

Here's How Three Cities Aim to Beat Youth Homelessness This Year

TakePart.com, August 11, 2016

For most kids, the end of summer means back-to-school shopping and hanging up swimsuits in exchange for new textbooks and class schedules. But for the 2.5 million homeless kids in America, September heat is a reminder that they're running out of time to find a stable place to live before the start of another school year.

According to the National Center on Family Homelessness, one in every 30 children in the U.S. does not have a home to sleep in regularly or is living in a temporary shelter such as a car or a motel. That's why A Way Home America, an initiative that aims to end youth homelessness by the end of 2020, will launch a 100-day youth homelessness challenge in Austin, Cleveland, and Los Angeles on Sept. 7.

The 100-day challenge will combine the efforts of city officials, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies to place local homeless youths into more permanent housing. Cities from across the country submitted ideas to decrease the number of homeless kids in their neighborhoods, and organizers chose three communities with the most feasible plans to hold the challenge. A Way Home America will work with the Rapid Results Institute, a nonprofit organization that has hosted 100-day challenges to end veteran homelessness.

"The purpose of a 100-day challenge is actually to set unreasonable goals, and then in the pursuit of those goals, [cities] discover ways of working together, strategies and solutions that would not have emerged otherwise," said Megan Gibbard, director of A Way Home America. "Something about the urgency of setting a 100-day challenge often encourages locals to step up and fund resources in new ways."

Each of the communities to be served was selected through an application process and will receive coaching and support to meet its specific goals in 100 days. For instance, Gibbard said shelters in Los Angeles hope to increase their housing rates from about 15 children per month to 100. Gibbard and other organizers hope the short time frame will convey to city officials and residents the urgency involved in reducing the homeless population in major American cities.

Gibbard said the goals the winning cities have set for themselves are preliminary and will be confirmed at the launch workshop on Sept. 7 and 8. Cleveland will pursue a goal to make sure young people in the child welfare system are properly housed, Austin will work toward developing a systemic response to youth homelessness in the region, and Los Angeles aims to house 100 young people in 100 days.

"Each one of the challenges that are pursued in local communities will be different based on the size of the community or assets they have to bring to the table and where they are in terms of their own process of addressing youth homelessness," Gibbard said.

Gibbard told TakePart that Los Angeles' large population will force city leaders to look for solutions to youth homelessness on a larger scale, while Austin has only recently begun to look for a systemic fix to homelessness across the region.

Funding for the challenge will come from multiple sources, including the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Melville Charitable Trust, the Raikes Foundation, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and Casey Family Programs.

"We need to support and accelerate community generated ideas to deliver better results. Together with the cities of Austin, Cleveland, and Los Angeles, we are confident that the 100-day challenge will create urgency for action and serve as a catalyst to more safely house and stabilize thousands of our nation's homeless youth," said Rafael López, commissioner of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in a written statement.

Gibbard said that although it's difficult to estimate the number of homeless kids assisted through the challenge, she thinks the initiative will help match about 100 children per city with a place to stay.

After this project, Gibbard said she hopes to discover how to work better with child welfare services, like foster care, which would impact thousands of young people facing homelessness across the country.