

Mandatory Spending Proposal: Homeless Assistance for Families

Federal Policy Update, July 2016

Program overview

The Administration's proposed Homeless Assistance for Families (HAF) program would provide \$11 billion over ten years to pay for Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers and rapid re-housing for families experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers allow extremely low income families to choose modestly priced housing in the private market and pay 30 percent of their income for rent, with federal funds (administered by a local Public Housing Authority) paying the remainder. Rapid re-housing works with homeless families to identify landlords and locate appropriate housing, provides short-term financial support, and connects families with services (including employment services) in the community. Both are proven to end homelessness.

If enacted by Congress, HAF would give communities what they need to ensure that no child lives on the streets or spends long periods in shelter, and that children and families unstably housed get help with housing. It would provide funding for housing interventions that have proven to end and prevent homelessness in a cost-effective manner, but that have never been funded adequately. The benefit to these children is obvious – by allowing them to quickly escape the trauma of homelessness, it avoids a host of negative outcomes, and allows their parents to provide a stable environment and get back to work. Benefits to taxpayers are equally robust, as families and children have better health, can maintain employment, do better in school, and are more able to contribute to their communities.

A game-changing feature of the proposal is that it is funded on the “mandatory” side of the federal budget. This means that it is a long term (in this case ten-year) commitment to address this problem. Funding will be reliable over these ten years, and rural and urban communities can concentrate on doing the work that will increase the likelihood that the goal of ending homelessness for America's families will be met.

Current status

National organizations concerned with housing, education, health, and child welfare have met and begun to build a coalition to support the Homeless Assistance to Families program. Members of Congress have expressed interest in sponsoring legislation to enact it. Passing legislation to create a new program – especially a mandatory proposal of this size -- is usually a multi-year undertaking. It will be necessary to identify key allies in Congress this year. Next steps will be to move the proposal into the next Congress and Administration.

Recommendation

Members of Congress should work with the relevant authorizing committees (Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs in the Senate; Financial Services in the House) to develop and introduce legislation to enact the Administration's proposal. They should encourage Presidential candidates to embrace a permanent and adequately funded solution to homelessness and housing instability for children and families.