

Analysis

Why solving homelessness is stupidly easy

The Week, by Jeff Spross, May 12, 2016

In the fight against homelessness, Central Florida has quietly achieved a remarkable victory over the last few years.

As recently as January 2014, leaders in business and local government were wringing their hands over rising rates of homelessness in Florida's Osceola County. Now a new census of the Osceola, Orange, and Seminole County region shows homelessness there fell 23 percent since mid-2015 alone — and dropped over 60 percent since 2013.

This didn't happen through some breakthrough discovery, or even major changes in program funding. It happened because of a simple conceptual shift: For a long time, it was assumed that you had to deal with the issues faced by homeless people — trauma, drug addiction, mental illness — before giving them heavily subsidized housing, often on the condition that they stayed clean and sane. Central Florida reversed the logic: Give people permanent housing with no strings attached.

The philosophy is called, appropriately enough, "housing first." And it's not just working in Florida. A recent study in Canada showed that homeless people who received both guaranteed housing and social support held on to their homes 63-77 percent of the time, versus just 24-39 percent of people who received the standard approach. Cities like Seattle, Denver, and Washington, D.C. — plus states like Rhode Island, Illinois, and, most famously, Utah — are seeing success with it.

But the story of "housing first" actually isn't a recent idea. It began in 1992 with a psychologist named Sam Tsemberis.

Studying the issue from his perch at New York University, Tsemberis made a breakthrough that was basically taxonomic. He understood that there are two types of homeless: the temporary and the chronically homeless. The former, which make up the vast majority of the homeless population, are basically just down on their luck and can be helped by relatively straightforward government assistance. But the latter group, about 15 percent of the total population, are basically homeless because of deeper issues like substance abuse, trauma, or mental disorders.

Tsemberis realized that forcing these people to jump through the hoops of testing and paperwork and rehabilitation programs before they could get a place to live was nuts. The chronic homeless more often face jail time and trips to the emergency room than the rest of the population. And homelessness is stressful: In a shelter, you can't even shut your door; if you can find a place to stay, you're often at the mercy of corrupt employers, irresponsible landlords, and abusive partners; there's no stable network of neighbors to rely upon for help looking after children. On top of it all, you can't even rest.

"I can sleep," one beneficiary of housing first policy in D.C. told *The Washington Post*. "Oh my goodness, I can sleep."

So Tsemberis proposed just giving the chronically homeless a place to live unconditionally and then building on that foothold by offering other social support. He helped set up a few test runs of the policy, but no one really paid him any mind until several people working on homelessness in Utah got a key official to give his ideas a hearing. Lloyd Pendleton

was the executive manager of the Mormon Church's Welfare Department and director of Utah's Task Force on Homelessness. And when he heard Tsemberis' idea, he was sold.

Pendleton's backing from the Mormon Church gave him the legitimacy to get Utah's famously conservative state legislature to sign off on using funds to give people homes unconditionally. And his connections to the state's network of aid programs helped cobble together the money to run the program and to coordinate with the various rehabilitation programs and social support providers that would help the tenants with their other struggles.

This is how housing first works in most places: The chronic homeless are identified, and money is put together to permanently subsidize them in an apartment or other living space. They usually have to cover 30 percent of the rent themselves, either with money from a job or another aid program. But the rest of the subsidy is permanent and unconditional. And once they have a stable place to live, they can start regular work healing mentally or kicking their addiction or whatever challenge they need to deal with.

As a result, Utah's population of chronic homeless dropped 91 percent and is almost nonexistent today. Programs in other states have reported similar victories.

Most even report that the program has saved them money on net: Providing the chronic homeless a long-term place to stay, no questions asked, intrinsically makes their lives more stable. So governments spend less on them in other forms of aid.

Expanding this approach nationwide will, of course, require more direct investment. Aid programs to help the homeless in any fashion remain horribly underfunded. In particular, sequestration and national budget cuts in recent years drastically reduced the streams of federal funding going to help these various programs at the state and local level.

But as Utah and Florida and these other places show, we don't just need money. We need a conceptual change. The notion that homeless people have somehow failed society, rather than society having failed them, is baked into our cultural thinking on the issue. It's why people think budget cuts to aid programs to "get people off the dole" are a good idea, and why it can seem like common sense that homeless people need to get their act together before they get permanent housing. Arguably the most important innovation "housing first" has provided is it flipped those moral assumptions on their head.

As Tsemberis told Mother Jones: "Going from homelessness into a home changes a person's psychological identity from outcast to member of the community." That comes first, not last.