

NATIONAL

HUD's hopes for the future

HUD Secretary Shawn Donovan cut his teeth on homeless issues with the National Coalition for the Homeless. Now, homeless advocates want to hear how he will apply what he's learned.

BY TONY TAYLOR
STREET NEWS SERVICE

Washington, D.C.—

Shawn Donovan, named secretary of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development served as an intern at the National Coalition for the Homeless when his career in Washington was just getting started.

Here are his reflections of that time:

"As an undergraduate I was volunteering at a homeless shelter in Cambridge and went to hear Robert Hayes, founder of Coalition for the Homeless, speak. His powerful words moved me to ask if there was any work I could do with the coalition in Washington as I was moving there to intern for Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Robert Hayes directed me to Maria Foscarinis and the National Coalition for the Homeless. I interned for the Coalition at the same time as working in Senator Moynihan's office and conducted research federal housing policy at both places. I remember staying up all night to set up an exhibition of photographs from Stephenie Hollyman's book "We the Homeless" in the Senate Rotunda." - Shaun Donovan

Tony Taylor: *At a recent news conference, President Obama was asked to comment on the growing crisis of family homelessness. The president responded by acknowledging that the homelessness problem in this country "was bad even when the economy was good," and cited the importance of creating quality jobs to help homeless families and individuals afford shelter. While job creation is certainly an important component of a federal response to homelessness, it is only part of the solution. What would you add to the president's response?*

Shawn Donovan: For many Americans, the previous economic prosperity was largely fueled by the artificial growth in home values. This put tremendous pressure on the rental marketplace as lower income families struggled to find a home or apartment they could afford. They experienced none of the benefits of a booming housing market and all of the negative consequences.



PHOTO COURTESY OF HUD

President Obama and I are convinced that any recovery must be sustainable and based on real growth, not only on the jobs front, but in the housing market as well. And this absolutely must include a more concerted effort on the part of the federal government to encourage the production of more affordable rental housing.

T.T.: *What steps have the Congress and your administration taken thus far that will prevent more people from becoming homeless and help put people experiencing homelessness back into homes?*

S.D.: The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provides \$1.5 billion in grants to rapidly re-house families who fall into homelessness or to help prevent them from becoming homeless in the first place. HUD's new Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program allows us to fund homeless prevention activities as never before. President Obama and the Congress recognized that too many families are experiencing a sudden economic crisis and are at extremely high risk of becoming homeless. The Recovery Act is just one way we're hoping to offer the kind of short- and medium-term help to put them on the path to self sufficiency.

T.T.: *For many years, low-income families and individuals in our nation have faced a severe shortage of affordable housing. How will the Department of Housing and Urban Development address this problem under your leadership?*

S.D.: The prior administration lost sight of how the housing boom, as beneficial as it may have been for homeowners, placed much of our available rental housing stock well beyond the reach of many lower income families. In particular, families living in high-cost areas continue to face a hard choice – either move to a lower cost area or live in substandard housing.

We must take a more balanced approach to our national housing policy. This is why we are seeking to create \$1 billion Housing Trust Fund to stimulate the production of affordable housing and to increase the

number of available rental vouchers. We also intend to increase funding to our long-standing Community Development Block Grants and HOME programs that will go a long way toward investing in the affordable rental market. I believe the president's proposed 2010 budget returns the federal government to its leadership role as a catalyst for expanding the availability of decent and affordable rental housing.

T.T.: *What role do you believe scattered-site public housing should play in your Department's response to homelessness?*

S.D.: Housing First projects have shown that homeless persons, including chronically homeless persons, can be stably housed in scattered-site housing, with appropriate support. Of critical importance is the ability of the families and service providers to be reliably in contact. Placing homeless families in locations that are distant to important service providers may add a layer of complication to the provision of services.

Placing homeless families in scattered-site public housing is a local decision based on the type of housing available, and the type and location of the services being provided. I encourage public housing authorities to connect with their community's local continuum of care to secure services and to assess what the best housing option might be for homeless families.

T.T.: *What is your vision for the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) in the coming years?*

S.D.: The focus of the previous Interagency Council was to end chronic homelessness. We learned from that experience that if we assess research and then clearly define a policy objective, target resources to meet that objective and then measure results that we can make a real difference. HUD, a member of the USICH, played a key role in this initiative. It's now time to use that same process and see what can be done not just for the chronically

Above, Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shawn Donovan at an Earth Day Event earlier this year.