

on the Record

Conferring on Homelessness

Researchers at the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness regularly attend conferences in order to keep abreast of developments in the field. Below, ICPH staff members offer UNCENSORED readers overviews and impressions of several local and national events that took place this year in different parts of the country.

On February 21 and 22, 2013, in Seattle, Washington, the National Alliance to End Homelessness held its annual conference on family and youth homelessness. U.S. senator Patty Murray of Washington and Nan Stoops, executive director of the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, were among the keynote speakers. Sessions explored a range of issues, including the use of rapid re-housing as a model to solve family homelessness, strategies to end veteran homelessness, services for runaway and homeless youth, and the intersection of domestic violence and homelessness. Topics discussed during several sessions are highlighted below.

Health Care Reform: What's in It for Families and Youth?

This session discussed the ways in which the Affordable Care Act (ACA) affects families and youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness. As part of the ACA, \$1.5 billion—separate from Medicaid—was set aside for grants for Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Programs to help low-income at-risk populations; these programs have proven to be a cost-effective means of improving outcomes for mothers and their children.

Though homeless families and youth are particularly vulnerable, the parameters of home-visiting programs have often excluded them. An advocate at Heartland Health Outreach in Chicago discussed that organization's efforts to broaden the programs. Among the suggestions were having more training for home visitors with regard to the barriers they face when working with homeless families; basing home visitors in homeless shelters; and identifying key leaders and experts able to prioritize the issue going forward.

A representative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation addressed another change enacted as part of the ACA: the expansion of Medicaid for youth aging out of foster care, who will now be covered to age 26. This population is often at great risk of becoming homeless and has high rates of acute and chronic medical, mental health, and developmental problems. Though the expansion of benefits does not, as yet, allow Medicaid coverage for this transient population to follow them if they leave the state in

which they were most recently in foster care, it moves the nation toward giving these young people “medical homes,” or home bases for health care.

Emerging Research and Practices on Veterans and Their Families

A number of sessions at the conference addressed homelessness among veterans. The National Center on Family Homelessness representative explained that 4 percent of homeless vets are women—the most underserved veteran population, especially those with families. Female veterans are more likely than their male counterparts to be married; they are more likely to suffer serious psychiatric illness; 81 to 93 percent of women veterans have been exposed to trauma, often prior to military service; 27 to 49 percent of women vets have suffered childhood sexual abuse; and 20 percent of the women who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan have experienced sexual assault while in the military. This abuse is highly correlated with post-traumatic stress disorder, leaving these women at increased risk of substance abuse—which in turn increases their risk of homelessness.

The National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans, part of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), gave a presentation on its work in developing the National Clinical Reminder, a set of screening tools for returning veterans. Data collected during the screening can be tracked longitudinally to enable clinicians to intervene earlier in troubled situations as individuals transition out of the military.

Throughout the two-day National Alliance conference, speakers acknowledged that in the context of the current fiscal situation, providers and researchers alike should expect to do more with less. Speakers highlighted the need for increased and improved data collection and evaluation to serve homeless families and youth.

The National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) hosted “United for Action,” its 2013 Housing Policy Conference &

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Lobby Day, from March 17 to 20 in Washington, D.C. Keynote speakers included MSNBC's Melissa Harris-Perry and U.S. representative Keith Ellison of Minnesota. The primary aim of this year's conference was to discuss and promote one of the NLIHC's legislative goals, the funding of the National Housing Trust Fund (NHTF). Under a bill proposed by Representative Ellison, the trust fund, which was created in 2008, would receive financing through the modification of tax deductions on mortgage interest payments. In multiple conference sessions, the NHTF was touted as a potentially valuable resource for new affordable-housing programs.

Several speakers also addressed the role that a vigorous commitment to developing low-income housing through the NHTF could play in drastically reducing or even ending homelessness. On this front, the focus was primarily on homeless veterans, a nod to the Obama administration's stated goal of ending veteran homelessness by 2015. There was widespread recognition that ending homelessness will not simply be a matter of securing money for new programs, but will require significant coordination across government agencies and between the public and nonprofit sectors. Many spoke optimistically about early successes with new initiatives that wedded low-income housing with other support services that particular groups might need.

That said, many at the conference expressed wariness about the current political climate. At the time the conference was held, the consequences of the federal budget sequester had yet to be fully felt, but many attendees and speakers acknowledged the threat that budget cuts posed to valuable government programs and grants. Multiple conference sessions also included discussions of occasional local resistance to new housing programs. Here, the conference benefited from the mix of provid-

ers, advocates, and researchers in attendance, which allowed for the discussion of NIMBYism from multiple angles.

From March 26 to 28, the Georgia Alliance to End Homelessness hosted its 10th annual conference, "Solutions to Ending Homelessness and Hunger: Stronger Programs Stronger People," in Marietta, Georgia. Keynote speakers included Justice Robert Benham of the Georgia Supreme Court, U.S. representative John Lewis of Georgia, and Pat LaMarche, author of *Left Out in America: The State of Homelessness in the United States*.

Ms. LaMarche discussed her most recent collaboration with Diane Nilan, the founder and president of HEAR US, a nonprofit organization dedicated to giving voice and visibility to homeless children, youth, and families. Together, the two embarked on a journey to visit family shelters across the Southwest in early 2013.

Among the discoveries made during their journey, which they affectionately called the "Babes of Wrath" tour, was what many homeless families experience when they lose their housing, place their belongings in storage facilities, and see their financial resources dwindle. Lost in the entertainment of A&E's reality-television program *Storage Wars*—which follows bidders searching for bargains at storage auctions—is exactly whose "abandoned" property they acquire. As it turns out, the property often previously belonged to homeless families, who lose everything when unable to keep up with storage payments. This includes personal photographs, health and financial records, and identification documents, which are of no value to, and immediately discarded by, new owners. The "Babes" have begun a legislative campaign, "Save Our Stuff," to allow families to retain their personal items. For more information, visit: www.SaveOurStuffNow.com.

Author Pat LaMarche (left) speaks with Anna Simonsen-Meehan and Matt Adams of ICPH at the 10th annual conference of the Georgia Alliance to End Homelessness.



Conference sessions covered topics such as Georgia's affordable-housing needs, veteran homelessness, recidivism, faith-based outreach, and homeless children's access to education. ICPH's Matt Adams and Anna Simonsen-Meehan gave a presentation on the link between foreclosures and homelessness, drawing on both national and local data to illustrate not only the severity of the housing crisis to date, but also the continued importance of protecting homeowners, renters, and communities alike from the devastating impact of foreclosures. The full report, "Foreclosures and Homelessness: Understanding the Connection," appears in the new ICPH publication *The American Almanac of Family Homelessness* and can be accessed free of charge at www.ICPHusa.org. ■

— Matt Adams, Josef Kannegaard,
Elizabeth Ezratty, and Anna Simonsen-Meehan