

U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness Successfully Lobbies Against Resolution to Assist Homeless Children, Youth, and Families

Intensive lobbying by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH) led to the tabling of a resolution expanding HUD's definition of homelessness at meetings of the U.S. Conference of Mayors in Las Vegas on June 3, 2006. The resolution was offered by Anchorage Mayor, Mark Begich, who was joined by 27 other mayors (see list), and endorsed by over 90 national, state, and local organizations.

Mayor Begich's resolution called upon HUD to expand its definition of homelessness to include people who are sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reasons, and those who are staying in motels because of the lack of adequate alternative accommodations. The resolution urged HUD to adopt a definition of homelessness that matches the reality of homelessness among families and youth, and is similar to definitions used by the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the U.S. Department of Justice.

ICH Director, Philip Mangano, argued against the resolution, asserting that labeling people who are doubled-up as "homeless" would be stigmatizing; that it would overwhelm the HUD homeless assistance budget; dilute current efforts to address "chronic" homelessness; and interfere with current 10-year-plans to "end" homelessness. Mangano also contended that people voluntarily sharing housing should not be considered homeless, thus demonstrating that he either failed to read, understand, or willfully misrepresented the resolution (which expressly referred to people living doubled-up or in hotels due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reasons).

During the Mayors' meetings, Mangano and two ICH regional representatives aggressively lobbied members of the Community Development and Housing Committee (which was to vote on the resolution), distributed talking points and assisted with an amendment to the resolution that would have referred the issue to HUD and ICH for further study. Ultimately, the committee voted to table the resolution rather than vote on it, or on the amendment.

The intensive lobbying efforts of the Interagency Council on Homelessness were built on misinformation and factual inaccuracy. The facts are as follows:

- People in motels or doubled-up are not stigmatized by being eligible for services that they need, nor are they forced to use the word "homeless" to describe themselves in order to be eligible for the federal health and education programs that currently cover them. By asserting that broader definitions of homelessness are stigmatizing, Mr. Mangano implies that many federal programs – including Head Start, Health Care for the Homeless, the Treatment of the Homeless program, the Runaway and Homeless Youth program, and the Education for Homeless Children and Youth program – are insensitive and inappropriate in their treatment of homeless people. These programs have had broader definitions for many years, a fact that Mr. Mangano chose to ignore. Furthermore, one must wonder how an agency that promotes initiatives that label individuals as

“chronically” homeless and “serial inebriates” can possibly be serious about the issue of “stigma.”

- HUD homeless assistance program are not entitlements; HUD is not obligated to provide services to all those who are eligible. Thus, there is *no* budget impact in expanding the definition. Rather, expanding the definition would give communities the flexibility they need to use *existing* dollars to meet local needs and priorities that *they* identify.
- Expanding the definition would not dilute any efforts currently underway to serve “chronically” homeless adults; communities could continue to serve this population, in addition to other populations who they cannot now serve – including the children who are at high risk of becoming tomorrow’s “chronically” homeless adults.
- Expanding the definition of homelessness would have absolutely no impact on existing 10-year-plans – in fact, some 10-year-plans, such as San Francisco’s, include a broader definition of homelessness. ICH’s principal concern appears to be maintaining a narrow definition of homelessness in order to appear successful, regardless of the real magnitude of homelessness in communities nationwide. (A particularly glaring example of this can be found in recent ICH announcements that “street homelessness” was down, while overall homelessness appears to be up nationwide. For example, ICH notes a 50% reduction in street homelessness for the city of Mobile, Alabama, conveniently leaving out the original sample size, which only showed 83 “chronically” homeless in 2005.)
- And finally, ICH willfully capitalizes on the perception that it controls HUD dollars as a way to influence mayors and local governments. Yet, ICH has no statutory power over funding to communities. Only Congress and HUD are legitimately empowered to determine how much, and where, federal homeless assistance dollars are distributed.

But what are facts compared to the efforts of a federal agency determined to define the problem of homelessness out of existence? Was the time, money, and effort that went into lobbying the mayors the best use of the federal dollars appropriated to this agency? Why is ICH, an agency that regularly praises communities for local planning processes, so troubled by the idea of giving communities flexibility to meet local needs? And why is the mention of children anathema to an agency whose mandate includes all homeless populations?

The momentum behind Mayor Begich’s resolution will not stop with this vote. The campaign to expand HUD’s definition now moves forward to the legislative arena. Congress has begun consideration of the reauthorization of the HUD McKinney-Vento programs through S. 1801 and H.R. 5041. Expanding HUD’s definition will be a key element of the advocacy of NPACH and our many national, state, and local partners. We urge you to contact your Member of Congress and ask them to include a definition of homelessness that is inclusive of *all* people who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate place to call home.