



Memphis gets millions to (yet again) end homelessness

Chris Butler

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The feds will give millions of taxpayer dollars to Memphis to end homelessness — again.

U.S. Rep. Steve Cohen, D-Memphis, boasts about how instrumental he was in getting that money from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development — again.

And certain Memphis media outlets are parroting the official government line this money will do everything it's supposed to do — again.

This year Cohen, according to a press release, got \$6.9 million.

No one from Cohen's office immediately returned Tennessee Watchdog's requests for comment Friday regarding whether this money contains the last cent needed to annihilate homelessness, not to mention its root causes, forever.

HUD officials are providing the money through their Continuum of Care program.

According to its website, CoC administrators are tasked with giving taxpayer money to nonprofits that serve the homeless.

Cohen, in his press release, listed five Memphis-based nonprofits that will benefit from the \$6.9 million.

Representatives from some of those organizations were unavailable to speak Friday. Others, such as Beers Van Gogh Center of Excellence, didn't seem to have a telephone listing available.

According to two 2013 Memphis Flyer articles, several homeless people organized against the center because one of its employees allegedly engaged in acts of violence and widespread sexual harassment against residents.

Memphis Flyer provided graphic details of allegations against the man, a peer counselor, who allegedly made unwanted sexual advances toward women and used homophobic language.

According to the Flyer, center officials did nothing about the man until homeless residents protested.

This, the paper went on, was part of a larger problem with homeless service networks called "Play To Stay," implying homeless residents must endure such treatment in exchange for assistance.

Information about whether government officials take such matters into account before giving money to nonprofits was unavailable Friday.

HUD spokesman Joseph Phillips, whose office is based in Atlanta, said he could not speak as Memphis' HUD office was closed due to inclement weather.

Meanwhile, one homeless person told Memphis TV affiliate WREG that government efforts to end homelessness are unrealistic.

Last year, HUD officials handed out \$18 million of taxpayers' money to Tennessee to end or reduce homelessness, with Memphis getting \$4.3 million.

Nashville's Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency is involved in a campaign to end chronic homelessness in the city by 2017 using an undetermined sum of HUD money.

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Washington, D.C.-based Cato Institute, said in a 2009 article that government cannot solve the problem.

“Private social programs are better than government initiatives in ministering to the whole person, rather than treating those in trouble as numbers and prescribing only a check or bed. Some of the neediest require proverbial ‘tough love’ — compassion and discipline,” Bandow wrote.

“It is important to keep people off the street and ensure that they won't face the same problem again. That often requires changes in behavior as well as circumstance.”