

Homeless and Policy – Part I

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC—safer, healthier people.

[Samantha Williams] I am Dr. Samantha Williams, a research psychologist at the CDC. Today, I'm speaking with Nan Roman, the President and CEO of the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

Nan, in today's society, why are people homeless?

[Nan Roman] The major reason that people are homeless today is because they can't afford housing. Housing is the driver in causing homelessness. There are other factors that also are involved. Illnesses—including mental illness, chronic substance abuse disorders, physical illnesses, HIV/AIDS—also affect people who are homeless and may cause them to lose income so that they can't afford housing.

[Samantha Williams] Can you put a face on who is homeless in the United States?

[Nan Roman] About half of people who become homeless every year are living in families with children; the other half are single adults. There also are a lot of youth who become homeless. We don't really have very good data on them or numbers. Eighty percent of people who become homeless are homeless largely for economic reasons. They basically stay homeless long enough to find another place to live. They leave the shelter system and they never come back. About 20 percent of people have serious disabilities. They really can't get out the shelter system without help.

[Samantha Williams] What is your organization doing to help achieve the goal of ending homelessness—specifically chronic homelessness over the next five years?

[Nan Roman] The National Alliance to End Homelessness is an organization that does advocacy at the federal level. We do public education, education of opinion leaders, education of people who provide assistance to homeless people, and we do capacity building among providers of homeless assistance. So in terms of ending chronic homelessness, we're working in all of those areas. In terms of federal advocacy, we're working on getting enough resources to go to scale in ending chronic homelessness. There're about 110,000 chronically homeless people. So to end chronic homelessness, we essentially need somewhere around 100,000 units of permanent, supportive housing. Federal resources will be key in providing those housing units, so we work on trying to educate congress and the administration about what those needs are.

Permanent, supportive housing has services attached, and one of the most difficult things for communities has been financing the services that go with permanent, supportive housing. And HHS has been actively looking at this, along with their partners at HUD, and we try to bring information to that discussion as well. One of the things we do in the education area is try to

build the intellectual capital around solutions to homelessness. Ending chronic homelessness is often a very cost-effective intervention.

The cost of the housing and services is often less than the cost of leaving people with serious disabilities on the street or in the shelter system. Homeless people are more ill, they consume more hospital days, they go to the emergency room frequently. They're also often incarcerated, basically because they're having to live their lives out in public. They get incarcerated for what we call status offenses. So they end up costing public systems of care—particularly the health care system—a considerable amount of money. It's often less expensive to house them than to leave them homeless. I think that that's particularly an important thing to understand when the economy is challenging. In terms of capacity building, we also work with communities to try to help them figure out how to shift resources into permanent, supportive housing, how to structure the creation of permanent, supportive housing in their plans to end homelessness locally.

[Samantha Williams] Nan, thank you for being with us today and for participating in the inaugural Public Health and Homelessness Symposium at CDC. If listeners would like more information about the National Alliance to End Homelessness, please visit www.endhomelessness.org.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.