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## **Money sought to create triage center, end PIP O'Brien says 'there is no question' shelter will be closed by end of year**

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**WORCESTER** — The effort to end homelessness in the city has made extraordinary strides since admissions to the People in Peril shelter were restricted eight months ago, but the shelter at 701 Main St. missed the target of closing altogether by June 30.

The city is looking for the money to create a triage and assessment center on Jaques Avenue and permanently close the emergency shelter by this winter. Although the \$1.25 million needed on top of the \$250,000 the city administration has identified for the project is not in hand, "there is no question it will be closed this calendar year," City Manager Michael V. O'Brien said Friday.

Meanwhile, South Middlesex Opportunity Council, which operates the emergency shelter, identified 197 "frequent or regular users" of the shelter. Of those, SMOC has found transitional or permanent housing for all but eight, according to Charles E. Gagnon, SMOC chief operating officer.

The number of emergency shelter guests at 701 Main St. fell to a stunning low of 31 people on July 3, between the efforts of SMOC and Community Healthlink, the nonprofit social service agency that has the contract to provide assessment and treatment services, according to Deborah J. Ekstrom, Healthlink chief executive officer. One source said it recently fell to 18 people.

In all, since Nov. 2, SMOC has found transitional or permanent housing for 235 people along with social services to keep them there, Mr. Gagnon said. That occurred with \$595,000 in state and federal money in a contract awarded to SMOC by the Worcester County Regional Network.

Community Healthlink began triage and assessment services on Nov. 2, requiring people to be screened before they would be allowed to stay at the PIP shelter. That replaced a decades-old policy of walk-in admissions there.

"We have made dramatic progress" since then, Ms. Ekstrom said. "We have diverted more people than we've sent to the shelter by probably 2-to-1," she said.

Working closely with SMOC, she said people who previously would have stayed at the shelter just by showing up instead were found housing.

The average daily census at the shelter — which is now called Greater Worcester Housing Connection to reflect its new mission — fell to between 40 and 55 in June, Mr. Gagnon said. That 35 percent reduction from the previous June is a record low over the past 20 years, he said.

The impending closing of the shelter will come as a relief to neighborhood residents and businesses who claim that it attracts crime, repels business and lowers property values.

But the real winners are people such as Richard Jackson, 49, who stayed at the PIP shelter "off and on for 3 years."

"Nobody wants to be at the PIP," said Mr. Jackson, who left for a rooming house run by SMOC at 26-28 Dayton St. With the closing of the rooming house while it undergoes renovation, Mr. Jackson now lives at a SMOC sober house at 25 Sturgis St., along with 16 other former residents of the PIP shelter. But Mr. Gagnon said the majority of the 235 people for whom SMOC has found housing are going to scattered sites owned by private landlords, not social service providers, many of them outside of the city. He said SMOC works closely with the city, whose policies he said are driving the process, and partners such as Community Healthlink, Dismas House, the veterans shelter on Grove Street and Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance.

The Worcester County Regional Network has awarded \$2.6 million in contracts from state and federal funds to combat homelessness. Mr. O'Brien said he is confident in the abilities of U.S. Rep. James P. McGovern, D-Worcester, and Lt. Gov. Timothy P. Murray to secure another \$1.25 million to renovate the second and third floors of a Community Healthlink building at 72 Jaques Ave. to house the triage and assessment center. After \$2.5 million in stimulus funds failed to materialize for a more elaborate project across the street at the Family Health Center building at 26 Queen St., Ms. Ekstrom said: "we adjusted our plans to do something less expensive but still meet our needs."

Mr. Murray, a former Worcester mayor who has led the state's homelessness effort, said he is working closely with the city

manager and Mr. McGovern to get the additional money. "We're getting closer, but we've got a little work to do yet" to secure the money, he said.

Through the state's insistence on the creation of regional networks — and Mr. O'Brien's leadership of the Worcester County network — Mr. Murray said that providers, nonprofit agencies and the voices of neighborhoods have worked together and resulted in better services for the homeless, reduced numbers of individuals in shelters and less use of hotels and motels to house homeless families.

Approval was delayed June 29 for the \$250,000 of Community Development Block Grant money the city manager wants to use to renovate 10,000 square feet for 25 people to be assessed at Community Healthlink. District 2 Councilor Philip P. Palmieri said he fully endorses the city manager's homelessness plan, but scheduled a hearing on it at 3:30 p.m. July 20 before the Public Health and Human Services Committee so the public can learn details of the plan.

While Mr. O'Brien vows the shelter will close this year, he challenges whether it can still be referred to as an emergency shelter because it is so different now. Those still there undergo assessment and triage while trying to find a permanent housing solution, he said, and "their past no longer exists — emergency shelter at night, the streets during the day."

It is 2-1/2 years since the City Manager's Task Force on Homelessness announced its plan to end homelessness in three years. "You have to set the bar high," Mr. O'Brien said. "Three years is ambitious.

"Quite likely we'll never end homelessness. But you can see when you push and you drive for excellence real things can happen."

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