

American Planning Association (APA) Policy Guide on Homelessness

Adopted March 2003. Available at: www.planning.org/policyguides/homelessness.htm

Reviewed by Rae Bridgman

While the scale of the problems associated with homelessness is obviously much greater in the United States than in Canada, and some of the recommendations are specific to U.S. legislative and policy contexts, several strategies outlined in the new *American Planning Association (APA) Policy Guide on Homelessness* may be useful for Canadian planners as well.

The guide highlights how “planners can play a significant role in reducing homelessness by determining local housing needs through their comprehensive plans, removing regulatory and legal barriers to the development of affordable and supportive housing, and fostering community support for permanent housing for the homeless.” It acknowledges poverty, unemployment, underemployment, and lack of affordable housing and health care as factors in the rising numbers of homeless people. It also distinguishes between people who are transitionally homeless who may require short-term emergency assistance and those who are chronically homeless. The latter may require housing combined with treatment, training and other social services. Advocated is a two-pronged approach, including short-term and long-term strategies, to prevent homelessness in the first place.

The policy guide outlines valuable priorities for the APA and its chapters on issues related to active planning advocacy. It comments on the importance of interagency partnerships and the establishment of a trust fund to increase

the pool of affordable housing. It stresses that national planning bodies need to educate decision makers about zoning, development or building regulations that may compromise efforts to provide affordable housing (e.g., ordinances restricting the number of unrelated individuals who may occupy a household residence).

Some key recommendations on which individual planners might act include a number of “shoulds”. Three of these can be stated as follows: (1) Planners should ensure that every community offers short-term (emergency) facilities as a basic life-sustaining service; (2) planners should ensure that “homelessness”, as a specific subject, is addressed in comprehensive planning documents; and (3) planners should ensure that local comprehensive plans provide diverse forms of housing, in all price ranges, throughout a community.

In addition to land-use planning issues, the guide also makes reference to other relevant subject matter. For example, the U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development “continuum-of-care” approach is cited, which encompasses a range of issues such as prevention, outreach and assessment, emergency shelter, transitional housing, permanent supportive housing, permanent affordable housing and supportive services.

However, the APA does not critique this continuum approach. Although the continuum or spectrum of strategies seems to be comprehensive, there are a number of cautions, particularly when

housing is tied to mandatory program participation. The “continuum-of-care” approach may help private agencies to develop services for homeless people through one integrated plan. With an increased emphasis on the rehabilitation of homeless people through education, job training and employment, failure to “progress”, or comply with case management contracts within designated time frames, can lead to perpetuating ideas about homelessness as the result of individual pathologies. Analysis of systemic social and economic contexts or processes associated with globalization, the potential for community development, and a non-judgmental approach (e.g., harm reduction, self-help, community economic development) do not seem to figure in the continuum.

In summary, although the APA’s policy guide on homelessness raises questions about why the potential for community economic development, mutual aid and other non-judgmental approaches to homelessness do not figure more prominently in the document, it does provide fertile ideas for the Canadian planning profession. ■

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