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Administration - Crash Course in Homelessness

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The federal government is offering housing assistance to people who were displaced by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita even if they were homeless before the storms. After previous disasters, only those who had lost their homes as a direct result of the event were eligible for transitional housing and relocation assistance.

"This is different," said Housing and Urban Development Department spokesman Brian Sullivan. "People who were never homeless a day in their lives are now homeless." In the face of mass tragedy, he said, extra help is required.

Katrina destroyed or damaged 302,000 housing units -- 71 percent of which were affordable to low-income families -- according to the National Low-Income Housing Coalition. HUD says that 50,000 people are eligible for help under its programs, and FEMA says it has helped 488,000 get housing.

Many of those who are newly homeless because of the hurricanes are finding places to live, but others who are less fortunate are adding to the country's homeless population. The eventual outcome -- whether the number of homeless people in America exceeds the pre-storm estimate of 730,000 -- will go a long way toward judging President Bush's 2002 vow to end "chronic homelessness" within a decade.

This year's hurricane aftereffects are unprecedented, but groups fighting homelessness say the government's relatively coordinated response in the weeks following the storms shows that where there's will, there's a way. Now they want to take advantage of the nation's acute awareness of homelessness to press their case.

"It's not that we don't have the resources to end homelessness," says Nan Roman, president of the National Alliance to End Homelessness. "It's political will, and it's an ephemeral thing."

If the political will that an issue commands is measured by how many government entities are devoted to it, then ending homelessness is getting plenty. In response to Katrina, the federal government has set up three housing-related task forces -- HUD's internal Hurricane Recovery and Response Center, which coordinates the department's various program offices; a White House Hurricane Katrina Task Force on Housing and Relocation Policy, led by HUD Deputy Secretary Roy Bernardi; and the Joint Housing Solutions Center, located in Baton Rouge, La., and administered by HUD and FEMA to coordinate interdepartmental efforts. Before Katrina and Rita, several federal bodies, including HUD, FEMA, and th

departments of Agriculture, Labor, and Veterans Affairs, administered major anti-homelessness program and those continue today.

The pre-Katrina estimate of 730,000 homeless people was based on data collected by hundreds of communities in winter 2005 and reported to HUD in June. A 2001 book by the Urban Institute, *Helping America's Homeless: Emergency Shelter or Affordable Housing?*, estimated the homeless population to be between 444,000 and 842,000 people, based on data collected in 1996.

In any event, the hurricanes have been both a setback and a wake-up call, worsening the problem and at the same time spurring a new response.

Katrina has been "a crash course in the reality of homelessness," says Maria Foscarinis, executive director of the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, who hopes the attention is here to stay. "It's not like people were not homeless on a massive scale before this hurricane."

When the short-term housing operations close up shop, it will fall to the federal Interagency Council on Homelessness, a little-known group tucked inside the White House Domestic Policy Council, to keep the focus sharp. Created by the 1987 McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, the group is charged with coordinating a coherent national strategy on homelessness among federal agencies. Congress is set to reauthorize the Interagency Council this fall in the fiscal 2006 Transportation-Treasury appropriations legislation.

Katrina "can be a real opportunity to relook at both poverty and homelessness in terms of the commonalities of those who are newly homeless, and those historically homeless by virtue of their circumstances," says Philip Mangano, the council's executive director.

The council has an up-and-down history. Congress siphoned off most of its funding in the mid-1990s, and it retreated into HUD, where it nearly died at the end of the Clinton administration. Bush reinvigorated the council in his fiscal 2003 budget, following up on the challenge enunciated by his first HUD secretary, Mel Martinez (now a Republican senator from Florida) in a 2001 speech. "It is time for the federal government to stop simply maintaining the status quo and invest in more-permanent solutions to the challenge of homelessness," Martinez told the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

The administration tapped Mangano, a former executive director of the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance and a popular figure among homeless advocates, to run the council. By all accounts, Mangano has breathed new life into it, in particular by raising its profile and credibility outside Washington. But getting federal agencies to sit together at the table to discuss homelessness has not been easy, and finding funds to combat the problem is even trickier.

"Philip Mangano has done a magnificent job of getting out to communities, and getting mayors and community leaders to sign on to this effort," says Fred Karnas, a former Clinton HUD official and executive director of the council, who is now a policy adviser to Arizona Democratic Gov. **Janet Napolitano**. But, "having said that," he adds, "I'm not sure what they've signed on to."

Mangano says that one of the council's goals is to gather innovative ideas in the field and disseminate them across the country. "The notion here is not, 'There's someone sitting in a corner office in Washington

creating a plan that is then visited upon the country,' " he says. Mangano has spent much of the past three years traveling to meet with governors, mayors, county executives, service providers, and homeless people. Mangano says that a feature common to the shelters he visited was one-stop shopping -- evacuees could receive a range of services including housing assistance, psychological counseling, and health care all in one place.

Mangano's enthusiasm plays well outside Washington. "He really helped spark the movement here," says Nancy Radner, executive director of the Partnership to End Homelessness in Chicago. "I can't say he was the linchpin, but he convinced Mayor [Richard] Daley to sign on to our plan." But Radner, who is working with Columbus, Ohio, and Indianapolis on a project to provide permanent housing for homeless people, says the council has not yet come through with funds to carry out the program. "Philip is inspiring us, but a little bit leaving us out there on our own."

Some activists doubt that the Interagency Council on Homelessness can accomplish its mandate. According to Foscarinis, "The council has not been at all aggressive in pursuing a federal response to homelessness." The group has focused too much on state and local activities, she says, even though "its mandate is to coordinate the agencies."

The administration's progress in ending chronic homelessness, Foscarinis says, has been "limited"; small boosts for programs that combat homelessness directly have been offset by cuts to general low-income-housing programs. The administration "has not shown real seriousness in leading even the limited commitment it has made," she says.

In his fiscal 2006 budget, Bush proposed \$1.4 billion for HUD's homeless assistance grants -- slightly more than the \$1.1 billion he suggested for 2002. Altogether, the administration is seeking \$4 billion in 2006 for a range of housing and social programs for the homeless -- an 8.5 percent increase from 2005. But that figure includes a broad swath of anti-poverty programs, advocates say. The Senate earmarked \$1.8 million in fiscal 2006 for the Interagency Council on Homelessness, as Bush requested. The House approved \$1.4 million, and the ultimate amount will be decided in final negotiations on the Transportation-Treasury bill.

Pete Dougherty, a career employee who directs homeless programs at Veterans Affairs and is its liaison to the council, says the participation of Cabinet secretaries in council meetings is "way more than we've ever had before." Meetings with Cabinet secretaries are typically held twice a year; agency liaisons to the council meet about once a month, Dougherty says. "In this town, having the boss coming to the meeting is significant."

The report accompanying the fiscal 2006 House Transportation-Treasury appropriations bill expressed concern over the council's "staff turnover." Mangano says his staff turnover matches that within any government agency.

But the report went further in its criticism, citing a "continued lack of cooperation" between the group and HUD -- even though HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson became chairman of the council in September. (That was after Labor Secretary Elaine Chao declined the post, a decision that the Senate Appropriations Committee criticized in its report.) The "failure of the administration to put forth a comprehensive funding plan for the elimination of chronic homelessness," the House Appropriations report said, shows that "the

council is not being successful in developing a government-wide response to this national problem."

The report language was dropped from the final House bill, but the council's troubles remain. The fact that the interagency council doesn't control federal funds earmarked for homeless programs, which in Washington translates into little clout, is a major weakness, according to some activists. "We support the dissolution of the council, because it really doesn't have teeth to it," says Robert Cordero, director of federal advocacy for the New York City-based Housing Works, a nonprofit group that supports homeless and formerly homeless people with HIV and AIDS.

Whether Mangano can translate his public-relations savvy into tangible results on homelessness, particularly post-Katrina, remains to be seen. "The [current] council has certainly engaged some partners in a way that they haven't been in the past," Karnas says. "But if you measured effectiveness based on what has been accomplished to address homelessness, I think the jury is still out on that."