

Testimony of G. Michael Arnold

Executive Director

Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority

Before the California State Assembly

Committee on Housing and Community Development

February 9, 2010

Good Afternoon Madam Chairman, Ms. Harkey, Members of the Committee:

I'm Mike Arnold, Executive Director of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, the lead agency for the Los Angeles City and County Homeless Services Continuum of Care. Thank you very much for allowing me the opportunity to talk with you today about the critical problem of homelessness here in California.

California is a state of huge richness in our diversity, our cultures, and resources. Sadly, it also has one of the largest, if not the largest, homeless populations in the Country. In Los Angeles County alone, based on our most recent homeless count, we have over 42,000 literal homeless individuals and family members and over 3,000 (3,102) of them are children. It's important to clarify that this population represents only those who are either in a program specifically for homeless individuals or families, or on the street and without shelter. It does not include the many tens of thousands around our State who are doubled or tripled up, staying with friends or family on a temporary basis, or those in hospitals, mental institutions, jails or other such places who, upon discharge, will have no means of support and no means of shelter.

Over the course of the afternoon, you have heard testimony from not only State departments that are working hard to help resolve homelessness throughout the State, but also from esteemed, knowledgeable researchers and our new Executive Director of the US Interagency Council on Homelessness. Each brings significant expertise on and understanding of homelessness to this hearing, and the themes that have emerged are clear.

We know that permanent supportive housing, that is housing with supportive services, is the primary solution for our chronically homeless individuals and families who have had long and/or repeated episodes of homelessness in their past. The significant barriers they face to obtaining and staying in housing are so severe that unless we are able to provide housing with supportive services, we will not break their cycles of homelessness.

We know that the services necessary to assist our homeless individuals and family members are extremely broad, from health and mental health to basic life skills to parenting skills to transportation, and that funding streams for these services come from multiple Federal and State agencies. And we know that the coordination of these sources and alignment with housing is extremely challenging – at the Federal level, at the State level, and at the local level.

We know that both building and operating permanent supportive housing is extremely challenging – the capital financing of these developments requires a mosaic of sources and programs that challenges even the most knowledgeable and skilled, and that once built, obtaining the services required to help residents stay housed requires another massive effort to cobble together funding to support the diverse service needs of our formerly homeless.

Almost six years after we, as a nation, as states and as local jurisdictions, were asked to create ten year plans to end homelessness, we still struggle daily with huge unmet needs for homeless services, shelter and housing.

However, thanks to the vision and energy of so many individuals who have committed themselves to finding solutions for homelessness, we're beginning to create a momentum that's delivering tangible results toward reducing homelessness. Dr. Culhane's research has opened eyes and doors for new approaches to addressing family homelessness. The Federal Interagency Council on Homelessness brought a focus and a determination to the idea that homelessness is a solvable problem – and through persuasion, coercion, and sometimes embarrassment, forced local jurisdictions to focus energy and resources to develop plans with specific outcomes to reduce and end homelessness. The Department of Housing and Urban Development, through the power of persuasion and incentive funding, has helped change the paradigm of the job of homeless shelter and service providers from making being homeless more comfortable to getting people housed and helping them obtain the benefits, training and resources necessary to stay housed.

I realize that these are difficult times for the State of California. I also believe that we have an unparalleled opportunity to think and act strategically in how we can most effectively use our precious resources to accomplish more. We need to capitalize on the momentum that's been built, not only nationally, but also in our local communities, in finding ways to get our homeless housed and deliver the services they need to stay in their homes.

The Los Angeles Homeless Continuum of Care provides a complete array of homeless services, shelter and housing programs over more than 4,000 square miles. LAHSA coordinates planning throughout the Continuum's 88 cities, which covers the entire County of Los Angeles excepting the cities of Glendale, Pasadena, and Long Beach who administer their own continua. We also partner with the County Board of Supervisors, the City Council and the Mayor's office, and regional homeless coalitions and Councils of Governments. We see the challenges our agencies face every day as they work to meet the service and housing needs of homeless individuals and families in our Continuum, and we have some concrete recommendations for actions to help achieve our mutual goal of ending homelessness in California.

Specifically, the State of California needs to play an active role in ensuring that every possible dollar available to address homelessness at the federal level comes to the State of California. In the Los Angeles Continuum of Care alone, over 28,000 (28,644) people, a whopping 70% of our homeless, have no options for shelter on any given night. Maximizing the resources that come to the State from the many Federal programs needs to be a priority of the State, and this Committee.

The State needs to find ways to ensure that funding available at the State level is coordinated and aligned with housing as it moves to the local level. Currently, there are multiple planning processes being conducted by multiple groups without leveraging on local community planning and action plans. For example, Mental Health Service Act dollars should be coordinated with local continua of care to maximize the value of both continuum of care resources and state mental health resources. We cannot continue to operate in our respective silos and expect to achieve better outcomes. That is why California needs a statewide interagency council on homelessness.

A State interagency council could be very helpful at the local level. As we have heard today, the needs of people who are homeless cross administrative boundaries and no single funding source or program can address the complexity of homelessness. Better coordination amongst State agencies is critical to ensure California receives its fair share of Federal funding. For example, mainstream benefits are underutilized. LAHSA estimates that 35% of our homeless population is eligible for SSI or SSDI, but only 19% are receiving it.

Recently, the Ohio Interagency Council on Homelessness and Affordable Housing launched a promising effort to increase homeless enrollment into SSI/SSDI, by expediting and revamping their state's policies and procedures. Locally, the State should examine the Housing Authority of City of Los Angeles' innovative implementation of its Section 8 Program. The city's program devotes 10% of its Section 8 vouchers towards a homeless set-aside program. This 10% set-aside nets over 4000 units for homeless individuals and families.

We know that there are various State public benefits programs that are utilized by local homeless populations. With greater coordination, these funds can be targeted more systematically, leading to greater utilization of Federal funds. The State needs to support outcomes-based incentives where homeless funding outcomes are focused on housing and housing stability, and we need to support local efforts to collect information on our homeless populations through the local Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS). State funding for homeless housing and services should require program participation in the local HMIS system to enable continua to have the most information possible to understand who is homeless in their communities, and what is provided that may be helping to solve homelessness.

We need to reduce the obstacles affordable and supportive housing developers face to get their projects built, and subsequently staffed and serviced in ways that keep people stably housed. Homeless service dollars should be aligned with housing, and we should look for ways to reduce the challenges of finding funding to support services in housing. For example, we should review our rules on allowable

uses for residual reserves in permanent supportive housing projects. It makes no sense to refund excess residual reserve funding on a project that is starving for service dollars to keep people housed.

Finally, we need to align ourselves as a State so our collective voice is heard at the Federal level. Unless we develop the ability to coordinate our message and speak as a State rather than as many local jurisdictions, we will never solve some of our more vexing problems, including the inequities in the allocation formulas for Federal McKinney Vento Homeless funding.

On behalf of the Los Angeles Continuum of Care, I thank the honorable members of this Committee for their focus on this critical issue. Homelessness is a solvable problem. I look forward to working together to increase, leverage and align our valuable resources to end homelessness in our State.