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HEAR US Inc.

A Naperville, IL based national nonprofit

*...giving voice and visibility
to homeless kids and adults...*

TESTIMONY

Before the

Subcommittee on

Housing and Community Opportunity

of the Financial Services Committee

United States House of Representatives

October 16, 2007

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My profound gratitude to Congresswoman Judy Biggert, a tremendous champion for homeless children and youth.

I am President and Founder of HEAR US, Inc., a national nonprofit whose mission is to give voice and visibility to homeless kids. In this role I sold my home and have spent the last 2 years traveling in my RV over 48,000 miles across this nation's backroads, interviewing homeless children and teens and their families. Our recently released documentary, *My Own Four Walls*, features these courageous kids talking about their homelessness.

I have worked for over 20 years with homeless children *and* adults, 15 years as director of large emergency shelters in Illinois, serving up to 150 men, women and children each night. I carry memories of those children and adults in my heart and their faces fuel my daily efforts.

My premise is simple:

"This nation needs a new, more promising approach to ensuring people in this country have a place to call home."

One family I met on my odyssey lived in Las Cruces, NM. The incredible grandmother, Esperanza, her daughter Elizabeth with her 5 children, struggled with poverty and housing issues for years. Esperanza, crippled by polio all her life, impressively managed to look after her grandkids while Elizabeth worked minimum wage jobs. When I met them, they were living in a congested motel room.

After months of waiting, they moved into a palatial 3-bedroom handicap-accessible subsidized apartment. Sadly their stay was short-lived. About 7 months after moving into their apartment, Esperanza died, and the family had to leave

The quotes below are from homeless kids across the nation...

'Just in this past year, I have lived in twelve different homes... with classmates, teachers, friends, and strangers. Anybody who would accept me was better than the street... I have always dreamed of being free. I want the freedom to know where I am going to sleep...to know where my belongings are...to know that I won't be asked to leave in the morning or the end of the week.'

Homeless child from KY

'It might not seem like much to others, like friends, when I tell them that I am going to stay the night at somebody else's house everyday, but it really takes a toll on me. I just cannot wait to achieve and have a home of my own someday.'

Homeless child from WI

because they didn't require an accessible apartment.

They moved into a cramped house with a friend because Las Cruces doesn't have a shelter to accommodate families with teenage boys. Elizabeth, drug-free and working 2 jobs, found herself desperately homeless again, sleeping on the floor with her 3 youngest children wrapped around her, knowing that their situation was precarious—dependent on her friend's hospitality—and her family's ability to endure this grueling arrangement. Elizabeth's on the long waiting list for housing, with Esperanza—the Spanish word for HOPE—in her heart.

'I can't remember ever staying in one place for too long. We never had a chance to be part of the neighborhood or make friends with local kids. Apartments, motels, and campgrounds were my life. Not knowing where we would sleep from one day to the next robbed me not only of my childhood, but also my self-esteem.'
Homeless child from CA

I wonder: When will we change our approach to assisting invisible struggling families like Esperanza's and Elizabeth's? For what cynical reason are families like theirs, struggling to survive in motels or doubled-up with others, not defined as homeless?

In Reno, I met Kandie and her 4 girls, housed in a church classroom, sleeping on "roller-beds" as 10-year old Tiffany dubbed the uncomfortable cots, inadequately warmed by scratchy wool blankets as cold winds gushed through cracks in the windows. "It's no fun living in a church," sagely pointed out Destiny, a perceptive 7-year old. The family had lived in motels before, and had their own apartment, but lost it when Kandie, caring for Shyann, her newborn, couldn't work, and her mother wasn't able to support the family. So, they moved in to the church, leaving their belongings in sacks in a corner allotted to them.

'We were afraid of being evicted from our apartment, so my mother's friend told her to move and live with her and her children until she was able to find a job and our own apartment...it was very stressful because a three-bedroom apartment could not handle her family and our family of five. Some of us slept on the floor, some of us on the couch. We were all shattered.'
Homeless child from KS

They could return each evening at 6, eat a meal provided by volunteers, play with meager toys, crawl under the scratchy blankets and then get up and out by 7 so the church could resume its normal business. 13-year old Amanda shared how

difficult it was living in the church, a place she couldn't invite her friends, couldn't keep their family pet, but added she was grateful not to have to change schools when they became homeless. After I interviewed them, I learned that the family had been put out of the church-shelter that night for a disagreement with another family. They were ripped from what little stability they had and put on a bus with a sack full of sandwiches to a family friend's home 14 hours away. Reno has a shelter for chronically homeless adults, but inexplicably nothing for families.

I wonder: Will they be any less homeless when they arrive at this friend's house? The church shelter was more stable and safe for these precious children than the "home" they were sent to after leaving the shelter - a place where uninvestigated accusations of abuse had occurred previously. Yet the former is considered homeless, the latter not. Moreover, the emphasis on chronic homelessness in this community has come at the cost of continued invisibility and lack of support for families like this, who move like nomads between inadequate arrangements. Is it not time to try a new approach?

I am haunted by an experience at my own shelter that occurred almost a decade ago. Highly-mobile TJ and his mom turned to us for help off and on for several years. This little guy changed places to live more often than he changed clothes. Somewhere along the way he encountered what is tragically common for kids in homeless situations—abuse which caused severe mental harm. His mother struggled to keep things together, forced to live precariously because she lacked other options. They showed up at our shelter when he was a severely disturbed 7-year old who snapped when he was faced with the prospect of living in our cramped family sleeping room—with wall-to-wall bodies of kids and moms, stranger danger that

Some days I even had to come to school without my books because I would have left them at one of my other friend's houses other than where I stayed the night before.'

Homeless child from MD

'Not having a permanent place to stay has made going to school very difficult. I would be exhausted... trying to find a place to sleep... While in school it was hard concentrating because I would worry about things like 'where am I going to sleep tonight?' and 'how am I going to eat?'

Homeless child from MD

scared him to death. After spending hours holding this traumatized little boy to keep him from harming himself or others, I had to involuntarily commit him for psychiatric evaluation. He, as mentally disabled as he was, and his mom would continue to be homeless, with his fragile situation, deteriorating further at great expense to him, his mom, and the community.

I wonder: Would this tragedy have been prevented had HUD recognized his homelessness when he and his mother were bouncing between homes, prior to entering our shelter?

And despite TJ's disability, the current HUD definition of "chronically homeless" doesn't include families at all. The proposed definition of "chronically homeless" in the Senate bill, S. 1518, does not include families where the child has a disability, so TJ's family wouldn't be prioritized for assistance. TJ is 18 now, and instead of having a bright future ahead of him, he has a life filled with hardship.

A limited definition of homelessness will not erase the painful realities for people such as Esperanza, Elizabeth, Crystal, Brianna, Anthony, Desiree, Kandie, Destiny, Amanda, Shyann, and TJ. To disregard their human value by narrowing the definition of homelessness to feign a successful war on homelessness defies comprehension. To force families to move repeatedly before assistance is provided, as proposed in S. 1518, is short-sighted and cruel. To proceed with HUD's proposed direction of codifying "chronic homelessness" at the expense of the millions of children, youth and adults who have no place to call home is fiscally as well as morally irresponsible. Their suffering and deterioration will be more costly.

My absolute dismay for this attitude is what brings me here today, and what will keep me returning as long as I am able. I have witnessed decades of HUD's abdication of responsibility to provide for those without a place to call home

'The night we got put out I cried for a long time. We drove to a motel...after awhile my mom and dad... told us that we were moving in with a long-time friend.

Everyone is a long-time friend until you have to live with them...

It was so humiliating, friends of our roommates would come over... and see me on the floor with my family. Eventually we fell apart with the other family and began staying in a motel again.'

Homeless child from CA

coupled with the federal government's obliteration of affordable housing resources, while extolling their efforts.

Although the inclusion of homelessness prevention funds in S 1518 appears to be a positive step, keep in mind some bleak, but important, realities:

- These families are already homeless.
- Prevention funds won't pay to attain permanent housing or provide supportive services.
- Since the families are not defined as homeless they are not counted in homeless census efforts, giving a false impression that rural areas have no homelessness.
- Prevention funds are limited to households at 20% or below of the Area Median Income, so many working homeless families will not qualify.
- With a drastically increased number of households losing their housing due to the sub-prime debacle, prevention funds will fall far short of the demands.

My efforts, like so many other beleaguered frontline shelter staff, included facing the nightly trauma of too many people asking begging for a place on the floor of our shelter. With the generous support of many individuals and organizations, we barely managed to provide this basic need.

Homeless service providers in communities of all sizes in our nation are waiting for the day that HUD provides the opportunity for people in all homeless situations to receive the assistance they need. They long to be free to focus on easing homelessness as it appears in their communities - on the street, doubled-up, or in motels - instead of having their hands tied with arbitrary rules and restrictions. It is no coincidence that the majority local service providers who have testified at these hearings support an updated definition of homelessness. They desire federal resources to supplement local efforts to house and assist the growing number of families, teens and adults without a place to call home.

Now, more than ever, as we witness hundreds of thousands of foreclosures, with the inevitable downward spiral towards homelessness for families who awoke to the

American nightmare—families who find themselves struggling to keep a roof over their heads, as they double-up with friends or families, or move into a motel that doesn't require a credit check or first/last month's rent—now this country should be embracing a comprehensive, well-thought out, adequately funded approach to ending homelessness.

I have witnessed over 20 years of this nation's failure to adequately address homelessness. I have experienced the frustration of complying with HUD's arcane approach to homelessness. I have witnessed many Continuum of Care groups grapple with unfeasible federal expectations which taxed valuable fiscal and human resources. And, at the same time, I have walked with thousands of homeless children, teens and adults who deserve a place to call home.

We need a new approach - much of the blueprint for which can be found in H.R. 840, the HEARTH Act. I urge the committee to incorporate measures from the HEARTH Act into HUD's new approach to homelessness.

- The HEARTH DEFINITION of HOMELESSNESS reflects the reality of families who have lost housing in urban, suburban and rural areas; and aligns HUD's definition with other federal departments.
 - HEARTH allows for local flexibility to respond to what local providers view as their greatest need, involving key stakeholders in the process.
 - HEARTH directs resources to prevention activities, and allows rural areas the flexibility to respond to homelessness as best fits their needs.
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