

Commission To End Homelessness Releases Findings: Recommends Focus On Permanent Housing Options

Recommends Focus On Permanent Housing Options

BOSTON-- (January 11, 2008) --Emphasizing the need to target the right resources to the right people at the right time, the special Commission to End Homelessness today released a comprehensive five-year plan to eliminate homelessness in Massachusetts. The Commission, co-chaired by Representative Byron Rushing (D-Boston), the 2nd Assistant Majority Leader; and Department of Housing and Community Development Undersecretary Tina Brooks, filed its report with the House Clerk with recommendations to focus on transitioning the homeless in the Commonwealth from shelters into permanent housing.

"We have developed a workable plan that if implemented and funded properly, will end homelessness in Massachusetts. The Commission saw its task not to study homelessness but rather to develop a plan for the best solutions and practices to end homelessness, prevent its recurrence, and remove barriers to permanent housing," Rushing said. "I am proud of the collaboration and the intensive work of this broad 30 member Commission. If we invest the necessary funds and reorganization at the beginning of this plan we will see over these 5 years, with the decommissioning of most shelter beds, sufficient funds to be reallocated to complete this plan and prevent the reoccurrence of this inhumane problem."

The Commission calls for an overhaul of the state's shelter system by having it function solely for emergency transitional, short-term residency while focusing resources on the need for every homeless individual or family to be permanently housed. Currently, the state Department of Transitional Assistance supports over 2,900 individual emergency shelter beds and nearly 1,900 for families. Due to a lack of flexible resources to help them find permanent housing, some have to stay long-term in shelters using them as a de facto housing option.

The recommended housing-based approach will use resources more cost-effectively with investment into building the infrastructure to stabilize, divert and re-house families and individuals who are currently in, or may come into the shelter system.

The Commission maintained a three-pronged focus to arrive at its recommendations:

- Prevention strategies to keep as many people housed as possible;
- Housing placement, subsidy and production responses for stable, permanent housing options; and
- Asset development supports that enhance the economic stability of individuals and families -- perhaps the most meaningful protection against future homelessness.

Within each of those categories, the Commission identified and reviewed many programs with demonstrated effectiveness that should be continued and expanded. The new system builds upon a foundation of uniform assessment, true resource coordination and early warning. This plan will not require new bureaucracy because an existing network of regional service providers will target specific resources where and when needed.

The Commission calls for the production of more affordable housing through not only the building of new units, but by also adding more housing vouchers to fill the gap between market rents and people's ability to pay. Barriers that prevent the homeless from accessing housing that already exists or will be produced must also be eliminated.

"Having a place to call home is fundamental. Housing is the infrastructure that enables family members to gain stable employment and allows their children to get the education they need and deserve to succeed in life," said

Undersecretary Brooks. "Transforming from an emergency shelter-based system to one focused on permanent housing will require investment and patience, but the benefits will be huge as thousands of currently- or imminently-homeless people will have a chance to be part of, and contribute to, their communities."

"The Commission's plan will transform the shelter system, foster collaboration between service providers, and, in essence, change the way we do business," said Julia Kehoe, Commissioner of the MA Department of Transitional Assistance. "We are excited for the opportunity to serve our citizens in a more comprehensive way, reducing barriers to permanent housing and providing the necessary supports to increase economic self-sufficiency. This change in focus is a crucial step toward not only ending homelessness, but breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty for so many of the people we serve."

To devise a housing stability strategy for all who touch the homeless system, the Commission defined the needs of the populations involved. For both families and individuals, the new system will treat each case as unique and devise a situation-specific response because under the current system, the length of stay in a shelter is not necessarily determined by the level of need.

The next step is for the state's Interagency Council on Homelessness and Housing (ICHH) to take these broad directions and work out specific budget and program guidelines. The ICHH currently provides a formal structure to improve the coordination of services and programs for the homeless population as well as the authority to develop, implement and monitor initiatives to end homelessness.

The next phase will involve testing and experimenting with flexible tools to learn the most cost-effective, lasting way to get families and individuals out of shelters for good and to help get them in stable housing situations. By piloting different, situation-specific approaches, the state will learn about the best practices for avoiding long-term homelessness. It is hoped that this will begin with Fiscal Year 2009.

While the ultimate goal is to replace most shelters with housing, before beds can be decommissioned, resources must be available, programs tested and experience gained.

The Commission has recommended an initial \$10 million investment to establish a pool of flexible resources for stabilizing, diverting, and re-housing families and individuals who are homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness. Funds ultimately captured from reduced shelter expenditures will be invested in permanent housing and related services, especially for the homeless and for those at risk of homelessness.

The Commission resulted from legislation first filed by Representative Rushing in 2001. It was signed into law in August 2006. In July 2007, legislation was passed to revive, continue, and conform the membership of the Commission to the Patrick administration. Commission members were appointed by Governor Patrick and Undersecretary Brooks and State Representative Byron Rushing were chosen as Commission co-chairs.

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