In November 2008, as the world was heading into the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, a conference took place at New York University about the effect of housing policy on homelessness. Papers from the conference were compiled in this unquestionably timely volume. As a practitioner who works with housing and mental health care providers of homeless services, I found the proposals startling.

*How to House the Homeless* does three things. It provides a critical assessment of gaps in current programs and practice, attempts to analyze the effectiveness of current policies, and offers a new agenda for future research. The book offers recommendations that housing and services practitioners like me need to know. It could change the way we do business.

Ingrid Gould Ellen and Brendan O’Flaherty identify a lofty goal in Chapter 1: to find the best housing policies and estimate how much they would reduce homelessness. Leading researchers offer six papers ranging in scope from “obvious” approaches such as housing subsidy programs and supportive services to nonobvious ones—for example, changing zoning laws and restructuring
mortgage contracts. Ellen and O’Flaherty lay out a number of research questions on the links between housing and homelessness. Identifying characteristics that lead to homelessness could help to shape policies that prevent it from occurring.

Part 1 looks at the effectiveness of current service models designed to help people leave homelessness. Robert Rosenbeck (Chapter 2) explores service models related to mental health problems, attempting to measure the cost effectiveness and policy relevance of the Treatment First model. Until quite recently, the homeless have been required to consent to treatment for mental health or substance abuse problems as a prerequisite to housing. Rosenbeck demonstrates that there is little distinct evidence for the effectiveness of intensive case management. The counterpoint is Chapter 3, where Sam Tsemberis shows that programs concentrating on housing (the Housing First model) generally do a better job than the Treatment Model in reducing homelessness, and do just as good a job in reducing psychiatric and substance abuse problems. The conclusion one must draw from Part 1 is that requiring treatment or sobriety as a condition for housing is not the most effective means of reducing homelessness.

Part 2 discusses ways to use housing policy to prevent homelessness. Jill Khadduri (Chapter 4) explores studies that show that increases in the supply of rental vouchers reduce homelessness. One study showed that Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV, also known as Section 8 vouchers) virtually eliminated homelessness among families leaving welfare. In Chapter 5, Edgar O. Olsen recommends that the entire current system of low-income housing programs be replaced with tenant-based assistance (i.e., vouchers). This shift could free up 2.4 million vouchers at no additional cost. Acknowledging a possible criticism, Olsen argues that there is sufficient vacancy in housing markets to absorb the voucher holders. I question the desirability of such a radical transformation. A voucher-only program would not meet the nonhousing needs of the homeless and would not adequately take into account the obsolescence of the existing housing stock.

Chapter 6 by Stephen Raphael explores a different angle—the effects of housing market regulation on homelessness. According to him, housing market regulation (e.g., “red tape” costs for zoning approvals) results in more expensive housing because it drives up land costs. Raphael’s analysis shows that higher housing costs in more regulated areas is statistically linked with the incidence of homelessness. However, he does not present any real policy recommendations because it is not politically feasible to eliminate existing land use and housing controls.

Although Chapter 7 by Brendan O’Flaherty was supposed to “span the gap between public-health researchers who think about the dynamic models of individual lives, and housing researchers, who generally use static models of aggregates,” it fails to achieve this goal, in part because it was so difficult to read. Because the entry into homelessness is highly unpredictable (according to O’Flaherty), the best predictors of who will be homeless in the future are those who are currently homeless and those with the cheapest, lowest-quality housing. The homeless shelter system cannot be completely eliminated, although O’Flaherty postulates that a number of hypothetical “insurance policies” could be put in place for homeless prevention. O’Flaherty’s inability to clearly explain what hypothetical “insurance policies” are and what the “moral-hazard concerns” are and how these terms can be used by practitioners prevented me from getting much out of the chapter.

O’Flaherty’s conclusion (i.e., that the current system of homeless services should be replaced) seems to echo the theme of the entire conference. Although the existing homeless assistance services delivery system is broken, it cannot be eliminated. I certainly hope that the providers of shelter, services, transitional, and permanent housing for the homeless and other low-income families are paying attention to the policy recommendations in this academic dialogue. The most valuable recommendations coming out of this conference are the effectiveness of the Housing First model and the utility of tenant-based rental subsidy programs in homeless prevention and reduction. A number of interest groups will inevitably push back against changes of the
magnitude recommended in *How to House the Homeless*. Nevertheless, a broad discussion of the recommendations on the two topics I have just mentioned is urgently needed.

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