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Local social services officials lauded a plan from the state Department of Housing and Economic Development to stop the practice of placing homeless families in motels for temporary shelter.

Department of Housing and Community Development Undersecretary Aaron Gornstein said on Wednesday that the department plans to phase out the costly practice by the middle of 2014.

Gornstein said the state is ramping up preventive measures to have families avoid homelessness in the first place, and for those who have already found themselves out in the cold, focusing on permanent housing.

For years, the state has placed homeless families in hotels and motels when the 2,100 rooms in the state's family shelters are full, a condition that has been static since the recession hit, Gornstein said.

The rooms the state rents for families, hitting a peak of 1,800 at the beginning of December, come at a high cost, Gornstein said. The state spent just shy of \$50 million on the rooms in fiscal 2012, he said.

"Is that the best use of taxpayer dollars? We don't think so," he said.

Gornstein said the push to reduce motel room placements is already in the works and the placements have dropped to fewer than 1,700.

Additionally, the motel and hotel rooms do not have kitchens and are not often located in places where families could walk to a grocery store or other amenities. Gornstein said that is not a proper place for families to live long-term.

"It's very difficult for families to get around. Some of the hotels are very isolated," Gornstein said. "It's just not a good place."

Gornstein credited the administration with making bigger investments in other areas, like the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition program, which offers financial assistance up to \$4,000 for families that are at risk of becoming homeless and the HomeBASE program, which provides cash to families to avoid or exit shelter. The state has also freed up an additional \$6 million for the Massachusetts Rental Voucher program, which gives a subsidy to low-income families for rent.

Locally, officials at the South Middlesex Opportunity Council welcomed the move, saying that motels are not a suitable place for families to live.

"We certainly agree with the state that we need to end the placement of families, especially with children, in motels," said SMOC spokeswoman Jane Lane. "It's just a dead end."

Lane said the agency participates in the HomeBASE and rental voucher programs, among others, which she called pieces of the larger picture when addressing homelessness.

Susan Gentili, director of SMOC's Emergency Services Division, said local motel placements are already going down, as the agency employs more preventative measures and tries to get families placed in motels or emergency shelters into permanent housing faster.

Gentili said that while there were 40 to 50 families placed in hotels across MetroWest a few months ago, that number has fallen below 30.

Gentili said she thinks that if the state push to move families out of motels is successful, it will free up the cash to permanently fund the other measures that strive for permanent housing.

Former Marlborough human services director and current Community Development Authority board member Lynn Faust said she agrees that motels aren't suitable for families but other overhauls have to be made for low-income families to be able sustain permanent housing.

Faust said that a low minimum wage, paired with a high cost of living in Massachusetts is a recipe for a cycle of poverty.

"Even if a person works 40 hours a week at minimum wage, they can't provide for a family," Faust said. "When we have a system where you can work full time and not afford to live anywhere, the system is broken."