



Patrick pumps \$10M into eliminating homelessness

by Steve LeBlanc

Gov. Deval Patrick is set to unveil a major new \$10 million push to virtually eliminate homelessness in Massachusetts in the next five years.

The goal of the initiative is to come up with better ways to detect when individuals and families are on the verge of falling into homelessness — and move in swiftly with aid and support.

Another goal is to quickly move those already homeless into permanent housing, including an increased use of housing vouchers.

As a down payment on the plan, Patrick's proposed state budget includes \$1.75 million for MassHousing and \$8.25 million for the state Department of Housing and Urban Development, an administration source told The Associated Press last weekend prior to the formal release of the budget yesterday.

The proposed extra spending is intended to support the goals of a report released earlier this month by a special commission on homelessness.

The plan could run into opposition in the state Legislature from those who point to the state's looming \$1.3 billion revenue gap and question whether the state can afford the extra spending.

The report sets an ambitious goal of all but eliminating homelessness in the next five years.

While Patrick talked about the state's lack of affordable housing during his first year in office, he spent less time on the issue of homelessness. The report and the extra funding marks a shift toward addressing one of the state's most entrenched challenges.

The state has come to rely too heavily on emergency shelters and needs to shift its thinking to providing permanent housing, Lt. Gov. Tim Murray said in an interview.

"We are always going to need some level of shelter at the front door ... but the system now is almost entirely emergency shelter," said Murray, who said he saw the toll homelessness takes on families and children firsthand as mayor of Worcester.

"At the root of most homelessness issues, in most instances, is a lack of affordable housing," he added. "How do we do a better job of detecting when families or individuals are at risk? How do we assess that?"

Last year, Patrick created a 30-member Commission to End Homelessness and charged it with drafting a plan to end homelessness in Massachusetts. He then created an 11-member Interagency Council on Homelessness and Housing to help turn the commission's recommendations into reality.

The Commission's report, released earlier this month, calls for an overhaul of the state's shelter system by focusing on permanent housing first, and using shelters as a last resort on an emergency, short-term basis.

The report said the state should focus on three goals:

- Identifying and helping people at risk of homelessness;
- Creating more affordable housing;
- Helping create economic stability for families to make sure they don't slip back into homelessness.

About 24,000 individuals move through the state's system of homeless shelters each year. Of those, about 4,000 are considered chronically homeless and essentially use the shelters as permanent housing.

Another 10,500 families come through the system each year — about 30,000 or more individuals, when adding in children.

State Rep. Byron Rushing, co-chair of the commission, said the first step was convincing key players that ending homelessness was something the state could achieve, instead of an impossible dream.

“The first thing that's really important is that we got everyone to say this is a discrete enough problem so we could end it,” he said. “This is not like trying to solve the affordable housing problem.

“We were really getting to a point where homelessness was becoming a permanent fixture,” he added. “That was really nuts.”

The next step involves coming up with strategies to get individuals and families into housing as quickly as possible and — equally important — preventing those on the edge from falling into homelessness, he said.

He said the state could accomplish the goal of virtually ending homelessness by reallocating the \$118 million it already spends on shelter beds, each year.

“Let's look at ways to shift that money from shelter beds to getting housing for people in shelters now, and getting to people who are at risk of losing their housing,” Rushing said. “We have to get to a place where people get served before they get into a shelter.”

Changing from a system that relies on shelters to a housing-based system will also help stabilize families and the communities they live in, according to state undersecretary of housing Tina Brooks, co-chair of the commission.

“Transforming from an emergency shelter-based system to one focused on permanent housing will require investment and patience, but the benefits will be huge,” Brooks said in a statement accompanying the report.

Under the budget proposal, MassHousing, the state's housing authority, would receive \$1.75 million to be spent directly on programs for the homeless.

The bulk of the money, \$8.25 million, will go toward a range of programs and strategies recommended in the commission's 41-page report — recommendations like creating a better system to detect when families and individuals are at risk of losing their homes, or placing more of an emphasis on housing vouchers when no affordable housing options are immediately available.

Under the plan, the commission and interagency council would come up with the best way to spend the \$8.25 million and submit the plan to the Patrick administration's secretary of administration and finance.