



Homeless programs asked to make ‘Sophie’s Choice’

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As homelessness in New York hits record highs, the city is about to shut down 51 successful programs that provide jobs and services to homeless people, several of which are here in the Downtown area.

Why? Well the short answer is money. The longer answer is that the Department of Housing and Urban Development — the federal agency that used to fund a wide range of programs to help homeless people get and stay housed, now just wants to spend its money on housing... which makes perfect sense. The trouble is, no other federal, state or city agencies have stepped in to fund necessary employment and support-service programs. The result is that successful programs that have helped thousands of the most vulnerable homeless New Yorkers turn their lives around are slated to die in a year.

Two that operate in the Downtown neighborhood are the Culinary Arts Training program, run by Project Renewal, and Binding Together; a third, Bailey House’s INVEST program, is citywide. Just these three programs annually educate, train and place more than 500 homeless people in real jobs.

Project Renewal’s Culinary Arts program, located at the Third Street Center on the Bowery, takes homeless men and women who cope with addiction and sometimes mental illness and, in six months, trains them to become food-service workers. The program is an enormous success with students and employers alike and, ironically, won an award for excellence from HUD.

Binding Together trains and places homeless men and women in graphic communications, often hiring them to work at Binding Together’s own thriving service bureau at 200 Hudson St., where they perform imaging, optical scanning, record management, printing, binding and finishing. The program trains and places about 260 homeless New Yorkers each year, and clients stay in those jobs. President Bush and the secretary of labor honored Binding Together with a Presidential Citation.

INVEST, operated by Bailey House, New York’s oldest AIDS housing provider, annually helps 150 homeless men and women train for and get jobs in data entry, office and clerical work and in culinary arts.

But cuts aren’t about the impact on programs; they’re about the impact on people. People like Vanessa, a graduate of the Culinary Arts Training program who spent her life homeless and addicted before coming to Project Renewal. Today, she is running a corporate kitchen and helping other Culinary Arts graduates turn their lives around. She has her own home, she’s back in touch with her family, and, most importantly, she’s happy. “People respect and admire me,” she said. “I never thought I’d be there.”

Or consider Maria who also spent her life in and out of jail and shelters, addicted to drugs. Thanks to Binding Together's vocational training and placement program, not only is Maria working full time as a supervisor at one of New York's most prestigious law firms, she also sits on the organization's board of directors.

Or Marvin, a homeless youth who was thrown out of his family's house because he was diagnosed with AIDS: After sleeping in parks and on the street, he entered the Bailey House program and availed himself of the INVEST program. As a result, he completed his GED and was admitted to Hunter College. He also secured a part-time job and moved out of Bailey House and into his own apartment.

But this isn't just about our clients, our programs or even New York's homeless. This is a national issue that has hit nearly every city and locality in the country; New York is just the bellwether.

The issue is twofold: one of policy, one of simple mathematics. On policy, HUD has decided it no longer wants to fund programs that don't directly create housing, despite the fact that homeless people cope with many, many problems, including mental illness, substance abuse, histories of abuse, poor education, histories of incarceration, spotty job histories and H.I.V./AIDS. But HUD hasn't found anyone else to fund the programs they used to pay for, which will leave 10,000 homeless New Yorkers stranded — as just one example of what is happening across the nation.

The second problem stems from money and math: Every homelessness program that's created needs to be refunded a few years later. This creates a "renewal burden" that grows as new housing and programs are established. As homelessness has increased, more and more programs have been developed to combat it and the renewal burden has grown apace. So it's just a matter of time before every city, each of which has a set allocation of homelessness funds, sees every dime of that money eaten up by the necessity of refunding successful programs.

In New York, we decided to cut programs that are up and running so that we would have money to build new housing in 2006.

But this won't fix the problem. Soon — a year from now — we will have to do away with other programs as well.

Around the country, other cities and localities have simply stopped building new housing, rather than cut programs.

Neither is a good solution.

There are lots of fixes for this problem, and all of them lie with the federal government. First, HUD needs to provide enough money to refund successful quality programs as well as pay for new ones. Second, other agencies need to pick up HUD's role in funding employment and services, namely the Department of Labor and the Department of Health and Human Services.

But until that happens, HUD cannot, in good conscience, force local communities to make a "Sophie's Choice" between our "daughter" — successful programs already in existence — and our "son" — new housing for the thousands of folks living in streets, shelters and institutions.

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