

State homeless commission looks to follow Framingham

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By Lindsey Parietti/Daily News staff
MetroWest Daily News
Wed Jan 16, 2008, 12:44 AM EST

BOSTON -

Charged with finding new solutions to the state's homelessness problem, a special legislative commission wants people first to believe that ending homelessness is possible.

The five-year plan of the Commission to End Homelessness reflects the philosophy that the South Middlesex Opportunity Council has brought to Framingham: temporary homeless shelters are not working.

Acting on its sometimes-controversial instincts, SMOC closed overnight shelters in favor of opening the Common Ground Resource Center.

At the center, homeless people meet with counselors who help identify their needs, connect them with family, job training, or place them in one of 300 housing units.

Commission Chairman state Rep. Byron Rushing, D-Boston, said the uniqueness of the SMOC program and the state's new approach is that the goal is not alleviating, but ending homelessness.

"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, and how do we make that shift,'" said Rushing who, after fighting to form the commission for 10 years, believes Beacon Hill is finally coming around.

Rushing said permanent housing can be built with the \$120 million the state already spends each year on sheltering an estimated 24,000 homeless individuals and 10,000 families.

He has asked Gov. Deval Patrick and administration officials for an additional \$12 million in fiscal 2009 to build affordable housing units so the state can begin closing shelters.

"SMOC is already a model for providing housing for these individuals or families, so we would want to make sure we support these organizations and use them as models for further developing," said state Rep. Kay Khan, D-Newton, who believes that even in a tight budget year the state can find additional funding with the help of housing bond bills.

"I think what we can draw from the commission is that all of the recommendations are things that can now be taken

more seriously and there's more of a blueprint of what does need to happen."

After attending a one-year review of SMOC's progress in December, Framingham Police Chief Steven Carl said the resource center has led to better placement of the town's homeless and less crime.

"All homeless people aren't criminals and all homeless people aren't substance abusers, but many criminals are homeless and many substance abusers are homeless," said Carl. "That's why we have to partner with social service agencies that have the resources to offer other services."

At the same meeting, SMOC Executive Director James Cuddy said the council hopes to open a Marlborough housing center by the spring and eventually expand its services to Worcester County.

(Lindsey Parietti can be reached at lindsey.parietti@cnc.com.)

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