

# Maine Voices: Laser focus on housing, resources is reducing homelessness

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By Cullen Ryan Special to the Press Herald

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People do well when they are housed. People do not do well when they are homeless. And none of us is better for having people be homeless in our society.

So, the obvious question is, why not end homelessness?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Cullen Ryan** is acting chair of the Statewide Homeless Council.

We know exactly what resources we need to solve the problem. The [Statewide Homeless Council](#) has a very clear and detailed plan. It involves our shelters focusing on getting and keeping people housed, and our state focusing resources on housing and support services that meet people's needs.

But that is not all we need to do.

Lots of people care and do their part, but our system is fragmented. To the individual experiencing homelessness, the "system" can present as a scattered set of hurdles – each prolonging homelessness. Despite wanting to, different organizations are not always good at communicating with and working with one another.

We are working to correct that.

There are ways to pull people together so they push in the same direction. Maine was a pioneer and early adopter of what is quickly becoming a best practice in ending homelessness around the country: through lists of names. The names of the people experiencing the longest stays in homelessness are reviewed on a weekly or monthly basis with every service provider at the table. Out of respect, numbers are used to represent names during these meetings. But the group focuses on one person at a time, and figures out together what role each professional can play to help that person be housed and stay housed.

This effort has helped our state house hundreds of people and reduce our numbers of long-term stayers (people with six months of homelessness in a given year) [by 73 percent](#). If we can get this done, it will help us end homelessness with other populations.

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Some of these hundreds of people used to be regular fixtures on our streets, with symptoms of illness on display in local communities. Now they are housed, well and stable – much like the rest of us, and no longer homeless.

It is amazing how one long-term stayer in homelessness can ricochet through many parts of the system – everyone knows the person. Years ago, a New Yorker article focused on a Nevada man known as “[Million-Dollar Murray](#),” showcasing how one individual was costing a community an enormous amount of money because of his homelessness. That same person, once housed, would go on to cost the community a tiny fraction. We want to do that with each person experiencing homelessness – get them housed and keep them housed. Stop the ricocheting and allow each person to become stable and well, which only comes with housing.

It makes sense: When a person has a serious and persistent mental illness, they can present as psychotic (not oriented to person, place or time), particularly when under stress. Chronic homelessness is arguably one of the most stressful conditions one can experience. It is no wonder we see long-term homeless people in many of our cities across the country displaying their illnesses – attending to delusions and hallucinations while wandering our communities. Cities like Chicago are finally recognizing that housing is a key form of health care, and securing housing is now being prescribed by medical doctors in hospitals tired of seeing repeat customers with no improvement – because of homelessness.

Housing is a key part of the solution. And services delivered in that housing ensure that people are successful there.

Maine is seeing success rates of [nearly 95 percent](#) in keeping the very people who were homeless the longest housed in the community. Housed so they are no longer acutely psychotic. Housed so they are no longer in our emergency rooms, shelters or jails. Housed so they are no longer victimized. Housed so they can be well and achieve their full potential. Housed so we can be better as a society, using our resources wisely and effectively.

We can end homelessness. It is a matter of leadership, will and priorities.

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