

SENATOR PAUL E. TSONGAS

U.S. Conference of Mayors

January 27, 1983

I would like to thank you for inviting me here today and giving me the opportunity to discuss what is a serious problem in our nation and what I feel is a vital piece of legislation. The need to discuss homelessness and hunger in the United States is a national disgrace. Yet the need is there whether we like it or not. What we do immediately in Congress and in our local communities can, at best, provide only emergency relief where major surgery is needed.

Of course, homelessness is nothing new in our country. But its increasing severity demands the attention of national and local officials, churches and private agencies and the American public at large. Clearly something has gone wrong in a country that can spend 1.6 trillion dollars in five years on its military, but cannot shelter and feed all of its citizens.

Congressman Foglietta of Pennsylvania and I are introducing a bill that provides revenue for shelter, food and other services to the homeless. A portion of the funds would go to the states, and a portion would go to local municipalities. Admittedly, our \$90 million legislative request is unequal to the magnitude of the problem. But it is a start. And it sends an all important message. It says that Congress cannot in good conscience sit on its hands while the most vulnerable people in our society die in the streets.

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The City of Boston estimates that there are between two and eight thousand homeless persons on the street of that city. Nationally, we have heard figures that range from 250,000 to one million. The very fact that we have such wide discrepancies in the figures is a clear sign that the issue needs closer scrutiny. Besides providing a budget to deal with this immediate emergency, this legislation would establish a national advisory council to inquire into the problem of homelessness. The council would seek lasting solutions. For too long we have had to struggle winter after winter with the same problems of how to shelter and feed the homeless.

These issues are hot now because outside it is cold and, every night, there is a news story on the plight of the homeless. We must not allow our sense of urgency to lapse with the winter. We must continue to work on this problem in July, so that next January, there is no need for emergency hearings and emergency bills. We must know, definitively, who the homeless are, why they are on the streets and what we can do to take them off the streets - not only for tonight, but permanently. We must know how the policies of the last two years have increased the number of homeless families. We must know how many unemployed and displaced workers are roaming the country looking for work. We must know how many people are in need of institutional help or support afterwards. Most of all, we must be prepared for the winters of the future and devise the best policy concerning human beings bereft on the streets.