

MEDIA TALKING POINTS

A key challenge when multiple people and organizations are speaking on the same topic is ensuring that core messages are consistent. When a number of organizations all reinforce the same key messages from different perspectives, the resulting “echo effect” can be very powerful.

The following talking points can help WRAP members discuss the major findings of the report in a consistent way. They are intended to be a guide rather than a script. They will be most effective if each organization customizes them with facts and stories from its own community or experience.

About Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP)

WRAP is dedicated to make ending homelessness a national priority. We believe that only by linking together local movements of homeless and poor people, service providers, and community groups will we be able to gather enough strength to achieve true systemic change in this country.

Main Message of Report

The perspective of this report is that federal responses to homelessness have failed and will continue to fail to resolve the problem unless they include a serious and sizable federal commitment to funding the production, subsidization, and preservation of affordable housing. The federal government’s decision to fund supportive housing with the extremely small funding stream for HUD *homeless assistance grants* – rather than with larger HUD *housing programs* – is a timely illustration of ongoing and long-term policies that have resulted in the dismantling of HUD affordable housing and the rise of mass homelessness.

1) I’ve seen lots of reports on homelessness. How is this one different?

This report looks at the root cause of homelessness – not individual problems but the lack of affordable housing – and documents the impact of DECADES of federal cuts to affordable housing for poor people.

2) What is the major finding of the report?

The report finds that federal cuts to affordable housing programs are the major cause of the re-emergence of mass homelessness across the country.



By initially responding to homelessness through the funding of shelters, rather than by addressing the systemic need for affordable housing, the federal government locked itself into a short-term path within which homelessness could not be resolved. The result of this lock-in was the institutionalization of the shelter system, continued loss of affordable housing and the criminalization of poor people forced to live in parks, alleys and streets.

The federal government is spending money on making housing more affordable for some, but not on developing and preserving affordable housing for low-income people. Over the last 30 years, however, annual tax expenditures for homeowner subsidies have grown from less than \$40 billion to over \$120 billion per year.

3) How many people are homeless in the United States?

There are only estimates. According to an Urban Institute study, as many as 3.5 million people, including 1.35 million children, are likely to experience homelessness in a given year. The Department of Education counted 1,065,794 homeless children enrolled in public schools in 2010-2011.

The federal government requires local communities to use such bizarre counting methods as “Point In Time” head counts, which are held every 2 years during the last week of January. Local volunteers are asked to count the heads of people they see sleeping outside and these numbers are added to the sheltered population. The last national point-in-time homeless count conducted in January 2011 “found” a total 636,017 people were homeless on a given night.

We should cut through all the bureaucratic classifications and simply use the definition of “homeless” from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary: “having no home or permanent place of residence.”

It is equally important to look at the number of people living in poverty. In 2008, 39.8 million people were living in poverty in the United States. In 2010, 46.2 million people lived in poverty, of which 20.5 million lived in extreme poverty. For African-American children, the poverty rate was 38%. Additionally, it is estimated that 8 million jobs have been lost since the start of the recession and 12.7 million Americans were unemployed in March 2012, a figure that does not include the underemployed or those who have given up looking for work. In August 2011, 45.8 million people received food stamps, 15% of the U.S. population. Welfare Reform also played a big role in the increases in poverty. Cash assistance for low-income households dropped from 12.3 million recipients per month in 1996 to 4.4 million in 2011. Increased poverty, job and housing insecurity coupled with decreased safety net programs mean that the road to homelessness has become increasingly short for a large portion of society.



4) Aren't there a lot of federal programs that address homelessness?

There are plenty of plans, studies and conferences, yet few actual programs. The Obama administration recently released a new "federal" homeless plan in addition to the 355 local 10-year plans written under the Bush administration and the 420 local Continuum of Care Boards and plans created under the Clinton administration. Each new policy has different priority populations and coordination oversight bodies. Because funding is administered through a competitive grant process, local service providers and communities compete against each other in a constant scramble for a tiny fraction of the dollars that were historically spent on affordable housing.

No matter how many hundreds of plans that communities are required to write, filling a \$39.6 billion affordable housing hole* with less than \$2 billion in homeless assistance funding is an exercise in futility that can never be compensated for by any amount of local coordination or consolidation.

* The difference between HUD's 1978 and 2011 budget authorities in 2004 constant dollars.

5) What happened to the housing and where is that money going now?

Over the last 15 years, 210,000 public housing units and over 360,000 project-based Section 8 units have been lost; and every year another 20,000-25,000 HUD-assisted units disappear. After starving public housing's capital and operating funds and lifting one-for-one replacement for units lost to demolition or disposition, HUD now says public housing is at a "tipping point." HUD estimates that public housing has \$26 billion in maintenance backlogs and wants to leverage private capital to "modernize" public housing. In 2012, HUD launched the Rental Assistance Demonstration, a program that allows up to 60,000 units to convert to Section 8 properties in order to access private investment. These units could be lost through expired contracts, foreclosure, or bankruptcy. This is unacceptable as public housing is the last defense against homelessness for over 1 million households.

Since 1986, as direct government funding for new affordable housing dwindled, most development and preservation activities have been supported through the Low Income Housing Tax Credit Program (LIHTC). Unfortunately, LIHTC units charge up to 60% of Area Medium Income, making them very difficult for the lowest income families to afford. People now often find themselves "too poor" to afford affordable housing.

Money that used to go to housing (and many other "safety net" programs) can be found in our massive military spending. The FY2012 budget request for the Department of Defense called for \$553 billion in discretionary spending and a total of \$703 billion for the entire national defense budget. The \$553 billion in discretionary military spending accounts for 59% of the federal budget's entire discretionary spending for 2012. In comparison, HUD receives 4% and Health and Human Services receives 6%.



Here are a few more comparisons:

- **ONE** Zumwalt Class Destroyer (\$4.127 billion) vs. **ALL** 2008 funding for Public Housing Operating Expenses (\$4.113 billion).
- **ONE** Virginia Class Attack Submarine (\$3.066 billion) vs. **ALL** 2008 funding for Public Housing Capital Expenses (\$2.895 billion).
- **ONE** San Antonio Class Amphibious Assault Ship (\$1.582 billion) vs. **ALL** 2008 funding for McKinney Homeless Assistance (\$1.440 billion).
- **TEN** F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Aircraft (\$1,220 billion) vs. **ALL** funding for new Section 8 and Public Housing Units (\$0).

We could more than double our affordable housing and homeless budgets by buying one less destroyer, one less attack submarine, one less assault ship, and a few less fighter jets.

6) So what's the solution?

Building affordable housing – at levels far above what has been produced over the past 30 years – gets us closer than any other single initiative. Local communities can't be expected to fix the crisis created by the federal government. The federal government needs to recommit to funding for affordable housing for low-income people and not at the expense of other cornerstone social programs. Housing is a basic human right – it's not okay for people to be forced into homelessness simply because they cannot afford rent, especially when government policies so heavily subsidize homeownership and provide tax relief and credits for corporations and wealthier individuals.

Homelessness will end only if we work from a social justice framework, build a mass movement, and ensure policy and financial support from all levels of government. We need to organize around people and not just issues and take the time and effort to build relationships that cross class, race and religion. Until we recognize housing as a human right, along with quality education, economic security, and health care, we will not end mass homelessness.

