

## I'm From the Government and I'm Here to Help You...

Contributed by Adam Maier  
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On Tuesday night and early Wednesday morning, between the hours of midnight and 3:30 am, I joined a team of volunteers under the guidance of the Department of Human Services to interview homeless individuals living on District streets. While volunteers are canvassing the entire city, the area that we covered extended from 3rd and D Street N.W. to Union Station. These interviews are part of the Housing First initiative that the District is undertaking to identify 400 chronically homeless individuals who will be selected for permanent scattered site housing by October 1st of this year.

The Housing First initiative as discussed in a prior blog entry (Mayor Unveils "Housing First" Plan to End Homelessness) turns the traditional approach to providing homeless services on its head. Instead of offering homeless shelters and one meal a day to homeless individuals (trying to get them off of drugs or alcohol, or into counseling, and then back on their feet so they can find a job, and then possibly find some housing), the "Housing First" approach says, "let's get people into housing first, especially the ones with the deepest emotional and physical obstacles to overcome &ndash; the so-called &lsquo;chronically homeless&rsquo; individuals." Chronically homeless individuals have a far better chance of being able to get on with their lives if the number one stress factor contributing to all their other problems is lifted &ndash; their homeless status. "Housing First" says, let's give these people a roof over their heads first, and a support structure around them to keep them focused on moving forward with their lives, and not back out onto the streets. During the recent consideration of the Fiscal Year 2009 budget Councilmember Wells fully supported the Mayor's funding request for the Housing First initiative and lead its consideration and eventual support by the full Council

The men and women I met earlier this week ranged in age from the mid-thirties to age 56, and the majority had spent over ten years living on the street. One person had grown up as a foster child parented by the District of Columbia government. Two named relative's who no longer expressed concern related to their wellbeing, one seated in a wheelchair had lost his foot to hypothermia, one requested assistance in having his child returned to him by the Child and Family Services Agency, none spoke of having the support of a caring adult in their lives, three spoke passionately of their faith and surprisingly the majority did not turn away from being asked three pages of government questions but warmly welcomed the opportunity to respond to the questions that I was required to ask.

Among the most difficult questions to ask were those related to being a victim of violent attacks since becoming homeless. Those conversations quickly led into a discussion of the choice to live on the street rather than in a shelter. All felt safer on the street. They complained that CCNV, the largest shelter in the city, as night fell was controlled by those with drug and alcohol addictions. The homeless who had heard of the Housing First initiative felt pleased that the government finally understood that what the homeless needed was a safe secure place to call home and the opportunity for support services to successfully confront the other challenges that they face including recovery from addictions, emotional and medical support, reuniting with family members, and searching for employment or suitable day programs. I ended the night (or early morning actually), as I expect they did, with renewed hope for those who are homeless and for our government. Understanding, opportunity and hope promised by a government agency no less, how refreshing.