UNDERSTANDING RURAL HOMELESSNESS

Rural homelessness differs from urban and suburban homelessness. The image of an individual sleeping on the street, clearly visible to those passing by, is much less frequent in rural America.

Literal homelessness, or the condition of living on the street or in a shelter, does exist in rural America, but due to the geographic vastness of most of these areas and a lack of centralized services and resources, it is much more infrequent.

This, however, is not to say that homelessness is any less of a concern in these regions. Individuals experiencing homelessness in rural areas typically face precarious housing conditions or move from one extremely substandard, overcrowded, and/or cost-burdened housing situation to another. These moves often include doubling or tripling up with friends or relatives. Although not homeless in the literal sense, these are individuals that do not have access to safe, secure homes of their own. Just like homeless populations in our cities, these are people who need access to services that will help them find housing and stay housed.

Rural communities struggle to find funding to provide these services. Before the passage of the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009, most rural homeless were in fact not even considered homeless by the federal government. The HEARTH Act expanded the federal government’s definition of a homeless individual to include those at imminent risk of homelessness—including those doubled up and those living in extremely substandard conditions.

The passage of the HEARTH Act set forward, for the first time in the federal definition of homelessness, criteria that better suited and described rural homeless populations.

Funding for homeless services is partially contingent upon the ability to enumerate the homeless population at hand. Fewer services aimed at homeless individuals, less shelters, and fewer resources to conduct point-in-time counts make it significantly harder to obtain accurate counts in rural areas. Moreover, substandard homes that would be considered condemned in cities remain inhabited in rural areas where condemnation processes often do not exist.
In other words, someone who would be considered homeless in an urban area is often not considered as such in a rural area, even if the circumstances are the same. This leads to significant undercounts. The challenge in enumerating rural homeless populations increases the difficulty these communities have in applying for federal homelessness dollars.

Due to this, the HEARTH Act included the creation of the Rural Housing Stability Program (RHSP). The RHSP allocated explicit funds for rural communities working towards homeless prevention and re-housing projects in ways that best align with the needs of their homeless populations. The RHSP provides rural communities and regions the ability to focus federal homelessness funding on programs that are more in line with the unique issues and concerns of rural homelessness.

This includes stabilizing the housing of individuals in imminent danger of losing their homes through the rehabilitation of existing dwellings or construction of new transitional or permanent housing. This increased flexibility is critical for rural communities that can now tackle homelessness in new and creative ways that might not be applicable in cities.

Rural communities often struggle to compete against larger, more organized urban areas and Continua of Care (CoCs). As homelessness is much more visible in our cities, the housing needs of urban areas often overshadow the needs of the rural homeless. With the RHSP, rural housing providers and communities are now placed in competition with each other as opposed to large urban centers. This ensures that funding will be used towards addressing the needs of the rural homeless as opposed to being swept under the rug by larger municipalities and CoCs.

Just like in urban spheres, homelessness is more prevalent in some rural areas than others. Counties that have persistently high rates of poverty often have larger homeless populations than other rural regions. Lessening the competition for homelessness dollars will greatly help these regions address homelessness and be more competitive for funding than they were before.

RHSP grants are available on a county by county basis. If any part of a county falls within a metropolitan statistical area as defined by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) or is considered to be a part of a metropolitan statistical area, they are ineligible and must apply for federal homelessness funding through the Continuum of Care (CoC) program.

As of now approximately $5 million has been estimated for FY 12 and FY 13 each. Although these sums are not huge, they are not insignificant and can have considerable impact on rural communities and their homeless populations. The RHSP just underwent a comment period on its proposed rule and as such no funds have been distributed as of yet.

Although the authorization of the RHSP is a step in the right direction, making sure that it remains properly funded and implemented will be critical in ensuring individuals experiencing homelessness in rural areas have access to the services that they need.