HUNGER, HOMELESSNESS STILL MAJOR CHALLENGES IN U.S. CITIES

Mayors Issue Annual Report on Hunger, Homelessness in 27 Major Cities

Washington, D.C. – The issues of hunger and homelessness still remain major challenges in U.S. cities according to a U.S. Conference of Mayors (USCM) report on the status of Hunger and Homelessness in 27 cities in America (listed below) that was released today by the U.S. Conference of Mayors on a news conference call.

For more than a quarter century, The Conference of Mayors has documented the magnitude of the issues of hunger and homelessness in our nation’s cities, as well as efforts cities are making to address these challenges.

“While there is currently an historic effort to restore America’s economy, the effects of hunger and homelessness are clearly evident in America’s cities and urban centers. This is why mayors have been so proactive in supporting and encouraging local food programs and why federal programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (food stamps) are so critical,” said Asheville, NC Mayor Terry Bellamy who chairs the USCM Hunger and Homelessness Task Force and participated in the press conference call. “The ‘food stamp’ program is an integral safety net for hungry families in our cities. Mayors want to ensure that the recent cuts made to the food stamp program are restored; and we support the Administration’s efforts in this regard. Asheville has seen a decrease in chronic homelessness due to a strong collaborative effort between local government and community partners through the implementation of the Housing First model.”

Every city surveyed reported that requests for emergency food assistance increased by an average of 24 percent across the cities over the past year. Among those requesting emergency food service, 56 percent were families and 30 percent were employed. When asked to report on the three main causes of hunger, respondents cited unemployment, housing costs and low wages.

Over the next year, 56 percent of surveyed cities expect a moderate decrease in resources for providing emergency food assistance; and another 8 percent expect a substantial decrease. In fact, cities most frequently cited increasing demand and decreasing resources, particularly related to federal and state budget problems, as the biggest challenge to addressing hunger in the coming year.

To combat hunger, many cities have instituted programs to address the challenge over the long term. Examples of successful initiatives include providing needy children with back-packs filled with non-perishable food in Asheville; a program that matches food cupboards with local gardeners to provide participants with locally-grown fresh produce in Philadelphia; and a comprehensive program in Los Angeles to raise community awareness about food stamp benefits, help people to determine eligibility and assist individuals in navigating through the application process.

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, whose city was included in the study said, “This year’s survey makes it clear that even working families are increasingly at risk for hunger and homelessness as a result of the crippled economy and rising unemployment. As mayors, it is our responsibility to create effective local programs and strengthen federal partnerships to help those in need.”

In the area of homelessness, the number of unaccompanied individuals experiencing homelessness over the past year increased by two percent in the surveyed cities, and the number of families experiencing homelessness increased by an average of 9 percent.
For families, unemployment was the leading cause of homelessness in the surveyed cities; for individuals it was the lack of affordable housing.

Across the surveyed cities, an average of 27 percent of homeless persons needing assistance did not receive it because of a lack of resources. When asked about the outlook for next year, officials were not optimistic: in 72 percent of the surveyed cities they expect the number of homeless families to increase, and officials in 77 percent of the cities expect the number of homeless individuals to increase as a result of a decrease in resources to provide emergency shelter.

In the survey report, twenty-four of the surveyed cities described programs that have been effective in addressing problems of homelessness in their communities. Many of these cited HUD’s Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program as the source of their funds for these programs.

“This report highlights the many factors that contribute to the issues of hunger and homelessness,” said Burnsville, MN Mayor Elizabeth Kautz, who is the President of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. “Although the report surveys 27 cities, it mirrors what is happening nationally. At a time when the poverty rate is at a record high, and in many cities unemployment is in double-digits, mayors cannot handle these challenges alone. We need all levels of government, as well as the private sector, to partner with us to assist growing numbers in our communities.”

U.S. Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan, who was also featured on the call, spoke about the Administration’s efforts on the national level to combat these issues. “Each year, the U.S. Conference of Mayors’ report helps us understand the state of homelessness in our communities, as well as how communities are responding,” said HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan. “It also reveals how communities are using new tools like the Obama Administration’s Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program—or ‘HPRP’—to meet increasing need. Last year’s report found that HPRP is ‘fundamentally changing’ the way cities respond to homelessness and with this year’s new report, we see how it is changing. For instance, Cleveland is using HPRP funds to create a ‘Central Intake’ system – helping the community not only manage the available beds and services more effectively but also ensure that households are finding permanent housing as quickly as possible.”

Prepared by City Policy Associates, the report contains individual profiles for each city in the survey including the median household income, the metro unemployment rate, the monthly foreclosure rate, the percentage of people in the city who fall below in the poverty line and contact information for specific service providers. The report 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 September 2009 to August 2010. A copy of the report and survey questionnaire can be downloaded at The Conference of Mayors website at www.usmayors.org. An audio file of the press conference call will be available at www.usmayors.org on Wednesday, December 22nd.

The 27 participating cities in this survey are members of The U.S. Conference of Mayors Task Force on Hunger and Homelessness and include the following:

Asheville, NC  Gastonia, NC  Portland, OR  Providence, RI
Boston, MA  Kansas City, MO  St. Paul, MN  Sacramento, CA
Charleston, SC  Los Angeles, CA  Salt Lake City, UT  San Antonio, TX
Charlotte, NC  Louisville, KY  San Francisco, CA  Seattle, WA
Chicago, IL  Minneapolis, MN  Trenton, NJ
Cleveland, OH  Nashville, TN
Denver, CO  Norfolk, VA  Phoenix, AZ
Des Moines, IA  Philadelphia, PA

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.