

My Turn: Helping Vermont end homelessness

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During the early 1980s as many families lost their homes and jobs, state and local governments were forced to dramatically cut the assistance they could offer. As a result, we saw a dramatic spike in the number of homeless men, women and families. Today we are emerging from an even more severe recession and once again local governments face hard fiscal times.

But thankfully, as a recent report shows, when it comes to homelessness, history is not repeating itself. Indeed, according to HUD's annual "Point-in-Time" count, which estimates the scope of homelessness on a given night in America, despite unprecedented economic headwinds, between 2010 and 2011 homelessness has gone down by almost every measure.

It's declined among both individuals and families, as well as among what we call "chronically" homeless people -- those who have been homeless for extended periods of time. And most significantly of all, veterans' homelessness dropped nearly 12 percent. This decline in homelessness is also being noticed in Burlington and Chittenden County where local planners report a one-year 20 percent drop in the number of persons living in their shelters and on their streets.

And the Obama administration is building on that progress for Burlington area families. That's why this week HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan announced nearly \$3.6 million in new funding throughout Vermont to fight homelessness, part of nearly \$1.5 billion to help more than 7,000 homelessness programs across the country.

These grants support a broad range of housing and services -- what we call the "continuum of care" -- from street outreach to the transitional and permanent homes that individuals and families need to start rebuilding their lives.

In Burlington, this investment will support efforts such as HowardCenter, which offers permanent housing solutions to those struggling with long-term homelessness. While these funds will help us to speed the progress we've made, we already know the tools the Obama administration is using to prevent and end homelessness are making a difference.

With the Recovery Act's Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program -- or HPRP -- we have saved more than 1.2 million people from living on our nation's streets -- "fundamentally changing" the way communities respond to homelessness, according to the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

With innovative tools like HUD-VASH, which combines HUD's Housing Choice Voucher rental assistance with VA's case management and clinical services, we've housed more than 25,000 veterans -- including more than 20 times as many veterans in the last two years as we had before President Obama took office.

Last year, the Obama Administration released Opening Doors -- the first comprehensive federal strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness in our history. The culmination of a decade of bipartisan progress, the plan commits our country to ending chronic homelessness and homelessness among veterans in five years, while ending homelessness for families, youths and children within a decade, and setting us on a path to end all homelessness.

And in today's tight budget environment, that commitment is all the more critical. Indeed, over the past decade, we've seen that when localities combine housing with supportive services the results are fewer

ambulance and police calls, fewer visits to the emergency room, and -- just as importantly -- real savings for taxpayers.

With these funds, President Barack Obama's commitment and the partnership of local leaders, we can bring this proven model not just to Burlington but to every community in the country -- and put us on a path to ending the tragedy of homelessness once and for all.

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