

No family deserves to go homeless

VIEWPOINT

At a time when most of us are planning to celebrate our annual Thanksgiving meal with family and friends, an unprecedented number of those less fortunate will be spending the holiday in emergency shelters or hotel rooms.



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In the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, over 3000 families are homeless, the highest count ever. With shelters full to capacity, over 1,000 of these homeless families are living in motels across the state, costing the Commonwealth over \$3 million each month.

Right here in Western Massachusetts, there are 519 homeless families, and another 20 to 30 become homeless each week.

The economy partly explains the current explosion in family homelessness. Job loss and foreclosure are cer-

tainly putting more households at risk, and these pressures are not likely to disappear anytime soon. The good news, however, is that a change in approach to the problem, as well as resources to support it, provide the promise of long-term solutions.

The change is called Housing First, which proposes what it sounds like: preserve or provide housing first, with the appropriate support services to go with it, to effectively reduce the number of homeless families and individuals. This is in sharp contrast to the old system, built up over a 25 year period, which unintentionally drove families to shelters as the quickest resource for housing and social service support.

The Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness, one of 10 regional networks across the state funded by the Commonwealth, is spearheading the change to a Housing First approach in Hampden, Hampshire, Berkshire and Franklin

Countries. A Network that includes dozens of service providers, municipalities, state agencies and the Western Division Housing Court, it offers a foundation for the collaboration that is necessary to maximize resources and discover best practices for greater success.

With state funding and additional funding, support from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, service providers across our four counties are looking to meet families before they come homeless, and provide them with the assistance they need to prevent their homelessness. This strategy includes assistance such as payment of rent arrears, mediation to maintain an existing tenancy, or financial assistance to move quickly to a new tenancy.

Key to this strategy's success is targeting the funds to those most at risk of actually becoming homeless. Surely many families in today's economy who would be helped by an extra \$1,000 paid toward housing costs, but most families — even most families living in poor-

ty — do not become homeless. Instead, they rely on the informal support of family or friends, and look to boost income and reduce expenses wherever possible.

The Network's goal, in partnership with service providers, is to ensure that limited resources are used to help the most at-risk families avoid homelessness.

The combination of homelessness prevention, Housing First, effective targeting of resources, and use of good data to plan and assess progress, has already shown results in other communities. In Columbus, Ohio, family homelessness dropped 40 percent over the period 1995 to 2004; in Hennepin County Minnesota, family homelessness declined 43 percent over a four-year period. New York City experienced a 19 percent decline over three years.

And for individuals, we've seen the success of a Housing First model closer to home in Springfield, where the model is used to help chronically homeless individuals maintain stable housing. The level of homeless adults without children in

Springfield peaked in 2007, after steadily rising for years. In that year, the city began implementing a plan to reduce homelessness, which included a major shift in spending priorities and program expectations. As a result, even in this economic downturn, the number of homeless individuals without children is down 18 percent. Springfield has been nationally recognized for its Housing First approach and its success.

We know these emerging strategies for reducing homelessness can work. Regionally, agencies are how helping less individuals into supportive housing in their own communities, replicating Springfield's approach. With Network support, new Housing First initiatives are underway in Westfield, Amherst, Northampton, Greenfield and Pittsfield. We are also on our way to finding out just what it means to best meet the challenge of family homelessness. We trust that by this time next year, more families will have a Thanksgiving table to call their own. They deserve nothing less.