



Federal Definitions of "Homelessness"

On November 15, 2011, after years of deliberation, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) released *final* regulations on the definition of homelessness used for HUD's homeless assistance grant programs. This fact sheet is designed to assist in general understanding of the changes that result from the new definition by explaining the significant changes and why they matter.*

Why Is There a New Definition?

When the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act was enacted into law on May 20, 2009, it reauthorized and consolidated federal homeless programs. Among the implementation tasks, it tasked the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) with updating and defining "homelessness" for the new HEARTH Act programs.

Since that time, HUD received enormous stakeholder feedback advocating for expansions and clarification of various homeless definitions.

What's Different?

- The final rule includes definitions for "homeless", "at risk of homelessness", and "chronically homeless".
- By not expanding the "homeless" definition to include individuals and families who are "couch surfing" or doubled up, HUD has maintained that the priority for limited resources are the neediest and most marginalized homeless persons. However, HUD has expanded the definition of "at risk of homelessness" to include these populations, making most people in these circumstances eligible for services and resources under the new Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) Program (a new interim rule for ESG outlining the changes was also released on November 15, 2011).
- The definitions are more inclusive of family homeless dynamics; it is now codified that families can be chronically homeless, and HUD has defined as "homeless" some families and youth who are considered homeless under other federal statutes.
- The time one is allowed to spend in an institution (such as jail, hospitals, or treatment) and still be considered "homeless" increased from 30 to 90 days.
- Homeless youth are clearly defined as being less than 25 years of age.
- Some forms of documentation used by other federal departments and programs can satisfy some HUD requirements.
- "Episodes" of homelessness are defined as being at least 15 days, which is important for determining chronic homelessness. (Four separate "episodes" within three years or continuously homeless for one year is required to be considered "chronically homeless".)

*Please Note: This fact sheet is intended to enhance general understanding and should NOT be used for determining eligibility for homeless programs. For more detail, please refer to HUD's HEARTH "Homeless" Definition Final Rule: <http://hudhre.info/index.cfm?do=viewResource&ResourceID=4519>