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HOMELESSNESS: Ending rather than treating saves money

By PHILIP MANGANO

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For 30 years, we've waited for some good news on what seemed to be the intractable problem of homelessness.

It arrived July 29 when the Department of Housing and Urban Development unveiled research conducted by local communities across the country showing far fewer homeless people living on our streets and languishing in our shelters.

The national figures demonstrate that the number of homeless people experiencing chronic homelessness — our most vulnerable and disabled neighbors — dropped from nearly 176,000 in 2005 to fewer than 124,000 in 2007, a decrease of nearly 30 percent.

What accounts for this documented decrease, the largest in our nation's history? The answer is not complicated. In partnership with the federal government, states and local communities are planning to end homelessness.

What works is evident in more than 500 communities, large and small, that are partnered in more than 350 10-year plans, shaped around business principles and practices, daring to put the verb end together with the noun homelessness.

After years of managing the crisis, governors, mayors and county executives are committed to ending the disgrace. And that collaboration is complemented by a partnership of 20 federal agencies in Washington and a provider community attuned to offering housing.

Fueling local political will is an economic reframing. Through cost studies across our country, we've come to learn that this population of street and long-term homeless people is very expensive to the public purse.

They are often randomly ricocheting through expensive health and law enforcement systems in our communities — emergency rooms, acute addiction and mental health services, and police, court and, sometimes, incarceration facilities.

Cost studies that have tabulated the expenses to keep someone in homelessness indicate that those costs are actually more expensive than providing the solution: housing with the needed support services.

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In fact, studies done in many communities tell us that the costs range from \$35,000 to \$150,000 per year for each person. People experiencing chronic homelessness are "high fliers" in many community systems.

The cost of supportive housing in those communities ranges from \$13,000 to \$25,000 per year for each person. You don't need to be Warren Buffett or a hedge-fund manager to figure out which is the better investment. Housing is the central antidote, both morally and economically.

The good news is that the federal government, the administration and Congress have made record investments in homelessness for the last seven straight years. President Bush has proposed an unprecedented eighth consecutive year of increases, more than \$5 billion for fiscal 2009.

We can now talk about these increases as investments, and we can anticipate a return as we've seen in the national and local decreases in homelessness.

And the investments are sound. The rapid dissemination of innovation practiced by the Interagency Council assures elected officials that they have equal access to the best ideas and that their investments will make a difference.

Investing in innovations that have been developed by providers and communities makes common sense and dollars and sense:

Housing First initiatives that rapidly move people into housing to provide stability while still being cost-efficient to taxpayers.

Street to Home engagement strategies to move people quickly off the street with the intent of housing.

Project Homeless Connect, the one-day, one-stop strategy to welcome homeless neighbors and increase access to resources that end homelessness.

There is much more to do for our neighbors who remain homeless, both families and individuals.

But the outcomes reported in late July — 52,000 people moving off our streets and out of our shelters ending hundreds of thousands of years of homelessness in those thousands of lives — confirm that the chronic-homelessness strategy of investing in innovative solutions is working.

That achievement is moving us closer to a tipping point in ending the homelessness of all of our neighbors.

Philip Mangano is the executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness in Washington, D.C.