



# Policy Priorities for the Health Care for the Homeless Community

April 2016

## Guarantee Affordable Housing

The lack of accessible affordable housing is the primary cause of homelessness. Nationally, a renter earning the federal minimum wage must work 85 hours per week in order to afford a one-bedroom apartment at Fair Market Rent, and of the 43 million rental households, 1 in 4 spends more than 50% of their income on rent. Until the housing crisis in this country is solved there will continue to be individuals and families falling into homelessness. Action must be taken to increase the supply of affordable housing.

## Reform the Behavioral Health System

The behavioral health system must ensure accessible and effective treatment for all Americans, especially those experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Behavioral health problems – addictions and mental illnesses – are both a cause and a result of homelessness. Untreated addictions and mental illnesses present serious barriers to employment, education, and housing, and perpetuate a costly cycle of incarceration, poverty, poor health, and continued homelessness. Behavioral health system reforms must reduce barriers to care; treat addiction and mental illness as a disease, not a crime; link services to housing and employment; and eliminate stigma.

## Increase Access to Care and Strengthen Medicaid

Of the more than 30 million people currently without health insurance in the U.S., nearly ten million are eligible for Medicaid. Uneven outreach and enrollment efforts, churning on and off of coverage, and states that have chosen not to expand coverage to single, low-income adults all contribute to vulnerable populations not having the access to the care they need. In addition, low provider reimbursement rates and stigma related to safety net programs also undermine an otherwise successful program. Until universal solutions are achieved, Medicaid must be strengthened and states that have yet to expand access should be provided further incentives to do so.

## Establish a Universal Health Care Plan

The U.S. is the only country in the developed world that does not guarantee access to basic health care for all residents. While the Affordable Care Act drastically improved access to care for millions, it still leaves millions more uninsured and perpetuates a broken and fragmented system of different payment structures, high deductibles for consumers, and huge profits for insurance and pharmaceutical companies. Guaranteeing comprehensive, affordable health care for all through a single payer, 'Medicare for All', national health care plan would lower costs, improve health care outcomes, and drastically improve the lives of millions of Americans.

## Reform the Criminal Justice System

The U.S. has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, disproportionately among people of color commonly convicted of nonviolent drug offenses. In 2013, nearly 7 million Americans were in the adult correctional system (4 million on probation, 1.5 million in prison, 850,000 on parole, and 731,000 in jails). People who are homeless are routinely criminalized as are people struggling with mental illness and addictions. Reforms of the criminal justice system must get rid of mandatory minimum sentencing, provide alternatives to incarceration for those with a mental illness and/or substance use disorder, and remove laws that criminalize homelessness.

**For more information, contact Matt Warfield, Health Policy Organizer: 443-703-1337 or [mwarfield@nhhc.org](mailto:mwarfield@nhhc.org)**