

Utah was once lauded for solving homelessness — the reality was far more complicated

The Salt Lake Tribune, by Bethany Rodgers, May 11, 2020

Five years ago, Utah officials proclaimed that they were closing in on a “functional zero” for chronic homelessness.

The San Francisco Chronicle held up Salt Lake City as an example to follow, declaring that “panhandlers and homeless camps are virtually nonexistent.” “The Daily Show” ran a segment in which a correspondent wandered Salt Lake City’s streets in a mock search for signs of homelessness. The Washington Post and The New Yorker wrote glowingly about the state’s progress.

The flood of attention coincided with the culmination of the state’s 10-year homelessness initiative, a project that started during the tenure of former Gov. Jon Huntsman and extended into the administration of Gov. Gary Herbert, who had served as Huntsman’s lieutenant governor.

“[W]e did our best to eradicate homelessness when I was governor before, and we came pretty close to doing that,” Huntsman, who’s now running to lead the state again, told The Salt Lake Tribune shortly before announcing his candidacy.

But the media portrayals of these gleaming successes didn’t quite match the complicated reality — that although the state had made strides, scores of Utahns were and are still caught in prolonged periods of homelessness.

In the years that came after the celebrations of 2015, officials would declare a state of emergency around Pioneer Park and The Road Home’s downtown shelter and pour tens of millions of dollars into Operation Rio Grande, an all-out attack on lawlessness in the neighborhood. They would also spend \$67 million on a new homeless resource system to address a problem very much alive and well in the community.

“I don’t think we’ve ever said that we met functional zero. There was a push on veteran homelessness, I think, that was pretty close to that,” said Jonathan Hardy of the Department of Workforce Services. “But as far as our chronically homeless, we’ve never gotten there.”

Robert Marbut, the federal government’s top official on homelessness, said in a recent Q&A session with members of the Pioneer Park Coalition that claims about the state of homelessness in Utah may have been related to federal definitions around how people experiencing homelessness are counted.

“You ended homelessness, remember?” he joked. “Three years ago you had no homeless people? [That’s because] your condition of homelessness didn’t exist in Salt Lake.”

That’s not to say the “housing first” initiative was ineffective, advocates say. Through the efforts of state, local and private partners, construction of permanent supportive housing communities surged across Salt Lake Valley. But it’s been more than 10 years since the opening of Palmer Court, the last major project to house chronically homeless individuals, even as the cost of rent has soared.

“There’s a temptation to say this is sort of a finite problem, and, in fact, it really isn’t,” said Glenn Bailey, executive director of Crossroads Urban Center. “You have to continually add resources in order to keep up with it.”

Housing first

In 2005, the first year of Huntsman's administration, Utah officials adopted a 10-year plan to end chronic homelessness using the "housing first" model — a deceptively straightforward approach that calls for tackling the problem by putting homeless individuals in homes. The initiative, which relied on local and nonprofit partnerships, focused on creating permanent housing with on-site support services so people could find their footing within the safety of their own apartments.

"It does work, but it takes patience and time and commitment and resources," Bailey said. "But it is one of the only things I've ever seen that, in the end, can change someone's life."

It wasn't long before these communities began to spring up. Sunrise Metro Apartments, Utah's first large housing development for individuals experiencing homelessness, opened with 100 apartments in 2007. Residents were able to stay for as long as they needed, with the promise that they would never pay more than 30% of their income on rent.

After that came the 84-unit Grace Mary Manor and the Kelly Benson Apartments, supplying 48 units for homeless seniors. A defunct Holiday Inn was retrofitted into a 201-unit community called Palmer Court; since its 2009 opening, more than 900 people have lived there.

The state's stock of permanent supportive housing was capable of sheltering 1,316 people in 2005. That capacity nearly doubled — increasing to 2,403 — over the decade that followed.

The housing was primarily targeted to serve the chronically homeless population, people who are on the streets for more than a year at a stretch or homeless four times within a three-year period.

"The investment was tremendous," said Sam Tsemberis, a national evangelist for the housing first model, recalling the way state, local and private partners were working in tandem. "It sort of showed what can be achieved when all those are aligned."

Declaring victory

By 2015, accolades were raining down on Utah officials. Headlines trumpeted that Utah was "winning the war on chronic homelessness" and presented the state as a model for other communities across the nation.

Meanwhile, state leaders were declaring victory in their 10-year initiative, proclaiming that Utah had achieved a 90% drop in chronic homelessness.

"No other state is even close," Gordon Walker, the state's former director of community and housing, told the Deseret News at the time.

Despite these celebrations, in 2015, the state's service providers tallied more than 3,000 individuals who didn't have a home during the annual point-in-time count. And while the subset of chronically homeless people had declined sharply over the prior decade, changes in reporting methodology helped drive the precipitous drop, Hardy said.

For instance, state officials in 2005 pegged the number of chronically homeless individuals in Utah at 1,932 — even though only 615 had been counted during the point-in-time census that year. Because the point-in-time tally is a reflection of one particular night in January, Hardy explained, officials used a multiplier to estimate the number of chronically homeless individuals across the entire year.

The problem is that officials weren't consistent; they compared the inflated "annualized number" from 2005 with the snapshot number from 2015 to conclude chronic homelessness was down 90% over the decade. Without this apples-to-oranges comparison, it would've been a more modest 71% reduction, or from 615 chronically homeless individuals to 178.

Still, Bailey says, the decadelong initiative did make a dent in chronic homelessness, which represents a relatively small share of total homelessness but demands a significant amount of resources.

“They did make a lot of progress,” Bailey said. “They never got it as far along as the state contended.”

Takes a village

Since Kelly Benson opened in 2011, construction of permanent supportive housing communities in the state has slowed for reasons including financial feasibility, advocates say.

Paying for these projects often involves cobbling together state and local assistance with federal tax credits and private donations and requires a high level of cooperation, said Janice Kimball, executive director of Housing Connect, formerly the Housing Authority of Salt Lake County.

"It really does take a village," she said.

Still, the state has boosted permanent supportive housing capacity by about 600 since 2015. For instance, Kimball's agency has focused on expanding rental assistance programs and adding scattered supportive housing units in various apartment complexes.

But the high demand in Salt Lake City's residential market makes building deeply affordable housing even more difficult as construction and property costs soar, explained Preston Cochrane, former executive director of Shelter the Homeless.

"The market-rate housing has the ability to capture the higher-market rents to get bigger loans," he said. "But affordable housing projects don't have that luxury."

There are a couple of housing projects in the pipeline — The Road Home and Shelter the Homeless just broke ground on a 65-unit complex called the Magnolia, and the Salt Lake City Housing Authority is working on a 100-unit facility called Pamela's Place Apartments. Both communities are designated for individuals experiencing chronic homelessness.

But the need for permanent supportive housing in all forms will continue to grow as the state does, mainly because many residents remain there for the duration of their lives. And that's OK, Kimball said.

"Most of the people there have a disability, maybe a mental health issue, maybe a substance abuse issue," Kimball said. "So being able to stay there, take care of the unit, pay the rent, we consider to be a success."

Housing first is much broader than permanent supportive homes, said Michelle Flynn, executive director for The Road Home. Flynn argues the state and its providers have never been more focused on the concept, which is baked into the state's brand-new emergency shelter system and a range of homeless services.

For people experiencing episodic homelessness, that could mean rental assistance or rapid rehousing.

Still, officials and advocates agree that affordable housing — from permanent supportive communities to apartments that are financially within reach for working-class families — is the biggest piece of addressing homelessness across the board in the state. And they hope Utah's next governor makes it a top priority to address this fundamental need for shelter.

“In terms of preventing homelessness, it's pretty straightforward,” Cochrane said. “It's housing.”

Editor's note • Former Gov. Jon Huntsman is a brother of Paul Huntsman, chairman of The Salt Lake Tribune's nonprofit board of directors