as the Millennial Housing Commission makes its report to Congress, the approaches and programs it recommends must complement and bolster local and state commitments.

The reality is that if California and the nation are to have the ability to deal with the energy crises of the future, we must have the foresight to invest now in proven solutions that will reduce the cost of chronic homelessness in years to come.

We can't afford not to.

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