



## HOUSE KEYS | Season 1: Episode 3: The Federal Role in Reducing Homelessness

*We talk with experts from HUD and the VA about homelessness in America and what's being done to eradicate it.*



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### TRANSCRIPT:

HOST: Welcome back to House Keys, a podcast devoted to housing. In past episodes, we've tried to focus on a number of issues confronting our housing markets, not the least of which is the cost of housing. We've talked about how we recover from big disasters that damage housing. And today, we're going to talk about the absence of housing – homelessness.

On any given night in this country, it's estimated that there are more than 550,000 persons living in our shelters or on our streets. Over the course of a full year, approximately a million and a half of people present themselves to emergency shelters or transitional housing programs. And then there are those who are doubled up, living with others, so called 'sofa-surfing.' They are men and women and children, they are

veterans. Some experience long term chronic homelessness, while others are homeless for short periods of time. So, it's complicated, yet, it's a problem that we see every day on the streets of our own hometowns.

And here to talk about homelessness are two people who have made it their lives to understand it and to end it. Norm Suchar directs a nearly \$2 billion dollar program at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, it's the federal government's largest homeless housing program. And Anthony Love, who is a senior leader at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs who can address the particular problem of homelessness among those who once wore our nation's uniform.

Gentlemen, thank you for being with us. So Norm, let's begin with you at HUD. Just how serious is this problem?

SUCHAR: Well obviously homelessness is really one of the most dire things that a person can experience. We see people experiencing homelessness for all kinds of reasons. For many of them, they're just very poor. They don't have very much income, they don't have the support networks they need, and then they have some sort of a crisis - they lose a job, they're evicted from their housing, or their housing converts to condos, or something happens, and they're out on the streets. For others, they're struggling with really severe disabilities - mental illness, addiction, health problems, and some people are essentially living in our shelters, on the streets, often going to jail, to hospitals, and that's their entire life.

We obviously have an really important role to play in helping to alleviate all kinds of homelessness, but it is something that we all have to work together on. Really pleased to be joined by Anthony here, VA and HUD work very, very closely together on the problem of veterans homelessness. But we obviously work with a lot of partners in the federal government, in the non-profit sector, in local governments, community leaders on how you end homelessness.

HOST: And it seems as though when you look at the data that's coming in from communities around the country, when they report just how many people are in their shelters and on their streets, the numbers either are holding steady or in some places, declining. In other places, they're going up.

SUCHAR: Yeah, we're really seeing a couple different things going on. We have a couple different situations. So, for most of the country, homelessness has been declining and continues to decline, and it's declining for both people in shelters and people sleeping outside. A lot of that progress is just because people have been coming up with better strategies, we're doing better at using data and outcome measures, local governments and the federal government are investing more in homelessness strategies, so we're doing better in most of the country.

But, at the same time that's happening, we're seeing some very sharp increases in homelessness in certain areas. Particularly in larger cities, particularly places with really high housing costs and very low vacancy rates. A lot of these places are located along the west coast, but it's not exclusively there. So, we're seeing some very sharp rises in homelessness in some of these cities. It's particularly in unsheltered homelessness – so we're seeing a lot more people living on the streets in some communities and this is obviously really troubling for us.

HOST: Anthony, from where the VA stands - it really assaults our sensibilities as a nation, that somebody would serve our country in military service and then find themselves in our shelter system or on the streets. The numbers though are encouraging on the veteran front though, are they not?

LOVE: That's right, yeah. As Norm alluded to, we've seen a sharp decline among homelessness overall. But with Veterans, we've seen – over the last maybe seven, eight years – roughly a 50% decline in the number of veterans who are homeless on any given night.

HOST: And why is that?

LOVE: Well there are a lot of things that contribute to that, one of the things that we can contribute to that is our very strong partnership with HUD and the use of the HUD-VASH voucher that affords that veteran an opportunity to get into an affordable housing unit and have VA services wrapped around him or her to keep them stable, to help them to improve their quality of life. That's a very intentional, intense, intervention that generally targets the most chronic veteran - the veteran who usually would not just raise his or her hand and come directly to you, but you have outreach workers going to pursue them and assessing them and realizing how chronic their situation is. The data shows that once they are stably housed, they do much better. That has been a huge contribution.

And also, I would say the VA itself adopting some of the best practices we've seen happening in communities around the country. Things like housing first – participating with the community with coordinated entry, and likewise. There are a lot of things that we do now that we didn't used to that contributes greatly to that decrease.

HOST: Are we learning a lot, Norm, about how we hear this notion that we can end homelessness although anybody of a certain age remembers there's always been homelessness, they imagine there will always be homelessness. Do we surrender to this notion that we'll never solve it, or is this something to be solved?

SUCHAR: This is absolutely something we can solve. I think a lot of people don't remember or really never lived at this time, but prior to the late 70's, homelessness was

very rare in the country. There was a lot more affordable housing at the time. There were certainly problems in housing problems but they didn't manifest themselves as homelessness and certainly not widespread homelessness.

What we've seen more recently is that we can, not just make a ton of progress, but that we can effectively end homelessness in certain communities. We have over the past several years, seen 64 different communities that have effectively ended veteran homelessness. That doesn't mean that no one ever becomes homeless, but if a veteran has a housing crisis, there is someone there to help prevent it, and if they do end up becoming homeless, they are quickly rehoused and they don't become homeless again.

So, we have worked really closely together to make sure we have a housing strategy for every veteran. Whether its HUD-VASH, whether its another resource, whether it comes from the VA, from the local government, from HUD, wherever it comes from, they key is really identifying a housing plan, a housing strategy for every single veteran - and this is absolutely something we can do for every person in the country.

HOST: Anthony, on the veteran side, who are these veterans out there? Are they just coming back from recent conflicts overseas, or are they older veterans? Who are they?

LOVE: They generally are older. They're mostly post-Vietnam era veterans. Pretty much if you take Vietnam and post-Vietnam, they will account for the vast majority of those veterans experiencing homelessness. You are seeing a few veterans from recent conflicts, but that hasn't reached what you would call a 'critical mass'. Mostly you see the Vietnam, Post-Vietnam, Gulf War veterans.

HOST: Are they individuals or are they in family dynamics?

LOVE: They're mostly unaccompanied individuals, but there are those families that are together. Not necessarily always nuclear families, but nevertheless they are. By and large, when you deal with veterans who are homeless, they are usually unaccompanied whether they are male or female. However, more times than not, the female would have a child accompanying her as she is trying to exit homelessness.

HOST: Norm, how do you react to the idea that you sometimes hear from people that somehow homelessness is a choice for some.

SUCHAR: This is something you hear a lot from people. I think part of the reason is what we offer people often is not very good. There are a lot of people who would rather sleep outside than sleep in some of the emergency shelters we offer them. But when we offer people a real choice - a very modest apartment, some help connecting with services in their community, people take that choice and they thrive in it.

So, part of our job is to figure out how do we give people more meaningful choices so they don't have to choose between sleeping in a warehouse with a hundred other people - many of whom are also very ill, or sleeping outside. We can offer them the dignity of a modest home, but a place where they can really use that housing as a platform for their recovery, for long term employment and growth and all the other things that we all strive for.

HOST: What's the cost of homelessness in this country? You're talking about providing a home to people experiencing homeless, that sounds expensive. But, doing nothing also kind of sounds expensive.

SUCHAR: Yeah, this is a great point. Anthony was talking earlier about the HUD-VASH program, this is a program that provides permanent supportive housing. So, it's a housing subsidy combined with wrap around supportive services to help a person stay stably housed, but also connect them with employment, with mental health, with other resources they might need. And what we've found is the cost of supportive housing is more than some of our homelessness interventions, but it is offset by cost reductions in many other systems of care. So, for example, what we see is when you house someone they're arrested less frequently, so you spend less on the criminal justice system, less on jails. They're hospitalized much less frequently, so you spend less on healthcare, on ambulance rides, you spend less on emergency rooms. You just see a lot of progress, and benefits, and improvements in well-being.

When we've really dug in and done the research to make these cost comparisons, what we find is that providing someone, particularly with a mental illness or other disability who's been homeless for a long time, providing them with supportive housing, the net public cost is the same or less than if you left them out on the street. So, the tradeoff there, the fact that you can house people, and improve their well being dramatically and the net cost of that is zero or negative, I mean that's a tremendous opportunity.

LOVE: Absolutely, it's like my grandfather used to say, 'you can pay me now or you can pay me later.' And if you pay me later, it's going to be much more expensive. So, to get them housed means, as Norm said, it will offset the cost of that, and not only that - it is the humane thing to do.

HOST: Okay. So if we could just take a look at this problem that most people don't think about except perhaps during the holiday season, they might even volunteer a bit of their time, and their treasure toward helping people experiencing homelessness, but how has it changed? How has the dynamic in this country changed? You mentioned it was never really very much of a problem thirty, forty years ago. Is it getting better?

SUCHAR: We're seeing a couple different things going on. One is affordable housing is becoming less and less available and less and less affordable. And that clearly increases

the odds that people are going to become homeless. So, we have that pressure that is a really big problem.

On the other side though, we have fairly dramatically approved how we address homelessness. Anthony talked about 'housing first' strategies so we can move people quickly into housing. The experience of homelessness really sets you back. And by housing people quickly, their setback is less so they can really recover and get moving much quicker. So, by employing those kinds of strategies, by really using data and evidence to measure what we are doing, and invest in more effective strategies, and frankly, to uninvest in strategies that aren't working so well, we are doing much better. The stuff we are doing is working much better. So, we have these competing pressures, but overall, or over the last eight or so years, the numbers have been going down modestly, we certainly want to accelerate that, but we've been making progress.

HOST: Anthony, you indicated that just since about 2010, we've cut veteran homelessness in this country in half. Something's working here.

LOVE: Absolutely. As Norm alluded to, we're being much more strategic, we're looking at data, there's not a difference, or you're not a bad person if you use data to try to solve a social problem. You can be compassionate and strategic. You can do both, in fact, I would employ you to do both.

What we've seen is, even within the federal government, we've tried to, what we call, massage bureaucracies to help things move quicker so that we can get those services to the men and women who need it.

We are working better with communities. We are listening to the actual people who are experiencing homelessness and giving them a say in how they are to exit homelessness and what solutions work best for them. And what we found is when you listen to people, who knows best on what works for you, than you? So, we are treating people as people, and using best practices, evidence-based practices to ensure they exit homelessness quickly. Because as Norm alluded to, when you are homeless, it is a traumatic experience. By getting them off the streets quickly, you can alleviate some of that trauma, that pressure that the individual feels.

HOST: We could talk about homelessness all day long and still only scratch the surface. Norm, just to conclude this - it sounds as though, you're talking about the partnership between HUD and VA, but this doesn't seem to be a federal-only response, it's an all hands at the pump type response to this, is it not?

SUCHAR: It is, absolutely. And I think the experiences of the communities who have effectively ended veteran homelessness is really instructive. They certainly took advantages of VA resources, of HUD resources, we worked with them, we partnered to

figure out how we can best apply federal resources, but they also took initiative and used local resources, they raised funds through tax measures, they raised money privately, and they did the work that Anthony was talking about.

We had mayors going out to talk to landlords and say, 'look, you can do something good here and it can still be a good business proposition for you.' And they went out and talked to employers, and again the same thing.

People who are experiencing homelessness are people who can really contribute a lot. We look at them while they are homeless and think that things look really bad, but what you find is that people who go from homelessness to housing – they look a lot better. Housing helps them recover. It helps them do the things they need to do to live a great life. Investing in them – either renting to them, employing them, involving them in your community, is a really worthwhile investment.

HOST: Norm Suchar of HUD, Anthony Love of VA, thank you both for being with us.

SUCHAR: Thank you.

LOVE: Thank you so much.

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