

Homes for homeless, no strings attached

BY ERIK ECKHOLM
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Arthur Sena spent years living in a hole that he had dug near the railway tracks. He would probably still be there, defying offers of help from social workers and using cardboard to ward off the chill, if Denver had not adopted a radical strategy of putting homeless people into apartments of their own, no strings attached.

The "housing first" policy that this city adopted last year is part of a movement throughout the United States that has reduced the numbers of the chronically homeless — the single, troubled men and women who spend years in the streets and shelters — in more than 20 cities.

In this campaign, promoted by a little-known office of the American administration, 219 cities, at last count, have started ambitious 10-year plans to end chronic homelessness.

The cities include New York, which is stepping up efforts to house the estimated nearly 4,000 people huddling on sidewalks or sleeping in parks, and Henderson, N.C., population 17,000, which recently counted 91 homeless people, 14 of them chronic cases.

Many of the early starters are reporting turnarounds. In Philadelphia, street dwellers have declined 60 per cent over five years. In San Francisco, the number of the chronic homeless is down 28 per cent in two years, in Dallas 26 per cent and in Raleigh-Durham, N.C., 15 per cent.

"I've sensed a new energy in city halls and state houses around the issue of ending homelessness," said Robert Hess, who just took over as homeless services commissioner in New York City after years

of similar work in Philadelphia. "This is unprecedented in my lifetime."

Part of the credit, Hess and others said, goes to Philip Mangano, who has spent five years visiting every mayor and governor he can, brandishing successful examples, cost-benefit studies and his own messianic fervour along with modest amounts of federal money.

"We're conspiring to undo what we'd been told for so many years, that this was an intractable issue," Mangano told 150 mayors, state and city officials and private leaders here in May. They were gathered for the first "national leadership summit," sponsored by the once-dormant office that Mangano leads, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness.

Wherever he goes, Mangano, 58, who was director of the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, emphasizes that it is cheaper to put the chronically homeless into apartments, and provide medical and addiction treatments there, than to watch them cycle endlessly through shelters, soup kitchens, emergency rooms, detoxification centres and jails.

"Cost-benefit analysis may be the new expression of compassion in our communities," he said at the Denver meeting.

In a study here, officials found that 25 men were taken into emergency detoxification centres for an average of 80 nights each in one year, at a total cost of \$772,000 US. Officials have found that they can provide housing and most medical and other services for about \$15,000 US a year per person.

New York City, a leader in supportive housing, recently counted 3,843 people living in the streets, a 13 per cent decline from the previous year. The state and city governments are also joining to build 9,000 supportive housing units in New York over 10 years.

Some "tough-love" groups have opposed housing first, saying that without more discipline, addicts will never succeed. But in experiments around the U.S., 80 per cent or more of those housed participants remained in their quarters after a year.