

Street People

No place like a home

Philadelphia has gone from being the model of how to handle urban homelessness to an example of what happens when you don't keep up with federal policy.

Consequently, the number of street people in the City of Brotherly Love ballooned to more than 600 last summer. Many found shelter for the cold winter, but hundreds remained on the streets, panhandling, sleeping on grates, searching for a meal, or drink, or fix.

The city had more than 800 homeless people 10 years ago. But the problem was attacked aggressively with a \$6 million plan that cut the population to 200 in three years by putting outreach teams on the street and building 300 units of long-term housing for

The city needs to conform with HUD policy: Give the homeless permanent shelter — and support.

the mentally ill and addicted.

The situation began to change about four years ago when Philadelphia didn't respond quickly to a change in federal policy, and as a result experienced a reduction in Housing and Urban Development money it received for its homeless programs.

While Philadelphia focused on temporary shelter, HUD was promoting its Housing First initiative aimed at providing permanent housing to the chronically homeless, people who had been rotating in and out of shelters for years.

The key to Housing First is not just to get people in permanent housing, but at the same time to make sure they have the support services they need — mental health, addictions, job counseling — to stay off the streets.

Philadelphia lost 40 percent of its HUD funding for homeless

programs in 2006 because it wasn't following the Housing First approach. It didn't regain that money until late last year by committing most of those funds to build permanent housing for 79 homeless persons with alcohol or drug addictions.

"Homeless in Philadelphia," a three-part series in *The Inquirer* this week, noted that the city's run-in with HUD over funding reflected a philosophical argument

apartment," countered Gloria Guard, president of the People's Emergency Center.

They're both right, of course. People need permanent housing. But they won't keep it unless their social problems are treated effectively. Housing First is designed to do both. It's good to see Philadelphia housing officials finally embrace the approach.

Just as important, though, is getting a handle on the backlog of



Officer William Glenn counts the homeless underneath Dilworth Plaza. The population had ballooned to more than 600 by last summer. MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / Inquirer Staff Photographer

over the best way to reduce homelessness.

"Instead of going into shelters, they need to go into their own place and then be offered — but not required to use — services to build stability," said Phyllis Ryan, executive director of Philadelphia Committee to End Homelessness.

"We're sending a message that poverty, serious trauma, domestic violence, childhood developmental delays, and addiction can be fixed with an

48,000 families on the list for subsidized housing in the city. Many who wait too long will end up in temporary shelters, further decreasing the spaces available for other street people.

It's been said before that how a city treats its most vulnerable citizens is a good gauge of its greatness. Philadelphia can again reduce the number of homeless with a multipronged effort that provides both housing and effective social services.