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## FIGHT HOMELESSNESS WITH DATA

IN THE 1980S, volunteers fought homelessness with bread lines and soup kitchens. But as the lines got longer, it became clear that a meal and a cup of sympathy weren't enough.

Then in March 1987, Representative Stewart B. McKinney, a Connecticut Republican, slept on a grate outside the Library of Congress. Actors and other members of Congress joined him in what was called the Grate American Sleep-Out. That July, President Reagan signed the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act. The new law brought funding for shelters, education and job programs, and some housing. Over time, the law's requirements expanded. Still, the country was merely managing homelessness.

Now public policy is getting smarter, and instead of managing homelessness, the federal government is seeking to end it. Rather than join sleep-outs, officials are relying on data. This change should transform lives and mesh well with state and local efforts.

Dennis Culhane, a University of Pennsylvania social policy professor, recently studied homelessness in Massachusetts and in Philadelphia, New York, and Columbus, Ohio. Armed with this new research, the president's Interagency Council on Homelessness will turn more of its attention to homeless families and youth. It had largely focused on ending chronic homelessness for single adults.

One crucial finding on families is that Massachusetts isn't investing wisely. The state spends more money on families with relatively fewer needs, and spends less on families that have greater social service needs.

One problem is the use of "transitional" housing. It gets families off the street, but families can get stuck, staying for months. Some are ready to move on to permanent homes but cannot afford to do so. Transitional programs are well-intended. But Culhane argues that services for the homeless often are not based on "a clear conceptual framework for the most cost-effective, optimal ways to address the problem."

Now the pressure is on to fit policies and spending to the actual needs of families. Quickly rehousing families that become homeless is essential. So is preventing them from losing their homes in the first place.

Federal efforts should champion a two-step approach: stabilize families, then help them increase their wealth. This means increasing federal funding for housing. It also means building systems that enable traumatized parents to succeed -- by getting more education, earning higher salaries, and overcoming depression and addictions.

Studies like Culhane's make it possible to calibrate policy with the realities of homelessness. A strategic, data-driven federal push could make homelessness a thing of the past.