Cities are taking a new approach to homelessness

BY **ALISSA WALKER@AWALKERINLA** APR 4, 2017, 10:53AM EDT

Fernando Lopez stands in his encampment under a Los Angeles overpass *David McNew*/Getty Images

Last week, Bergen County, New Jersey, was declared the first community in the U.S. to end chronic homelessness. At a press conference, Housing and Urban Development officials said a reason behind Bergen County's success was a $11 million "one-stop shop" facility, where homeless residents can stay while they receive on-site treatment and housing assistance.

"By securing safe, permanent housing for individuals who were chronically homeless, we're providing these most vulnerable residents with the stability they need to address other challenges that have limited their ability to prosper in our communities," said Bergen County executive James J. Tedesco.

What Tedesco described is a "housing first" policy, an approach to ending homelessness that's gaining popularity in many communities. Housing first means getting people housed while they receive counseling or medical attention, instead of requiring people to be employed or sober before they are given a place to sleep. This method is not only proven to help people stay housed permanently, it also saves cities lots of money (for example, paying for preventative medical care is way cheaper than paying for repeated emergency room visits).

Amid a debate over who qualifies for social services, however, a "housing first" approach remains radical. The traditional approach is for cities to criminalize homeless behavior in the hopes of deterring it; for example, Los Angeles has made it illegal to sleep in your car and San Francisco no longer allows pitching tents on city streets. This approach seems particularly backwards when cities aren't offering alternative places for people to live. And again, incarceration (or sending people through endless court dates) ends up being more expensive than paying for housing.

But while chronic homelessness—defined as people experiencing long-term conditions like mental illness or drug addiction—is declining overall in this country, there is a new and growing class of Americans facing what's called "housing insecurity." In an age of major housing shortages compounded by great economic disparity, more Americans than ever are finding themselves on the precipice of homelessness. These are Americans who may become homeless for weeks, months, or years at a time, but aren't necessarily on the streets—they're moving in with family members, staying at motels, or living in cars.

Cities are struggling to house those who don't fit the traditional definition of homelessness. Even New York City, which funds an effective support infrastructure that houses virtually all of its homeless residents, is having difficulty processing people and allocating assistance. A heartbreaking story in *New York Magazine* follows seven homeless individuals and families in their paperwork-strewn bureaucratic nightmares to become permanently housed. Most of those profiled have jobs and attend school. "The new working poor are homeless," said Christine Quinn, a former New York City councilmember who runs one of the city's homeless shelters.

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These new conditions call for a new approach, and one way cities are addressing this unfolding crisis is moving from enforcing anti-homeless policies to assisting their homeless residents. But the move from enforcement to assistance requires a major shift in thinking from city officials.

In January, Oakland took an important first step away from criminalization by offering city serviceslike trash pickup and portable bathrooms for people living in homeless encampments. Now the city is building official homeless campgrounds. As *Mother Jones* reporter Matt Tinoco explains, it's a different take on the housing first approach: not having to worry about a clean, sanitary place to keep their tents or store their belongings allows homeless residents to focus on finding jobs and places to live. "Breaking camps apart takes them farther away from permanent housing," the city's legislative analyst Alex Marqusee told Tinoco.

Honolulu, which has the highest per-capita homeless rate in the country, is taking an even more revolutionary approach to housing its residents fast. A Hawaii state senator who is also an ER doctor has proposed classifying homelessness as an illness. The rationale is that doctors can "prescribe" housing, which would allow advocates to use Medicaid and other public assistance funds to subsidize housing, as seen the Vice News segment below.

Cities are also trying simple, low-risk ways to help people get housed. A Portland startup named NoAppFee.com, for example, uses micro-lending to front the application fees for renters until they can repay them. These fees, which may seem small to market-rate renters, can often be a huge financial barrier to those looking for subsidized housing. But the app isn't solely targeted at homeless residents; even people who aren't subsidized renters can use the service, which is perhaps even more important. It's an easy, preventative way to serve anyone who needs help.

A housing-first approach might appear monumentally difficult in a city like Los Angeles, where there are over 40,000 homeless residents countywide, and 74 percent of those residents are unsheltered. Which is why L.A. has a big-dollar, top-down plan to serve the city's growing homeless community, mostly through taxing L.A.'s more financially secure communities. A pair of recent ballot measures will fund a $1.2 billion bond measure for permanent housing and $355 million in services annually.

But while cities allocate funds to serve the needs of the chronically homeless, they should also be making smaller gestures that help those teetering on the brink of housing insecurity. Take the tiny curbside food pantries which are popping up in

communities all over the country. Like the "little free libraries" that foster a "take a book, leave a book" culture on sidewalks, these encourage people to take or leave food, toys, and other personal care items.

In a poignant NPR segment, the creators of these "little free pantries" say their creations provide anonymous, judgment-free help for those who need it. Jessica McClard estimates that most products she places in her Arkansas pantry are gone within 45 minutes. "The frequency of the turnover and the fact that other sites in town are also turning over that frequently, it suggests to me that the need is tremendous."

Much of the social stigma around homelessness comes from applying for assistance. And many of the problems cities encounter are from being overwhelmed by processing those applications. Our solutions to homelessness should be more like sidewalk food pantries, born of the understanding that we are all one missing paycheck, medical emergency, or eviction notice from being on the other side of that exchange.

Especially as the future of Housing and Urban Development funding is up in the air due to budget cuts proposed by the new administration that would specifically limit low-income vouchers, cities won't be able to rely on federal housing dollars. While funneling energy toward building more residential units is important, what cities need to focus on are ways to provide immediate stability to their residents, whether it's a safe place to park an RV, or a storage locker for valuables, so homeless residents can focus on their jobs, their families, their lives.

Imagine cities where more basic services like clean restrooms, dignified laundry facilities, or free sidewalk snacks are available to all, no questions asked. Those amenities aren't just offering assistance—they are also public improvements that make our cities better places for everyone to be.