



HOMELESSNESS & “FUNCTIONAL ZERO:” A CRITIQUE

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“Functional zero: At any point in time, the number of people experiencing sheltered or unsheltered homelessness will be no greater than the current monthly housing placement rate for people experiencing homelessness.”

-- Community Solutions

*“If you can’t explain it to a six year old,
you don’t understand it yourself”*

- - Albert Einstein

For years homeless advocates have argued about the definition of homelessness and how inclusive or limited it should be. This is not an esoteric exercise, since the answer drives federal resources.

Sadly, some researchers, consultants and advocates convinced Congress years ago to a much more limited definition of homelessness along with focusing resources first on the chronically homeless, with veterans, families and youth all next in line. This was done of the fallacious argument that once we ended chronic homelessness, we could then devote resources to ending it for the next sub-population. This did not happen and hundreds of thousands of people experiencing homelessness have remained invisible to our leaders at all levels.

*“When people are invisible, you can’t find a solution
because you don’t see them”*

- - Marc Uhry, Fondation Abbe Pierre

Ten year plans to end homelessness are in their 2nd decade or abandoned altogether.

Rather than focus on the systemic and structural systems and policies that have created three decades of mass homelessness – beginning with President Reagan devastating the federal affordable housing budget by 75% in 1980; the continuing dismantling of local, state and federal housing, social services, health and mental health budgets; discharge policies from prisons, jails, hospital and foster care that routinely discharge people to the streets and a minimum wage that keeps people shackled to poverty – we now seek to arrest and define our way out of homelessness.

Criminalization of homelessness:

Despite the admonition by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness [USICH] to communities to move away from trying to “arrest their way out of homelessness,” the number of anti-homeless ordinances in the nation has proliferated. For example, the Sacramento city has 11 municipal codes that criminalize people experiencing homeless – five for standing, sitting and resting in public places; five for camping in public places and three that criminalize begging or panhandling.

Prisons and jails have become the housing for people experiencing homelessness, especially people of color and those with mental health issues.

Functional zero:

Couple this with the newest trend to define our way out of homelessness.

Community Solutions has created the term “functional zero” which took them three pages of definitional “metrics” to operationalize. *What would Einstein say?*

Basically, a community can still have 10,000 homeless people, for example, but if that community can say the number of people entering homelessness is equal to the number exiting—they have reached “functional zero” --- forget the 10,000 languishing on the streets and in shelters.

This term is harmful and counter-productive to addressing the myriad of reasons why people become homeless and is dismissive of the systemic reasons why people become homeless.

In no other walk of life do we use the term “functional zero”- to end hunger; ending domestic violence; ending gun violence? Ending discrimination? In no other walk of life do we address a crisis by redefining it and settling on homeostasis as the new reality.

It is harmful because when politicians and community members hear “zero”- they hear we have ended homelessness – not what Community Solutions has defined it to mean. Then when it is time to allocate scarce public resources it would not be unreasonable for the public and/or elected officials to argue we don’t need as many resources for homelessness because we have solved it! Yet we know nothing could be further from the truth.

We have entered into a new era of becoming more sophisticated about managing homelessness – creating a new way to define status quo – however we rapidly move the same number of people entering homelessness as who exit.

Salt Lake City, Houston, New Orleans and Phoenix: These four cities have become the poster cities for “functional zero” in ending homelessness – which make great headlines and sound bites. But, look at the numbers and what they really meant was ending veteran homelessness Ooops Not really ... chronic veteran homelessness.... And they haven’t even done that.

Take a hard look at the numbers and trends that each of these four cities report to HUD annually [Source: Homeless Point in Time Count and Housing Inventory Count, 2012, 2013 and 2014]. [See analysis and data below]

Trends in the four “functional zero” cities: 2012 – 2014:

- Total number of homeless veterans in the four cities in 2014 was 1,392;
- Salt Lake City: the number of homeless veterans increased from 247 [2013] to 275 [2014];
- Total number of homeless people in 2014 was 15,357
- The number of total homeless people increased in Salt Lake City from 2,123 [2013] to 2,150 [2014] and in Phoenix from 5,889 [2013] to 5,918 [2014];
- The total number of permanent supportive housing [PSH] units in the four cities in 2014 was 8,831 or 57.5% of the total number of homeless people;
- The total number of PSH units in New Orleans decreased from 2,670 [2013] to 2,464 [2014].

Clearly none of these cities can legitimately claim they have ended veteran homelessness, yet they have been successful at creating the new urban myth that if we just do what these cities have done we can end homelessness as well.

USICH: Federal agencies that belong to USICH have recently moved away from using the “functional zero” terminology and adopted the new “operational definition of ending homelessness” contained in USICH’s recently released amended federal homelessness plan *Opening Doors:*

An end to homelessness means that every community will have a systematic response in place that ensures homelessness is prevented whenever possible or is otherwise a rare, brief, and non-recurring experience.

This “new” definition of ending homelessness essentially is a retooled “functional zero” definition dressed in new terms. Of course we want a rapid and systematic response to preventing homelessness. However, the new paradigm fails to address how we get to that point in the first place. What about the people who are currently experiencing homelessness?

Tragically for people experiencing homelessness, USICH has opted to size the definition of ending homelessness, based on limited existing federal resources rather than right size the resources to fit the homeless crisis in this nation.

Zero means zero:

While SRCEH supports a “rapid-same-day” response to homelessness, we refuse to abdicate to arresting and defining our way out of homelessness. Yet, a new report by HUD, *Family Options Study*, has shown that the rapid rehousing approach is not nearly as effective as a housing voucher strategy.

SRCEH remains committed to galvanizing the political and community will that “zero” truly means ending and preventing homelessness in our community.

No definitional gimmicks...

No smoke

No mirrors.

As a community we first must stop criminalizing people experiencing homelessness and focus on creating enough affordable housing, social services, health and mental health care and living wage jobs and income that we end and prevent homelessness.

We can end and prevent homelessness if we are intentional about moving beyond sound-bite jargon and squarely address the homeless crisis as a social justice issue and support housing and health care as basic human rights.

Analysis of “Functional Zero” Cities Salt Lake City; Phoenix; Houston & New Orleans

How does a total of 15,357 people experiencing homelessness equate to “0”?

Background:

Salt Lake City, Phoenix, Houston and New Orleans are all cities that have claimed to “end” either veteran homelessness; chronic homelessness or homelessness in general, using the “Functional Zero” definition [See attached SRCEH critique]

Analysis of their Point in Time Count & Housing Inventory Count:

However, an analysis of each city’s Point in Time Count and Housing Inventory Count from 2012 – 2014 reveals a different story – while each city individually and collectively have lowered their homeless veteran and overall homeless population and increased the number of permanent supportive housing units – they cannot legitimately claim to have “ended” homelessness in any of their cities:

The key findings and trends include:

Homeless Veterans:

- Between 2012 - 2014 the number of homeless veterans decreased in three of the four cities and increased in New Orleans;
- Overall, the number of homeless veterans for the four cities declined from 2,979 [2012] to 1,392 [2014]
- Overall, the percentage of Unsheltered homeless veterans for the four cities decreased from 48% [2012] to 33% [2014];

Total number of people experiencing homelessness:

- The total number of homeless for the four cities decreased from 21,038 [2012] to 15,357 [2014];
- The percentage of total unsheltered for the four cities declined from 44% [2012] to 28% [2014];

Emergency Shelter Beds:

- Three cities – Salt Lake City, Houston and New Orleans saw a decline in emergency shelter beds – from 3,864 [2012] to 2,803 [2014];
- Phoenix saw a slight increase in emergency shelter beds from 1,038 [2012] to 1,055 [2014];
- Overall for the four cities, this was a decline of 1,061 emergency shelter beds or an average decline of 265 emergency shelter beds

Transitional Housing Beds:

- All four cities saw a decline in transitional housing beds – from 5,596 [2012] to 4,362 [2014]
- This was a decline of 1,234 transitional housing beds for the four cities or an average decline of 308 transitional housing beds;

Permanent Supportive Housing - PSH:

- Two cities – Salt Lake City and New Orleans – saw a decline in the number of PSH units;
- Two cities – Phoenix and Houston – saw an increase in the number of PSH units;
- Overall for the four cities, there was an increase of 1,800 units of PSH or an average increase of 470 PSH units

4 “Functional Zero” Cities: Point in Time Count & Housing Inventory Count: 2012 - 2014

City	Homeless Point In Time Count											
	2014				2013				2012			
	Veterans				Veterans				Veterans			
	Sheltered	Unsheltered		Total	Sheltered	Unsheltered		Total	Sheltered	Unsheltered		Total
Salt Lake City	260	15		275	241	6		247	366	29		395
Phoenix	262	48		310	388	123		511	605	247		852
Houston	310	334		614	452	425		877	380	782		1162
New Orleans	126	67		193	119	92		211	188	382		570
	Total Homeless				Total Homeless				Total Homeless			
	Emergency Shelter	Transitional Housing	Unsheltered	Total	Emergency Shelter	Transitional Housing	Unsheltered	Total	Emergency Shelter	Transitional Housing	Unsheltered	Total
Salt Lake City	1362	678	110	2150	1367	667	99	2133	1361	912	190	2463
Phoenix	2558	2307	1053	5918	2177	2131	1581	5889	2343	2393	1749	6485
Houston	1033	1984	2291	5308	1241	2140	2978	6359	1063	2300	3824	7187
New Orleans	593	570	818	1981	578	720	1039	2377	601	863	3489	4903
	Housing Inventory: # of beds per housing type											
	2014				2013				2012			
	Veterans				Veterans				Veterans			
	Emergency Shelter	Transitional Housing	PSH	RRH	Emergency Shelter	Transitional Housing	PSH	RRH	Emergency Shelter	Transitional Housing	PSH	RRH
Salt Lake City	0	225	357	19	N/A				N/A			
Phoenix	95	56	301	14								
Houston	40	229	1416	131								
New Orleans	0	167	474	143								
	Total Homeless				Total Homeless				Total Homeless			
	Emergency Shelter	Transitional Housing	PSH	RRH	Emergency Shelter	Transitional Housing	PSH	RRH	Emergency Shelter	Transitional Housing	PSH	RRH
Salt Lake City	969	743	1868	505	1055	838	1632	N/A	966	938	1301	200
Phoenix	1055	387	823	34	929	569	626	N/A	1038	714	468	221
Houston	1142	2548	3676	488	1269	2706	3242	N/A	1191	3102	3066	177
New Orleans	606	684	2464	320	660	729	2670	N/A	669	842	2116	62