



# How Would Terminating USICH Affect Efforts to End Homelessness?

## Preliminary Findings from Interviews with Federal Agencies, Communities, and Advocacy Organizations

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To understand the US Interagency Council on Homelessness's (USICH's) role in the nation's efforts to end homelessness and potential effects of the agency's planned termination in 2017, we interviewed more than 40 federal and local stakeholders across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. Overwhelmingly, stakeholders considered USICH an important part of a highly effective performance-driven partnership and argued that terminating USICH could slow down efforts to end homelessness.

## What Is USICH?

The US Interagency Council on Homelessness promotes services integration and systems change to end homelessness. Its mission, by statute, is to coordinate the federal response to homelessness and create partnerships with the private sector and local governments to prevent and end homelessness. The council includes the heads of 19 federal agencies<sup>1</sup> and elects a chair and vice chair annually from among its members. The current chair is Secretary Sylvia Mathews Burwell of the US Department of Health and Human Services, and the vice chair is Acting Secretary John B. King Jr. of the US Department of Education.

Since its establishment in 1987, USICH has been subject to changing congressional and administrative priorities, losing its funding for six years before it was refunded in 2001. USICH has an annual budget of approximately \$3.5 million. Under its current congressional authorization, USICH is scheduled to automatically sunset on September 30, 2017.

## What Are USICH's Key Contributions?

While many actors play important roles in the effort to end homelessness, interview respondents collectively credit USICH for driving major progress:

- In 2010, USICH released *Opening Doors*, the nation's first comprehensive federal strategy to prevent and end homelessness. USICH created *Opening Doors* with unprecedented input from thousands of stakeholders, including practitioners, researchers, public officials, and people who have experienced homelessness. Federal agencies and hundreds of communities have adopted this plan, galvanizing coordinated action to end homelessness on specific timelines.
- USICH guided federal agencies and communities in applying research to practice to improve programs and systems by pushing to adopt housing-first models as a best practice and navigating difficult conversations to transform homeless services into crisis response systems.
- USICH was a leading thought partner in shifting policy priorities to fund what works for ending homelessness, resulting in reduced funding for less effective and more expensive strategies, such as transitional housing, and increased funding for permanent housing strategies.
- USICH led the creation of federal criteria and benchmarks for effectively ending veteran and chronic homelessness. Using this guidance, 26 communities and two states have put the necessary systems in place to meet the established benchmarks for effectively ending veteran's homelessness.<sup>2</sup> These milestones have shifted the conversation from managing homelessness to ending it, building momentum community by community.
- USICH created clear guidance on how federal resources, including such benefits as Supplemental Security Income, Social Security Disability Insurance, and Medicaid, can be leveraged to help end homelessness.

## How Are Efforts to End Homelessness Progressing?

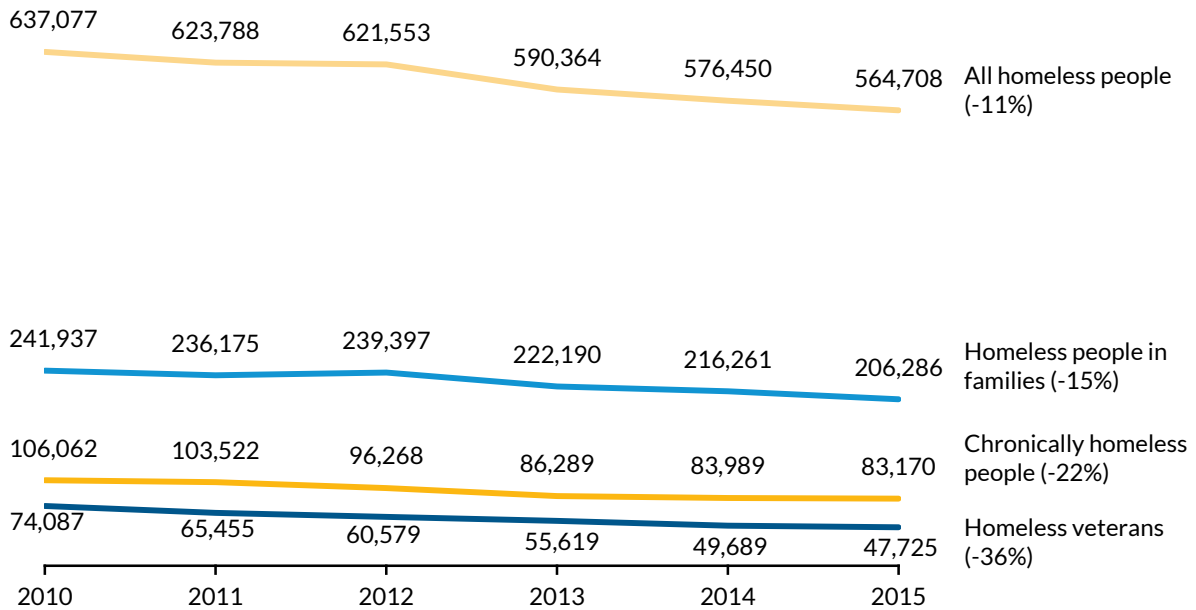
National and local stakeholders in the government, private, and nonprofit sectors across the country use *Opening Doors* as a road map to end and prevent homelessness. Agencies such as the US Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Labor, and Veterans Affairs use it to guide the implementation of targeted federal homeless assistance programs. Hundreds of local governments have released plans to end homelessness that implement strategies identified in *Opening Doors*.

Since 2010, the number of homeless people has declined 11 percent. The most progress was made with subpopulations: veteran homelessness declined 36 percent, chronic homelessness declined 22 percent, and family homelessness declined 15 percent (figure 1). The progress among homeless veterans is especially notable. Progress ending chronic homelessness appears to have tapered off

recently. Homelessness isn't decreasing everywhere. Some communities, where homelessness is rising rapidly, have declared homeless states of emergency.

FIGURE 1

Point-in-Time Estimates of People Experiencing Homelessness, 2010–15



Source: Henry et al. (2015).

## How Does USICH Facilitate National and Local Progress?

Tasked with coordinating the federal response to homelessness, USICH is perceived as uniquely positioned to help federal, state, and local actors achieve the nation’s ambitious goals. Overwhelmingly, stakeholders across all sectors and levels of government identified USICH as part of a highly effective performance-driven partnership to end homelessness. USICH brought together partners who had never worked together because of various forces that kept work in silos. Many stakeholders pointed to USICH as a model of interagency collaboration, with a focus on evidence and results that led to key successes. Stakeholders commonly discussed five components of USICH’s role. The assessment’s two case studies also illustrate USICH’s role in the successes and challenges of Houston and Los Angeles.

## Coordinate an Interagency, Multisector Response to a Complex Problem

USICH works directly with federal staff from cabinet secretaries to program managers. Coordinated federal leadership can send a strong message to communities to prioritize multisector collaboration. USICH also brings nonprofits, business leaders, and philanthropy to the table as full partners. Federal and local partners across all sectors see themselves as part of the solution:

- Cabinet-level leadership routinely attend USICH's quarterly council meetings.
- USICH regularly convenes national advocates for coordination and input.
- Strong USICH messaging on the cross-sector response to homelessness led to the formation of local homelessness task forces (box 1).

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### BOX 1

#### Engaging the Business Community

In Los Angeles, progress on homelessness has been challenging. Homelessness has been on the rise since 2010, including large increases in chronic homelessness and people in families. However, veteran homelessness has decreased 36 percent since 2010. While many in the city have played a role in these efforts to end homelessness, stakeholders credited USICH with planting critical seeds of leadership, particularly within the business community. USICH staff across two federal administrations spurred the private sector to see their part in the solution and spent time with key business leaders in the city, providing a link to best practices and peer contacts in other communities and preventing the need to reinvent the wheel. Business leaders in Hollywood brought neighborhood stakeholders together for the first time to create Hollywood 4WRD, launch a plan to end homelessness, embrace housing-first models, and track progress. Additionally, the Business Leader's Task Force on Homelessness created the Home for Good action plan to end chronic and veteran homelessness in Los Angeles County by 2016. In consultation with USICH, the task force conducted research and elicited community input, ultimately embracing housing-first models and committing to an ambitious timeline. The task force continues to advocate for evidence-based practices in allocating public resources.

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## Navigate the Silos That Block Coordination; Reduce Fragmentation

The government invests approximately \$5 billion in targeted homeless assistance programs each year (USICH 2015). USICH provides an infrastructure that brings federal agencies together to ensure those dollars fulfill their purpose without unnecessary duplication or gaps. USICH understands the statutory requirements of different programs and the goals and priorities of different agencies, translating across agencies to find common ground and commitment to common goals:

- USICH brought the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs together to plan for “warm handoffs” of transitioning military service members, ensuring housing stability.

- Based on USICH guidance, communities worked to overlap Housing and Urban Development data systems (Homeless Management Information System) and Veterans Affairs data systems (Homeless Management Evaluation System) to produce a shared list of veterans who most need housing assistance.

## Identify and Expand Evidence-Based and Cost-Effective Solutions

USICH's staff members are experts on strategies to end homelessness. They are able to focus on the big picture, while other agencies must focus on program administration. USICH doesn't have a program budget to defend; it is driven by the evidence and can be a neutral broker in difficult policy negotiations, ensuring government funds what works:

- Evidence shows transitional housing is less effective and more expensive than other housing strategies (Gubits et al. 2015). In *Opening Doors*, USICH outlined strategies to retool transitional housing, which helped inform the Fiscal Year 2015 Housing and Urban Development Continuum of Care program competition, reducing funding for transitional housing by \$155 million, increasing funding for permanent supportive housing by approximately \$165 million, and doubling funding for rapid rehousing.<sup>3</sup>
- Communities model local action to reflect federal priorities and credited USICH with bringing credibility to difficult decisions to shift policy and funding priorities to align with best practices, such as housing-first models. In turn, USICH facilitates a feedback loop to federal agencies to understand how policies are implemented on the ground, creating a collection of best practices and highlighting necessary federal changes (box 2).

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### BOX 2

#### Leveraging Federal Leadership

Houston has seen large decreases in homelessness across the board since 2010, and declared an effective end to veteran homelessness in 2015. Stakeholders agreed that many forces aligned to create the city's momentum for such a milestone, including leadership from the mayor, the business community, the Fiscal Year 2015 Housing and Urban Development Continuum of Care program competition, the public housing authority, and local philanthropy. Stakeholders also agreed that those local leaders rallied around *Opening Doors*. USICH leaders met with leaders across the city, lending credibility to the idea that Houston could end veteran homelessness with the right strategies and investments. The city aligned its homeless system to federal recommendations, citing USICH as its closest federal partner, with staff frequently on the ground to be "barrier busters" and help navigate federal programs and regulations. Stakeholders said USICH staff would often go in first for difficult conversations, bringing the federal government's voice to partners who resisted the shift to housing-first or data integration efforts. USICH also took Houston's voice to the federal government, inviting partners to present on their work to the council. Hearing that Houston wanted to better understand the role of income and employment strategies, Department of Labor staff followed up directly by

connecting with the local workforce investment board, spurring new partnerships and strategies in the work to end homelessness.

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## **Drive the Work of a Federal Strategic Plan, Holding Multiple Agencies Accountable to Shared Goals**

USICH focuses on the system and policy changes needed to end homelessness, while many other agencies focus on the effective administration of federal programs. USICH is perceived as an expert resource to federal agencies and communities, and a vehicle for holding federal actors accountable to results. Without infrastructure to drive interagency work and measure progress, agencies often communicate without the action needed to drive measurable results:

- Various agencies have been working on homelessness issues for decades, but many view the urgency and focus that came to the work after *Opening Doors*, especially the focus on regularly measuring progress, as the crucial factor in progress made since 2010.
- Communities credit USICH with unprecedented access to federal staff, resulting in unique clarity and alignment in the work to end homelessness.

## **Marshal Cross-Sector Resources for Maximum Effectiveness**

USICH convenes agencies from a position of independence and authority. Agencies negotiate with USICH at the table because USICH holds a systems-level vision, not an agency's agenda. USICH can connect the breadth of federal resources, providing clarity and guidance to make local investments most effective:

- Agencies credit USICH with helping maximize federal resources by clarifying the role of federal programs, including Supplemental Security Income and Social Security Disability Insurance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, housing vouchers, and Medicaid, to best serve people experiencing homelessness. For example, USICH facilitated the joint release of guidance from the Social Security Administration, Veterans Affairs, and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to connect people experiencing homelessness to Supplemental Security Income and Social Security Disability Insurance benefits.
- Communities cite USICH's Supportive Housing Opportunities Planner Tool and the benchmarks and criteria for ending homelessness in generating cross-sector investment in local homeless response systems.

# What Are the Potential Effects of USICH's Planned Termination in 2017?

USICH has helped change the conversation from managing homelessness to ending it. Given the successes of USICH and its partners so far, many stakeholders are looking to the even tougher work ahead, tackling homelessness for populations like youth and families, and ultimately the lack of affordable housing and persistent poverty that leads to homelessness. To continue achieving results, stakeholders overwhelmingly believe USICH should continue as a key partner, maintaining critical federal infrastructure for the work. Stakeholders believe the work to end homelessness would continue without USICH, citing the full buy-in the work has had at all levels. However, they also noted various ways that terminating USICH would slow efforts to end homelessness and weaken the collective movement.

## Federally

- Agencies said they would continue collaboration, but without USICH to ensure quality and consistency, the value would decrease and results would suffer.
- Agencies believe USICH and the cabinet-level leadership that guides it motivate federal staff to collaborate, and without such leadership, staff urgency and focus would wane.
- Agencies argue that locating the functions of USICH within one member agency would compromise the independence necessary to convene agencies and negotiate commitments to common goals. Member agencies also do not have the staff capacity to fulfill USICH's role.
- Federal stakeholders also saw USICH's potential termination as a signal to those who work on homelessness that ending homelessness is not a federal priority.

## Locally

- Community stakeholders believe their burden would increase by having to independently seek out best practices and navigate relationships with federal stakeholders.
- Local stakeholders worry that bold goals and policy shifts would be perceived as politically driven or in support of an agency's agenda, rather than part of a national plan to end homelessness.
- Communities fear the lack of leadership and local presence of USICH staff would cause confusion, resulting in less efficient use of federal funds.

At all levels, stakeholders said USICH has played a major part in the successes since 2010, and the same results could not be expected without USICH. Further, USICH has shown that with effective federal infrastructure, interagency collaboration can be a key factor in good government and cast a vision for ending other social problems no one thought solvable.

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## BOX 3

### Methodology

Preliminary research findings are based on interviews, literature review, and secondary data collection conducted from April 18 to July 8, 2016. The research team conducted over 40 individual and group interviews with respondents, identified by USICH, who are working to end homelessness and have engaged directly with the agency. To capture the federal perspective, we interviewed lead staff from the US Departments of Defense, Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, the Interior, Justice, and Veterans Affairs, as well as the Social Security Administration. In addition, we interviewed key staff from the Government Accountability Office and the White House's Domestic Policy Council. We interviewed lead staff at five key national advocacy organizations and nonprofits as well as three former USICH directors.

To capture the local perspective, we conducted two site visits to Los Angeles and Houston. These sites were selected from the list of USICH's priority communities. USICH provided us with contact information of key stakeholders they engage in each of these communities; these stakeholders included respondents from the local Continuums of Care, city or county, business community, and nonprofits. We supplemented the site visits with telephone interviews to other local respondents who engaged directly with USICH in five communities.

Our findings are not representative of all communities working to end homelessness and only represent the views of the people we interviewed. Interviews were designed to gather respondents' professional perspectives on the role and impact of USICH in efforts to end homelessness and the potential impact of USICH's planned termination in 2017. Full research findings, including a list of interview respondents and interview guides, will be presented in a final report in September 2016.

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## Notes

1. The 19 agencies are the US Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, the Interior, Justice, Labor, Transportation, and Veterans Affairs; Corporation for National and Community Service, General Services Administration; Office of Management and Budget; Social Security Administration; United States Postal Service; and the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.
2. "Mayor's Challenge," US Department of Housing and Urban Development, accessed July 13, 2016, [http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program\\_offices/comm\\_planning/veteran\\_information/mayors\\_challenge/](http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/comm_planning/veteran_information/mayors_challenge/).
3. Norm Suchar, "SNAPS In Focus: FY 2015 CoC Program Competition Recap," news release, May 16, 2016, <https://www.hudexchange.info/news/snaps-in-focus-fy-2015-coc-program-competition-recap/>.

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