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Fewer people living in shelters

More families are now homeless

By Lee Hammel TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

lhammel@telegram.com

The number of homeless people, both in Worcester and Worcester County, has decreased for the first time since the Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance began counting five years ago, Executive Director Grace K. Carmark said.

“Collaborative community programs,” some of which have encountered stiff neighborhood opposition, are credited by Ms. Carmark for reducing the numbers of people living on the street or in shelters.

But the bad news is that the number of homeless families in the city and the county continued to increase, according to the “point in time” survey done Jan. 30 by the housing alliance for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

“In addition to the 246 families in Worcester County living in emergency homeless shelters or transitional housing programs” in difficult economic times, Ms. Carmark said, “an additional (estimated) 2,500 children and parents in families are living in doubled-up or unsafe housing conditions” and are not counted under HUD rules.

Ms. Carmark blames the housing market and the economy for family housing woes.

She highlighted the reduction in the chronically homeless population — 10 percent in the county and 6 percent in the city — and said, “Worcester and Worcester County should be proud of this result.”

The federal government defines chronically homeless people as disabled people who have been continuously homeless for a year or who have had four episodes of homelessness in the past three years.

New “federal money has been targeted toward the single and chronic homeless population and we’re seeing the results of that. But families have not been a priority in federal funding,” Ms. Carmark said.

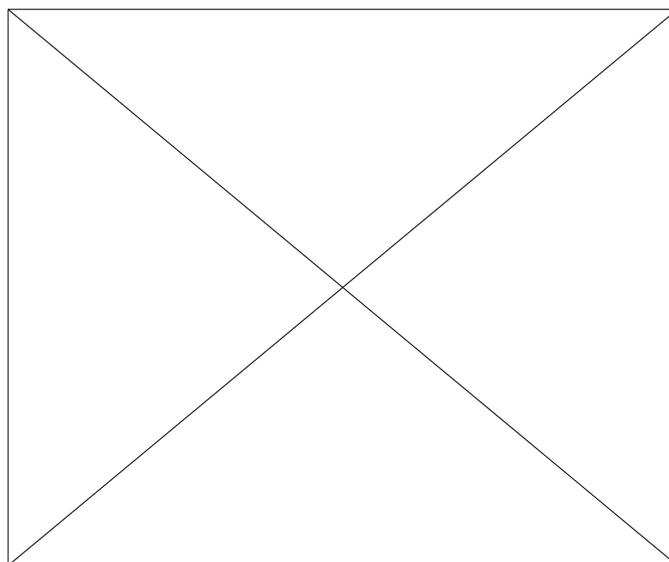
It’s been “a dozen years since there’s been any new funding for families,” she said. “There’s been an emphasis on the visibly homeless individuals on the street that people see every day. But what folks don’t understand is the majority of homeless people are families.”

When it comes to deciding whether to fund programs for families or individuals, she said, “we need to do both.”

Homeless families are less visible because “most families move seven times between relatives and friends, where they double up, before they ever enter a shelter. They don’t want to lose their independence, they don’t want to lose their family unit,” Ms. Carmark said. “When you enter a shelter, you lose that independence and privacy for your family to function and thrive in.”

Unlike the Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance’s family shelter, the 35-unit The Village at Cambridge Street, most shelters involve congregate living, she said.

The Jan. 30 survey counted 586 homeless individuals in Worcester County, 34 of them not in either an emergency or transitional shelter. That’s 105 fewer than last year, or a 15.2 percent reduction.



Of those surveyed Jan. 30, 411 homeless people were in Worcester — 23 of them not in a shelter. That's 60 fewer — 12.7 percent — than the city had last year.

But the number of homeless families with children in the city rose 4.5 percent to 184. They comprised 541 people, which is 89 more, or 19.7 percent, than the year before. All of them were in shelters.

Combining those figures, the city had 29 more homeless people, a 3.1 percent increase, over last year.

Community Healthlink provided 12 new housing units for chronically homeless adults in Fitchburg and eight in Worcester last year through the Worcester County Leased Housing Program.

South Middlesex Opportunity Council added 56 single-person occupancy units for homeless people last year and acquired 45 others, just in Worcester. Those are intended to help the Framingham-based nonprofit social services agency close the People in Peril homelessness shelter it operates at 701 Main St. in Worcester, according to COO Charles E. Gagnon.

Additionally, "consistent with the regional approach, we also produced 13 new units in the city of Fitchburg and we're currently producing units in Leominster, Gardner and Spencer," he said.

Mr. Gagnon said SMOC's approach to producing a continuum of supported housing for families and individuals throughout the region is consistent with the philosophy of both the City Manager's Task Force on Homelessness and the Worcester County Continuum of Care.

Despite neighborhood opposition to the plans for the programs in Worcester, Mr. Gagnon said, SMOC has received no significant complaints from the neighbors since the program opened and has quickly taken care of any concerns it has received before they could become problems.

SMOC has been successful in reducing the clients at the PIP shelter by 25 percent over the past year, he said. The census at the PIP shelter, which has been a target of neighborhood and political ire, was between 95 and 115 last year, he said — still above its legal occupancy level of 88, but a lot less than the more than 150 who have stayed there on cold nights years ago.

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