

Budget-cutting might hurt fight against homelessness

Craig DeVrieze | Posted: Sunday, September 4, 2011 2:10 am

If a federal initiative to eliminate homelessness in the U.S. by 2020 sounds ambitious, Jennifer Ho says you won't know if you don't try.

The deputy director for accountability management for the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, Ho last year helped launch a White House-backed plan with that far-reaching goal.

Does she believe it is achievable?

"I do because I think we know what to do," Ho said of a multibillion-dollar program that will have to succeed in an era of hard-core D.C. budget-cutting. "I guess the other thing I know is that if you don't have an ambitious goal, you certainly won't make progress."

Ho and the council coordinate the efforts of 19 federal agencies - including 13 of 15 cabinet-level departments - and will oversee a comprehensive federal program introduced in 2010 by President Barack Obama.

"Opening Doors" is a two-part federal plan to end veterans' and chronic homelessness by 2015 and to eliminate homelessness for children, families and teens by the end of the decade.

Ho said the initiative piggybacks a program launched under the administration of President George W. Bush to bring veterans and the chronically homeless off the streets by 2015.

That 2005 initiative has not yet been accomplished, but Ho said significant inroads have been made.

"Even though we didn't reach that goal, there was a one-third reduction in chronic homelessness," she noted. "So having the goal really showed the way.

"And we believe that is what is needed for youth homelessness, that we need to have a concentrated effort towards an ambitious goal so we can both size the problem and then demonstrate the ability to reduce the number of youth who are homeless."

The initiative's original budget called for outlays of \$3.8 billion in 2010, \$4.2 billion this year and \$4.8 billion in 2012, but program funding remained at 2010 levels in the 2011 budget approved last spring.

Specific spending within a drastically trimmed 2012 budget resulting from last month's debt-ceiling agreement won't be determined until October. But even in the face of aggressive deficit-hawking, Steve Berg, vice-president of programming and policy for the National Alliance to end Homelessness, expressed hope that spending on homelessness actually could increase.

"Even within these new restrictions on federal spending, I think there's room for small adjustments in priorities and I think that people are seeing these homeless programs as a priority given what people around the country are facing," he said.

The impact of previous cuts has been felt in communities throughout the U.S., the Quad-Cities included. State funding is dwindling and funding for implementation of the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act of 2009 was not included in the 2011 federal budget. And Community Development Block Grant funding, which helps communities fund local housing programs, was cut by \$650 million.

Project Now in Rock Island lost four units for family housing as a result of the 2011 cuts.

"They just keep chipping away at this network, this safety net," said Ben Cleaveland, supervisor of homeless youth programs at Bethany for Children and Families in the Quad-Cities. "Man, if they keep chipping away, there will be some programs that are closing and there won't be as many services out there for people to go to.

"You are not going to be able to balance the budget on the backs of poor people and that's basically what they are starting to do," he said. "Really, they don't have a voice."