



Affordable Housing Finance

THE BUZZ

Web Exclusive

POP Quiz

AFFORDABLE HOUSING FINANCE • June 2009

Philip Mangano began working with the homeless as a volunteer on a Boston breadline in the 1980s.

He was most recently executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, where he had the job of coordinating the federal government's efforts to end homelessness.

He stepped down from the post in May but not before telling us what he looks for when he visits a new housing development, the local innovations that have him excited, and who would make his guest list for dinner.

Q: Why is it so hard to end homelessness?

A: Well, in a good economy housing costs go up, low-rent apartments disappear, and some are left out. In a bad economy, you have the “double trouble” of housing foreclosures and job losses. Either way, boom or bust, the poorest are at risk.

We know what to do. The central antidote is housing. Our good intentions and well-meaning programs aren't enough. We need sustained political will at every level of government to create that housing. Recent cost studies demonstrate that managing homelessness is more expensive than solving it. That's stimulating new government and private-sector resources and housing solutions. We've seen some progress in the last few years, but maintaining the reductions will be difficult.

Q: Are cities prepared for a sharp rise in homelessness if the economy continues to worsen?

A: More ready than they've ever been. There are now more than 850 communities across the country that have created local 10-Year Plans that have put innovative ideas and business practices to work for homeless people. And they've received record resources for the past eight years. Both the president and the Congress are focusing on preventing homelessness through a variety of initiatives including the president's recovery package and the Neighborhood Stabilization Program targeted to mitigate the foreclosure crisis. So, better strategies and more resources. The hope is to put a tourniquet on the hemorrhaging of human misery.

Q: How did you get interested in homelessness?

A: Years ago, I walked into a movie theater to see a [Franco] Zeffereilli film entitled *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*. Had no idea what that meant. But the film turned out to be the story of St. Francis of Assisi, who committed his life to the poorest of the poor. While I understood charity and compassion, I'd never heard of anyone investing their whole life in the poor. At that time, the poorest were those on our streets. I went in thinking one way about my life and came out thinking another.

Q: Give us a statistic or fact about homelessness to think about.

A: I'll give you two. Between 2005 and 2007, the number of Americans living with disabilities on our streets and long term in shelters dropped by nearly 30 percent, more than 50,000 fewer. Given an average of a five-year history of homelessness per person, that first national documented decrease in homelessness ended more than 250,000 years of homelessness.

The cost of a person experiencing chronic homelessness randomly ricocheting through expensive health and law enforcement systems in 65 cost studies from around the country ranges between \$35,000 and \$150,000 per person per year. The cost of housing and support services for that person in those same cities ranges from \$13,000 to \$25,000 per person per year. You don't need to be Warren Buffett, or even Suze Orman to figure out which is the better investment.

Q: What is a recent accomplishment that you are most proud of?

A: The reduction in homelessness of our poorest and most disabled neighbors accomplished in partnership with mayors, county officials, governors, and the private and faith sectors.

Q: What has been a disappointment?

A: That the deteriorating economy has put more people, especially families, at risk of homelessness. Often families playing by the rules, paying their rent, now undermined by job loss and economic machinations beyond their control. We had demonstrated a reduction in families between 2005 and 2007. That is now overwhelmed by the economic tsunami.

Q: Share with us a brief update on how many communities have adopted 10-Year Plans to End Homelessness and how these plans are working.

A: There are now more than 850 mayors and county executives partnered in more than 350 10-Year Plans to End Homelessness across our country. Communities large and small, coast to coast, all committed and learning from one another. Many cities have seen decreases in street and chronic homelessness. And that is the single metric in any 10 Year Plan—that fewer of our neighbors will be experiencing the long misery and human tragedy of homelessness.

Q: What's a local innovation to combat homelessness that you are excited about?

A: No question, the whole rapid rehousing effort, often called Housing First, is the most important innovation in our effort to reduce and end homelessness. Offering the customer a place to live in permanent supportive housing as quickly as possible has answered the question of "how" to reduce homelessness. Cost studies tell us it's cost effective. Consumers tell us that it's their preference. Taxpayers are happy for the investment that solves problems and saves public money. We are indebted to Dr. Sam Tsemberis of New York's Pathways to Housing for his determined initiation of this practice as a national model.

A second innovation would be Project Homeless Connect developed in San Francisco as a one-day, one-stop bringing together all of the referral and quality of life resources people need—from housing to haircuts, from transportation to treatment. More than 200 cities are now participating and the trajectory out of homelessness is being realized.

Q: When you visit a new housing development what do you look for?

A: I am most interested in how much the units cost. We have finite resources. Maximizing the number of units now that we recognize housing is the central antidote makes sense, and we need to be certain of the dollars and sense.

Q: Tell us about a recent homeless person that you met.

A: Having lived on the streets off and on for a dozen years and in shelters in the intervening time, Joe had given up. On himself and any hope of living a “regular” life. He had served in the Army, been married, fathered, and divorced. He used substances. Had been incarcerated briefly. Suffered from depression. A little more than two years ago, he came off the streets into a Housing First apartment. He’s now on SSI, volunteering in programs, connecting with his children. Most importantly, he’s happier and one of the most cheerful rent payers you’d ever see!

Q: If you unexpectedly had the day off, where would we find you?

A: Trying to get to the ocean.

Q: If you were hosting a dinner party, who would be on the guest list?

A: Well, I love that movie *Places in the Heart*, where the living and those who have lived before share supper. In that spirit, gathered round the table would be lifelong heroes including abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Susan B. Anthony, spiritual mentors St. Francis of Assisi and the provoking Simone Weil, Victorian critic John Ruskin, poets Ann Sexton and Mary Oliver, and dropping by for dessert would be Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill. For entertainment, Mark Twain, Mort Sahl, and Bono.

Q: What’s on you iPod?

A: As soon as my nephew provides the tutorial, I’ll let you know. Certainly Judee Sill, Bach, and U2.

Q: What’s the last book you read or last movie you saw?

A: I just finished a book of excerpts of Bobby Kennedy speeches contextualized by events of the day. It’s called *The Gospel According to RFK*. Had me in tears more than once. And, I just saw the documentary about high-wire artist, Philippe Petit entitled *Man on Wire*. While it’s a stimulating view of his personal and professional life, the movie is about doing what others think is impossible.

Q: What’s next for Philip Mangano and the council?

A: There’s no “next” until homelessness is ended. Another of my abolitionist heroes, Wendell Phillips, wrote that “nothing is done, until it is done right.” The only future for homelessness is abolition. And Susan B. Anthony got it right about social wrong, whether limited suffrage or homelessness: “Failure is impossible.”