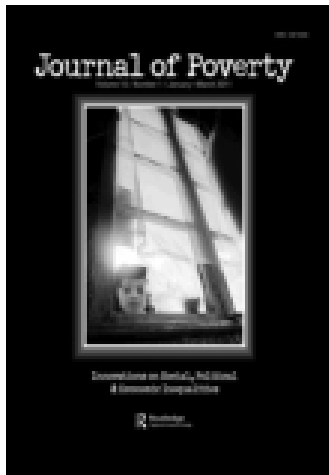


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### Works in Progress: Searching for Solutions to the Difficult Problems of Homelessness

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## **Works in Progress: Searching for Solutions to the Difficult Problems of Homelessness**

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Our interest in editing this special issue stemmed from our experiences researching homelessness alleviation projects in Chicago including the Chicago Housing for Health Partnership (CHHP) and Chicago's city-wide Plan to End Homelessness. CHHP provided homeless individuals with a quick path to permanent, supportive housing upon release from a hospital for chronic physical illness. With an experimental design, it followed those provided with the housing and compared their outcomes to those provided with "usual care"—a referral to a shelter. The Chicago Plan to End Homelessness implemented a Housing-First strategy, creating new programs to move people who were homeless quickly into permanent housing. It also increased allocations of funding for supportive housing.

In our research on these organizations and others we encountered the growing coherence in public-private systems of programs and policies addressing homelessness. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) policies such as the "continuum of care" program foster local collaboration and require joint planning for allocation of funding to local agencies. Simultaneously, national advocacy organizations have advanced concepts such as Housing First, which is becoming embedded in HUD and many local systems' policies.

The Housing First model works to fast-track participants into permanent, stable housing, regardless of any physical, mental, or emotional health barriers; compliance with medication regimens; or substance abuse patterns. Housing First policies are based on two beliefs: one ethical and one practical. First, there is an ethical belief that housing is a human right and that there is nothing that a person can do that relinquishes his or her right to deserve

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safe, stable housing. Second, there is the practical concern that any other issues, such as health problems, mental illness, substance abuse, and so on, are all easier to treat in a cost effective manner when someone is already in stable housing. Housing First policies represent a significant departure from previous practices that focused on emergency shelter systems and usually required compliance with sets of rules often including being clean, sober, and compliant with medication regimens.

We continue to see that the “homeless alleviation system” is a work in progress that includes many different components. The emergency shelter systems, initiated in the 1980s, were often built on the even older private (and often religion affiliated) volunteer soup kitchens, church basement shelters, and skid-row missions. These were overlaid with supportive permanent housing programs, new innovative Housing First and permanent housing programs, and sophisticated supportive service programs. Yet the parts of the system often had difficulty communicating with each other or coordinating care.

In addition to investigating the homeless systems of Chicago, we encountered the stories of homeless individuals and families that demonstrate the clear, continuing need to find workable solutions to housing problems, and the importance of supportive housing services for many chronically homeless individuals. We have followed these individuals’ progress through an uneven and often fragmented system (George, Chernega, Figert, Stawiski, & Bendixen, 2008); we have also seen the success of Housing First programs such as reduced hospitalizations (29% fewer), fewer hospital days (29% fewer), and fewer emergency department visits (24% fewer) (Sadowski, Kee, VanderWeele, & Buchanan, 2009). In the evaluation of the Chicago Plan to End Homelessness, we saw the superiority of new programming that concentrated on getting people housed immediately as opposed to relying on a shelter-based system (Sosin, George, & Grossman, 2012).

Although there has been significant research on the effectiveness of new homeless alleviation policies, there has been relatively little academic publishing on this research. Policy-based or community-based research, like that done on the effectiveness of homelessness reduction programs, suffers from a lack of academic publishing opportunities, but such research is crucial for academics, policy makers, and students to understand. Thus, we sought a venue to compile excellent, current research on effective strategies for alleviating homelessness, with an emphasis on programs that were instituting a Housing First approach.

The included articles represent a wide variety of approaches to the topic. The first article, “Individual Predictors of Community Costs Before and After Housing First” by West, Patterson, Mastronardi, Brown, and Sturm presents an excellent literature review on the housing-first movement and goes on to describe a small-scale research project testing the cost-effectiveness of a

Housing First program and the personal characteristics of participants (age, gender, health status, etc.) that affect cost effectiveness.

Jessica Lauren Perez's article, "The Cost of Seeking Shelter: How Inaccessibility Leads to Women's Underutilization of Emergency Shelter," qualitatively investigates the reasons that many homeless women choose to not seek shelter in emergency housing programs. She finds that though emergency beds may be "available," there are a variety of reasons that women may not see them as "accessible" given their particular circumstances. Perez also demonstrates how homeless individuals experience the fragmentation and "holes" in under-resourced and undercoordinated local systems. This research highlights the need for flexible programs that serve homeless individuals "where they are at."

"The Community Empowerment Fund: A Matched Saving Model as an Innovative Approach to Housing the Homeless" by Biggers, West, De Marco, Dorrance, and Manturuk and "Case Study of a Legal-Oriented Intervention to Assist Homeless Disabled Individuals With SSI/SSDI Applications" by Casey MacGregor investigate the impact of non-housing-related services (financial services and legal services, respectively) on the success of the homeless finding and keeping housing. These two articles show that providing shelter or even subsidized, permanent housing, may not be enough to successfully sustain people who were homeless. MacGregor's article, especially, also highlights the "on the ground" difficulties in service coordination, a reality that the participants in Perez's study also encountered.

Walker, Hempel, Unnithan, and Pogrebin's article, "Parole Reentry and Social Capital: The Centrality of Homelessness," compares the outcomes of parolees released to stable housing versus those who were homeless. Their conclusion, that secure housing is very important to successful social reentry after release from prison, supports the need for more policies to fast-track anyone who needs housing into stable, permanent shelter.

Finally, Ryan, Jeffreys, Ryczek, and Diaz's article, "Building Public Will: The Battle for Affordable—and Supportive—Housing," describes how a coalition of organizations, advocates, representatives of homeless individuals, and others worked to affect public policy in Rhode Island in favor of creating more permanent, supportive housing. This final article is included to highlight a "way forward" toward successful housing policy.

The work of many researchers, program employees, and the experiences of countless homeless individuals all contributed to the articles in this special issue. We would like to thank all of them for their work and for sharing their experiences with us. We aspired to collect a set of articles that would not only highlight the current challenges in the system, but also would light a way forward. We hope they will help communities and academics around the country create, improve, revise and restore programs to serve the homeless populations of our world.

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