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**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development
and the twenty-fourth special session of the General
Assembly: priority Theme: Affordable housing and
social protection systems for all to address homelessness**

Statement submitted by Haiti Cholera Research Funding Foundation Inc, non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

The word “homeless” often brings a particular image to mind. Typically, this image is an unkempt man, apparently living on the streets, and assumed to be struggling with mental health and substance abuse issues. While that stereotype represents reality for a relatively small percentage of people who are homeless, the faces, ages, and situations of those who are homeless are widely varied. Homelessness includes families with children, young adults, couples, single men and women, and unaccompanied youth.

The Economics of Addressing Homelessness

The primary costs of homelessness to local communities and the State are not the costs of operating emergency shelters and providing meals. Rather, homelessness affects local economies in ways that are much less obvious. Homelessness significantly increases community costs borne by local governments, the State, and taxpayers in terms of emergency response teams, crisis stabilization units, uninsured emergency and inpatient medical care, and law enforcement involvement. Further, the presence of street homelessness may impact businesses by reducing foot traffic, tourism, downtown redevelopment, and property values.

Chronic homelessness, in particular, results in especially high community costs. People who are chronically homeless are those who have experienced long-term homelessness and have a disability. A recent study of homeless individuals living in Central Florida estimated the community costs of \$31,065 per person per year, for an annual cost for 107 homeless individuals totaling over \$3.3 million. In contrast, providing those same individuals with appropriate housing and services in the form of permanent supportive housing would cost approximately \$10,000 per year per person, one third of the cost of managing their homelessness.

Another aspect to consider when addressing the costs of homelessness is to examine how wisely we use homeless-specific funding. Funding to address homelessness is scarce and it is incumbent upon the State, local governments, and homeless serving organizations to invest in programs that are both effective.

Historically, communities have invested significant resources in addressing the needs of people who are homeless through emergency shelters, meal programs, clothing and transportation services, and so on; as well as through programs that offer services and transitional housing. While these programs do address needs, they do not tend to help people move out of homelessness rapidly or in a cost-effective manner. This type of investment deals with the population’s symptoms of homelessness, it does not seek to cure them of their homelessness entirely.

The Human Side of Homelessness

Beyond the significant economic costs of homelessness in our communities, there are lives at stake. The experience of homelessness is traumatic and daily survival is a challenge. People who are homeless are less likely to connect with community health care resources, engage fully in employment and education, and have stable relationships with friends and family. Homelessness exacerbates pre-existing health problems, reduces the speed and likelihood of recovery, and exposes people to more health threats. Children who experience homelessness develop more slowly, have more health issues, and are less likely to achieve in school.

WHAT CAUSES HOMELESSNESS?

Because homelessness is a complex social problem, there is no simple list of causes. We, however, identify contributing factors, prioritize those factors, and consider how to address those issues in ways that reduce homelessness. Understanding homelessness requires consideration of societal factors that intensify or perpetuate homelessness, as well as personal issues that contribute to the risk of a person becoming homeless. The systemic causes of homelessness are, however, often overlooked while personal issues tend to be overemphasized. It is true, for instance, that mental health and substance abuse issues are more prevalent in homeless populations than they are in the general population. However, that fact should not lead one to the conclusion that behavioural health issues cause homelessness.

In fact, the overwhelming majority of people struggling with mental health and/or substance abuse issues are not homeless. Further, the majority of people who become homeless do not have behavioural health issues but inadequate access to health care is a factor that exacerbates homelessness, but mental health issues and substance abuse do not directly cause it.

Other factors:

- Scarcity of affordable housing (low incomes making it difficult to maintain stable rental housing)
- Inadequate access to physical and behavioral health care (health emergency and related uninsured health costs can cause a person to become homeless.)
- Need for employment and better income opportunities (to an improved economy and job growth)

Chronic Homelessness

Persons who are identified as “chronically homeless” are those who have been homeless for longer than a year and have a disabling condition. People who have been homeless a long time and have disabling conditions tend to be the most frequent utilizers of community emergency services and costly community resources. Many are also among the most medically vulnerable of people who are homeless due to serious medical conditions. For both these reasons – the vulnerability and community cost of the chronically homeless population – helping chronically homeless people move out of homelessness and into permanent housing is one of the nation’s and Florida’s top priorities. Although this group accounts for less than 18 percent of those who are homeless in Florida, when a typical taxpayer, business owner, or tourist thinks about the word “homeless,” chronically homeless individuals are most likely to come to mind. After multiple years of reflecting significant decreases in chronic homelessness, the number increased slightly this year.

Homelessness Among Families with Children

Children who experience housing instability are more likely to have emotional and physical health issues and are less likely to participate and excel in school. Further, the experience of homelessness makes it more challenging for the head of household wage-earner to become or stay employed, precipitating a downward spiral making it even more difficult to recover housing and family stability.

Families lose housing most frequently due to eviction, foreclosure, or other economic hardship. They can also lose housing because of a natural or man-made disaster or domestic violence. In any case, the family loses legal hold on their space. They are residing in a place by the grace and mercy of friends or relatives or by their last dollars, in a shelter, or on the streets. It doesn’t matter to the children. Their world

just turned upside down. Most times their school is the only space that looks familiar and “belongs” to them.

Even if children have a roof over their heads, the space is not theirs and they are homeless. These circumstances can have a long-lasting detrimental impact on the social-emotional development and educational progress of children. Once housing is lost, especially if lost for economic reasons such as loss of employment, it usually takes a long time for the family to gather the financial resources necessary to regain access to their own housing. Families in this situation can become mobile and have difficulty staying together.

For children and youth who lose their housing, the experience is traumatic. Loss of housing requires most of a child’s attention and emotional energy just to try to understand what is happening to them and their family. They suddenly move in with another family or to a motel or worse. Family routines are different, their neighborhood relationships, the foundation of childhood security, are gone and the third primary source of emotional security and relationships, their school, is threatened. While some are more resilient than others, children do not have the life experience to process this event effectively.

For the past three years, the Haiti Cholera Research Funding Foundation Inc has been collaborating with Florida Department of Children and Services and Palm Beach County Homeless and Housing Alliance to provide Temporary Shelters to women and children. The Foundation also serves as an advocate to enroll low income family to the Florida Healthcare District Health Insurance program.
