

EarthLinks at the Roots: Defining Homelessness

What does it mean to be homeless?

The official definition of homelessness according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary is overly simplified as “having no home or permanent place of residence”. When one over simplifies the issue of homelessness, the intricate factors surrounding homelessness and what it truly means to be homeless are ignored.



Who are "the homeless"?

Homelessness is more than just a phenomenon for politicians to address. Everyday 11,377 [ii](#) men, women, and children in the Denver Metro Area experience homeless.

The Merriam-Webster definition falls short of describing the very human aspect of homelessness. Anyone who drives through

downtown Denver will at some point look out of the window and see someone with a cardboard sign saying something along the lines of “Homeless. Anything helps.” Though those who panhandle are a minority in Denver’s homeless population, they are who we envision as “the homeless”. This view practically eliminates the 40% [iii](#) of the homeless population that holds a job, as well as the 62% [iiii](#) of the population that is families with children. So, if we cannot properly identify the homeless how can we even begin to determine the reasons they became homeless in the first place?

What can be done to aid and support people who are homeless?

A simply defined problem demands a simply thought out answer: if the problem is a lack of housing, the obvious solution is housing. However, the complexity of the effects homelessness has on people requires more than just providing a home. In Denver, approximately 86% of homeless individuals attributed the following as the cause(s) to their situation: loss of employment, inability to afford the cost of housing, fragmented family life. Therefore, one must look into solutions to those causes. Perhaps acquiring and keeping housing is the end goal, but the means of getting there varies upon the cause. If loss of employment is an obstacle for an individual, the best means of assistance may be to provide them with tools and resources to obtain a job and stay hired. If the issue is a fragmented family life, the individual may need support and a stable place to be while determining future steps, but may not need any form of employment help at all. Some people may need a lot of help and some people may need very little, but it is important to remember that there is not a one size fits all solution to homelessness. That’s why the simplified answer of “providing a house” isn’t always enough if a person has no means of paying the bills.

How do we redefine homelessness?

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, recognizing the many aspects of homelessness, defined homelessness in a more comprehensive way so as to create a better fit the population who receives assistance from HUD funded programs. The four categories of homelessness are: [\[iv\]](#) Though these definitions are not perfect, their specifications help to pinpoint a fuller understanding of what homelessness is.

Families with children or unaccompanied youth who are unstably housed and likely to continue in that state. This is a new category of homelessness, and it applies to families with children or unaccompanied youth who have not had a lease or ownership interest in a housing unit in the last 91 or more days, have had three or more moves in the last 90 days, and who are likely to continue to be unstably housed because of disability or multiple barriers to employment.

People who are fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, have no other residence, and lack the resources or support networks to obtain other permanent housing.

People who are losing their primary nighttime residence, which may include a motel or hotel or a doubled up situation, within 14 days and lack resources or support networks to remain in housing. The proposed regulation also describes specific documentation requirements for this category.

People who are living in a place not meant for human habitation, in emergency shelter, in transitional housing, or are exiting an institution where they temporarily resided. People will be considered homeless if they are exiting an institution where they resided for up to 90 days, and were homeless immediately prior to entering that institution.



What is the role of Earthlinks in the expansive issue of homelessness in Metro-Denver?

At Earthlinks, there is a strong belief that the best approach to a fulfilling life is a holistic approach. Earthlinks strives to create a positive atmosphere in which a community can build and thrive. Participants can plant in and enjoy the foods from the organic garden as well as utilize them to create Earth friendly products for Earth friendly use- feeding both the body and the soul.

EarthLinks provides participants with opportunities to build and enhance their creativity and self confidence as well as create a community. The resources provided for participants as well as the skill building workshops all help participants find the help they need during difficult times.

Footnotes

[\[i\]](#) Point in time survey through Metro Denver Homeless Initiative

[\[ii\]](#) Provided by Denver's Road Home educational video

[\[iii\]](#) Point in time survey through Metro Denver Homeless Initiative

[\[iv\]](#) End Homelessness.org Federal Policy

Brief <http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/3006>