

# The Washington Times

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### **OP-ED: MANGANO: Ending homelessness**

#### **What doesn't work and what does**

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When President Bush called on the nation to reduce and end chronic homelessness in 2003, few people were optimistic that such a goal was achievable. Many were cynical about the motivation. After all, hadn't the nation focused on this issue long enough to know that change was improbable?

For 25 years, those of us on the front line of the problem were frustrated that nothing seemed to work. People experiencing homelessness were shuffled and cycled from street, to emergency room, to shelter, while we waited for some positive news.

That news arrived last month, when the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) unveiled new research conducted by communities across the country showing that the number of homeless people living on the streets and languishing in shelters is down - dramatically.

According to the data, between 2005 and 2007, the number of people experiencing chronic homelessness - our most vulnerable and disabled neighbors - dropped from nearly 176,000 to fewer than 124,000. That represents a decrease of 52,000 or nearly 30 percent.

What accounts for this documented decrease, the largest in our nation's history? What has moved the nation from being demoralized that street homelessness seemed to be an intractable part of our social landscape, to being re-moralized that change is possible, both visible and quantifiable?

The answer is straightforward. In partnership with the federal government, states and communities are now planning to end homelessness with a new approach. If good intentions, well-meaning programs, and humanitarian gestures could have gotten the job done, homelessness would have been history decades ago.

After years of managing the crisis and experiencing what doesn't work, mayors, governors, and county executives are learning what does. That is evident in more than 500 communities, large and small, from coast-to-coast that are partnered in more than 350 plans to end homelessness in 10 years. These plans are shaped around business principles, daring to couple the verb "end" with the noun "homelessness." That collaboration is complemented by a partnership of 20 federal agencies and a provider community attuned to offering housing.

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Economic thinking is also fueling this new approach. Through nationwide cost studies, cities are learning that people experiencing chronic homelessness are very expensive to the public purse. They are often randomly ricocheting through very expensive health and law enforcement systems - emergency rooms of hospitals, acute addiction and mental health services, police, court, and sometimes incarceration facilities.

Studies show that costs associated with those who are the most vulnerable and disabled range from \$35,000 to \$150,000 per person annually. Chronically homeless people are "high fliers" in many community systems. In these same communities, the annual cost of the solution, permanent supportive housing, ranges from \$13,000 to \$25,000 per person. You don't need to be Warren Buffett to figure out which is the better investment. Housing is the central antidote, both morally and economically.

Putting business approaches to work for homeless people just makes sense. Discover what works, what is field-tested and evidence-based, and invest old and new resources in those initiatives. When cities and communities do that, they see visible results on their streets and in the lives of homeless people.

The good news is supported by the fact that there are now more resources available than ever before. The Administration and Congress have made record investments for the last seven straight years, and President Bush has proposed an unprecedented eighth consecutive year of increase, more than \$5 billion for fiscal 2009.

We can now talk about these increases as investments and anticipate a return in the lives of homeless people. 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 are making a difference. Investing in initiatives that have been developed by innovators makes common sense - and dollars sense.

Some of these innovations include Housing First initiatives to move people rapidly into housing to provide stability for the person and cost efficiency for the taxpayer; Street-to-Home engagement strategies to relocate people quickly off the street with the intent of housing; and Project Homeless Connect, a one-day, one-stop strategy to increase access to resources that end homelessness.

President Bush's seemingly improbable marker to end homelessness is being realized across our nation by a non-partisan partnership that understands that on this issue there are no Democrats or Republicans but simply Americans partnering to end a national disgrace.

There is much more to be done for people who remain homeless, both families and individuals. But the outcomes reported last month 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.

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