

THE SACRAMENTO BEE

Homeless issues don't get much attention in Congress.

Here's why

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For months, the tents were visible from the Capitol's windows.

Then one day last June, the National Park Service brought in trucks and bulldozers, clearing out the homeless people who had settled in Columbus Circle, an expansive grassy area just a short walk to the Capitol.

The demise of the homeless encampment meant that for congressional lawmakers, the city's homelessness crisis was now largely out of sight. And it was and remains largely out of mind.

Homeless issues have long struggled to become a priority in official Washington. They don't have the powerful lobbies and fundraisers that other interests can mobilize. They lack the daily urgency of the sort of instant crises — think Ukraine, bank failures, debt limits, mass shootings — that dominate the media and poll-driven D.C. dialogue.

And except in hard-hit areas in California, New York and a few other places, there's also not usually a strong, savvy constituency back home whose priority is helping the homeless.

“The most visible form of housing insecurity is when we see people unsheltered living on the street. The inclination of many people, especially homeowners and small businesses, is to push people out of sight, out of mind,” said Sarah Saadian, senior vice president of public policy and field organizing at the National Low Income Housing Coalition. “They're concerned about not seeing homelessness, not solving it.”

BIDEN'S EFFORTS

The Biden administration and its congressional supporters insist they're sensitive to the homelessness issue and are trying mightily to move ahead on several fronts.

The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, which represents 19 federal agencies, released a detailed strategy in December called "All In" that aims to reduce homelessness 25% by 2025 and ultimately end it.

The plan focuses on making shelters more accessible, housing more affordable, and on expanding the number of both in a nation that once had a surplus of affordable housing and now faces a shortage.

Carolina Cournoyer, the council's communications manager, said its strategy emphasizes the need to fix systems — from health care and criminal justice to schools and labor — to prevent people from losing their homes in the first place.

As part of the strategy, the White House and the coalition last month launched a new initiative called "ALL INside" to get people off the streets and into homes in communities with high rates of homelessness: Communities across California with a focus on Los Angeles as well as Dallas, Chicago, Phoenix and Seattle.

For the next two years, federal staff will embed themselves in their mayors' and local offices to cut red tape and lower barriers to housing, health care, and other services for people experiencing homelessness.

In March, President Joe Biden proposed significantly more funding for homelessness, in particular for programs that help people with severe mental health conditions and victims of domestic violence. The president's budget also proposes a housing voucher for every low-income veteran and every kid aging out of foster care — a new policy to prevent two groups of people at high risk of homelessness from falling into it.

One of the budget's major initiatives involves Homeless Assistance Grants to state and local governments, grants that would help people experiencing homelessness access shelter, find housing, and access supportive services when needed, such as substance use treatment or mental health services.

Biden is proposing spending \$3.7 billion in fiscal 2024, the 12-month period that begins October 1. That would be up \$116 million from this year.

The administration is also proposing an increase in aid for renters, or Section 8, to \$32.7 billion next year, up about \$2.4 billion.

“For those of us at HUD, that means addressing homelessness with urgency and ensuring everyone in this country has access to quality affordable housing,” said Marcia Fudge, secretary of Housing and Urban Development.

But for all that hope there is this: Biden’s plans instantly faced political and practical roadblocks.

No one expects his budget to be approved intact. “Dead on arrival,” said Senate Republican Whip John Thune of South Dakota Wednesday.

More ominous for homeless programs, under the debt deal negotiated last month by Biden and Republican House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, overall spending in fiscal 2024, which begins October 1, is to remain at fiscal 2023 levels.

Flat funding “acts as a cut and reduces the number of people able to be served by these programs, as well as the kind and number of resources grantees can offer,” said Kim Johnson, policy manager at the National Low Income Housing Coalition.

Even the Biden-McCarthy agreement could be altered. A group of conservative House Republicans is insisting spending be cut back to 2022 levels. Fudge has estimated that would mean hundreds of thousands of people would be evicted from Section 8 housing.

PROMISE AND PROBLEMS

Sen. Brian Schatz, D-Hawaii, heads the Senate subcommittee that writes the housing budget. Asked the biggest hurdle to more housing money, he said flatly, “finite resources.”

Senators would not rule out increases in homeless funding, but it will be tough. “That’s yet to be determined,” said Sen. John Hoeven, R-North Dakota, a subcommittee member.

Many Democrats argue that the Biden administration and the Congress controlled by Democrats in 2021 and 2022 has produced important results for homeless programs.

“Democrats have made meaningful progress,” said Rep. Maxine Waters, D-Los Angeles, top Democrat on the House Financial Services Committee.

She praised recent White House and Democratic policies for producing “historic levels of housing assistance.”

But since January, Republicans have controlled the House, and there are at least three complications as lawmakers consider homeless policy funding:

- **Reluctant constituencies.** Nationally, HUD counted 582,500 homeless people in the United States on a single night in 2022.

California topped the state list with an estimated 171,000 homeless people, or 30% of the national count New York was second with about 74,000. No other state’s homeless population topped 26,000.

In Sacramento County, the HUD count found 9,278 homeless people, up from 5,570 in January 2019, and 3,665 in January 2017. The study found that about 20,000 people were expected to experience homelessness at some time during last year.

.Lawmakers agree homelessness is a serious issue, but the political will to do much is lacking and there is often disagreement among elected officials as to the root causes.

All those problems make the task of congressional advocates unusually difficult.

“I think it’s a challenge to take this to scale, to make a difference nationally,” said Sen. Chris Van Hollen, D-Maryland, a housing appropriations subcommittee member.

- **Not a federal problem?** There’s a sense that homelessness is not something that Washington should tackle in any detail.

“The solutions need to be crafted in the state and local areas,” Sen. Mike Braun, R-Indiana, said, since they best understand how to cope with the issue. Braun is a Senate Budget Committee member.

People across the country tend to agree with Braun.

A January Grid/Harris nationwide poll found 42% of Americans said homelessness was primarily a local problem, and 26% said it was a state issue. Only 14% said it was mostly a federal matter.

“Members of Congress pay attention to voters,” Saadian said, “and people struggling to pay their rent, who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk for homelessness, don’t vote at the same level as homeowners.”

Vanessa Brown Calder, director of opportunity and family policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, did see constituent concern growing. In California. A February Quinnipiac University poll found homelessness the top issue, mentioned by 22% of those surveyed. Next was affordable housing at 17%.

“People are probably more interested than they’ve been in a long time,” Calder said, as they see more homeless people in their cities and neighborhoods.

“Whether that translates into more funding or whether there should be more enforcement around urban camping that’s where you find somewhat of a split,” she said.

Calder, who has studied housing and homeless policy extensively, cited California’s experience with emphasizing permanent affordable housing, a program she questioned.

“It is clear that the policy is not delivering on lofty promises to end homelessness,” or even reduce the homeless population, Calder said. The program is hamstrung by high housing prices and overly restrictive zoning regulations.

Calder found that a similar policy in Houston resulted in better outcomes, where more affordable home prices and looser zoning regulations make it possible to provide less expensive shelter.

Although California has made efforts to reform zoning, it will require ongoing efforts to meaningfully increase housing supply and affordability. One possible way of providing more affordable shelter: Have Washington tie certain federal spending to requirements to permit and build more housing.

But that gets back to the problem of Washington running things. “Folks don’t like the idea of the federal government putting requirements on cities and states. I don’t like the idea either,” Calder said. “It’s complicated when you have a huge amount of money going out the door to states and cities and ignore what’s happening locally.”

▪ **It's complicated.** “A lot of it is mental illness, addiction, things like that,” said Sen. John Boozman, R-Arkansas, a housing subcommittee member. He wants a closer look at “communities that have been doing a really good job.”

The place to start in easing the homeless crisis is by providing affordable housing, Saadian said, a widely shared view. “Evidence shows the best way to help people exit homelessness is to provide access to housing,” she said. “There are still many elected officials who hold the belief that the reason people are homeless is personal failings.

“They don’t look at systemic issues in the housing market, the job market. That also feeds into the lack of political will.”

The homeless issue is so broad and so difficult to grasp and manage that many lawmakers simply back away, lamented Van Hollen.

“I hear from a number of my colleagues about shortages of affordable housing in rural areas as well and we’ve had some hearings on that.

“I think there are some that just want to give up,” Van Hollen said. “We should not give up.”