

Editorial: Ending homelessness

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In cities large and small, the homeless are treated like outdoor furniture. We steer around them, avoiding eye contact. On Thanksgiving, we may send them some food. When it gets too cold, police may make extra efforts to get them into a shelter for the night. But for the most part, homeless people are ignored. They will always be with us, so let's provide overnight shelters and move on.

But those who have paid close attention to homelessness know better. Academic research and practical experience across the country have found that homelessness shouldn't be tolerated, it should be ended. One way to accomplish that is to do away with an earlier response to the problem: temporary shelters.

Overnight shelters that offer little in the way of services beyond a cot in a warm room mostly serve to keep people homeless, this line of argument says. Homelessness is a symptom of other problems: mental illness, substance abuse, physical disabilities, lack of a job or job training, inability to access services. If you don't have a place to call home, it's almost impossible to address those problems.

In MetroWest, an organization with decades of experience working with homeless people has adopted the new approach. South Middlesex Opportunity Council closed its Framingham overnight emergency shelter in 2006, replacing it with a resource center that connects homeless people with an array of services, including housing, that address the causes of their homelessness.

SMOC's work has drawn the appreciation of local police and the attention of policy-makers. The Massachusetts Commission to End Homelessness is taking lessons from SMOC in drafting a five-year plan for the state.

"As we improve the system of shelters it costs more money...you begin to say, 'Wow, we're spending as much money on that as we could be on permanent housing,'" state Rep. Byron Rushing, the commission chairman, told the Daily News.

The state spends \$120 million a year on shelters for an estimated 24,000 homeless individuals and 10,000 families, Rushing says. With that kind of money, those people could be moved into better housing and get the services they need to live successfully on their own.

Rushing is looking to work with the governor and Legislature to change the way Massachusetts thinks about homelessness, using SMOC's program, along with similar initiatives in other states, as a model. We wish him success. Homelessness is only inevitable and intractable if we believe it to be so.