

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

December 6, 2019

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President
United States of America
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20410-1000

Dear President Trump:

We write to request that you work with the homeless advocacy community, Congress, and local communities to find a qualified executive director to head the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, one who is serious about tackling the problem of homelessness in America in a humane, strategic and evidence-driven manner.

We are profoundly disappointed with your decision to fire the head of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, Matthew Doherty, and replace him with Robert Marbut. Mr. Marbut is, among our many concerns, unqualified, unprepared, and disdainful of the mission of the critically important federal agency which he has been appointed to lead.

The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness has been in existence for 32 years.ⁱ The Council coordinates the federal government's to homelessness, better ensuring that all federal agencies are collaborating smoothly to end homelessness and to mitigate the harms experienced by people without stable housing.ⁱⁱ Along with other evidence-driven solutions, the Council has promoted the "Housing First" model – a model that prioritizes removing as many obstacles and unnecessary requirements as possible that stand in the way of people's access to permanent housing.ⁱⁱⁱ The "Housing First" model has been found to effectively reduce homelessness, mitigate the harmful health impacts of homelessness, reduce criminal justice system costs, and better ensure safety and stability for adults and children.^{iv}

However, Mr. Marbut rejects over a decade of learning, research, practice, and bipartisan agreement that "Housing First" ends homelessness. He ignores ample evidence of the underlying cause of homelessness – our country's severe shortage of homes affordable to its lowest income renters – and instead blames homelessness on what he perceives as moral failings. His work as a consultant has been to encourage local governments to warehouse people experiencing homelessness on campus-type facilities with a host of required "24/7 programming." In one such campus that he created in St. Petersburg, people experiencing homelessness were made to first sleep on mats in a courtyard outside the facility; only with "good behavior" could people made their way indoors to the air conditioning and, after further proving their worthiness, bunk beds. These practices are both cruel and disregard decades of research about the most appropriate and effective ways to address and end homelessness.

Marbut has encouraged cruel policies because he believes that municipalities efforts are making living on the streets too comfortable, which he derisively calls "goodies". He often says he does not believe criminalization is the answer to homelessness, but he is a strong proponent of criminalizing much of the behavior and activity that make being homeless and living on the street bearable. He advocates for outlawing "street feeding" programs run by churches and charitable organizations, sleeping in public, and

panhandling. If someone who is homeless is then found sleeping on the street, for example, the police offer the person a choice: going for “24/7 programming” at the homeless campus, or jail.

As Chairwoman Waters stated in her October letter to you, “To date, your Administration has taken several steps that would increase homelessness in this country, including: proposing to defund key HUD programs, proposing to impose steep rent increases on the lowest income HUD tenants, seeking to evict mixed-status immigrant families living in subsidized housing, increasing the barriers to emergency shelter for LGBTQ individuals experiencing homelessness, and weakening fair housing protections.”

Homelessness has always been a bipartisan issue – with leaders on both sides of the aisle working to end this solvable crisis. We are very concerned that the Trump administration would pick someone whose professional work is based on practices that are such cruel, punitive, ineffectual and expensive to run the only federal agency tasked with ending homelessness. The USICH members will vote on his appointment at its December 10 meeting.

Again, we soundly reject your choice of Robert Marbut. We appreciate your attention to this critical appointment for our nation’s most vulnerable, and we look forward to working with your staff and you to help select a suitable replacement for Mr. Doherty.

To sign-on or if you have any questions about this letter, please contact Darrell “Rico” Doss in Congressman Clay’s office at darrell.doss@mail.house.gov, or 202.225.5104.

cc:
US Interagency Council on Homelessness

Sincere regards,

Wm. Lacy Clay

Pramila Jayapal

Gwen Moore

ⁱ P.L. 100-77

ⁱⁱ Website, United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, “About USICH” <https://www.usich.gov/about-usich/> (last checked on December 6, 2019)

ⁱⁱⁱ United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, “The Evidence Behind Approaches that Drive an End to Homelessness,” (December 2017) https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/evidence-behind-approaches-that-end-homelessness.pdf

^{iv} United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, “The Evidence Behind Approaches that Drive an End to Homelessness,” (September 2019) https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Evidence-Behind-Approaches-That-End-Homelessness-Brief-2019.pdf