



National Coalition for the Homeless

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**Testimony of
Donald Whitehead, Executive Director of the National Coalition for the Homeless
U.S. House of Representatives Financial Services Committee
Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity
July 13, 2004**

Chairman Ney and members of the committee, it is an honor to be asked to testify today on H. R. 4057, The Samaritan Initiative Act of 2004. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today with many of my esteemed colleagues to offer insight on this proposed legislation.

I am Donald Whitehead, Executive Director of the National Coalition for the Homeless, the Nation's oldest and largest advocacy organization that works exclusively with and on behalf of people experiencing homelessness.

The National Coalition, like many of our partners, is deeply concerned about the recent growth of homelessness across America. We are pleased that the Interagency Council on Homeless is coordinating with other federal agencies to respond to the growing needs of homeless individuals. This coordination is essential as we work together to end homelessness.

The number of people experiencing homelessness continues to grow unabated and new resources are required to meet the demand, but those new resources cannot come at the expense of reduction to existing programs. The Samaritan Initiative would be funded at the expense of the McKinney / Vento Homeless Assistance Program. The President's budget proposal for McKinney/Vento is \$1.26 billion. It is estimated that \$1.3 billion is required to maintain the current programs at FY 2004 authorization levels. Leaving the program at FY 2004 levels still leaves us with a huge amount of unmet need. In FY 2004, HUD had to turn down \$273 million in Continuum of Care requests due to lack of funding. Instead of using resources to start new programs, we should be concentrating on fully funding the programs that already exist. The Vento/Vento Program offers greater flexibility in geographic targeting and eligibility of participants, while also targeting the chronically homeless population. Furthermore, by putting this money in McKinney/Vento, the administrative costs associated with starting and administering new programs can be avoided, and more people can be served.

The Samaritan Initiative is only available to people experiencing chronic homelessness, and the government definition of Chronically Homeless applies only to unaccompanied homeless individuals with a disability who have been continuously homeless for a year or more or have had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years. While this is an important population to serve, this definition excludes families who have experienced long-term homelessness. Families are the largest growing sector of the homeless population. Families now represent 40% of the homeless population. Even families whose head of household is disabled are excluded from the Samaritan Initiative.

Furthermore, we object to the codification of this definition of chronic homeless. There is widespread disagreement among practitioners about the definition of “chronic homeless” as well as the ethics and practicality of using this definition to deliver services. Congress should not put this definition into statute

We are also concerned that this initiative on its own does very little for its target population. Ten million dollars in the Department of Health and Human Services to be distributed across 50 states for people with complex health and mental health needs is woefully insufficient.

In addition, this program provides only three-year grants followed by the option to reapply for another three years of funding at half the amount. The people who will be served by this initiative have, by definition, severe mental or physical disabilities. In order to remain in permanent housing they will likely need supportive services for the rest of their lives. If funding is cut off, they will be at risk of becoming homeless again.

We applaud the drafters and sponsors of this bill for their recognition that both supportive services and affordable housing are necessary to end homelessness, but we question the effectiveness of earmarking \$50 million for affordable housing production while, at the same time, cutting \$1.6 billion from the Section 8 Housing Voucher Program. As long as the Section 8 program is in crisis, we cannot end homelessness in this country.

Furthermore, any initiative to end homelessness or chronic homelessness in this country must be forward thinking and comprehensive, and it must include the production of large amounts of affordable housing. There are two such initiatives in the House of Representatives right now, both of which have more cosponsors than H.R. 4507. These are the National Housing Trust Fund (H.R. 1102), which would provide funding for 1.5 million units of affordable housing over the next ten years, and the Bringing America Home Act (H.R. 2897), which is a comprehensive bill to end homelessness in this country. The Bringing America Home Act includes housing, health care, economic justice, and civil rights provisions. A list of endorsers is attached to this testimony and we ask that it be entered in the record.

We appreciate the recognition by this committee that ending homelessness must be a priority, but the Samaritan Initiative is not an effective way to accomplish that goal.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.



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Organizations who have endorsed the Bringing America Home Act include:

National Organizations

- Call to Renewal
- Child Welfare League of America (CWLA)
- Coalition on Human Needs
- The Corporation for Supportive Housing
- ENPHRONT
- Local Initiatives Support Council
- The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People)
- National Association for the Education of Homeless Children & Youth
- National Association of HUD Tenants
- National Center on Family Homelessness
- National Coalition for Homeless Veterans
- National Council of La Raza
- National Health Care for the Homeless Council
- National Housing Law Center
- National Housing Law Project
- The National Housing Trust Fund Campaign
- National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty
- National Low Income Housing Coalition
- National Organization for Women (NOW)
- National Policy and Advocacy Council for the Homeless
- National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness
- NETWORK
- North American Street Newspaper Association
- Prisons Foundations
- Rainbow-PUSH Coalition
- Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism
- SEIU
- Sisters of Mercy Institute
- Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)
- U.S. Conference of Mayors
- United Farm Workers of America
- United for a Fair Economy
- North American Alliance for Fair Employment
- Poverty & Race Research Action Council

Local/State Organizations

- Aids Volunteers of Cincinnati (AVOC)
- The Alpha Connection (Punta Gorda, FL)
- Beyond the Boundaries Housing Subcommittee (Ellicott City, MD)
- Calvary Women's Services (DC)
- Center for Women in Transition (Champaign, IL)
- Colorado Coalition for the Homeless (Denver, CO)
- Community Home Ownership (Fridley, MN)
- Community Psychologists of Minnesota, Inc. (Columbia Heights, MN)
- Cradles to Crayons (Quincy, MA)
- Elim Transitional Housing, Inc. (Minneapolis, MN)
- Empowerment First (Florida)
- First Christian Church (Port Charlotte, FL)
- Free to Camp Coalition (Phoenix, AZ)
- Georgia Task Force for the Homeless (GA)
- Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless
- Haven House, Inc. (Jeffersonville, IN)
- HAVEN House (MO)
- Heart House, Inc. (Lawrenceberg, IN)
- High Hope Employment Services, Inc. (MO)
- Hogar Padre Venard (Puerto Rico)
- Homeless Action Network of Detroit (Detroit, MI)
- The House of Hope Transitional Living Center (KS)
- Housing Alliance of PA (PA)
- Hunger Action Network of New York State (NY)
- Indiana Coalition for the Homeless
- Integrated Community Solutions, Inc (Fridley, MN)
- La Coalicion de Apoyo Continuo a Personas Sin Hogar (Puerto Rico)
- La Fondita de Jesus (Puerto Rico)
- Labor Line Services (FL)
- Leadership Conference of Women Religious (Silver Spring, MD)
- Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger & Homelessness (Los Angeles, CA)
- Mercy Hospital and Medical Center (Chicago, Ill.)
- The (Metro Atlanta) Task Force for the Homeless (Atlanta, GA)
- Multi-County Community Service Agency (Meridian, Miss.)
- N Street Village (Washington, DC)
- Nashville Peace and Justice Center (TN)
- Nashville Homeless Power Project (TN)
- New Hampshire Homeless
- The Next Step Foundation, Inc. (Princeton, NJ)
- Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homeless (Cleveland, OH)
- Northern Kentucky Housing And Homeless Coalition, Incorporated
- Ohio District 10 Congressional Homelessness Summit (Lakewood, OH)
- Operation Enduring Independence (Kenner, LA)
- Operation Get Down (Detroit, MI)

- Operation Hope Educational and Development Corporation (Decatur, GA)
- Orange County Community Housing Corporation (California)
- Our Brothers' Keeper (Detroit, MI)
- The Partnership Center, Ltd. (Newport, Kentucky)
- People's Emergency Center (Philadelphia, PA)
- People Who Care (Canada)
- President Advisory Board City of Boston (Boston, MA)
- Project Home (Madison, WI)
- Rays of Hope Advocate for the Homeless (Nashville, TN)
- Resident Advisory Board City of Boston (MA)
- Residents for Affordable Housing (Minneapolis, MN)
- Rhode Island Coalition for the Homeless
- Sacred Heart Church (Jeffersonville, IN)
- Sts. Joachim and Ann Care Service (St. Charles, MO)
- St. Joseph's Mercy Care Services, Inc. (Atlanta, Georgia)
- Saint Louis University School of Social Service (St. Louis, MO)
- St. Louis Catholic Church (Ellicott City, MD)
- St. Stephens Housing Services (Minnesota)
- The Salvation Army, Laconia, NH
- The Salvation Army, Concord, NH
- San Francisco Coalition for the Homeless
- Sisters Of Mercy (Cudahy, WI)
- Sisters of Mercy, Chicago
- Sisters of Mercy (Bronx, NY)
- Sisters of Mercy (WI)
- Sisters of Mercy, Regional Community Leadership Team of New Hampshire (Windham, NH)
- Sisters of Mercy Associates- Omaha Region
- Sisters of Mercy Associates- Rochester Region
- Sisters of Mercy Associates- Regional Community of New Jersey
- Sisters of Mercy Associates- Vermont Regional Community
- Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Rochester Regional Community
- Sisters of Mercy Baltimore Regional Community (MD)
- Souls For Christ Deliverance Center (Detroit, MI)
- Southern Indiana Housing Initiative
- Southwest Florida Addiction Services, Inc.
- Southwest Florida Coalition for the Homeless
- Supportive Housing Association of NJ (Cranford, NJ)
- Taking It To The Street Ministries (Dorchester, MA)
- Transitions, Inc. (Bellevue, KY)
- Welcome House of Northern Kentucky, Inc.
- Williams Emergency Housing Center (Jeffersonville, IN)
- Wyoming Coalition for the Homeless (Cheyenne, WY)
- Progressive Options, Inc. (OR)
- Housing Alliance of PA
- Wider Opportunities for Women (DC)

- Universal Healthcare Action Network (OH)
- Beyond Shelter (CA)
- Bethany House Services (OH)
- Charlie's Place (DC)
- DC Action for Children (DC)
- Iglesia del Santo Cristo Soberano (PR)