

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

The Definition of Homelessness Proposed by the House Financial Services Committee & the Amendment to Improve It

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE PROPOSED DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS?

- The 14-day limit on motel stays and doubled-up situations is narrow and arbitrary. It will exclude many children, youth, and families who are homeless and in desperate need of help.
 - Homeless families and youth often live in doubled-up situations temporarily because they lost their housing and have no where else to go. These families and youth have no control over how long they can stay. They are at the mercy of the “host” household – very rarely, if ever, are they notified or given a specific number of days that they can stay. They live in a constant state of uncertainty because they can be told to leave at any time.
 - Homeless families stay in motels because they lack alternate arrangements and don't have the money to obtain or maintain stable housing. These families are using what meager resources they have on motel fees. Forcing these families to wait until they have only enough for 14 days forces them to squander their savings until housing is even further out of reach.
 - A motel room is not a home – especially for children and youth. Motels where homeless families stay are frequently in dangerous locations, overcrowded, and unsanitary. There is often no place for cooking or refrigeration, no services, and no safe place for children to move or play. Motels are by definition unstable environments. They threaten child and youth development and put them at risk of harm.
- The proposed definition presumes that adults living on the street or in shelters are more vulnerable and in greater need of help than children in motels and doubled-up situations. This is not true. These populations are equally vulnerable. The proposed bill thus does not appropriately target resources and attention.
 - Children and youth have unique developmental needs.
 - Staying in doubled-up and motel situations jeopardizes children and youth's health and development. The high rates of mobility that accompany these situations wreak havoc on all aspects of child/youth development, and put children and youth at high risk of developing other problems as adults.
 - Therefore, the assumption that the proposed definition targets the most vulnerable is incorrect, because it excludes many children and youth who are unable to get into shelters because shelters are full, non-existent, or out of reach due to eligibility rules.
 - The definition thus does not target federal resources on homelessness to all of those who are in the most dire situations.
- The proposed definition undercuts the efforts of the education community.
 - Over 60 percent – nearly 600,000 children – are considered homeless by the Department of Education, but not by HUD.
 - Children and youth in these homeless situations face greater barriers to education than just those in the classroom. Yet the failure of the HUD definition to include these children creates barriers to referrals for services and other critical inter-agency collaboration. Without safe, stable housing and access to supportive services, children and youth are at high risk of mobility and academic failure.
 - In addition to the problems created by the definition, the proposed legislation eliminates an original HEARTH Act¹ provision that specifically included school district liaisons or their designees as part of Collaborative Applicants. Schools thus have no seat at the table, and most homeless children and youth served by schools are not considered eligible by HUD.

¹ The HEARTH Act (H.R. 840, the Homeless Emergency and Rapid Transition to Housing Act) is the legislation with over 80 bipartisan co-sponsors that includes the ideal HUD definition of homelessness, one that appropriately aligns HUD's definition with the definition used by the Department of Education.

- The “10 percent flexibility” provision to allow Continuums to serve children, youth, and families who are considered homeless by other definitions is extremely unlikely to result in services for these children, youth, and families.
 - Unless these children, youth, and families are defined as homeless by HUD, it is extremely unlikely that communities will choose to use HUD homeless assistance funds to serve them because:
 - The proposed legislation codifies bonuses and set-asides for serving those who are eligible under the HUD definition, thus creating strong incentives to serve that population
 - The vast majority of local and state plans to end homelessness, which will continue under any Administration, use the HUD definition of homelessness. Many plans focus on chronic homelessness, excluding all homeless children, youth, and families. These plans incentivize attention, resources, and services for HUD-defined homelessness only.

WHAT IS THE HOMELESS CHILDREN AND YOUTH AMENDMENT?

- The Homeless Children and Youth amendment would make children, youth, and families who are verified as homeless by official personnel in four federal programs – Education, Head Start, Runaway and Homeless Youth, and Early Intervention – count as homeless under the HUD definition.

HOW WOULD THIS AMENDMENT BENEFIT CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES?

- Federal program personnel/local grantees in early care, education, and youth programs could make referrals with ease to HUD homeless assistance programs to help these children, youth, and families access necessary services and supports, including housing.
- Communities would have greater awareness of the numbers and needs of those children, youth, and families who need housing and shelter but are unable to obtain it. This will enable communities to mobilize non-federal resources and new community partners to assist these children and youth.
- Consistency across federal programs will help public schools support more children and youth with the housing and services outside the classroom that are so important for children to be ready to learn.
- These children and youth will have greater access to state and local-funded programs that use the federal HUD definition of homelessness. This includes, in many communities, Section 8 housing where there is a homeless priority.
- Homelessness looks different in different communities. The Homeless Children and Youth amendment provides flexibility to respond to homelessness as it appears locally. It imposes no requirement on any community. It doesn’t pull funding from anywhere else. It simply allows communities to serve children, youth, and families who have been identified by other programs, and are in desperate need of assistance.

ISN’T THIS AMENDMENT THE SAME AS THE ORIGINAL HEARTH² ACT DEFINITION?

- No. The original HEARTH Act definition included all people living temporarily in doubled-up and motel situations. The Homeless Children and Youth Amendment covers only children and youth, and their families.
- *The original HEARTH Act did not contain a process for verifying homeless status.* Under the original HEARTH Act, HUD programs would have had to create mechanisms for determining eligibility under a new definition. The Homeless Children and Youth Amendment streamlines this process by authorizing personnel from four federal programs to verify homeless status. Since these four programs are authorized and required to identify and provide

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outreach to these youth, there is a formal, pre-existing mechanism for verification. This ensures a smooth referral process, as well as improved collaboration.

- *The Homeless Children and Youth Amendment would cover at most an estimated 1 million children, youth, and their families who become homeless over the course of a year. This is only one-fourth of the number of people estimated to be eligible under the original legislation.*

WON'T THIS AMENDMENT INCREASE THE NUMBER OF HOMELESS PEOPLE AND MAKE IT HARDER FOR COMMUNITIES TO END HOMELESSNESS?

- *All of the federal programs included in the Homeless Children and Youth Amendment already are required to report their numbers to their respective federal agencies. Thus, rather than “increase the number of homeless people” the amendment will simply require HUD to acknowledge and accept the work of other federal programs and agencies that serve homeless children, youth, and families.*
- *If HUD expects communities to truly plan to end all homelessness and be successful, HUD's definition of homelessness must be realistic and accurate. Local communities respond to homelessness using the federal definition of homelessness adopted by HUD. This definition must acknowledge the unique needs of children and youth, and the realities of family and youth homelessness, in order for communities to respond effectively.*

HOMELESS CHILDREN AND YOUTH AMENDMENT

In reference to the Manager's Amendment circulated on July 10, 2008 by the House Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity:

Page 5, after line 19 and before line 20, insert new (6)

“(6)

(A) A child or youth who has been verified as homeless, as such term is defined in section 725(2)(B)(i) of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, by a local educational agency homeless liaison, designated pursuant to section 722(g)(1)(J)(ii) of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, and the family of such child or youth; and

(B) A youth verified as homeless by the director of a program funded under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, or a designee of the director; and

(C) A child verified as homeless under Section 602 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act by the director or the designee of such program, and the family of such child; and

(D) A child verified as homeless under Section 637 of the Head Start Act by the director or designee of such program, and the family of such child.

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