

Chronic homelessness: interviewing the
future's home

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1 Considering homelessness

Meditating, for a moment, on what a home is, a question comes to mind: to whom? Home is something one learns from one's culture; there is no single idea of home that can be pointed to as the end-all be-all of homeness. So to be specific, what is a home *in America*? The United States is a big place, though; home is still going to mean a thousand different things to a thousand different people. So perhaps a better tactic to arrive at an agreeable understanding is to examine not what home is but rather what it is not—or, similarly, what it means to *not have a home*.

From a legal perspective this seems relatively simple at first blush; the U.S. federal government has a definition of homelessness. In fact, there are two different definitions in use throughout various federal agencies, though they have a fair bit in common.¹ The most succinct piece of the latter of these definitions is the following: “[A homeless person is] an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.”² This definition fragment enumerates four qualities of a ‘residence’ that are necessary for that residence to constitute a ‘home’ in the eyes of the law; a residence having these qualities is capable of removing from an individual the quality of being homeless, implying it is these qualities of the residence that make it a home.

A cold and calculating definition, perhaps, but such is law. However, this surface-level understanding of homelessness and ‘homeness’ is not entirely satisfactory; after all, what do each of those qualities mean in reality?

'Nighttime' is the only one that could reasonably be called self-explanatory; the rest will require some scrutiny.

For a residence to be 'fixed' could mean several things. The rest of the definition provides some insight: a residence cannot be 'fixed,' perhaps, if it is "not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;" however, this language also seems to conflict with possible ideas of what an 'adequate' residence would represent.³ Better luck might be had with 'regular,' as it's clear throughout both definitions that a residence only qualifies as a home if not "temporary," i.e. that residence is not to be "imminently [lost]" whether by legal eviction or any other force.

The more closely one looks at the problem of defining homelessness, the more clear it becomes that it's nearly as difficult as the problem of defining home in the first place. This is not because it's especially difficult to say whether or not a given individual is homeless, but rather because there are so many different ways for someone to be homeless. The manifold possibilities are a reminder that talking about one kind of homelessness is not talking about all kinds of homelessness, and that the solutions to one kind of homelessness could be—but are in no way necessarily—the solutions to another kind of homelessness.

2 Chronic homelessness

With all that said, it is time to depart from philosophy and engage with one of those specific kinds of homelessness. Chronic homelessness is defined by the National Alliance to End Homelessness as “long-term or repeated homelessness. Chronically homeless people have a serious physical or mental disability, including mental illnesses like schizophrenia, and may also struggle with alcohol or drug addiction.”⁴ While the needs of people with disabilities vary vastly depending on the specifics of their disability, chronically homeless people all have in common the need for additional help beyond just getting housing. The 2015 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates that approximately 83,000 members of the total homeless population (numbering around 565,000 people) were chronically homeless in the U.S. in January of 2015.⁵

While homelessness often begins with something as simple as a missed month of rent, and in lucky cases doesn’t last much longer than that, chronic homelessness usually runs deeper.⁶ As chronic homelessness implies the existence of some kind of debilitating physical or mental condition, it follows that that same condition often plays a role in leading the sufferer to become homeless, whether because they were incapable of holding a job, couldn’t pay rent due to drug addiction costs, or anything else.⁷

3 Homelessness rehabilitation

The general consensus among researchers and service workers is that 'Housing First' initiatives are the unequivocal best means of rehabilitating chronically homeless persons.⁸ The Housing First philosophy functions as its name implies: beneficiaries are put into high-quality housing without stipulation, usually meaning that there are no requirements for beneficiaries to be addiction-free or actively receiving treatment for mental health issues.⁹ While specifics differ, the goal of Housing First is to ensure that individuals in need of support can receive that support without having their access to housing gated.

Pathways to Housing PA is an agency specializing in a Housing First approach to homelessness rehabilitation in the Philadelphia area.¹⁰ They make several powerful claims about the efficiency and efficacy of their methods; most profoundly, they note their cost per person for services as being as little as half the cost of other comparable programs serving the same population in Philadelphia.¹¹ They also find their services to have very high placement and retention rates, with numbers for both coming in at around 90%.¹² Admittedly, the number of people served by Pathways in Philadelphia is low (in the hundreds) compared to the population of chronically homeless people needing aid, but combined with endorsements from government work, it seems clear that Housing First methods work and work well.¹³

In addition to the obvious benefits for the people receiving aid, research shows that homelessness rehabilitation programs can be financially beneficial

to governments as well.¹⁴ Indeed, studies in multiple jurisdictions have shown that comparing the cost of housing and supporting the chronically homeless to the cost of alternatingly jailing, publicly sheltering, and providing health-care for the same population shows that simply providing the housing and support to begin with is, financially speaking, the better decision. Programs almost always break even compared to the average cost of jail/shelters/health care/etc., and are actually usually far cheaper.¹⁵

4 Federal government works

First brought before Congress in 2010, the *Opening Doors* strategy was designed by the Obama administration as a “comprehensive federal strategy to prevent and end homelessness.”¹⁶ It remains the primary statement by the U.S. federal government on working to combat homelessness in America, though whether the Trump administration will support and continue to work towards the goals of the plan is still unclear. *Opening Doors* was updated in 2012 and 2015 to reflect progress towards the goals of the project; a drop in the homeless population nationwide, including in the chronically homeless population, was observed in the Annual Homeless Assessment Reports used as data sources for the updates.¹⁷

As previously alluded to, the *Opening Doors* strategy has taken a Housing First approach to aiding chronically homeless people. It seems clear that Housing First is being adopted by aid programs as the standard for working

EXHIBIT 1.1: Estimates of Homeless People By Sheltered Status, 2007–2014

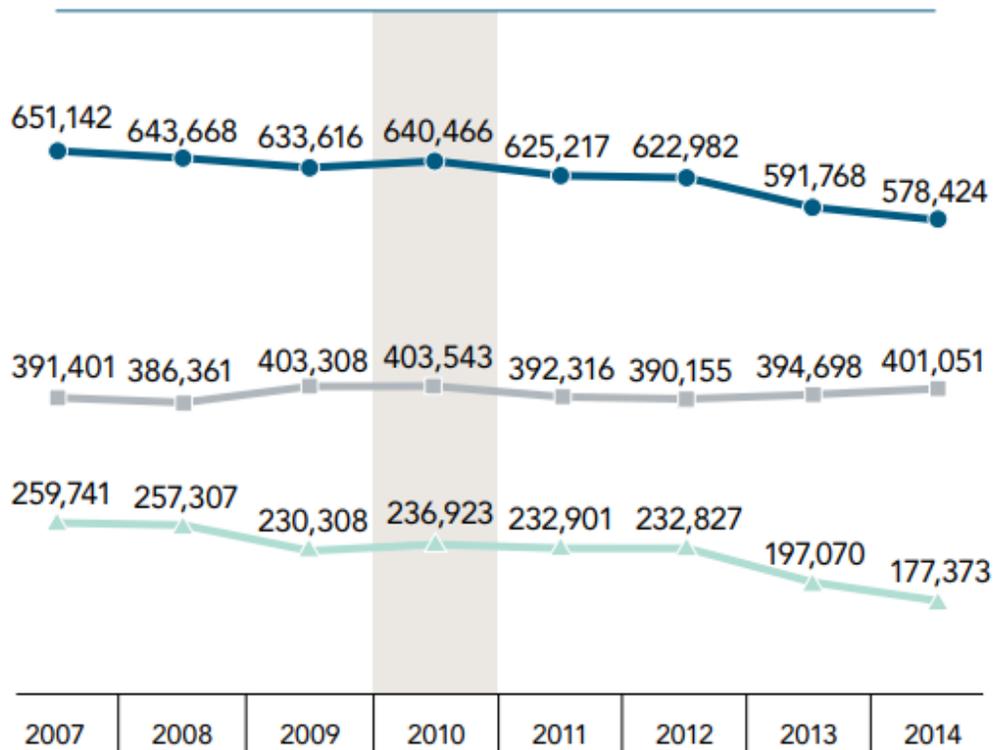


Figure 1: Graph of the homeless population over time from 2007 up to 2014.¹⁹

with chronically homeless persons; however, this means that the need for plentiful and high-quality housing is more pressing than ever.

5 The matter of housing

Saved potential costs nonetheless, paying to house chronically homeless individuals is expensive, and housing concerns are constant. A considerable per-

centage of the homeless population, and of the chronically homeless population, resides in the state of California; the cities in California where homelessness is most prevalent, like Los Angeles, already have extremely low vacancy rates.²⁰ Similar stories come from all over the country, though; for example, in Jackson, Wyoming, rising rent costs and lack of affordable housing are pushing lower-income workers either out of the town or onto the streets, or into cars.²¹ This is one mechanism by which housed people are forced into homelessness, but even more importantly, it's a vital part of why it can be difficult for homeless people to make it back into mainstream society. Even in locations where Housing First initiatives can get aid to the people who need it, beneficiaries can often have a tough time finding affordable housing in regions like Jackson—and the aforementioned California cities, just to name a few.²²

Lack of affordable housing impacts the entire Housing First system as well. Though most Housing First scenarios involve getting permanent supportive housing (that is, housing coupled with supportive services and care) for beneficiaries, it's not unheard of for tenants to choose to 'graduate' from the system and move into separate housing on their own.²³ This housing still needs to be lower-cost, though, and in areas where rent has risen dramatically, it can be close to impossible for these potential graduates to move out of their permanent supportive housing and free up that space for other prospective tenants who might have a greater need for specialized care.²⁴ It becomes obvious that creating and maintaining guaranteed affordable hous-

ing in problem areas is a high-priority issue for both homelessness rehabilitation and providing space for low-income individuals and families at large.

6 A need for alternative options

Affordable and low-income housing in America has something of a troubled history. Investigating the public housing projects that were built with federal funding in the latter half of the 20th century shows that most, if not all, have fallen into disrepair and are stricken with poverty.²⁵ In fact, most of these projects were so unsuccessful at providing a positive living experience for their tenants that they have been demolished under the HOPE VI act of the 1990s.²⁶ These projects, high rises that could hold dozens if not hundreds of families, have largely been replaced with scattered housing that aims to provide for a wider range of economic status, hoping to avoid the concentration of poverty that claimed so many of the former housing projects.²⁷ However, questions naturally arise surrounding the creation of higher-cost housing to replace the former high rises; after all, if the point is to make residences available at affordable rates, is it even possible for these replacement housing units to do the job they are intended for?

So, in order to provide an easy, low-cost and possibly standardizable (to some degree; regional differences in space, climate, etc. will of course prohibit the creation of any one-size-fits-all solution) approach to creating affordable housing, it seems necessary to begin to think 'outside the box' on

how property can be developed.

7 Alternative housing designs

In locations across the country, homeless aid programs have begun to develop tiny-house village-style housing solutions that are cheap to implement, relative at least to the cost of building new apartments.²⁸ While exact costs depend greatly on the scope of the project and target quality for the individual units, villages in this style have been implemented for as low as \$5,000-\$10,000 per unit, though that price is most likely an optimistic low for most developers and also relies on donated labor.²⁹ Other thoughtful and cost-effective design decisions, like the “optimum value engineering” described in a Department of Housing and Urban Development document that aims to minimize the materials it takes to frame a house, are the kind of valuable alternative routes that are vital to being able to create enough residences to continue to provide permanent supportive housing to populations that need it.³⁰

Other lessons in experimental housing design can be found in developing or less wealthy nations, where housing issues are vastly more widespread than in the U.S. An excellent example comes out of South Africa, where architect Luyanda Mpahlwa took to mind several vital design lessons—use what one has, build to the needs of the user, and so on—to create simple, effective, and high-quality housing for people in urban areas of the nation.³¹



Figure 2: Mpahlwa stands next to one of the partially-constructed houses of his firm's design.³³

The project, called 10x10, uses sparse wooden frames fenced with steel grid and filled with sandbags to create the framework for a home. The sandbag-filled frames—the sand for insulation, a natural property of the material—are then covered with spackle and painted for a weather-resistant and good-looking finish.³⁴ While the specifics of Mpahlwa's project might not be entirely adaptable to any given city location in the U.S., it is the style and philosophy of his design that seems vital to take to heart. Breaking free of traditional concepts of how to build and what to build when creating housing units for affordable housing or housing for the homeless is a vital

step towards being able to create that housing at all.

8 How to take action

While it's difficult—if not impossible—to paint with a thick brush when describing the challenges of combating homelessness in the United States, keeping philosophy in mind can guide action, policy, and aid in the directions with the best chance for improvement. The large population of homeless people across the country, and specifically the chronically homeless, has many different needs in many different places, but all are united by a need for one simple-yet-complex thing: a home. Philosophies of aid like Housing First are the kind of actionable ideas that can provide for those needs and more, hopefully being able to not just house homeless populations but provide them with the opportunity to work towards a truly better life. Especially for the chronically homeless, a population stricken, by definition, with physical and mental disability, much aid is needed.

Private and government aid programs alike have shown that Housing First is the best way to help people who are chronically homeless, but there can be no Housing First without housing. Areas with the largest homeless populations are also usually the areas with the least housing available, or else the most expensive housing; so, more and cheaper residences are needed. Traditional styles of building are functional, but often take too much time, money, and effort to put up—instead, new ways of thinking about what a

useful dwelling needs and how such a place can be made are needed. Projects like the tiny-house villages or Mpahlwa's 10x10 provide guidance in staking out this territory, arming architects and policy makers alike with ideas for building the spaces tenants need to get closer to a better life.

This is the fundamental push: thinking inside the box brought us the public housing projects of the 70s, 80s, and 90s; thinking inside the box brought us the housing shortages so many cities currently face. Thinking outside the box could let us find new ways to make places people can call home. Whatever home is, it's what people need.

Notes

¹“What is the official definition of homelessness?,” National Health Care for the Homeless Council, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.nhchc.org/faq/official-definition-homelessness/>.

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³Ibid.

⁴“Chronic Homelessness - Solutions,” National Alliance to End Homelessness, accessed April 10, 2017, http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/chronic%5C_homelessness%5C_solutions.

⁵Meghan Henry Azim Shivji Tanya de Sousa Rebecca Cohen Abt Associates Inc., “The 2015 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress,” (Washington, D.C.), 2015, <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2015-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>.

⁶“Chronic Homelessness,” 2010, 4, https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset%5C_library/BkgrdPap%5C_ChronicHomelessness.pdf; “The Facts on Homelessness and Housing Affordability,” Citizens for Adequate Housing, accessed April 10, 2017, <http://cahns.org/>

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⁷“Chronic Homelessness,” 4.

⁸“Opening Doors: federal strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness,” (Washington, D.C.), 2015, 29, https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset%5C_library/USICH%5C_OpeningDoors%5C_Amendment2015%5C_FINAL.pdf.

⁹“The Housing First Model,” Pathways to Housing PA, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://pathwaystohousingpa.org/housing-first-model>.

¹⁰“Overview,” Pathways to Housing PA, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://pathwaystohousingpa.org/overview>.

¹¹“Evaluation of Pathways to Housing PA,” (Philadelphia, PA), 2011, 2, http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.philanthropynetwork.org/resource/resmgr/research%5C_reports/pathways%5C_to%5C_housing%5C_report%5C_%7B%7D.pdf.

¹²Ibid., 19-21.

¹³“Evaluation of Pathways to Housing PA”; “Opening Doors: federal strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness,” 29.

¹⁴“Supportive Housing is Cost Effective,” National Alliance to End Homeless-

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¹⁵“Supportive Housing is Cost Effective.”

¹⁶“Opening Doors,” United States Inter-agency Council on Homelessness, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.usich.gov/opening-doors>.

¹⁷Abt Associates Inc., “The 2015 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress”; “Opening Doors,” 8.

¹⁸Meghan Henry Azim Shivji Dr. Alvero Cortes Katherine Buck Abt Associates Inc., “The 2014 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress,” (Washington, D.C.), 2014, 6, <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2014-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Adam Nagourney, “Old and on the Street: The Graying of America’s Homeless,” May 31, 2016, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/31/us/americas-aging-homeless-old-and-on-the-street.html>.

²¹Garnet Henderson, “Homelessness and Housing Shortages are a Big Problem in

Luxury Resort Towns like Jackson Hole,” accessed April 10, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/homelessness-is-a-big-problem-in-luxury-resort-towns-like-jackson-hole.

²²Ibid.

²³“Moving On: Facilitating Tenants’ Ability to Move from Permanent Supportive Housing to Other Housing Opportunities”:1, http://www.endhomelessness.org/page/-/files/3743%5C_file%5C_Moving%5C_on%5C_from%5C_PSH%5C_Final.pdf.

²⁴“Moving On: Facilitating Tenants’ Ability to Move from Permanent Supportive Housing to Other Housing Opportunities”; Liza Doran, “Affordable Housing Shortage Puts Low Income Households in Major Cities at Risk of Homelessness,” August 18, 2015, 2, accessed April 10, 2017, <http://www.endhomelessness.org/blog/entry/affordable-housing-shortage-puts-low-income-households-in-major-cities-at-r#.W0tLY3X6xhF>.

²⁵Alana Semuels, “New York City’s Public-Housing Crisis,” May 19, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.>

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²⁶Samuels, “New York City’s Public Housing Crisis.”

²⁷Samuels, “New York City’s Public Housing Crisis”; Erik Eckholm, “Washington’s Grand Experiment to Rehouse the Poor,” March 21, 2008, accessed April 10, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/21/us/21housing.html>.

²⁸Erika Lundahl, “Tiny Houses for the Homeless: An Affordable Solution Catches On,” accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.charterforcompassion.org/problem-solving/tiny-houses-for-the-homeless-an-affordable-solution-catches-on>.

homeless - an - affordable - solution - catches-on.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Dana Bres, “Framing for Strength and Efficiency,” *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research* 11, no. 3 (2009), <https://www.huduser.gov/periodicals/cityscpe/vol11num3/ch14.pdf>.

³¹“10x10 Low Cost Housing Project,” accessed April 10, 2017, <http://www.designindaba.com/projects/10x10-low-cost-housing-project>.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.