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Housing First works as nothing else has

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There really is no place like a home.

That's the finding of the Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, which found that the number of chronically homeless people living on the streets and in homeless shelters dropped 30 percent between 2005 and 2007.

A nearly one-third reduction is the definition of wildly successful among people who work with the homeless population's toughest cases. One researcher called the results nothing short of phenomenal. "These are people who everyone thought were hopeless," Martha Burt of the Urban Institute told The New York Times.

Federal officials attribute much of the decline to Housing First, an 8-year-old strategy that has turned the traditional model of homeless assistance on its head.

Instead of shuttling transients from one emergency shelter to the next because their mental illness or drug addiction make them unfit for more permanent arrangements, Housing First does what its name suggests. The idea is that giving the homeless stable housing will foster the sense of safety and security that's needed to allow drug and mental treatment to be successful.

That philosophy is guiding several efforts in Pierce County to reduce homelessness, the most visible of which has been the City of Tacoma's campaign to close homeless encampments.

The encampment program has encountered some bumps along the way. Finding suitable apartments and willing landlords proved more difficult than expected, and in some cases the same limitations that made the homeless vulnerable on the street also posed problems at their new homes.

Program officials are retooling to address those issues, but clearly they are on the right track. This year's homeless survey showed a drop from 727 people on the streets in 2005 to 265.

Numbers like those are worthy of celebrating, but they should not obscure an important fact: Street people are but a fraction of the homeless population.

The bigger yet largely invisible problem is the number of families that have roofs over their heads for now, but only because they've rented motel rooms or are bunking with relatives or friends. Their numbers are growing as more people face foreclosure.

Success at getting the chronically homeless housed should steel the nation's resolve to deal with homelessness in all its forms.