

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Obama Promised to End Homelessness This Year

February 20, 2023

By Robert G. Marbut and Marvin Olasky

It may be hard to believe looking at the current state of major American cities, but 2023 was supposed to be the year that all types of homelessness would be eradicated. That's what the Obama administration promised when in 2013 the Department of Housing and Urban Development formally [changed](#) the federal government's homelessness policy to "housing first," under which homeless people receive federally funded housing vouchers with no strings attached. Things haven't panned out as the administration planned.

Team Obama ignored a harsh reality of homelessness: It is overwhelmingly a problem of untreated mental illness and substance-use disorder. California Policy Lab, a nonpartisan research institute at the University of California, [found in 2019](#) that 78% of the homeless population in America reported having mental-health conditions, and 50% said mental illness contributed to their loss of housing. Additionally, 75% of the homeless said they struggled with substance abuse, and 51% said drug or alcohol use contributed to their loss of housing.

Before the 2013 change, HUD geared its approach to homelessness to deal with this complexity. Though the agency doesn't deal directly with homeless people, it does provide the bulk of the government funding dedicated to helping them. This money is given to governmental agencies that are part of the Continuum of Care program. These are quasilocal entities that are sometimes managed by local government departments. But what HUD says goes, since that's where most of the money comes from.

Before 2013, HUD strongly encouraged and often required that Continuum of Care organizations provide treatment and job training and that they make housing vouchers conditional on participation in those programs. In 2013 the Obama HUD told all funding recipients that they instead had to adopt "a Housing First approach" without "service participation requirements."

That change precipitated a dramatic increase in homelessness. HUD data show that unsheltered homelessness rose 20.5% from 2014 to the beginning of 2020, before Covid hit. In California, which in 2016 made things worse by [mandating](#) that all state homelessness funding fit housing-first policies, homelessness rose 47.1% from 2015 to 2019.

Children were hit especially hard, adding to the tragedy of the Obama policy. The Education Department, using a different technical definition of homelessness than HUD, reported that the total number of children without a home increased from 679,724 in 2007 to 1,508,265 in 2018, a pre-Covid increase of 122%.

Housing-first advocates argue it's unreasonable to ask homeless people to get treatment before handing them a voucher, but all sorts of federal funding comes with restrictions on recipients for their own good.

Pell grants require students to make satisfactory academic progress, attend classes and maintain passing grades. Unemployment benefits require recipients to look for jobs. The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program generally requires beneficiaries to work or advance their educations. These mandates aren't imposed arbitrarily. They improve recipients' well-being by staving off dependency, helping them get back on their own feet.

Inexplicably, homelessness is treated differently. Policy makers act as if it's simply an issue of people not having houses, rather than a complex problem often rooted in mental illness and substance-abuse disorders. Housing is certainly part of the solution, but it isn't a panacea.

The situation is dire, but there's hope if Washington changes course. In addition to requiring that housing voucher recipients get treatment and job training, Congress should pass the [Housing PLUS Act](#), which would set aside at least 30% of federal homeless assistance funds for addiction treatment and mental-health services. In all federal homelessness assistance programs, Washington should make a priority of funding treatment for the homeless based on the trauma they've experienced. None of these changes require additional federal funding, only that money be redirected toward policies the evidence shows will work.

People who are living on the streets are suffering. They need help and we should help them. Doing it right, however, will require more than sticking them in apartments where they're out of sight and out of mind.

Mr. Marbut was director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2019-21. Mr. Olasky is author of "The Tragedy of American Compassion." Both are senior fellows at the Discovery Institute.