

New Homelessness Czar Takes Aim at Longstanding Policy

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The Trump administration's new homelessness czar is proposing a wholesale shift in the country's philosophy for aiding the unhoused, potentially upending existing approaches as big cities and states struggle with the deepening problem.

Robert Marbut, the head of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, the top federal body on the issue, blames the rise in homelessness in large part on a policy called "Housing First," which was conceived in the 1990s in New York City and soon became best practice but whose definition has since become contested. It aims to get people a reliable home before focusing on services such as rehabilitation, treatment or finding a job.

He opposes offering support services only after a home has been provided and wants to tie services to housing vouchers or placement, he said. "We need services and housing together."

"The situation has gotten so bad, in so many places," Mr. Marbut said in an interview. "People who were saying, 'Well, it's really not that bad,' or 'This is a temporary bump' or 'This was a one-off year' are starting to realize what's going on is not working."

The number of homeless in the U.S. steadily fell from nearly 650,000 in 2007 to less than 550,000 in 2016, according to statistics from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. But since then, the number of unhoused has begun to rise, hitting approximately 552,000 in 2018.

While Mr. Marbut, who took the position in December, is the administration's face of homelessness policy and charged with coordinating federal efforts, individual agencies like HUD or the Department of Veterans Affairs—along with members of Congress who pass laws and budgets—have long held de facto power to shape policy.

Mr. Marbut's predecessor, Matthew Doherty, said a federal Housing First focus dates back to the 2000s.

The Housing First approach "doesn't mean anything goes," Mr. Doherty said in an interview, adding that services must be offered in a "proactive and engaging way so people take advantage of them."

One of the most-successful federal government initiatives by outcome is a supportive housing program run jointly by HUD and the VA, known as HUD-VASH, that relies on a Housing First model but provides extensive services and requires a case worker's involvement. It has been credited with helping to reduce the homeless veteran population from 73,000 to 30,000 in a decade.

"I love HUD-VASH," Mr. Marbut said. "It's doing exactly what we're saying." He said he doesn't want to argue over definitions of Housing First because its meaning has changed over time.

In his new role, Mr. Marbut also wants to push for deregulation to allow municipalities to have more say in setting policy rather than following the lead of federal agencies. And he wants local governments and regulators to cut the time it takes to begin affordable-housing projects and to reduce costs borne by builders.

Advocates say those plans don't go far enough. "There's a lot of places where housing is more expensive because of regulation," said Nan Roman, chief executive of the National Alliance to End Homelessness. "That's not an immediate solution. It would take decades for that to trickle down."

Advocates also say Mr. Marbut's previous work shows a record of consolidating homeless people in large shelters and then pushing for them to demonstrate changes in behavior before they can move up to permanent housing.

"That's not at all the approach we're looking for," Mr. Marbut said.

Mr. Marbut previously spent years working as a consultant to cities on homelessness issues. Prior to that, he was chief executive of Haven for Hope in San Antonio, a large shelter that incentivized the use of services.

In the past, he has opposed providing some services to the homeless in parks or on the streets, saying that such efforts make it possible to remain in a cycle of homelessness.

The White House has attacked primarily Democrat-leaning areas like California and the Northeast, where homeless populations are highest, for what it said were lax rules regarding how the homeless are treated.

During a September visit to California, President Trump said the homeless can tarnish cities' images. "They have to clean it up," he said. Local and state governments have deployed billions of dollars in taxpayer-funded efforts to address growing homelessness in the state and to combat rising rents.

Around the same time, the White House Council of Economic Advisers released a paper on homelessness that advocated requirements for aid and "reforming the Housing First approach," raising the possibility of tighter policing of those on the street to reduce the "tolerability of sleeping on the street."

"We can easily get tied up in political and policy questions," said Heidi Marston, head of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. "At the end of the day, we're helping people in crisis."

She said Housing First doesn't mean there are no requirements involved. "It means housing as a human right," she said.

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