

# CORRECTING THE RECORD: ROBERT MARBUT'S FALSE CLAIMS ON HOMELESSNESS



**R**obert Marbut, President Trump's pick to lead the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, ignores decades of learning, research and bipartisan agreement by rejecting "[Housing First](#)," a proven model for addressing homelessness that prioritizes access to permanent, stable housing. Housing First recognizes that stable housing is a prerequisite for effective psychiatric and substance abuse treatment and for improving quality of life. Once stably housed, individuals are better able to take advantage of wrap-around services - to help support housing stability, employment, and recovery. Without stable housing, attaining these personal goals becomes much more difficult.

Marbut instead focuses on behavior modification rather than addressing the underlying cause of homelessness: the severe shortage of homes affordable and available to America's lowest-income individuals.

- **Marbut ignores the structural issues that lead to homelessness, choosing instead to blame it on homeless people and homeless programs.** The primary driver of homelessness is that poor people's incomes are too low to pay for the housing that is available, particularly in high-cost markets. According to [research](#) from the National Low Income Housing Coalition, there are fewer than four homes affordable and available for every ten extremely low-income households. And there is little help from the federal government: despite the need, just one in four eligible households receives any housing assistance because of chronic underfunding. Lack of behavioral health treatment is also a factor in homelessness. Marbut has no strategy to help people address these structural problems. He proposes no housing strategy. While he recognizes that behavioral health services are necessary, forcing people into congregate shelters and advocating for a mandatory, punitive, behavior modification approach are at odds with well-established best practice.
- **Marbut's approach [forces people](#) into large shelters with strict behavioral requirements that may not be appropriate for their needs and provide no path back to housing.** Marbut says he does not believe criminalization is the answer to homelessness, but in fact his model uses the threat of jail to force people into the shelter or campus. He [advocates](#) outlawing "street feeding" programs run by churches and charitable organizations, sleeping in public, and panhandling - all life-sustaining activities.
- **Marbut mischaracterizes Housing First as "Housing Only." He says that it does not include services and is one-size fits all. Nothing could be farther from the truth.** Housing First is a flexible approach [based on evidence](#) that the stability of a home will help people experiencing homelessness succeed in treatment, employment, education, health, etc. Housing First is simply a focus on getting people back into a home as soon as possible. Services are available before, during and after getting housing, as needed -- and wanted. In fact, Housing First programs are generally service-intensive. Housing First programs can require sobriety or be highly structured, and indeed there are consumers who prefer those models. But the Housing First approach requires that if they do not work, a lower-barrier housing option must be provided. No one should be returned to homelessness.

- **Marbut’s model is an outdated one that was practiced during the early years of homelessness, but it was abandoned by communities and past Republican and Democratic administrations because it was ineffective and caused homelessness to increase.** There is widespread consensus – based on decades of learning and research – that the solution to homelessness is housing coupled with supportive services, as needed. The Housing First approach has been advanced by the [George W. Bush](#) and [Barack Obama](#) administrations, including their [Departments of Housing and Urban Development](#), and [Veterans Affairs, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) and [U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness](#), as well as by the [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#), and many other experts.
- **Marbut claims that his model is responsible for reducing homelessness, but he fails to support this claim with solid data.** He generally takes only a small portion of the community’s homeless population into account, does not include the people in his facilities as homeless (who are homeless, by definition), and ignores the impact of a whole range of other, more effective interventions that may be underway in a community, such as rapid re-housing. In [cities](#) he has worked in, the homeless population trends generally follow those of the state, indicating that it is not his model alone that has an impact. Finally, even by his measure, any decrease he finds is short-lived as all the communities he has worked in [continue to struggle](#) with homelessness and, in some cases, experience significant increases.
- **Marbut points to San Antonio’s Haven for Hope as an example of his approach of co-locating services and behavior modification, but there is little evidence that this approach was successful.** He has [claimed](#) an [80% reduction](#) in homelessness in San Antonio as a result of Haven for Hope. HUD’s [Point in Time](#) count, however, shows an overall increase in homelessness in San Antonio over the decade. There is little evidence that co-locating homeless services in one site is more effective at ending homelessness than distributing services throughout the community. It is often expensive and inconvenient for homeless people, who, as a result, do not access services. Haven for Hope had no strategy for housing people. People who did not follow rules slept in an outdoor courtyard. Marbut managed Haven for Hope only for its first year. It recently changed its approach to be more housing focused.
- **Marbut has a practice of repeating claims that are not backed by evidence.** Marbut has, for example, [stated](#) that those who panhandle on the streets spend 93 percent of the money they receive on drugs, alcohol, or sex. He has repeated that figure in dozens of appearances before city councils and media outlets, including an interview with NPR’s Rachel Martin in 2014. When the Weekend Edition host [pressed for details](#), Marbut replied, “We’ve done a lot of research.” Such research has not been published, nor has Marbut provided it. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, data on this topic is weak; [one survey](#) conducted 20 years ago found that the largest reported expense for panhandlers was food – not drugs, alcohol, or sex. Marbut has also made unfounded claims that 40% of California’s wildfires are due to homeless encampments. There is no evidence to suggest that homeless encampments are a significant contributor to wildfires; CalFire does not specifically track homeless encampment fires. Moreover, people experiencing homelessness and homeless encampments are often the targets of violent crimes, including arson. In 2019, a fire quickly grew into a brush fire after two men in California allegedly [threw a “firework” into a homeless encampment](#).

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