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# Sustaining Our Data-Driven Focus:
*Findings and Implications of Recent Reports and Data Regarding Homelessness in America*

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When we released the amended *Opening Doors* earlier this year, the changes included increased emphasis on the use of data in decision-making and performance management to prevent and end homelessness. We know that the focus on data is helping drive systems change and progress in many communities, and we echo that focus at the federal level. All of the work that USICH's member agencies do together – both among the Council leadership and through the many different Federal interagency working groups USICH convenes – is grounded in data. We make data-informed decisions to identify the customized interventions that people need to end their homelessness, to tailor our Federal strategies, and to help assess the impact of our efforts.

This document considers several recent sources of data: Part 1 of HUD's 2015 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report to Congress (AHAR); Part 2 of HUD's 2014 AHAR; and data from the Department of Education for School Years 2011-2012 to 2013-2014.

**Summarizing the 2015 Point-in-Time Count Data**
The 2015 PIT count data HUD released in November 2015, based upon information gathered and reported by communities across the country through their local counts, provides us all with important benchmarks for measuring the impact of the strategies and programs we are implementing. Such point in time data – in this case, from a point in time in January 2015 – provides us with a snapshot of the estimated number and demographics of people who are experiencing homelessness at a given point of time, and also helps us assess the impact of our strategic activities up until that point.

The 2015 PIT data helps document significant progress since the launch of *Opening Doors* in 2010, especially in reductions of unsheltered homelessness. Key data points include:

- *Overall Homelessness:* The PIT count data reported by communities estimates that the total number of people experiencing homelessness at a given point in time declined by more than 72,000 people between 2010 and 2015, an 11% reduction since the release of *Opening Doors*. In January 2015, an estimated 564,708 people were homeless on a given night. Most (69%) were staying in residential programs for homeless people, and 31% were found in unsheltered locations. Overall, unsheltered homelessness has decreased by almost 26% between 2010 and 2015.

- *Individual Homelessness:* The PIT data estimates a 9% reduction in the number of individuals experiencing homelessness between 2010 and 2015, including more than a 16% reduction in the number of unsheltered individuals experiencing homelessness. There was a total reduction of less than 1% in the number of individuals reported as experiencing homelessness between 2014 and 2015.

- *Family Homelessness:* PIT data indicates a 19% decline in the number of families with children between 2010 and 2015, including a 64% reduction in families counted as experiencing unsheltered homelessness. There was a total reduction of 5% in the number of families with children reported as experiencing homelessness between 2014 and 2015.

- *Veteran Homelessness:* The PIT data also indicates an estimated 36% reduction between 2010 and 2015 in the number of Veterans experiencing homelessness, including a 47% reduction in the estimated number of Veterans experiencing unsheltered homelessness. There was a total reduction of 4% in the number of Veterans reported as experiencing homelessness between 2014 and 2015.

- *Chronic Homelessness:* The PIT data estimates a 22% decline in chronic homelessness between 2010 and 2015, including a 13% reduction in unsheltered chronic homelessness, but also results in estimates that the decrease in the number of people experiencing chronic homelessness decreased by only 1% between 2014 and 2105.

- *Youth and Young Adult Homelessness:* The 2015 PIT data estimates 46,808 unaccompanied youth and young adults experiencing homelessness, including 9,901 parenting youth and young adults. Federal agencies know that communities are working hard to improve their approaches to counting youth, and HUD and USICH have been providing guidance on data collection requirements, but we expect it may take a few years for us to have an accurate picture of the scale of youth experiencing homelessness and to be able to use that data to assess progress over time. We caution people not to do year-to-year comparisons of that data.

**Implications of this PIT Data**
This 2015 PIT data has many clear implications for our continued work to end homelessness in the United States, including:

- *We are continuing to make progress, but need to increase the pace of progress in order to achieve the goals of* **Opening Doors.** While the progress is encouraging, especially the reductions in unsheltered homelessness, we need to continue to drive as hard as we can – and to make strategic investments – at the Federal, state, and local levels to increase our progress, including the funding for another 25,500 units of permanent supportive housing included in the President's FY16 budget.

- *Racial disparities in the impact and experience of homelessness remain clear.* For example: while African-Americans make up only 12% of the U.S. population, the PIT data estimates that more than 40% of the people experiencing homelessness are African-American; and while Native Americans make up 1.2% of the general population, they represented an estimated 2.7% of the people counted in the PIT data, despite the fact that very few tribal communities are included within PIT counts.

- *There are significant geographic differences in the trends seen within the PIT data.* The PIT data from 33 states and the District of Columbia indicated that homelessness had declined between 2014 and 2015, while the data from 17 states indicated increases. CoCs from major cities reported a 3% increase in homelessness between 2014 and 2015, driven by increases reported in New York City and Los Angeles, and including an 11% increase in the number of people reported as living in unsheltered locations.

- ***Housing affordability remains one of the most significant challenges to achieving our goals.*** Taken together, and considering other data sources described below, this data shows that communities are making significant progress in reducing homelessness, especially unsheltered homelessness, but there are still many people staying in unstable housing situations. The findings from the Family Options Study earlier this year provided powerful evidence of the impact of access to affordable housing on ending family homelessness. We need to do everything we can to expand access to housing affordable to families who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness, including removing local policy barriers that limit the creation of affordable housing options in the private market, prioritizing people experiencing homelessness for mainstream affordable housing resources, and investing into affordable housing opportunities across all levels of government.

**Other Sources of Data**

At USICH, we know that while the estimates that we can draw from this PIT data are vitally important, they are not the only data that we need to consider – and are not the only data that communities should use – to guide the strategic decisions and tailor the interventions that we need to end homelessness.

*Federal Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Veteran Homelessness*

For example, we now have measures and data that help us to define success in ending homelessness. The Federal Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Veteran Homelessness are helping communities consider their data in new ways to document and improve the efficiency with which their systems are ending homelessness for Veterans. As of the date of this document, 17 communities and the State of Virginia have been confirmed by VA, HUD, and USICH as having effectively ended Veteran homelessness. In addition, communities that are participating in the Federally-funded Zero:2016 initiative are capturing and using critical data about the efficiency and capacity within their local systems for ending Veteran and chronic homelessness, and many of these communities appear to be on track for achieving their goals.

*Sources of Annualized Data*

While we use the PIT data to compare our progress from year to year, this data does not represent the full scope of homelessness. We also need to consider sources of annualized data that help us understand the number of people who experience homelessness or housing instability over the course of a year. Such data helps paint a more complete picture of the state of homelessness in our country, and is critical to understanding the level of need in our communities and the resources necessary to assist every individual and family who is experiencing homelessness or housing instability. For example, HUD's AHAR Part II is based upon 2014 information drawn from Homeless Management Information System data, which documents the number of people who experience homelessness in shelters over the course of the year. This data showed a 4.6% increase between 2013 and 2014 in the number of people who used shelter at some point during the year, representing the first year sheltered homelessness had grown since 2010.

For understanding the scope and scale of homelessness among youth and families with children, we also closely consider the data gathered by schools for the Department of Education, which was also included and discussed with HUD's 2014 AHAR Part II report for the first time and also published in November 2015. This annualized data documents the number of children enrolled in public schools who experience homelessness at some point during the school year, and includes children who are living in shelters or who are unsheltered, but also includes children who may be staying in motels or in doubled-up arrangements.

According to this data, public schools reported that 1,301,239 enrolled students were identified as experiencing homelessness and/or housing instability at some point during the 2013-2014 school year, representing an 8% increase between the 2013 and 2014 school years. Approximately three-quarters of the students identified were sharing the housing of other people, while 15% were in shelters, 6% were in hotels/motels, and 3% were unsheltered. Of these 1.3 million students, approximately 89,000 were identified as unaccompanied youth, not living with families.

Over the last three school years, the number of enrolled students experiencing homelessness and/or housing instability grew by a total of 15%. The number of students living in hotels or motels due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations increased by 28% over the three-year period, and shared housing has also seen considerable growth, increasing 16% over that timeframe. This data helps us understand and document the number of families staying in unstable housing situations and speaks to the significant need for access to affordable housing options for families, including options that are provided through the private market or through publicly-subsidized programs.

**Responding to Data at the Local Level**
All of these different data sources can and should be used at the community level to drive local planning and action, to strengthen the systems we need to end people's homelessness, and to address broader housing needs. We know that officials in some communities that have been experiencing increases in their estimates of homelessness have felt spurred to declare states of emergency in order to try to respond with greater flexibility and to help drive greater progress toward ending homelessness.

When there are thousands of people experiencing homelessness, many of them unsheltered, sleeping on our streets, in our parks, with literally not even a roof over their heads, that is a crisis that deserves our urgent attention and action. But we need to make sure that we don't respond with ineffective solutions; we need to ensure that we respond with the solutions that we know will work – Housing First approaches, providing rapid connections to affordable housing and permanent supportive housing, and partnering those housing interventions with the right level and kinds of services for each individual and family. And we need to make sure that we take those solutions to the scale needed in each community to resolve the current crises and prevent them from re-occurring, to truly make homelessness in our country a rare, brief, and non-recurring experience.

At USICH, we're committed to working with communities across the country to understand the meaning and implications they are drawing from this data, to use this data to continue to assess and recalibrate their efforts, and to help shape strategies that will ensure a focus on lasting solutions. In addition, we will be providing additional guidance to communities regarding how to use different sources of data to determine local strategies and to set local goals for addressing the housing needs of individuals and families facing a variety of challenges and circumstances.