



### **She has Nothing**

One of my neighbors lives outside. She's homeless. I met her on a cold winter night sitting below a walkway at church. I urged her to seek shelter, but she refused. The woman mentioned she would lose her spot if she moved. She went on to describe how people would give her *stuff*, and then she'd be able to pass the items along to others who had nothing. Her statement didn't make sense. She had nothing. Still, this was so important to her that she was willing to freeze to death to claim the space.

I looked at the sleeping bags, and the rubbish stacked in a box in front of her. My heart sank, because I knew she wouldn't leave. It was as if I'd said nothing. She crossed her knees while rocking back and forth to keep warm. The memory troubles me. When I walked away, I thought to myself "it's too cold outside for her to survive." I was wrong.

I decided to stop by the next morning with a cup of coffee. A gesture I made for my own benefit. I wanted to ease my conscience for leaving her in the cold the night before. She gratefully accepted my offer. We chatted for a short time before I went on my way. The next time I returned; she was gone. I don't know where she went. Today, there's nothing to remind me of our short friendship, but a pair of old shoes sitting next to the wall. But I know somebody will move in under the walkway soon. The number of homeless people in my community keeps growing.

That's why I was suspicious when I read the Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) for 2017. The homeless activity I'd observed didn't agree with findings in the report. I decided to look at the study closer. Every year the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) counts the number of homeless people who use services during the last week of January. This survey is commonly known as the *point-in-time count*. This process is delegated to providers who offer temporary shelter in the *Continuums of Care* in exchange for federal funds. The data collected from these communities substantiated a decline in homelessness from 2010 to 2016, followed by an increase in 2017. Specifically, the AHAR indicates "since 2007 homelessness declined by 14 percent (93,516 people) overall between 2007 and 2017" (Henry, Watt, Rosenthal, & Shivji, p.10, 2017).

The *count* for 2017 revealed 553,742 people were homeless during the month of January (Henry et al. p. 1, 2017). Washington State providers turned in data supporting 29 people were homeless per 10,000. However, these numbers are deceptive because so many people aren't counted. I requested the

*scope of the study* from HUD under the Freedom of information Act to learn more. I recently received this response:

While the Department seeks to waive fees where appropriate, HUD is also obligated to safeguard the public treasury by refusing to grant waivers except as provided by the FOIA. Under the FOIA, requesters deemed other requesters generally pay HUD's search and review costs, except for the first two hours of search (or review) time, and photocopying costs in excess of 100 pages. Therefore, your request for a few waiver is denied (FOIA request, p.1, 2018).

The AHAR report is 100 pages; thus, it's unlikely the *scope of the study* is more than 100 pages. Additionally, this information should be readily available. It's the most current report in electronic format. I sensed the denial was an intentional delay. I called the office of Government Information Services several times to discuss this, but they haven't returned my calls. I'll send an appeal.

The delay has encouraged me to continue searching. I decided to check the most [frequently asked questions](#) about the AHAR. HUD outlines what data is reported to Congress, and admits the AHAR is based largely on the universal data elements in HUD's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) Data Standards and the *point-in-time count* done in January (Henry et al. pg.6, 2017). The missing component, which isn't obvious to the reader, is the research generally doesn't include people who live in rural communities. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless;

Rural homelessness is an epidemic afflicting thousands of individuals and families every year, but rural communities often face a dearth of homeless assistance services. The current formula and method for distributing funding through HUD homeless assistance programs (the continuum of care application process) puts rural communities at a disadvantage. (National Coalition for the Homeless, para. 4, 2013).

I haven't been able to locate information that supports the AHAR changed the formula for funds distribution. Although, I will continue to look. In addition, it's important to know the report doesn't include:

- people who are sheltered because they're victims of domestic violence
- people who are in jail or hospitals
- unborn children of expectant mothers
- people who died because of homelessness
- people the agency has classified as *service resistant*.
- people who for whatever reason avoid being counted, i.e. pet owners

It's not evident how lawmakers can equitably distribute resources when so many people aren't counted. I don't expect HUD, or any agency, can count every person who is homeless given the numbers will always be in flux. Still, the AHAR report should include an initial statement describing what groups of people are not included in the data. This omission could result in people making false assumptions.

I acknowledge some of my skepticism could be associated with personal exposure to homelessness in Mount Vernon. Better explained as; the number of people who are homeless in Washington is increasing; while the number of people who are homeless nationally is decreasing. The AHAR confirmed half of all people experiencing homelessness did so in one of five states: California (25%

or 134,278 people); New York (16% or 89,503 people); Florida (6% or 32,190 people); Texas (4% or 23,548 people); or Washington (4% or 21,112 people); (Henry et al. p. 12, 2017). Communities in Washington reported 29 people for every 10,000 people who were homeless. The next highest state was California at 34 per 10,000. The number in Washington intensifies when it's augmented by the number of Veterans who are living unsheltered. Of those who were counted, Washington has the fourth highest percentage of homeless Veterans in the country, and the second highest number of homeless Veterans overall.

I felt a sense of disgrace when I read through this portion of the report. The feeling was familiar. It was the same mix of personal and social disappointment I experienced when I walked away from the woman at church. I encounter the same discomfort when I pass by a homeless person who is begging on the street. But I don't know what to do about it. Sometimes I think to myself, "what is the government doing about it?"

Reports are necessary, but it's difficult to find out what happens with the information. I've sent requests to Patty Murray, Rick Larson, and Suzan DelBene trying to find out how the AHAR is used to appropriate money. I received a timely response from the office of Patty Murray. Her office forwarded a link for the United States [Interagency Council on Homelessness](#). There's a strategy plan called "Opening Doors: Federal strategic plan to end homelessness," which references the AHAR, and the Fiscal Year 2017 Performance and Accountability Report. I'm still going through it. I also reviewed the [Live Hearing](#) for the United States Senate Committee on Appropriations to read what was approved for HUD in 2019.

Bill highlights include: \$22.8 billion for tenant-based Section 8 vouchers; \$7.5 billion for public housing; \$11.7 billion for project-based Section 8; \$678 million for Housing for the Elderly; and \$154 million for Housing for Persons with Disabilities.

Emphasis on Homelessness – \$2.6 billion for homeless assistance programs and includes several provisions to improve HUD's delivery of housing and services to address particularly vulnerable populations, including veterans, youth, and survivors of domestic violence. The bill includes \$20 million for new family unification vouchers to prevent youth exiting foster care from becoming homeless. An additional \$80 million is provided for grants and technical assistance to test comprehensive efforts to end youth homelessness in urban and rural areas. In addition, the bill provides \$50 million for rapid rehousing assistance for domestic violence, and \$40 million for new HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) vouchers (Committee on Appropriations, para. 22, 2018)

I'm committed to exchanging the complaints in my head with positive action. You can [take action](#) too, by sending an email, or calling your representative using the information available at the National Alliance to End Homelessness. When you select the "call" icon, you'll be directed to a page with talking points, and phone numbers for your representative. I was pleased when my call was answered without delay. I used talking points 2 & 3, but there were a few others to choose from. Here's an example:

- Point 2: On any given night, more than half a million people experience homelessness in the United States, yet the US has continued to see homelessness decline nationwide over the last decade. Homelessness an issue I care deeply about. We have the

knowledge to end homelessness in our community, but we need more resources to do it. The McKinney-Vento program has helped drive decreases across the country, is an essential resource for our community (National Alliance to End Homelessness, para. 2, 2018).

In some ways, my viewpoint on the AHAR changed. I don't know when. Perhaps this happened when I mentioned the AHAR report to a homeless man. He laughed, and said "the government will never be able to count us.... we're everywhere and we move too much." I knew he was right. I'm certain the AHAR misrepresents the homeless population; but I'll admit, I've started looking through information with a renewed mindset. Why? The answer is simple. It's because one of my neighbors lives outside. She's homeless, and she has nothing.

#### References

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