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Foreword

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Foreword

Raymond L. Flynn

Imagine a hypothetical disaster befalling America's cities. A bomb, perhaps; or a ferocious hurricane; or an earthquake. Two to 3 million Americans lose their homes. We know that, daily, the evening news and the major newspapers would feature stories on the number of people victimized by the disaster. Many Americans would volunteer to help their neighbors in need, and many community agencies and local governments would come to the rescue, but the public would rightly expect the federal government to play a leading role in repairing the human and physical damage. The president and Congress would act swiftly to declare a national emergency and to funnel relief into the cities.

In fact, a national disaster *is* occurring in America now, and what is especially horrifying is that few of our nationally elected leaders are even addressing the crisis, let alone proposing serious solutions. By some accounts, 2 to 3 million Americans are homeless. Although some dispute this figure, the fact remains that the number of homeless Americans is growing.

Each year, the U.S. Conference of Mayors undertakes a survey of America's cities to assess the trends regarding homelessness, hunger, and poverty in urban America. For five years I was privileged to chair the Task Force that sponsors this survey. What we have found — a rising tide of homelessness in America — reflects a national scandal.

This is the most pressing moral issue facing our country. I hope that this special issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy* will help catalyze public debate and help build political support for an all-out effort to attack economic and social injustice, which is at the root of our homelessness dilemma.

I hope, too, that the analyses provided in these articles will help reverse what some perceive as a growing backlash against the homeless population. Most Americans are decent, compassionate people who are ashamed of our nation's growing poverty and injustice. But as the homeless problem grows, some Americans — encouraged by misguided media accounts, columnists, talk show pundits, and even some government officials and candidates — have grown impatient at the sight of homeless people on the sidewalks and subways of our cities. There is at times a tendency to blame the victim.

Raymond L. Flynn, elected mayor of Boston in 1983, was reelected in 1987 and again in 1991. Chairman of the U.S. Conference of Mayors' Task Force on Hunger and Homelessness for five years, he is currently president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

In truth, homelessness is a result of economic injustice and misguided public policy — and policymakers who have turned their backs on human needs. America is in deep crisis. Families, workers, and businesses across the country are hurting. During the 1980s, the incomes of America's richest one percent (660,000 families) increased by 77 percent, while the incomes of the bottom 40 percent of families declined. The basics of middle-class life — owning a home, getting a college education for the children, having access to decent health care, even holding a steady job — are now increasingly out of reach.

Furthermore, as of February 1992, over 8.4 million Americans are out of work — 1.3 million more than a year ago. The number of poor Americans has increased by over 2 million — to more than 33 million — in the past year alone. This includes one in five children. A recent Harvard University study revealed that the decline in housing prices during the past year has not relieved the housing shortage for poor and working-class Americans. Most cities are facing severe fiscal traumas and a few have even fallen into bankruptcy.

Homelessness is a symptom of these larger economic and social forces. But the problem has been compounded by the federal government's failure to address the basic needs of the poor and disadvantaged in at least three areas.

First, federal cutbacks have dug huge holes in the so-called safety net. Job training, education, human service, and other programs have been slashed, making it more and more difficult for low-income Americans to lift themselves out of poverty. *Second*, housing programs have been dismantled by over 70 percent. The number of affordable housing units has declined, while the number of poor has grown. *Third*, deinstitutionalization emptied America's mental hospitals without providing adequate resources for community-based facilities. As a result, many shelters have become, de facto, America's new mental institutions, but without the resources to provide adequate care.

We have made some progress on the housing front in recent years. In the late 1980s, Congress passed the McKinney Act to provide funds for housing, health care, and social services for the homeless. In 1990, Congress passed a comprehensive housing bill that includes funds to protect the inventory of existing subsidized housing, help first-time home buyers, and modernize public housing. I am particularly pleased that the bill incorporates legislation — the Community Housing Partnership Act — that is modeled on our successful Boston program, which provides federal funds to community-based nonprofit housing developers.

But we cannot rest with this victory. It is a good first step, but it is hardly the solution. The level of resources authorized by these bills is woefully inadequate for the tremendous need that exists across the country. We are still spending a good deal less than we were ten years ago; not surprisingly, the crisis is much worse. Despite this reality, some segments of our society argue that the responsibility for dealing with homelessness should be shouldered by private charity, by volunteers, and by local government. The people who work on the front lines of the housing crisis — the shelter providers, the tenant activists, the community development corporations, and the soup kitchens — are the real heroes of this generation. But it is clear that charity — soup kitchens and shelters — is not the answer to this national problem.

True, these groups *have* sought to fill the gap left by Washington's withdrawal. In Boston, we have been able to fulfill our commitment that no homeless person will be denied at least a warm bed, a hot meal, transportation to a shelter, and access to

health care. But our goal is not to create more and better soup kitchens and shelters. We have to eliminate the *need* for soup kitchens and shelters.

Despite heroic efforts, it is simply beyond the capacity of private charities and local governments to solve this crisis. Only the federal government has the kind of resources we need. But if Washington is going to address this problem, it will require a broad political coalition to change national priorities and meet human needs.

In some ways, our work this year is harder than ever, because the nation's economy is in a severe recession and the federal government has a growing deficit. On the other hand, we have witnessed the end of the Cold War, which offers an unprecedented opportunity to redirect our nation's resources and brainpower to domestic needs like housing, health care, education, and the plight of our cities.

If we are going to address homelessness seriously, we need to reorder our nation's priorities. We cannot continue to pour billions of dollars into bailing out the savings and loan industry, providing indiscriminate tax breaks for big business and the very rich, and wasting vast resources in a Pentagon budget to defend our allies against a military threat that no longer exists — while proven cost-effective programs that upgrade the lives of poor and working-class Americans go begging.

We have to reverse the direction of the past decade, during which our economy stagnated while our competitors moved forward. Meanwhile, our federal government failed to address our country's serious economic troubles. It sat on its hands, withdrawing from the problems facing the American people. Even today, our national leaders seem to be completely out of touch with the daily concerns of most Americans. Neither the Bush administration nor Congress has proposed any serious game plan for revitalizing the economy and putting America back to work. There is no relief in sight for the economically squeezed middle class. There is no plan to repair the safety net for American families in need. There is no forward-looking blueprint to convert our militarized economy into a peace economy and to make sure that, in the process, workers, communities, and firms that have relied on Pentagon spending are not victims of the end of the Cold War.

What's needed is a national effort to close the *investment gap* that is at the root of America's economic decline. We have to reverse the direction of the past decade and invest in American jobs, invest in the American people, and invest in American cities.

The end of the Cold War offers us an unprecedented opportunity to invest in our domestic future. The biggest danger facing America today is not the red menace, but the pink slip. We must mobilize Americans around a national agenda for economic growth and justice. 🐼