



Brief One

A Federal Approach to Homelessness

A Movement Begins

Homelessness made it onto the national agenda as poverty increased in the early 1980's. Organizations such as the Community for Creative Non-Violence (CCNV) helped raise national awareness. Mitch Snyder, a lead social activist with CCNV, gained national recognition by going on a 51-day hunger strike. He wanted to force the Reagan administration to convert a federally owned building in Washington, D.C. into a homeless shelter.¹ The administration agreed to Snyder's demands two days before the 1984 election. The building was leased to CCNV for \$1 per year.

Snyder became a hero. CBS created a television movie on Snyder's life starring Martin Sheen and Dennis Quaid, who later participated in other demonstrations protesting ineffective federal homelessness policies.² The publicity of Snyder's story successfully raised awareness about homelessness on a national level.

In 1986, a benefit called Hands Across America raised money to combat homelessness in local communities.³ Seven million people joined hands and formed a human chain that stretched over 4,000 miles across the cities of America. This advocacy effort helped shape the first federal homeless service legislation.

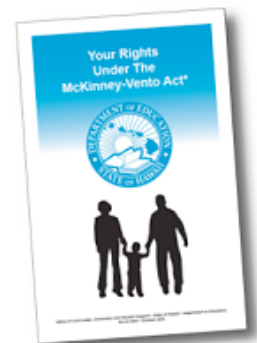
The Homeless Persons' Survival Act was introduced to Congress in 1986. However, only parts of the legislation initially passed. The Homeless Eligibility Clarification Act of 1986 removed address requirements for a number of federal programs (i.e. Supplemental Security Income, Food Stamps, and Medicaid). In the same year, the Homeless Housing Act created Emergency Shelter Grants, which are funds to build and operate emergency shelters for homeless individuals. With the passage of this legislation, the government acknowledged that a shortage of services existed for the homeless population.

The McKinney-Vento Act

In late 1986, the Urgent Relief for the Homeless Act was introduced to Congress as the first major piece of federal legislation on homelessness. This legislation contained parts of the original Homeless Person's Survival Act and passed through Congress in spring of 1987.⁴ It was renamed the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act in memory of its key Republican sponsor who was known as a fighter for the "causes of the forgotten." Sadly, Representative McKinney became the first congressman to die of AIDS in office.⁵ On July 22, 1987, President Reagan signed the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act into law.*

The McKinney-Vento Act guarantees a range of services and programs for the homeless population. These include expanding Emergency Shelter Grants (ESG), providing health care services to the population through the Health Care for the Homeless and Community Mental Health Services block grant, providing educational opportunities for homeless adults and youth, and modifying the food stamp program to incorporate the homeless population. The act authorizes resources for many different federal departments and disperses money to state and local levels. The act offers federal funding, but solutions to eradicate homelessness continue to be generated at the local level.

Before 1994, individual local agencies (mostly non-profit organizations) were awarded McKinney-Vento dollars through a competitive grant process. For example, Shelter Plus Care Program dollars were awarded to local agencies based on the strength of their application relative to other applicants. Funding levels were determined on an individual provider-basis, by the level of need for services in a community. A similar process was used to grant funds for new transitional and supportive housing programs.



* In 2000, President Clinton renamed the bill the McKinney-Vento Act in honor of the bill's co-author Bruce F. Vento, who worked alongside McKinney in the fight against homelessness.

A Coordinated Approach

By 1990, the need for a “complete” system of care for the homeless was obvious. Housing needed to be combined with essential services such as health care, substance abuse treatment programs and job training programs. New York was one of the first cities to implement this approach. In 1992, Andrew Cuomo, the head of New York City’s homeless commission, drafted a report titled *The Way Home: A New Direction in Social Policy*. The report recommended that an individual’s housing eligibility depend on their willingness to participate in service programs (i.e. substance abuse treatment or job-training programs). It also recommended increased coordination between local non-profits and the city to combat homelessness. Cuomo believed that a “complete” system of care was needed to move the homeless toward self-sufficiency.⁶ This approach to homelessness is considered a “continuum of care” system.

In February of 1993, Andrew Cuomo became Secretary of Community Planning and Development of HUD. He brought the continuum of care approach to the national stage. In May of 1994, the Clinton administration published a report called *Priority Home! The Federal Plan to Break the Cycle of Homelessness*. The report recommended restructuring the McKinney Act and other housing programs. In particular, the report called for increased coordination between housing programs and services for health, mental health, and substance abuse.⁷

Along with the Clinton administration’s report, HUD shifted its funding structure to emphasize a Continuum of Care (CoC) approach. Instead of creating competition between individual providers, the CoC approach creates an incentive for communities to work together. Funding is granted to entire communities based on the strength of their CoC plan, relative to other regions. Each community has the flexibility to develop their own CoC approach given their capacity and philosophy for providing housing and services to the homeless community.

MCKINNEY-VENTO PROGRAMS		
AGENCY	PROGRAM	GOALS
Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)	Emergency Shelter Grants	Improves quality of existing emergency shelters, builds additional emergency shelters and provides funds to operate emergency shelters.
	Supportive Housing Program	Promotes the development of housing and supportive services for assisting homeless persons to transition from homelessness to self-sufficiency.
	Supplemental Assistance for Facilities to Assist the Homeless	Provides supplemental financial assistance to other Federal homeless programs and supports innovative local assistance programs.
	Section 8 Moderate Rehabilitation for Single Room Occupancy (SRO)	Provides rental assistance to homeless individuals.
	Shelter Plus Care Program	Provides housing to homeless individuals with disabilities, mental illness, AIDS or substance abuse addictions. Awarded to local agencies based on the strength of their application relative to other applicants.
Health and Human Services (HHS)	Healthcare for the Homeless Program	Provides funding to local agencies that provide a coordinated approach to delivering care to the homeless population.
	Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH)	Provides financial assistance to states to support services for individuals who are suffering from serious mental illness and/or substance abuse and are homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless.
	Emergency Community Services Homeless Grant Program	Provides funds to assist the homeless -- with special emphasis on elderly persons, handicapped persons, families with children, Native Americans and Veterans.
HSS and HUD	Surplus Federal Property to Assist the Homeless	Provides Federal leases of under and un-utilized land to regions, which can be used to provide shelter services and storage, or in other ways that benefit homeless people.
Dept of Education	Adult Education for the Homeless Program	Provides grants to state education agencies for the purpose of providing basic skills and literacy training for homeless adults.
	Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program	Provides grants to state educational agencies to ensure that all homeless children/youth have equal access to the same free/appropriate education provided to other children/youth.
FEMA	Emergency Food and Shelter Program	Supplements and expands ongoing efforts that provide shelter, food, and supportive services for needy families and individuals.
D. of Ag	Food Stamp Program	Eliminated address requirement to the original food stamp program making it accessible to the homeless population.

Endnotes

¹ Collins, 118.

² Deparle, Jason. *Mitch Snyder, 46, Advocate of Homeless*. The New York Times, July 6, 1990.

³ *Hands Across America Turned Our Eyes Inward*, USA for Africa; <http://www.usaforafrica.org/legacy/hands.htm>

⁴ Baumohl, 161.

⁵ Lundin, Carol. *Stewart B. McKinney: The Man*. Project Hope Newsletter. <http://web.wm.edu/hope/national/mckinney/bios.pdf>

⁶ Silber, Kenneth. *New testing ground for the other Cuomo - Andrew Cuomo, son of New York State Governor Mario Cuomo*. March 1993; http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1571/is_n11_v9/ai_13625807/pg_1?tag=artBody;col1

⁷ *Ibid*, 171.