Housing And Homelessness

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"capital gains thing". Between Gramm-Rudman, questionable tax figures, mounting pressure to increase spending on education, child care, and especially drug "warfare" and the new proposed tax-cut, Congress will be hard-pressed to find an extra thousand, let alone a few million dollars. The March may have challenged the thinking of more members of Congress, but more remains to be done to make Congress reorganize its spending priorities.

But is more money for HUD really the answer to the housing problem? Unfortunately, even if Congress were to allocate more money for housing programs, the marchers' goal of reduced homelessness and a higher standard of living for America's poor may not be realized. The disastrous precedent set by HUD officials illustrates the problem with entrusting conservative politicians with the task of administering government social programs. As Time magazine has noted, the Department became "a dumping ground for Reagan contributors, who knew little or cared little about housing." No wonder prominent Republicans, such as former Secretary of Interior James Watt and Washington lobbyist Paul Manafort, "were paid small fortunes to win building contracts for wealthy developers." And it should come as no surprise that well-connected mortgage companies were issued shaky loans, largely guaranteed by government, that quickly went bad. In short, HUD's budget became the cookie jar from which favors were dispensed to prominent Republicans and their friends. HUD's reputation is soiled; its effectiveness as an instrument of change has been undermined.

It's time to ask for more than just dollars; it's time to demand a commitment from the federal government to promote housing policy by doing more than just permitting the existence of HUD. Officials at HUD have to be appointed by a concerned president on the basis of demonstrated commitment to the needs of the poor. The existence of a bureaucracy, even one with a significant budget, can be rendered meaningless if it is hampered every step of the way by a hostile administration. We need officials at HUD who both care about the needs of the homeless and the working poor, and are willing to twist political arms to get things done.

Unfortunately, protests about the problems caused by incompetency, outright greed, and years of financial neglect seem to be falling on deaf ears. The prosecutions that are underway are only distracting attention from the real task of building housing and/or establishing an effective rent voucher system. But Congress cannot act alone and the president, on whom so much depends, will not act at all.

> The housing crisis has pinched the lower-middle class as well as the millions of American workers dependent on minimum-wage jobs. But Bush just doesn't seem to want to get involved.

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And so the buck is passed to local governments, who are forced to deal single-handedly with the emergencies that spring up in their own communities. Homeless shelters have sprung up all across the nation, providing temporary relief and new miseries for homeless families, who must choose between often dangerous city accommodations or the street.

Many housing advocates, such as Jim Tull '76, director of Amos House, a Providence shelter for the homeless, agree that shelters are not enough and that the only solution to homelessness is the construction of affordable housing.

Fortunately, Mayor Joseph R. Paolino of Providence seems to be getting the message. Providence plans to spend $1 million to buy vacant lots and dwellings on Federal Hill that will be cleared and sold to developers, who in turn will build 30 to 50 moderately-priced one-and two-family houses. Yet local governments often have resources too limited to implement long-range housing policies that can help more than just a small segment of the population. Consequently, the number of shelters will continue to rise, as will the number of distraught citizens facing disaster.

Once again, the answer seems to be a federal commitment to a long-term and costly process. The real question is how much more misery and how much more shouting and marching it will take to convince Washington that hard-working, yet poor Americans are in real danger of being swept away by the tide of homelessness.

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and lack of ability to meet security deposits were major reasons given by those using the state's shelter resources for their homeless condition, according to the 1989 United Way study.

The high cost of housing, in combination with major cutbacks in federally subsidized housing programs, reduce substantially the number of affordable housing opportunities for Rhode Islanders. State government, the Rhode Island Housing Agency, local cities and towns, and a variety of non-profit community based housing programs are trying to fill this vacuum, so far with only limited success.

Social and psychological factors as well as economic factors contribute significantly to the homeless problem. National studies by such groups as the Urban Institute of Washington, D.C. and the U.S. Conference of Mayors estimate that a substantial minority of homeless people have some serious social problem--drug or alcohol addiction, mental illness, or victimization by domestic violence.

Another cause of homelessness is misguided governmental policies. Some of the federal government's urban renewal programs have reduced the stock of low income housing by replacing structures such as rooming houses for the poor with gleaming office buildings for professionals. Advocates for the poor often cite substandard welfare payments as another potential cause of homelessness.

III. Solutions to Homelessness

Although there is no simple, all-purpose cure for the homelessness epidemic, many programs, policies and changes in attitudes could reduce the rate of homelessness substantially over a period of time. Increasing the supply of affordable low income housing has to be a major component of any homelessness reduction policy. This will take a combined partnership of federal, state and local governments, community groups, and private financial institutions. The federal government's role must increase in view of the 75% cutback in federally subsidized housing programs which has occurred between 1981 and 1989, and the squandering of many of the government's remaining housing funds through unnecessary contracts with housing "consultants." The federal government must not only spend more money on housing, but spend it far more wisely than in the past, by, among other things, adopting a strict rule that no federal urban renewal program will result in a net reduction in a locality's housing supply. Scaling back centralized bureaucratic programs in favor of decentralized efforts to provide seed capital for responsive local non-profit housing organizations also is imperative.

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In the short run, the federal government will have to increase its support for emergency shelter and food programs, while longer range homelessness prevention strategies are implemented.

Any sensible, long-term approach to stopping the homelessness epidemic must deal with the social caues of homelessness. We need more and better anti-drug and alcohol addiction programs, more emphasis on the prevention, detection, and punishment of domestic violence, better counseling services for the homeless so that they can develop the coping and life skills necessary to maintain an independent existence, and mental health deinstitutionalization policies which provide more group homes and support services for previously institutionalized patients. In this last area, Rhode Island is recognized as a national leader for the services it provides its adult mentally ill population.

The private non-profit sector and individuals are currently playing, and will have to continue playing a large role in reducing homelessness. Nationally, 90% of homeless shelters are run by community or church groups.

IV. Conclusion

In a community as close knit and caring as Rhode Island, homelessness is an especially painful and frustrating problem. For thousands of Rhode Islanders who currently are homeless, and the tens of thousands who are one small step removed from this disillusioning condition, many actions can be taken to ease their plights. A multi-faceted approach is essential, because there are numerous causes for homelessness and a diverse set of people within the homeless population. But clearly, there is something every citizen can do about combatting homelessness--from volunteering at a local soup kitchen, to raising money for a community shelter, to raising the consciousness of neighbors, friends and elected officials about the causes and potential cures for homelessness.

Above all, we must make the battle against homelessness a concrete, sustained and serious effort, not simply a fad or cause for which many words and few resources are expended. No longer should we tolerate a national political agenda in which approximately four times as much money is spent on the "pie in the sky" Star Wars defense system as on programs directly for homelessness. If we are truly committed to making the 90's the "we" decade rather than the "me" decade, we will pay much more attention to the syndrome of homelessness, and the waste of human potential it represents.

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