



NEWS The United States Conference of Mayors

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MAYORS EXAMINE CAUSES OF HUNGER, HOMELESSNESS

The U.S. Conference of Mayors Release 2008 Hunger and Homelessness Survey Results

Miami, FL – Hunger and Homelessness are both on the rise according to a U.S. Conference of Mayors report on the status of Hunger and Homelessness in America. For more than 22 years, the Conference of Mayors has documented the magnitude of the issues of hunger and homelessness in our nation's cities. Released at a press conference at the 4th Annual Miami Cares Day at the Miami Rescue mission, this report provides an analysis of the scale of the problem in twenty-five of America's major cities (listed below) and the efforts these cities are making to address the issue.

"At this time of significant economic downturn, the issues of hunger and homelessness in America are more prevalent than ever. Cities are the front lines where these effects are first felt, which is why mayors have been proactive and have implemented local initiatives to combat hunger and homelessness in their communities to take care of our most vulnerable residents," said Conference President Miami Mayor Manny Diaz, whose office is a major sponsor of Miami Cares Day.

The report reveals that on average, cities reported a 12 percent increase in homelessness from 2007 to 2008, with 16 cities citing an increase in the number of homeless families. The lack of affordable housing, poverty and unemployment were cited as the primary causes of homelessness for families. For individuals, the top three causes cited were substance abuse, affordable housing and mental illness.

This year's survey included a special focus on the demand for government subsidized housing and the effect of the foreclosure crisis on homelessness. Twelve cities (63) percent reported an increase in homelessness because of the foreclosure crisis. However, many cities did not have enough data to quantify the extent of the increase. The tenants of rental units in buildings where the landlord faced foreclosure were the most vulnerable to becoming homeless. Also, when asked if their waiting lists for public housing and housing vouchers had increased or decreased, most cities reported that their waiting lists were closed to new applicants due to excess demand.

Not surprisingly, poverty, unemployment and the lack of affordable housing were also cited as the top three causes of hunger in the surveyed cities. The report shows that requests for emergency food assistance went up in nearly every city surveyed with the demand outpacing the supply in 20 cities. Significantly, an estimated 59 percent of requests for food assistance were coming from families -- many for the first-time.

"This report highlights the factors that contribute to poverty in this country and shows how they are inter-related," said Gastonia (NC) Mayor Jennifer Stultz, Co-Chair of the Conference's Task Force on Hunger and Homelessness in a statement. "Yet, these are major challenges that cities, regardless of size, cannot handle alone. Mayors are already working with the new Administration to ensure that those most in need in America are not forgotten."

This year's report also contains individual profiles of hunger and homelessness for each city that participated in the survey, as well as contact information for service providers in those cities. These profiles includes the median household income, the media monthly housing costs and the percent of people living below the poverty line in each city included in the survey.

Other key findings of the report are as follows:

Hunger -

- Cities were more likely to cite the high cost of housing as a main cause of hunger than the recent increase in food prices. In fact, when asked what would be most helpful in addressing hunger, affordable housing was the most commonly cited response.
- While funding donations to food pantries increased by an average of 19 percent, there was only a 5 percent average increase in the amount of food distributed by food pantries over the last year.
- Cities adapted to increased food prices by purchasing cheaper protein sources and fewer whole grains; cities also reduced the variety and amount of food offered to people per visit to stretch limited food supplies.

Homelessness -

- Nineteen of the surveyed cities (83 percent) reported an increase in homelessness over the past year. On average, cities reported a 12 percent increase.
- Most cities reported that, at times over the past year the demand for homeless assistance exceeded the availability of shelter. In some cases, cities supplied motel vouchers or designate overflow areas within shelters. It was not uncommon to turn people away due to lack of available beds.
- Most cities in the survey appear to have embraced the philosophy of placing chronically homeless persons into permanent housing as quickly as possible, then providing services.
- All but one of the cities surveyed has developed or is in the process of developing a ten-year plan to end homelessness. Three quarters of these plans (75 percent) focused not just on ending homelessness for chronically homeless disabled adults, but also on preventing family homelessness.

In a statement, Mayor Gavin Newsome, Co-Chair of the Conference's Task Force on Hunger and Homelessness said, "This report demonstrates that working families are increasingly at risk for hunger and in danger of homelessness, resulting from the weak economy coupled with high prices for food and fuel. San Francisco is finding new and innovative solutions to these problems like Direct Access to housing and Project Homeless Connect, but it's clear that we have a long way to go. We will continue to expand our partnerships with the private sector and the federal government - because as this epidemic grows, it is our responsibility, to help ensure that every family has enough to eat and a decent place to live."

The report was prepared by Abt Associates and is based on data collected from The U.S. Conference of Mayors Hunger and Homelessness Information Questionnaire, completed by cities that reported on persons receiving food and shelter services over a one-year period from October 2007 to September 2008. A copy of the questionnaire is included in the report, which can be downloaded in its entirety at The Conference of Mayors website at www.usmayors.org.

The 25 participating cities in this survey are members of The U.S. Conference of Mayors Task Force on Hunger and Homelessness and include the following:

**Boston, MA
Charleston, SC
Charlotte, NC
Chicago, IL
Cleveland, OH
Dallas, TX
Denver, CO
Des Moines, IA
Gastonia, NC
Kansas City, MO
Los Angeles, CA
Louisville, KY
Miami, FL**

**Minneapolis, MN
Nashville, TN
Philadelphia, PA
Phoenix, AZ
Portland, OR
Providence, RI
St. Paul, MN
Salt Lake City, UT
San Francisco, CA
Santa Monica, CA
Seattle, WA
Trenton, NJ**

The U.S. Conference of Mayors is the official nonpartisan organization of cities with populations of 30,000 or more. There are 1,139 such cities in the country today, each represented in the Conference by its chief elected official, the Mayor.