



Built for Zero Canada
Functional Zero Chronic Homelessness
Question and Answer Document

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INTRODUCTION

Built for Zero Canada (BFZ-C) is working to support a core group of leading communities end chronic homelessness – a first step on the path to eliminating all homelessness in Canada. **The BFZ-C Functional Zero Chronic Homelessness Q&A includes definitions and provides answers to commonly asked questions about functional zero as it relates to BFZ-C.** This document is primarily intended for BFZ-C communities and complements other information included on the website at www.bfzcanada.ca. This document will continue to be updated as needed to further clarify information and/or to include additional questions.

The following 21 questions are answered in this document under the headings highlighted in blue:

Homelessness Definition (page 2) – find BFZ-C in yellow highlights

1. What is the Canadian definition of homelessness?

Chronic Homelessness Definitions (page 2) – find BFZ-C in yellow highlights

2. What is the Government of Canada' definition of chronic homelessness?
3. What are provincial definitions of chronic homelessness?
4. What is the US definition of chronic homelessness?

Ending Chronic Homelessness Definitions (page 4) – find BFZ-C in yellow highlights

5. Where is the Government of Canada at in defining an end to chronic homelessness?
6. Where is the national conversation at in defining an end to chronic homelessness?
7. Where are the Provinces at in defining an end to chronic homelessness?
8. Who has a definition for an end to chronic homelessness?

BFZ-C and Functional Zero Chronic Homelessness Key Questions (page 7)

9. Why has BFZ-C adopted this definition of functional zero chronic homelessness? (described in Q#8.3)
10. Why is BFZ-C focussed on ending chronic homelessness first?
11. Why is BFZ-C aiming for functional zero on chronic homelessness rather than absolute zero?
12. Have any communities achieved functional zero on chronic homelessness?
13. What happens if a community achieves functional zero chronic homelessness and then their numbers increase?
14. What definition of “homelessness” and “housed” is being used in BFZ-C?
15. What definition of chronic homelessness is being used in BFZ-C?
16. What about communities who achieve a functional end to chronic homelessness? What's next?

Ending Homelessness for All – Definitions and Considerations (page 9)

17. Who has a definition for an overall “end to homelessness”?
18. Why is the definition for functionally ending chronic homelessness different from that of functionally ending overall homelessness?
19. How does the concept of functional zero homelessness consider a “gendered lens”?
20. How does the concept of functional zero homelessness consider an “indigenous lens”?
21. What have been some key considerations for communities that have functionally ended homelessness?

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Homelessness Definition

1. What is the Canadian definition of homelessness?

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) created the [Canadian Definition of Homelessness](#) in 2012 and updated it in 2017. In this document homelessness is defined as, “*the situation of an individual, family or community without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it*”. The definition document also describes a typology of homelessness that includes 1) unsheltered, 2) emergency sheltered, 3) provisionally accommodated, and 4) at risk of homelessness.

The Government of Canada’s [National Housing Strategy: A Place to Call Home](#), was released in April 2017. The following definition of homelessness comes from the National Housing Strategy – adapted from the Canadian Definition of Homelessness developed by COH, and included in [Reaching Home: Canada’s Homelessness Strategy Directives](#):

“Homelessness is the situation of an individual or family who does not have a permanent address or residence; the living situation of an individual or family who does not have stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it.

It is often the result of what are known as systemic or societal barriers, including a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, the individual/household’s financial, mental, cognitive, behavioural or physical challenges, and/or racism and discrimination.”

These two definitions of homelessness have been adopted by BFZ-C and should guide communities when making decisions about which local programs and or situations they count as “homeless” or “housed” in their community.

Chronic Homelessness Definitions

2. What is the Government of Canada’s definition of chronic homelessness?

Through the [HPS Directive 2014-2019](#): “*Chronically homeless refers to individuals, often with disabling conditions (e.g. chronic physical or mental illness, substance abuse problems), who are currently homeless and have been homeless for six months or more in the past year (i.e., have spent more than 180 cumulative nights in a shelter or place not fit for human habitation)*”.

This definition was updated through [Reaching Home: Canada’s Homelessness Strategy](#), which began April 1, 2019. [Reaching Home Directives](#) include the following definition of chronic homelessness,

“Refers to individuals who are currently experiencing homelessness AND who meet at least 1 of the following criteria:

- they have a total of at least 6 months (180 days) of homelessness over the past year
- they have recurrent experiences of homelessness over the past 3 years, with a cumulative duration of at least 18 months (546 days)

Chronic homelessness includes time spent in the following contexts:

1. *Staying in unsheltered locations, that is public or private spaces without consent or contract, or places not intended for permanent human habitation (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) Typology: 1.1 and 1.2).*
2. *Staying in emergency shelters, including overnight shelters for people experiencing homelessness (including those for specific populations, such as youth, families, and newcomers), shelters for people impacted by family violence, and emergency shelters for people fleeing a natural disaster or destruction of accommodation (COH Typology: 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3).*
3. *Staying temporarily with others without guarantee of continued residency or the immediate prospects for accessing permanent housing, or short-term rental accommodations (for example, motels) without security of tenure (COH typology: 3.2 and 3.3).*

It does not include situations where individuals have access to secure, permanent housing, whether subsidized or not. The definition also does not include time spent in transitional housing or in public institutions (for example, health and corrections), although individuals who are discharged into homelessness from transitional housing or public institutions can be considered chronically homeless if they were experiencing chronic homelessness upon entry to transitional housing or the public institution.”

This new Reaching Home definition of chronic homelessness has been adopted by BFZ-C.

3. What are provincial definitions of chronic homelessness?

Some provinces may not have definitions. Those provinces that do have a definition for chronic homelessness have either adopted the Canadian federal definition or have more closely aligned with the US definition.

For example, Ontario’s [A Place To Call Home: Report Of The Expert Advisory Panel On Homelessness](#) (October 2015), “Recommendation #2: The Province adopt the Federal Homelessness Partnering Strategy definition for ‘chronic homelessness’.” Which was then included in the Homeless section of the [Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy Update](#) (2016).

[Alberta Human Services - Definitions of Homelessness \(2012\)](#): Chronic Homelessness “Those who have either been continuously homeless for a year or more, or have had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years. In order to be considered chronically homeless, a person must have been sleeping in a place not meant for human habitation (e.g., living on the streets) and/or in an emergency homeless shelter”.

4. What is the US definition of chronic homelessness?

The US federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) released a new definition effective January 2016 which can be summarized as, “To be considered chronically homeless, a person must have a disability and have been living in a place not meant for human habitation, in an emergency shelter, or a safe haven for the last 12 months continuously or on at least four occasions in the last three years where those occasions cumulatively total at least 12 months”.

(<http://www.csh.org/2015/12/hud-defines-chronically-homeless/>)

An [overview summary of chronic homelessness](#) was released in April 2018 by Dennis Culhane of the University of Pennsylvania from the Center for Evidence-Based Solutions to Homelessness.

Ending Chronic Homelessness Definitions

5. Where is the Government of Canada at in defining an end to chronic homelessness?

The federal government does not currently have a definition for ending chronic homelessness.

Announced as part of the 2017 budget, the federal government identified its interest in halving chronic homelessness as part of the new National Housing Strategy as recorded by The Star:

- Government estimates peg the number of chronic and episodic homeless at 25,000, meaning the Liberals expect that 11 years from now, federal spending will have cut that number to 12,500. <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2017/04/22/liberals-aim-to-cut-homelessness-by-50-per-cent-with-new-reduction-targets.html>
- In The Star Opinion article by Adam Vaughan (parliamentary secretary to the minister of Families, Children and Social Development) and Jean-Yves Duclos (minister of Families, Children and Social Development and minister responsible for Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation) reiterate aim to cut chronic homelessness in half <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/commentary/2017/05/04/canadas-renewed-commitment-to-housing.html>.

This interest in reducing chronic homelessness by 50% was confirmed when [Canada’s National Housing Strategy: A Place to Call Home](#) was released in November 2017.

The federal government is currently measuring chronic homelessness through two venues. The first is the voluntary national coordinated Point-in-Time Counts (e.g., 2016 and 2018) in which one of the core questions is related to chronicity “In total, how much time have you been homeless over the past year? [Best estimate], Length _____ days/weeks/months, Don’t know, Decline to answer”. The second way is through the [National Shelter Study 2005-2014](#) using period prevalence data through the Homeless Individual and Family Information System (HIFIS).

In addition, they funded the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) Innovative Solutions to Homelessness (ISH) Fund for the “Making Zero Count: Defining an End to Homelessness” project (see further information in Q#6).

6. Where is the national conversation at in defining an end to chronic homelessness?

Since 2016, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH), the University of Calgary School of Public Policy (SPP), and the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH) have supported a collaborative process to develop a definition of what it means to end homelessness in Canada **(broadly – not necessarily specific to chronic homelessness)**.

In the summer of 2016, the COH launched a consultation to seek feedback on a proposed definition of ending homelessness found in the working paper [“Discerning ‘Functional Zero’: Defining and Measuring an End to Homelessness in Canada”](#). See also this [blog post](#) from Alina Turner (University of Calgary; Turner Research & Strategy Inc.) from May 2016. Based on feedback, the [Canadian Definition of Ending Homelessness](#) was released in early 2017 which included the following definitions for “functional zero” and “absolute zero”:

- Functional End - A Functional Zero end to homelessness means that communities have a systematic response in place that ensures homelessness (unsheltered homeless, sheltered homeless, provisionally accommodated or imminent risk of homelessness) is prevented whenever possible or is otherwise a rare, brief, and non-recurring experience.
- Absolute End - Absolute Zero refers to a true end to homelessness, where everyone has access to supports and appropriate housing so that no one becomes homeless (unsheltered homeless, sheltered homeless, or provisionally accommodated) or at risk in the first place.

From 2017-2019, the COH led the “Making Zero Count: Defining an End to Homelessness” project (funded through HPS) to further develop, create tools, and test the current definition. An Advisory Board was formed to support the process. Project activities include hosting an Indigenous Roundtable in conjunction with the 2017 National Conference on Ending Homelessness and working with five communities to further develop the definition and tools (Kelowna, Regina, Winnipeg, Waterloo Region, and Saint John).

The Making Zero Count Project resulted in continued support for the three-part framework to inform the understanding of an end to homelessness (lived experience, homeless prevention systems, and public systems). It also resulted in the development of three specific tools to assist communities: 1) Service Coordination Resources, 2) Resources for Developing an MOU Between Public Systems & Homelessness Sector, and 3) User Design Toolkit.

Built for Zero Canada is using a specific measurable definition for a functional end to chronic homelessness (see Q#8.3 below) and is in the process of working with Community Solutions and others to confirm a functional “zero for all” measureable definition (see Q#19 below).

7. Where are the Provinces at in defining an end to chronic homelessness?

Ontario identified a goal of ending chronic homelessness in 10 years (by 2025) in its [Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy Update](#) (2016). Ontario then passed regulations in the fall of 2016 and released [Guidelines for Service Manager Enumeration](#) in March 2017 requiring service managers to enumerate homelessness every two years beginning in spring 2018. One of the core enumeration questions required by the Province will measure chronic homelessness: “In total,

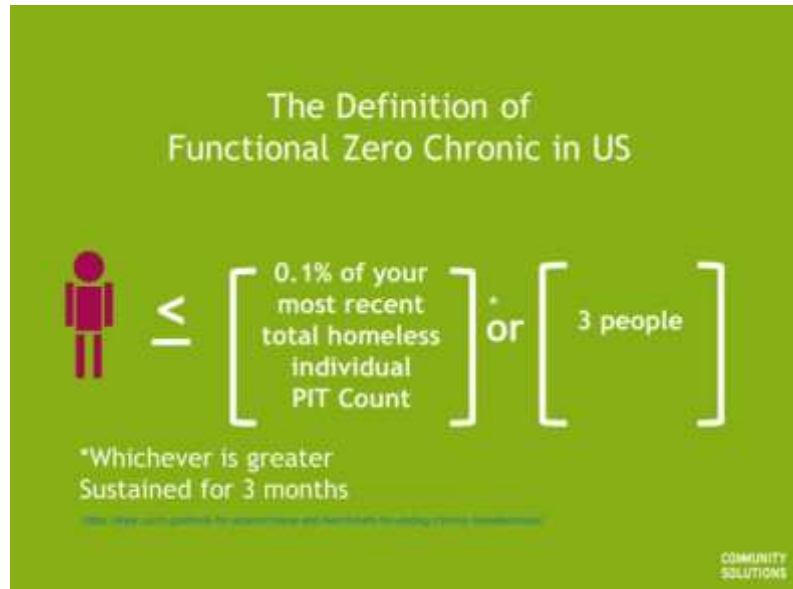
how much time have you been homeless over the past year? [Best estimate], Length _____ days/weeks/months, Don't know, Decline to answer". The Province does not currently have a definition for ending chronic homelessness.

8. Who has a definition for an end to chronic homelessness?

Three groups have clear measures:

- 1) **The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness** - [Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Chronic Homelessness](#)

- 2) [Community Solution's Built for Zero](#) - definition described in the picture to the right. This definition aligns with the USICH definition above. Currently only focusses on single adults experiencing homelessness.



- 3) [BFZ-C](#) definition was adapted from the Community Solutions' Built for Zero definition above. **Function zero chronic homelessness is achieved when there are three or less people experiencing chronic homelessness, sustained over three consecutive months, as measured through a quality By-Name List (including single adults, youth and families).**



Toronto is the only community in Canada that falls outside of this definition (as they identified greater than 4,000 actively homeless during their PiT Count). BFZ-C is working with Toronto to confirm their functional zero definition.

See this short 4 min animated [video](#) from CAEH on By-Name Lists and Functional Zero for Chronic Homelessness for further information.

BFZ-C and Functional Zero Chronic Homelessness – Key Questions

9. Why has BFZ-C adopted this definition of functional zero chronic homelessness? (described in Q#8.3 above)

This is an outcome-focussed definition that:

- Is simple to measure and easy to understand;
- can be consistently applied across different community contexts based on real-time and reliable data through a [quality By-Name List](#);
- is a strong indicator that a community's local system is functioning effectively to prevent and end chronic homelessness; and
- can continue to be utilized monthly to monitor whether functional zero chronic homelessness is being sustained.

10. Why is BFZ-C focussed on ending chronic homelessness first?

BFZ-C has identified prioritizing those with the greatest need beginning with those experiencing chronic homelessness (as defined in Q#15) as we work with communities to build coordinated homeless-serving systems focused on preventing and ending homelessness for all people.

Starting with those with the greatest needs (e.g., chronic), allows communities to work across populations groups (e.g., youth, men, women, families, veterans, indigenous) and have the greatest possible impact on:

- people experiencing homelessness - reducing premature aging, chronic health conditions, injury, victimization, and early death
- local homeless systems – focussing efforts and limited resources to relieve pressure on shelters and to focus on ending rather than managing homelessness in ways that will better serve everyone
- other systems - reducing pressure on other community resources such as ambulance, hospital emergency rooms, policing, and corrections
- taxpayers and donors – where focussing on those with the greatest needs has the highest financial return on investment

And we know it's possible to end chronic homelessness! We now have the evidence-based research, tools and program models to support people to get housed and to stay housed. Three communities in the US have already ended chronic homelessness using the same coordinated system, quality improvement and measurable data approaches we have adopted within the 20,000 Homes Campaign.

11. Why is the BFZ-C aiming for functional zero on chronic homelessness rather than absolute zero?

The 20,000 Homes Campaign's ultimate goal is absolute zero on chronic homelessness and the Campaign will continue to support communities to get there. However, a measure of functional zero chronic homelessness is identified as the initial goal as it recognizes:

- Chronic homelessness has historically comprised anywhere from 5%-20% of many community's homelessness population. Reducing chronic homelessness to 0.1% of the homeless population or three or less people and sustaining that number for three or more months demonstrates significant progress in designing a local system that ensures chronic homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring.
- Inflow of chronic homelessness onto a community's By-Name List may be somewhat unpredictable. For example, despite a community's best efforts, they may not be able to identify, engage and house someone within the month in certain situations (e.g., when someone arrives from another community, has been discharged from an institution without sufficient notice or planning, returns from an inactive status, or unexpectedly loses their housing).
- Sometimes it takes significant time to engage and build trust with someone experiencing chronic homelessness or to engage additional community partners to provide the appropriate level of support.

12. Have any communities achieved functional zero on chronic homelessness?

Currently, three communities in the United States have been confirmed through Community Solutions' Built for Zero and the US federal government as ending chronic homelessness including: Bergen County, New Jersey; Lancaster County, Pennsylvania; and Rockford, Illinois (to hear how they did it – watch this [webinar](#) and/or this [video](#)). Several other communities are actively reducing their numbers on chronic homelessness. The following report highlights the impact of Built for Zero between 2015-2018, [Getting to Proof Points: Key Learning from the First Three Years of Built for Zero](#).

No community in Canada has yet been confirmed through BFZ-C as achieving functional zero on chronic homelessness. Progress in this area is being tracked on the [BFZ-C website](#).

13. What happens if a community achieves functional zero chronic homelessness and then their numbers increase again?

Once a community is confirmed as having reached functional zero on chronic homelessness they move into the work of sustaining those gains. Sustaining requires continued commitment and on-going system improvements to respond to ever-changing community dynamics. While it is possible that a community's numbers will fluctuate in the sustaining phase, they do not lose their status as having achieved functional zero on chronic homelessness. However, in order to maintain their sustaining status, they must continue to meet the functional zero chronic homelessness definition. If a community's numbers increase above the functional zero threshold, they must again reach and sustain functional zero for three months to be recognized as sustaining.

14. What definition of "homelessness" and "housed" is being used in BFZ-C?

Homelessness - BFZ-C uses the definitions of sheltered, unsheltered and provisionally accommodated as per the Canadian Definition of Homelessness outlined in Q#1.

Housed - BFZ-C uses the definition of stable, safe, permanent and appropriate as included in the Canadian Definition of Homelessness outlined in Q#1. Housing should align with the Housing First principle of choice and self-determination and could include many options such as a single apartment, shared housing, family home, or long-term care (as long as it is stable, safe, permanent, and appropriate).

15. What definition of chronic homelessness is being used in BFZ-C?

BFZ-C follows the Government of Canada definition of chronic homelessness (see Q#2). However, communities are encouraged to focus on housing people who are chronically homeless as well as those with the highest acuity.

Given the updated definition of chronic homelessness released through Reaching Home April 1, 2019, BFZ-C will be supporting participating communities to work towards capturing data aligned with this new definition over time. Communities will continue to collect and report chronic data as they are able, noting any differences in their data submission.

16. What about communities who achieve a functional end to chronic homelessness? What's next?

Once a community achieves functional zero on chronic homelessness, they take what they have learned and apply it to another priority population (e.g., youth, families, Indigenous Peoples, veterans). The definition for ending homeless with these groups will look different than that for chronic homelessness (see Q#17).

Ending Homelessness for All – Definitions and Considerations

17. Who has a definition for an “end to homelessness” generally?

Definitions for functionally ending homelessness (beyond that for functionally ending chronic homelessness) are outlined below under the headings of Canada, the US Federal Government and Community Solutions.

Canada

- For the work taking place nationally in Canada, refer to Q#6 and Q#8.3.
- Province of Alberta – [A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years](#) (2008, pg.14), “Ending homelessness will mean that even though there may still be emergency shelters available for those who become homeless, those who become homeless will be re-housed into permanent homes within 21 days”.
- Medicine Hat – [At Home in Medicine Hat: Our Plan to End Homelessness](#) (2014, pg. 10), “An end to homelessness means that no one in our community will have to live in an emergency shelter or sleep rough for more than 10 days before they have access to stable housing and the supports needed to maintain it.”

United States Federal Government - The US has done considerable work defining an end to homelessness for a variety of populations and/or conditions as they work to implement “[Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness](#)”. This federal plan was first released 2010 and updated in 2012 and 2015 with plans to release the next update in summer 2018. The initial plan set goals to end veteran’s homelessness by 2015, chronic homelessness by 2017, and family and youth homelessness by 2020. As they worked towards these goals, they have created and evolved the following definitions for an end to homelessness:

- [Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Veteran’s Homelessness](#)
- [Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Chronic Homelessness](#)
- [Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Family Homelessness](#)
- [Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Youth Homelessness](#)

Community Solutions - Community Solutions Built for Zero is aligned with the US federal government definition for functionally ending chronic homelessness but has an alternate and more rigorous measure for functionally ending veteran’s homelessness (they do not yet have a definition specifically for families and youth, but definitions for these populations could align with the veteran’s definition). See below.

A functional end to veteran’s homelessness has been achieved when the number of veteran’s experiencing homelessness is less than the past six-month average monthly housing rate, sustained for three consecutive months. So that on a monthly basis, the community has demonstrated the ability to house the number of veteran’s experiencing homelessness). For a further explanation, see this short [video](#) from Community Solutions on By-Name Lists and Functional Zero for Veteran’s Homelessness.



In their recent report, [Getting to Proof Points: Key Learning from the First Three Years of the Built for Zero Initiative](#) (2018), Community Solutions outlines the differences in definitions and also considers key strengths and weaknesses, as with the veteran’s definition outlined below:

“The strengths of this definition are obvious: it is simple, clear and objectively measurable. It is also tied to a community’s actual data, which requires each community to track and monitor veteran homelessness over time. The definition also has weaknesses, however. For one thing, the definition does not consider length of time homeless, which means a community could have the same, small group of veterans stuck on its streets month after month with no incentive to house them. (We have yet to see this phenomenon, but it is possible.) We have begun to consider revisions to the definition of sustainability, one of which might simply be that no veteran ever experiences homelessness in a community for more than a single month. This would make the number of veterans experiencing homelessness less important, provided they could be housed very quickly— stock and flow analysis in its purest form.”

18. Why is the definition for functionally ending chronic homelessness different from that of functionally ending overall homelessness?

A functional end to chronic homelessness should be measured differently from that of a functional end to overall homelessness for one key reason: unlike youth, family, or veteran homelessness, chronic homelessness is primarily a function of time and condition, not affiliation. Everyone is considered “homeless” the day they hit the streets; whereas, people must go without a home for more than 180 days in the past year or 18 months in the past three years to be defined as chronically homeless (see Q#2-Q#4). A good community system has ample time to connect people to housing before they meet the chronic definition, which means a hard zero (or very close) on chronic homelessness should be possible.

19. Are there any ideas or resources related to the concept of functional zero homelessness with a “gendered lens”?

Stated another way, how is or can definitions for functionally ending homelessness be inclusive of all people along the gender spectrum (e.g., men, women, transgendered, two-spirit)? A definition of functional zero must first consider what is meant by “homelessness” and what is meant by “housed”. The current definition of homelessness is outlined in Q#1 and recognizes many different typologies of homelessness under the headings of unsheltered, emergency sheltered, provisionally accommodated, and at-risk of homelessness. The definitions of what is meant by “housed” is included in Q#14 and includes a wide range of housing options. Definitions for functional zero are outlined in Q#6, Q#8 and Q#17. It is currently understood that these definitions are inclusive of all people along the gender spectrum.

20. Are there any ideas or resources related to the concept of functional zero homelessness with an “indigenous lens”?

As with Q#19, this consideration would need to begin with a definition of homelessness that is culturally sensitive to the histories of indigenous people and the impacts of colonization. See the [Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada](#). The other key consideration is what is meant by “housed” – see Q#14 for the current BFZ-C definition. This question is also being considered as part of the Making Zero Count project (see Q#6).

21. What have been some key considerations for communities that have functionally ended homelessness?

Two key considerations include:

1. **The importance of sustaining** – Its not, “set it and forget it” or a box that gets checked - it takes continual problem-solving and on-going effort and resources to sustain a functional end to homelessness. The approaches used to reach a functional end to homelessness will not necessarily be the same ones that are needed to sustain those gains.
2. **Communities may still observe people “in the streets”** - that are either experiencing or perceived to be experiencing homelessness. Even for communities in the US that have

been confirmed as functionally ending veterans or chronic homelessness (see Q#12), they have not necessarily sustained an “absolute end” to homelessness (see definition in Q#6). Also, people may perceive that someone is homeless when in fact they have a home – making inaccurate assumptions about their housing situation based on a disability, the way they are dressed, or their activities.