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New strategy aims to end homelessness

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In 2006, 39-year-old Leticia Brown entered the House of Hope homeless shelter in Lowell. The shelter was a source of support during one of the low points in her life, but Brown had to abide by its many rules and regulations.

"The shelter was a huge blessing for me, but I felt like I didn't have control of my life," Brown said.

On Mother's Day 2007, Brown, a mother of two, moved into one of House of Hope's apartments for low-income residents as part of the organization's goal of finding permanent housing for its shelter population.

Brown, who now works in the housing department of a local nonprofit, said getting her own space has given her a more positive outlook and more independence and privacy.

"Once you get an apartment it is a whole new life," Brown said. "I feel motivated, proud and confident. I also can cook and eat whenever I want."

House of Hope's strategy is known as "Housing First," a growing approach to end homelessness by securing housing for the homeless, rather than the continued reliance on shelters.

The South Middlesex Opportunity Council, a Framingham-based social agency, started a Housing First program in October 2006, converting a Framingham shelter into a resource center where the homeless could go for counseling to get them into housing.

The philosophy moves support services, including health care, case management and vocational training, from the shelter to a home setting. The idea is to provide long-term help in a stable place, instead of an emergency shelter, for those who have been homeless for over a year or in a shelter at least four times annually.

Most of this target group struggles with a mental illness.

"Housing is the absolute foundation for everything people can achieve in their lives," said Deb Chausse, executive director of House of Hope. "It enables education, employment and taking advantage of community resources."

Gov. Deval Patrick's administration has thrown its support behind the Housing First model. A major thrust came on Dec. 16 with an \$8.25 million award to help eight regions in the state switch to the new strategy.

The fund was part of the Massachusetts Commission to End Homelessness' 5-year plan to eliminate homelessness in the state by 2013 and survived Patrick's budget cuts in October.

According to Lt. Gov. Tim Murray, chairman of the state's Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness, most of the money will help local agencies work together to place people in housing and provide funds to help them stay there.

"At the end of the day we want people to try work together for the mission of housing people long-term for their health and economic betterment," Murray said. "We believe Housing First will drastically stem the tide of those at risk of being homeless, or in a hotel or motel."

The new funding comes at an opportune time. By the end of November, 2,565 homeless families were being served by the Department of Transitional Assistance - a record high and almost 100 more than September.

All 2,900 beds available statewide are filled, forcing communities to move people into motels. More than 650 families are in motels across the state, led by Cambridge (82 families) and Brockton (76).

As the housing crisis and economic recession continue, the numbers are likely to rise.

"With unemployment rates going up, there is going to be more need for assistance," said Robert Pulster, executive director of the state interagency council.

The rise in homelessness has increased support for Housing First.

In 2005, Quincy announced a 10-year, Housing First-style plan. As a result, the city saw a 52 percent drop in chronically homeless residents (from 142 to 62) between January 2004 and 2008, said John Yazwinski, the CEO of Father Bill's shelter in Quincy.

This drop helped reduce emergency room visits in Quincy and provided stability to those who got housing, Yazwinski said.

"Many of the people we didn't think could be housed were able to be housed with the right supports," Yazwinski said. "They are no longer ricocheting in and out of systems of care."

After SMOC converted the Framingham shelter in October 2006, from that month until September 2007 the number of people entering the shelter was reduced to 641 compared to 1,000 the year before.

The average length of shelter stay was reduced from 90 to 30 days. Forty percent of the 549 people who left the shelter were placed in housing.

"There are still challenges and work to be done, but everyone would say getting people into housing with supportive services has been a really successful model," said Heidi Gold, director of program development at SMOC.

Katie E., who asked that her last name not be used, is one of SMOC's success stories. Diagnosed with schizophrenia after finishing college, Katie was homeless for several years and hospitalized numerous times. In 2006, she entered one of the council's houses. She was connected with behavioral health services and participated in a day program.

"The house gave me a stable place to be and all the women there helped each other out," Katie said. "It was great to not have to be outside all day."

Last month, the 30-year-old moved into her own apartment where she is visited by a mental health department case manager. Katie said she is still adjusting to her new place, but feels much more stable.

"A lot of times in the house there would be chaos and I would have to deal with other people's problems on top of my own," Katie said. "It is much more peaceful now. I have had the longest streak of stability I've had in a long time."

Springfield implemented a 10-year Housing First plan in January 2007, reducing the number of individuals needing shelter from 149 to 107 - a decrease of 28 percent - during the first year, according to Geraldine McCafferty, deputy director of the Springfield Office of Housing.

"Taking the chronically homeless out of the shelter has taken a lot of burden off the system," McCafferty said.

The Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, a policy advocacy group that represents 88 agencies, has run a state-funded pilot program, Home and Healthy for Good, since 2006.

The program helped secure housing for 275 of 336 participants, who had been homeless an average of 5.6 years. The alliance found that for each tenant, the state spent an average of \$7,224 less on housing and state services than they have for a person in a shelter.

"For too many people, the emergency shelter has become the housing niche for the poorest of the poor," said Joe Finn, the executive director of the shelter alliance. "Housing First is more efficient and effective, and we have seen reductions in health care costs in particular."

Phillip Mangano, executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, which includes top officials from 20 federal agencies, applauds Massachusetts's support of the more cost-effective policy.

Mangano cites 65 cost studies from across the country that have found a sheltered person costs between \$35,000 and \$100,000 a year while a person in housing with supportive services costs between \$13,000 and \$25,000.

"People who are on our streets or who are in shelters long term are some of the most expensive to the public purse," Mangano said.

The interagency council encourages municipalities across the country to create 10-year plans to end homelessness. Mangano is encouraged that 14 communities in Massachusetts, including Lowell and Fall River, have taken that step.

"If you look at the plans around Massachusetts, the thing they have most in common is their commitment to innovative ideas," Mangano said. "Massachusetts has shown a great sensitivity to ending homelessness."

Mangano points to Lowell's plan as a model of success because it is innovative, has political will behind it, along with support from the business community.

Promoting affordable housing is also a major component of the state's Housing First strategy. Patrick signed a \$1.3 billion housing bond bill in May that will boost the state's efforts to create and sustain affordable housing over the next five years.

"We need to work with housing authorities and private developers to refurbish older buildings or build new houses, so that we have more affordable housing units," Murray said.

But not all are enthusiastic about new spending for Housing First. An economist at the conservative-leaning Beacon Hill Institute believes it is not the time for the Legislature to invest \$8.25 million in the plan.

"We should be addressing the root causes of homelessness and to address many of the root causes there doesn't need to be a single dollar being spent," said Benjamin Powell, a senior economist at the institute.

Pulster, however, believes that even with the state budget crisis homelessness will be substantially reduced because of the commonwealth's commitment to Housing First regionally.

"We think with regional approaches we will be better positioned to respond to the current increase in homelessness and leverage resources to deal with

it," Pulster said. "We will see the reduction in the need for shelters."

(Lyle Moran is a student in the Boston University State House program. This is the first in a series of stories about state issues.)

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